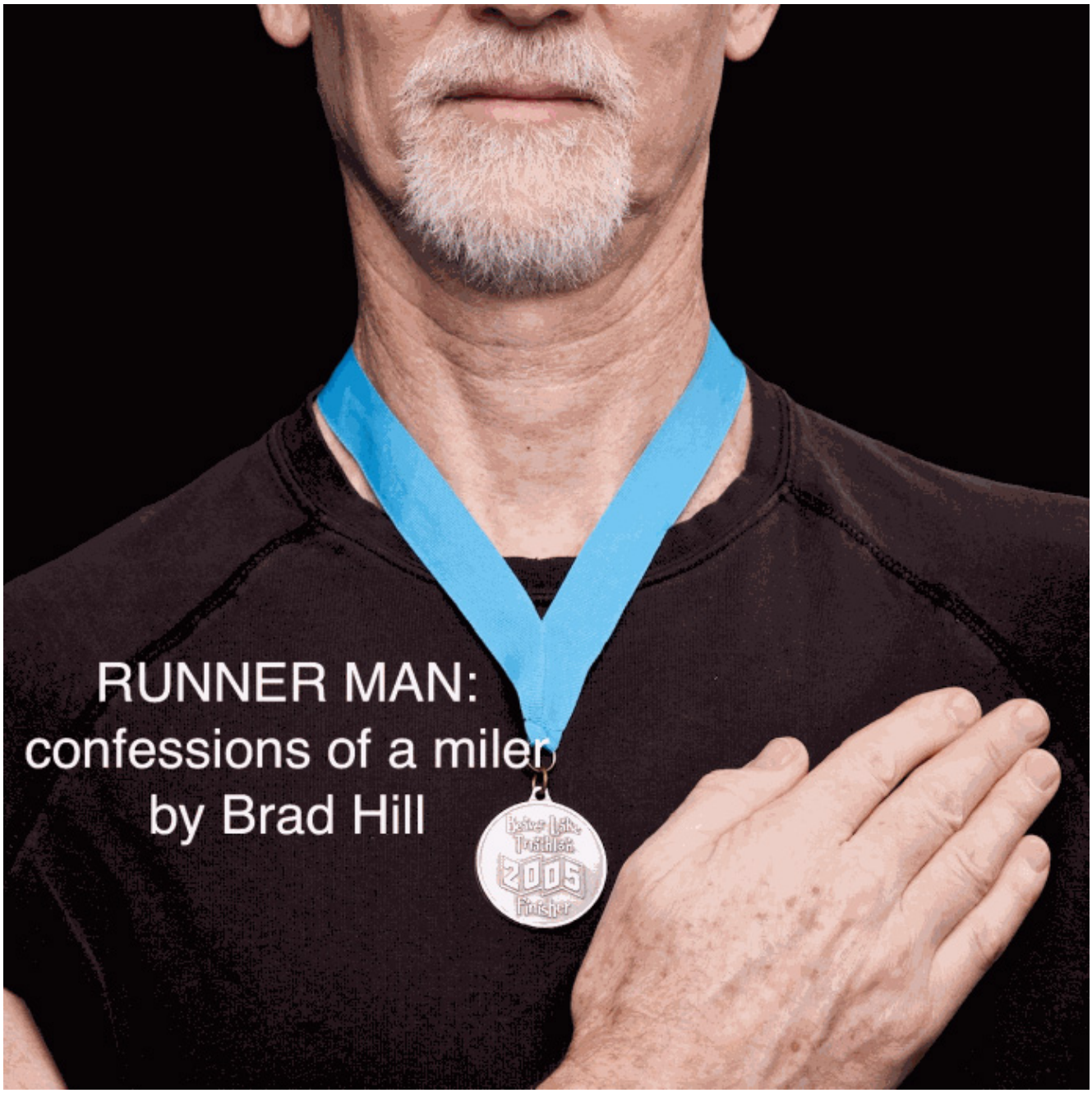

Runner Man

confessions of a miler

by Brad Hill

©2010 by Bradley Hill Released under the Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial No Derivatives license. http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/ 978-0-578-05338-7

Introduction

"Running is a lot like life. Only 10 percent of it is exciting. 90 percent of it is slog and drudge." (Dave Bedford, English distance runner). Or as they say for the Chicago 13.1, running is where the party meets the pavement. I run to win, pure and simple, but in 45 years of running, I have won only three times. You will read about these astounding victories below. OK, contain your excitement please. I have finished last more than I have finished first. Most of life is in-between, being the bubble centered at the top of life's bell-curve. Sometimes you tilt one way and you slide to the front. Sometimes you tip the other and slide to the rear. I wear New Balance shoes, but for the reverse reason. Life is not about balance, but imbalance. The imbalances drive us, provoke us, thwart us, and overcome us. It is the sliding up and down, back and forth in life that makes it sweet and lusty. Running is therapy, it is weight-control, it is about willpower and self-analysis. It is spirituality with laces. Running teaches us lessons of life, but how we run and why we run reflect the lessons of life already learned.

I will take you through my life as a runner and teach you all you need to know about both running and life...

Preface

On any given day, guts and will can prevail over talent and ability...but not usually. Don't bet on it.

No pain, no gain- true in moderation. More pain means not sane.

I am on the last lap of life. This is what the actuarial tables tell me. At 60, I, statistically speaking, have another twenty years. But who knows. I may only have another hundred yards before I cross The Finish Line. Or another 800 meters. Maybe just the final, 4th lap. So I had better plan for the longer run, just in case.

In my half century of running I have learned a number of very important lessons, most of which escape me now. Running in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo, then Zaire, I learned, for example, to watch for open man-holes. That was a very painful lesson. I'll never forget it, but then I'll probably never need to remember it either. Another lesson...if you sprint for the end but miscount your laps, that last lap is hell. But for a moment I was in the lead. I thought I had actually won a race! People were cheering me on as I pushed to the front of the pack...but I wondered why there was no tape. Then the bell rang and I knew I was damned. In the end I finished dead last, walking across the line. Nobody was cheering. But you know what? It was worth it. So the lesson? Grab your moment of fame because the moment of shame is not far behind. Don't blame you if don't really like that lesson.

Most of my life I have been tall and lean. As a child, though, I was somewhat chubby and not very coordinated. Now of course I can ride a Unicycle and sometimes beat my wife at a game of Horse ...not at the same time mind you. But as a child, I took my share of being chosen last for the team. I had a reputation for dropping the ball and striking out. One day we were playing kickball and I got my vengeance. Somehow I had managed to get on base. The "up" boy kicked the ball and I ran towards second only to be stopped by John Black. He had caught the ball and now faced me. He was going to hit me with the ball and I would be out. It was like shooting fish in a barrel...a big fish with a shotgun actually. John was The Guy. An official bona fide athlete. Excelled at every sport. He could climb a rope with just his arms. He looked at me and smiled. I had about as much chance to escape this hit as the basket had of escaping MJ's final championship-winning shot. Then it all went into slow motion. I visualized him throwing it just a bit too high, aiming for my torso. I saw myself falling flat and the ball going over me. I then would sprint for home and win the game and John would be the chump and I would be the champ. He raised the ball over his head with both arms, slowly...he heaved it just a bit too high...the ball floated towards me and I dropped flat. His arms came down and the ball sailed towards me...and over my head because I was indeed flat on the ground. John looked stunned that he had missed. I jumped up, touched third, and ran for home. John ran after the ball, but it was too late. The crowd, meaning a couple of girls including one named Bunny, and the playground supervisor, were silent. John walked back to the pitchers "mound" and looked at me. He was angry at me. We had never been friends, but now we were antagonists. It was like Michelle Wei beating Tiger Woods on the final hole. They would never

date after that. This is a running story, not a kickball story, because I ran the bases. First lesson: a flop in time saves your behind. Second lesson, shaming the Guy and making him your adversary is always worth the moment of glory. Like the father said in Friday Night Lights, the State championship ring is all you will probably get in life, so make the most of it. Third lesson, ignore the girls on the sideline except for "Bunny." If you play to them, you'll lose your way. They would have cheered for the Black, but not for his slayer. Lastly, visualization is crap. The ball wasn't really in slow motion. It was all luck combined with fear but we take wins any way we can get them.

My Junior High School Running Career

At the end of 9th grade we had to run a "timed mile." This was called "Junior High" and included 7th, 8th, and 9th grade. Next year was "High School." We were all afraid of High School. It wasn't called "High" for nothing. Big kids went there. They dated and drove cars and had sex and drank, all the stuff we 9th graders only dreamed about. They had real teams that "went to State." The 9th grade PE teacher terrorized us with the "timed mile" for weeks. "Four laps, fast as you can...no puking at the end!" He said. Louis made it worse. Louis was another Guy with actual facial hair and muscle definition. He smoked and probably already had had sex. "Shit," said Louis, "four laps ain't nuttin'...I think I'll break the effing school record..." His casual approach to the death race felt like melted dry ice in my stomach. "Ever run a mile before Hill?" He called me " Hill" instead of "Brad." It made me want to cry.

The day came. About twenty of us lined up- boys and girls. I figured I could beat Roger. Roger had had polio and limped badly. That girls were there put on unbearable pressure. I was already deep into remorse, guilt, self-recrimination, and wishing I had facial hair before the whistle even blew. I knew some, maybe all, of the girls would beat me. I hated myself. I would never get a date when I got to "High School" much less have sex- ever. I was no man. Louis sauntered up to the front and slouched. "OK," said the PE teacher, Mr. Dahl, "four laps...don't puke out on me people..." He liked to call us "people" all the time. "Time to hit the showers, people..." or "Don't let me down people..." I wanted to be people but knew before I even started that I at the end I would not be people. Mr. Dahl would think I was subhuman. He would not look me in the eye. The girls watching would giggle at me. Bunny was there. Kickball girl. Red hair in pig tails. A big smile. Shiny black shoes. Green eyes and green sweater. I never noticed her. Well, they would just be quiet when Roger finished. He was heroic but flawed. I was flawed but not heroic.

The whistle blew and we started to run. Louis was already ten yards ahead by the first corner. At the end of the first lap I was in the middle with only three girls ahead of me and sure enough Roger was behind me running with a strange hobbling gait that reminded me of the three-legged rabbit my dad had kept. Ever see a three-legged rabbit hop? It doesn't go straight, it veers one way, then over-corrects. That was Roger. Half way through the second lap, I was in the bottom third but still actually running, which surprised me. But I was already gasping. My legs were hurting. But I kept on. I lost more ground on the third lap but I wasn't last. Several girls and Roger were actually falling behind me. I could not get enough air. I almost tripped on the inside rail lining the track. Another girl passed me on the back straight of the last lap. Then another. Roger was gaining. Coming around the last corner I could see the end but I just could not run...I struggled on and on ...kind of run-walking and crossed the line. "Eight Thirty Five!" shouted Mr. Dahl. I bent over, dizzy. I started to cough. I wished I could spit up blood, at least that would get me some sympathy, that I had pushed to the point of shedding blood. My chest hurt, my lungs hurt, my legs were linguini. Finally I straightened up. "Hit the showers people." The next day Mr. Dahl posted the results. I was fourth....from last. Louis had run 5:16. I would not break that time until my senior year of High School. "Hey, Hill," shouted Louis from the locker room. He was standing there naked showing off.... "What was your time?"

Before I go on, you need to learn these lessons with me. Don't compare yourself with the Louis of this world. Right. Compare yourself with the Rogers. Hey, I beat the heck out of Roger! Best if they are not handicapped though. Second (ly), sometimes you should just quit after the second lap. Better to quit than to die. Any excuse will do. My shoe came untied. My heart stopped. You could trip the guy in front and both go down.

Avoidance is better than failure. Sometimes the longer you go, the more ground you lose. Third, keep a towel on until you can hang proud. This is a metaphor of course. In other words, don't strut until you got the stuff. I have yet to strut, actually, speaking metaphorically.

Mr. Dahl informed us that in High School, we would have to run two miles in P.E. in the Fall for something called "cross country." He had no idea what terror that evoked in me. Two miles was as impossible as broad-jumping the Grand Canyon. I considered stepping in front of a bus instead, it would be less painful.

Then something happened in me. A Voice said, "Hill, you can train for this...you have all summer to get ready...you can do this!!! Go go go!" I had never heard this voice before so I told it to shut up. My real voice said, "break your leg! Do the belly flop! Forget that other voice!" I had grown up a bit, I was taller and leaner now. I was over six feet by the end of 9th grade. Long legs. Just maybe...

So I laced up my Red Keds tennis shoes and ran up the block and back. The next day I did the same thing. Then I did it twice. Then three times. Then I ran down to the store and back. I realized that I liked to run when nobody was around. I visualized running at the front of the pack, people cheering deliriously as I broke the tape and set a new record- for 6th grade girls. By the end of the summer two miles felt easy.

My High School Running Career

Inevitably, inexorably, Fall came. PE came. Cross-country came. Mr. Kraft was the new torturer, but this time I faced the firing squad without a blindfold. The day came when I heard the words "OK, go out the road, loop around the church, and come back...that's about two miles...take it easy...ok let's go..." And I went. I pushed hard, for me anyway, got to the church breathing easily and I was in the front pack. That was different. On the way back I pushed just a bit harder and coasted to the end just behind Louis and the front- runners. I was tired but no blood, no puke, no hurting lungs, no coughing...but where were the girls? Louis turned around in a bit of surprise. "Hey Hill, what you doin' here?" I smiled and didn't answer. My life's goal was to beat Louis...sometime, somewhere, just like I had defeated "the Black." There would come a day when he would be shamed.

Ready for a couple more life lessons? First, make plans to beat the Guy but don't tell him. Whatever you do, don't tell him!!!!! If you do, he might squash you like a bug. Second, training really helps. I mean, nothing helps you to run like running. Put in some sweat equity. Working out actually improves your performance, trust me on this. A schedule that escalates in distance and speed will actually increase your distance and speed. No kidding. Third(ly- should these be adverbs or what?) don't wear Red Keds. At least not these days. Today you should wear New Balance or Adidas. OK?

P.E. Cross country went well. When Louis and his group (yes, he had people) missed practice, and they did often (they said they were hung over...whatever that meant), I would finish in the first group. One day Mr. Kraft said "Hill..." - why don't people just call me Brad like my mother?- "Hill...ever think about turning out for track?" Actually, no, never had I ever. Me thinking about turning out for track would be like the Bubble Boy thinking of making the Olympic gymnastic team. But I replied modestly "not really." "Well, Hill, you ought to think about it." So I thought about it.

At this point I should tell you runner types that I was doing the two-mile PE run in about 14 minutes. Maybe ok for 10th grade PE. But the top cross -country boys in Varsity were doing this in about 10:30. The school record for the mile run was 4:46. I would sit at lunch and look up at the record board in the cafeteria. The mile record is branded on me like the Triple Z might be on a cow. To this day I can look up from my mac 'n cheese and see that record, 4:46. At the time it seemed unattainable. While licking my ice cream cone I vowed that one day I would break that record.

So I signed up for track that fateful spring of 1966. I would be on the "JV" or "Sophomore" team. The next year as a Junior, if I did well, I might get on the "Varsity" team. Getting on the Varsity Team was a fantasy akin to putting a man on the moon, which "they" did three years later. I told Mr. Kraft I wanted to be a miler.

So, first of all, don't listen to your coach. They are usually obsessed and have singular issues. Secondly, and this anticipates a bit, times for PE don't mean squat. It's like comparing Glasnost with Perestroika, it doesn't work. It is like learning checkers only to have to play chess. PE running is taking the median times and anything above the middle is "good." Turning out for track is not like joining the Cub Scouts, it is more like enlisting in the Army Rangers. Thirdly, don't volunteer voluntarily.

March came and with it track season. I had trained all winter. In Seattle that meant mostly running in the rain. I ran in a heavy yellow rain coat, like kids wear while waiting for the school bus. I got new Red Keds because my other ones were now pink. In March we began to seriously train. I had never seriously trained before. We ran repeat 400's and repeat miles and something called "over distance." Already skinny as a copperhead snake, I lost weight. I came home, ate dinner, did some homework, then collapsed into bed. Mom was worried, which was good. Dad said "Good job son." Training was ok. I usually finished the runs last or nearly last, but it was just training. Nobody was watching. But sooner or later I would have to run in a "meet" against other schools and people would be watching. I looked forward to my first meet about as much as Dusseldorf did its first carpet -bombing.

The first meet came. The JV went first. The mile event was announced. We all lined up. I automatically took my place in the second row. I bent over and put my hands on my knees like I was about to burst out of the "blocks" like a sprinter. "On your marks," said the guy with the gun. "Get set..." I shut my eyes. This was going to hurt badly. In every way. At least this was an "away" meet so Bunny was not there to witness this. BAM! I hoped it was loaded and aimed at me...then I ran...Louis just took off and never looked back. He put more and more distance between himself and the next guy with every lap. I "paced myself" and finished last in 6:19. 6:19 was great in PE, but in reality it got me last. So...stick with PE. You don't have to try for the next level you know. Once you get to the top of whatever category you are in, stay there! Don't Peter Principle out on me, you hear?

Bunny was in the band. I was First Chair in band, untouchable as lead sax player. She played flute. We were "in like." Once we held hands. I bet I could have won the mile that day! At least in PE class. She came to my last meet of the year. I tried to talk her out of it, but she "wanted to be there for me." Great, just great.

We lined up. Louis of course was there. He didn't line up so much as saunter up. The gun went off. In PE they use a whistle. You know you are in real competition when they use a gun. This was the first time anybody had come to watch me run. It was unnerving. How was I supposed to run when "my girl friend" was watching? I thought of Louis in the locker room and just knew that this was not a good thing for me. I ran my heart out. I was only ten yards behind Louis at the end of lap one. Only twenty at the end of lap two. I glanced behind. Yes, indeed, there were some runners behind me!!! Forty yards behind him at the end of lap three. I hated lap three. I would be fine except for that lap. It always tore my heart out. But that was when Louis began to sprint. Two runners behind me. One lap to go. I put my heart and gonads into it. I stretched it out, lowered my head, and gasping for breath drove my pain-racked body around the last lap. I lost ground to Louis more slowly!!! I could hear the runners behind me closing in on me. Coming around the last lap, I was beginning to black out and bleed from my nose and ears. Only one runner passed me. I would not be last! It was sweet victory. I crossed the line in 5:45. I had broken six minutes for the first time. It was a huge PR for me! Bunny was there at the end and came over. She smiled. "Great run Brad." She reached for my hand and gave it a squeeze.

So...Bunny is better than Louis any day. Don't trade the favor of the Guy for that of the Girl. Louis never held my hand and she never called me "Hill." Next, if you excel at band, maybe you should stay in band. Nextly, if you are losing ground slower over time, maybe you are improving. A decreasing loss-ratio is really an improvement. At least it should be in your own mind. Nobody will notice other than yourself but you know.

Louis is not moving away from you as fast as he used to. If you are ever to beat the Guy, he can't notice the rate of change.

5:45. I had improved two minutes and forty-five seconds in only one year. Do that one more year and I would run a three minute mile. But I had yet to run into lesson number 89, the better you are the more slowly you improve. It's like losing weight. The first pounds are easy. The last ones are the hardest. Lesson 89b is enjoy being "most improved." Most improved just means you were originally, well, crap. I could also easily win most improved in golf, or weight lifting or basketball.

Driven insane by needing Bunny's esteem, and my evil vow to somehow beat Louis and break the school record in the mile, with images of The Black in my mind, I determined to run cross-country in the Fall of my Junior year of High School. When track ended, I did not. I had no plan, no coach. I just laced on my Keds and started running. By the end of the summer I was running five miles a day, usually in the 7:30-8:00 minute range. This was Fall of 1966. Cars would honk, people would throw stuff at me. I ran in the rain and in the heat. I also grew a couple more inches and could count my ribs and even my tendons. I ran alone.

Jim Ryun had run 3:58 in the mile as a junior in High School. He was tall like me, but from Kansas, which explained everything. He was and still is my hero. No matter that he never won Olympic Gold and fell down in Munich...he was my alter ego. I had a picture of him by my bed and when those guns sounded, I visualized Jim Ryun.

Cross Country hated me like the mongoose does the cobra. As a Junior I had to be on varsity. We ran about 50 miles a week in training. No matter what the work out, I was last back. Mr. Kraft was the coach. He was sympathetic but not compassionate. "Pick up Hill. You can do this Hill." Faster Hill. Farther Hill. Work harder Hill. In cross-country only the first five runners count, and I never counted. I was about as far from being counted in the final results as Mr. Ed would be in the Belmont Stakes. The races were all about 2-2 Â½ miles. I was averaging in the sixes per mile, but the front- runners were in the low fives. On one race I was so far behind that I made a wrong turn and never did find the finish line. But, oddly, nobody noticed. I came back to the bus and got on. Nobody even said "missed you Hill!" The one good thing was that Louis did not "do" cross- country. He was a "miler" and would not stoop to this. I never saw him running or training. He smoked and I assume he was out drinking, driving, and having sex and squandering his advantage over me. The day would come...

Cross- country taught me some important lessons. You can get used to losing and after awhile, it is not so bad. The goal becomes to lose less badly. I learned to take pride in my improvement and bettering my previous times. I also learned that when my times did not improve, it was because of the course, or shoes, or what I had to eat, a side ache, or the other runner that tripped me. It is good to have a repertoire of excuses handy. Mr. Kraft never seemed to believe me though. He would just look at me and faintly smile, nod once, and walk away.

Shared pain forges community. We cross-country types were a brotherhood. We had no cheerleaders and rarely made mention in the school news. Nobody came out to watch us, not even Bunny because, being the Pacific Northwest, we usually waited for it to rain before we had a meet. The Strong cared for the Weak, the First encouraged the Last. I wish. In truth, the First just went to the showers and studiously ignored those who did not contribute to the "points." They would avoid eye contact with the Others. The lesson from this is, basically, to detest these SOBs and one day hope to be one, in which case you can also head for the showers and ignore the Others.

Mr. Kraft was a closest Satanist. I know this because when the season was over he invented the 800 mile club. "This is unofficial...the School cannot conduct any official training until Track Season starts...but unless you wear pink undies, you had better train your asses off all winter. Your goal is to run 800 miles between now and March..." Well, heck, that was only 200 miles a month or 50 miles a week for four months...@ ten miles a

day five days a week. After school a few of us would take off and come back ten miles later, sign the log, and stagger into the showers. We were men. We reveled in the pain, the distance, the loneliness of the long distance runner. We were misunderstood. Johnny Yuma. We could not stay out late because we would fall asleep. We could eat anything in any quantity and still loose weight. We did not smoke or drive...or anything. We were the Green Berets (this was the time of Vietnam, remember?) of the road. My life was running-centric. I fell into bed looking at Jim Ryun. Sometimes I even got up early and ran in the morning. I would go beyond the 800. I would do a thousand and like it!

When Spring training came, Bunny had kind of disappeared. To this day I don't know what happened. That is probably because I am a male. I am sure she could tell me. I guess I needed to talk to her, but I was busy running. Maybe she, like, wanted to go on a date or something. Waiting for me by the locker room after my soggy ten- mile run was probably not what she wanted. I am just guessing at this, however. So I turned to Mary. Her brother was a Guy, a sprinter, a Guy who lettered in basketball and football as a sophomore. She apparently liked the smell of analgesics ointment and always came to the games and meets...with her parents. Her father was one of those protective "what are your intentions towards my daughter" kind of men. He was a fireman, big, imposing, and spoke in tongues. Yes indeed. He was a deacon in the Assemblies Church down the street from my rather tame middle-of-the-road "evangelical" church that believed that too much emotion was suspect. But she knew how to whoop and holler, no matter where I finished in the race. But I get ahead of myself here. I liked her brother, Jeff, mostly because he didn't run the mile.

Inevitably, inexorably Spring came. I signed my last log entry at 880 miles. I had exceeded the minimal demand, but fell well short of my ambition. I had also cheated on about thirty miles or so...well, ok, maybe fifty...but still I really belonged to the club. There were not many members. Only five to be exact. I was now among the "elite", the separated ones. Students spoke of us in whispers in the corridors. They turned to look at us when we walked the halls. We were like Colonel Mosby's Grey Ghosts of the Civil War, feared, mythical, dangerous men. Well, not really of course. Nobody except Mr. Kraft and Mary seemed to even know about his company of dangerous men. In all probability we were just thought of as weird. People did not invite us to parties.

They would rue the day.

On the first day of Spring training Mr. Kraft said "Hill, you and Ken, take the distance guys for a hard mile...you seem to be in shape." Louis of course had not shown up yet for training camp. I was thrilled. I was going to "take them out for a hard mile."

"OK," I said to the guys, "let's go...try to keep up." Yes, I said that. We took off around the track and I pushed hard. The second lap I pushed harder. For me, this was not training. It was fundamental validation. It was salvation. Vindication. 880 miles...well, maybe 830...was about to pay off. Third lap I picked it up and drove ahead like there was a pot of gold at the end. Then Ken passed me. Then a couple of others. I sprinted around the last corner, or so I thought, and finished in the middle. This was fabulous! I had never finished in the middle before, anywhere, anytime! I could actually see Ken cross the finish line. I was in sight!!!! My time was 5:36. After four months, 830 miles of running, and losing my first girl friend, I had improved an astounding 9 seconds. Mr. Kraft seemed pleased. "Way to go Hill." He thought that this was just an easy training mile for me. What he didn't know was this was my 110% effort.

Time for more lessons learned here. Girl friends are good to have around, but they come and go, so don't depend on them. You can always trade up. I suppose the same truth is shared among the "girl friends" in regard to boys. Whatever. Next, shared experiences do not forge brotherhood. In fact, these same "shared experiences" can be used against you later. At a five-year High School reunion, Ken said to a group standing around proudly holding their beers since they had turned 21, "Hey, Hill, remember that 'take them out for a hard mile...? Here's to the 800 mile club!" and he pulled hard from his longneck. But the main lesson from the winter of '67 was 'the harder you work, the slower the improvement.' But it is still improvement, what the

heck. At least Roger was no longer a threat.

So track season began. It was a disaster for me. Mr. Kraft introduced the "HILL" as a training method. We ran a 100, then 200, 400, 800, 1600, then back down the "HILL."

Then we did it again. I found that I could actually beat the distance guys at the 100 and often at the 200, but then, forget it. I had no endurance. No lung capacity I supposed. Then we would do 400 repeats. "Hill can you do at least one 75?" shouted Kraft. He meant 75 seconds for the lap, which if multiplied by four would be a five-minute mile. No, Mr. Kraft, I cannot.

I also grew during this year. Now I was about six foot five but hadn't gained any weight. I looked like an emaciated stork running around the track. I could now see my capillaries prominent under my skin or so I imagined. Cheeks were gaunt. Legs were long and thin. Torso was stretched unnaturally. I did not look like Jim Ryun who was almost my height. He had muscle here and there. I read that he could do fifty push ups. I could do ten.

Louis and his "group" finally showed up. Mr. Kraft let them in late. Louis automatically led every work out. No matter what it was, he was in front. It was just assumed. Frank and Sam were usually just behind him. If any of them tried to make a move, he would just pick it up a bit. It seemed so effortless somehow. He was endowed with God-given talent. An amazing athlete I had to admit, even though I hated him. During the winter he had not even joined the ten-mile club, yet there he was, in front, our leader. I would see him with his "group" smoking afterwards, getting into his Chevy Impala SS and taking off while I got onto the "activity bus" and headed somewhat towards home.

The first race of the season inevitably, inexorably arrived. It was at "home" and so Mary was there. Her brother had taken three blue ribbons already. He had earned his letter for his jacket on the first meet. The gun sounded, and we took off. I immediately thought my spikes were too long. The cinder track was soft and the spikes just gathered more weight on my shoes. I looked at Mary, then Mr. Kraft and the Voice said "Hill forget it...no hope...why the pain and suffering? Coast my friend, just coast, get done, finish, go home." And so I did. My first race brought me in last at 5:34. After all those "Hills" I had gained two seconds. My athletic scholarship in track at Villanova was not very promising at this point. Mr. Kraft said nothing to me, and that eviscerated me. Not even "well, Hill, there is always next week..." or " Hey, Hill, two seconds better, good going." No slap on the butt. But then I saw him look at Louis with no expression and wondered what he was thinking.

The '67 track year ground on and on. Mary was there to cheer her brother, but nowhere to be seen after the meet. I was embarrassing her. I knew that and understood. She was right. She needed to attach herself elsewhere. If only she knew then that one day I would be a rich doctor she would not have abandoned me so easily. But on the other hand, maybe she knew that at least the "rich" part would never happen. I did eventually become a doctor...of theology, but it doesn't pay so well. But - we move on here.

Mr. Kraft from today's perspective should have been arrested for training abuse. He wanted what he called a "winning season" which my High School had never known in track. Mt. Rainier HS had won championships in basketball and football but never in track or cross -country. We lost the first meet dismally. So he cranked it up with an inspirational speech that began like this: ".... .... " silence. He stared at us in the locker room. He shook his head. Turned to walk out then took a drink at the water fountain, gulped, spat it out, then left. He was done with us. The only bright spot was Louis, who had won the mile at 4:49, smiling at the end.

The season ground on and on. Kraft invented "ankle weights." We wore these five pound weights around our ankles as we ran. The idea was that once we took them off, we'd feel so light, we'd sprint to the front and win. What it did for me was to inculcate a sense of being weighed down, lead-footed. When I took them off for the meet, I still ran as if I had weights. I was accustomed to them. I lived up to their expectations of me.

The final meet of '67. Mary was not there. But Jane was. Yes, I had acquired another girl-friend. At least I thought we were "like that." Jane was into music and was also very disturbed. Today she would be a Goth. Then she was a Manson groupie that thought Charles had received a 'bum rap.' Hey I was still first chair in the Sax department and so we had "affinity." Except that she was as serious about music as I was about running. "Ever hear of Herbie Mann and 'Birdland'?" she asked me. No. But I soon found out. Jane was Juliet bound. She was "troubled" and that attracted me. She smoked some weed and was anti-war but never marched. She had no clue about running and just loved the idea of "being with a real athlete." That was me, a real athlete. At least until she actually came to a meet.

Ok, back to the final meet of '67. Again, we lined up. I was on the outside but pushed my way to the front line. The line was curved because those on the outside would have to run a little father. So, at the line up, I was in front. That was way cool because that was about as close I would ever get to being 'in front.' The man pointed the gun right at me and squeezed the trigger and we were off. I assumed my usual leaden last place. Louis was second, cruising along. Frank and Sam were just behind. At the end of the second lap I realized I was not that far behind. I was inspired to pick it up a notch. I passed a runner. That had never happened before. I was astounded. I looked back at him wondering if he had had pulled a muscle or something. I passed another runner on the third lap. I could see Louis ahead of me. But he was on the backstretch and I was just rounding the curve. This was it. I dug deep, then deeper, reached down to that inner well of soul that only God knows is there, my legs pumped and ... the rest is pretty much in my unconscious mind. Louis went and broke the school record and ran a 4:39 mile and I crossed the line at 5:19. Louis was only half a lap ahead of me. Thirty-nine seconds, that was all. He had no idea how close I was. I was not last. Two other runners straggled in behind me. Both healthy males.

I learned a lot in '67. First, don't date girls that have jocks for brothers. They have way high standards of performance in 'every area.' Second(ly), girls don't like guys that need to go to bed by 8 pm. Thirdly, no amount of work, self-sacrifice, and training can make up for lack of talent and natural ability. It can close the gap, but the Guy, now the "Man" is still the "Man." Horrendous discipline can close the gap, however, only if the Guy is oblivious and doesn't care. And, lastly, training with weights only weighs on you. Better to train running downhill or with helium balloons attached to you. If you run faster, then you think you are faster. Then you are faster. Then you win. Don't train to lose. And more lastly yet, narrow the gap but shut up about it. The goal post may have moved (from 4:46 to 4:39), but so what? You can still do it. You just need the right girlfriend. And coach. And talent. And will-to-power. Yes, I had discovered Nietzsche.

I know this sounds preposterous, but I did do Cross Country my senior year, that of '67' - '68.' I knew somewhere deep in my Freudian psyche that this was futile and akin to a death wish. The longer the race, the poorer my relative performance. It was a repeat of the previous year. I trained hard, did not smoke, drive or have sex like Louis. Again I came in so far back that my contribution to the team was zero. I enjoyed the camaraderie of towel-snapping and aspersions on my hair-follicles, or lack of them in crucial places. My "team" suggested that I might not want or merit an actual "girl" - type friend. Once, however, I waved my long-spiked shoe at Frank and hinted that I might tear his face off with said-shoe if he suggested such a thing again. I was amazed at how much press that got. "People" suddenly gave me some space.

At one point I vaguely realized that Jane was not around. What ever happened to her?

We had a dual meet with Tacoma...the limp-wristed team to our South. Tacoma...anybody from Seattle detested Tacoma. It smelled. It had no airport. It only had an inferior zoo. Aroma of Tacoma. Seattle just never lost anything to Tacoma...except for Cross Country. We lined up. The gun went off. As Louis did not deign to do cross country, Frank and Sam took the lead. All was in order. But Tacoma cheated and had a couple of black athletes. They were Africans. Of course at that point I didn't know that I would live there for a couple of decades. Now days of course, this is accepted and normal and we know that either Ethiopians or Kenyans always win. But not in '67. Frank and Sam were third and fourth...and it came down to me and one other Guy. If I beat him we would win the meet. If he won, the whole city of Seattle would lose to this

flea-bitten excuse for a city. Of course we had no idea what was riding on this race. We were neck and neck. He wore Number 31. His head was up, and his elbows too high. His legs came up like he was goose-stepping in some Nazi march. He was a joke. Blond, blue-eyed...and wore sun glasses. Nobody wore sunglasses in '67. A year later in the '68 Olympics Tommy Smith did the black power salute and wore sunglasses in a race, but not yet. Two years later every sprinter wore black and sunglasses. Anyway, where was I? Number 31 and I ran together until we came over the last hill. We were both gasping and our heads were wobbling. Jim Ryun was criticized for bobbling his head in the stretch, so I was proud to do so. We looked at each other and came to a tacit agreement. We would cross the line together and it would be a tie. But, a pox be on blond blue-eyed Nazi's...he lurched ahead, beat me, and because of that Tacoma beat Seattle. It actually made headlines at the time. Never been done. In all of history, Tacoma had never prevailed. Until then. And it was my fault. Mr. Kraft didn't even take a drink and walk out. He gave me a "look" and ... left. He was not back as either History teacher or Coach the next year. Evidently I was responsible for getting him fired.

So...are you ready? Don't extend yourself beyond your limits. It has no dividends. Secondly, abstinence has nothing to do with athletics. You might abstain on other grounds but don't delude yourself that it improves "performance." Thirdly, you always represent more than you know. I carried the weight of all of Seattle on my shoulders and didn't know it until afterwards. Any moment Governor Daniel Evans might call me and say how disappointed he was. Don't trust Nazis. And don't wear sunglasses unless you win.

So...we come to my Senior Year of Track. Spring of 1968. My last chance to beat Louis and break the school record. I had now achieved my current height of Six Feet

Six Inches. I was taller than Jim Ryun which was not a good omen. I could do twenty push ups. I had once again run through the Winter and had to spray myself with bleach to get rid of the mold that came with so much running in the rain.

Mr. Kraft had been replaced with Mr. Helm. Really, I kid you not, dubbed the "helmsman." He was a former "Guy." I could tell by his demeanor. He bounced when he walked. Once in practice he had run the 400 with the middle-distance boys and smoked them easily. He had won State in wrestling. He let that drop one day. He had won State in the 400. He let that drop also.

"Listen up girls," he said to us in a pep talk "this is our year. Don't let me down. You won't let me down, will you?" It was personal with him. He was a dangerous man. This was his first year teaching. He had yet to be crushed under the weight of his own failed aspirations. He had yet to lose to Tacoma.

Once again Louis and his group showed up late. Mr. Helm watched them walk onto the infield. We could all tell by his body language that he was steamed. He got very still as they crossed in front of him, then turned just his torso a bit to follow them. They did not come over to him. When they sat on the curb and began to lace up their shoes, he said just loud enough for them to hear, "Louis, come here for a minute." Louis looked up, then slowly got up and came over. He put his face into Louis's personal space. We could not hear what he said, but Louis walked back to his group, said something, and they all got up and walked off the track. As it turns out, Mr. Helm was a pretty good guy. He let them back into the team a week later.

The first meet inevitably inexorably arrived. Kendra was there for me. Her father was the local chief-of-police. She was bit too exuberant for me. She stood on the stand and shouted "Go Brad, go, win win win!" People looked at her and shook their heads. "Yeah Brad, go baby!" Mr. Hill looked at me and smiled. "Go baby?" I shrugged.

The gun went off as it always finally does. The first lap is always my best because I am still fresh and strong and breathing ok. Makes sense. As I get more tired and out of breath, it gets harder. Louis went through the first lap in 68 seconds, I was only 7 behind. I could hear the times being read out, which was different for me. I usually could not hear the leaders' times! Wow. "Go baby!" I said to myself. Kendra was jumping up and

down and waving. She had managed to get a few others to join her. "Win win win" she chanted. Well, "winning" was a subjective thing. If I improved my PR, I "won" in my mind. If I didn't finish last, I also "won." I did the math. Seven seconds times four laps, I would only be 28 seconds behind at the end. That means I would be coming around the corner when the winner crossed the line, I would be on the same "stretch." But the math was wrong. Louis did another 68 and I did a 78. That was a PR for me at the 800 mark, 2:33. The third lap is always my worst lap. It is just survival at that point. The legs are going, oxygen debt causes black spots to swim around my eyes. On the backstretch of the third lap I question my sanity and my life goals. My head bobbles and all I want to do is to finish. There is real pain in my chest as my lungs heave in desperation. My stride shortens and I basically give up my dreams.

"Go baby, win win!"

I hear the gong sound, signaling the last lap. But I can't hear their times anymore.

Coming around the corner I see Kendra. I realize that I am in last place. Her cheering me on is like cheering on the Cubs in early season. They haven't won the Series in a hundred years. But I am not that far behind the second-to-last runner.

I see Mr. Helm at the beginning of the straight. Then he utters the words that sear my soul and will become my mantra for life. The moment is indelibly etched in my mind and heart for eternity. Throughout the decades it would provide the motivation I needed to drive forward and "be all I can be."

"Hill!" he shouted at me, "don't be last again!"

Kendra suddenly stopped cheering. I think it finally dawned on her that her boyfriend was going to finish last. It got very quiet. The sounds of the spikes hitting the cinders, the tortured breathing became inordinately loud. They reverberated around my head. "Hill, don't be last again!" That was not even fair. I wasn't always last. But this was it. I dug deeper, looked into the abyss and found a secret reserve of strength, wringing out that last drop of energy, I did in fact get blood out of my turnip. I lengthen my stride and go for it. I feel light and fast and somewhat euphoric. I pass him on the backstretch. The gap widens. I pity him, he will be last. But then he comes back at me. We come around the last corner. I see Kendra watching, quietly, sitting down. Then I go by Mr. Helm who is standing there with his arms folded, saying nothing. I take out the pick-ax of my will power and manage to chip out one more iota of strength and I beat him by a stride. That will show The Helmsman! Last again indeed!

I took two steps and collapsed on the track, gasping for breath. I really didn't have to, but thought it would look impressive to Mr. Helm and Kendra. Kendra did run over to the side of the track, since only the athletes were allowed on. "You ok? You ok! You won you won!" That was why I liked her.

Louis had run 4:28, meaning he had run "negative splits"- the last half faster than the first. It was a new school record. I had run 5:15, a new PR for me and I smiled. I had finally beat Louis. Yes, as a senior in High School, I beat his 9th grade time by one second! Take that Louis!

The Spring unwound as usual. It was exceptionally wet, windy and cold, even for Seattle. Mr. Helm had his own set of muscle-numbing, mind-bending, soul-rending workouts. We would run laps, the last guy had to pass the first, then the new last guy had to pass the first, etc. That worked for me on the first lap. After that, I never could pass the group. He did the "Hill" as before, but more than once. Mr. Helm was a big fan of over distance, we ran repeat 2000's, meaning five lap races. We did five miles as a "warm down."

Louis did not really put himself into these training runs anymore. He rarely tried to win a practice heat. He usually just tucked in the middle and called it good. He would miss at least one practice each week, sometimes two. He had a good excuse. He was sick. His boss made him stay late (he worked at grocery store

so he could afford his car).

We were out on the soggy track late, the dark clouds made it seem like evening, which I guess it was. The cinders stuck to our shoes. We were cold, exhausted, and wishing for death or at least warm showers. Mr. Helm posted our workouts so we knew what we had to do. We were done and ready to go in when he shouted at us milers...

"OK, do a hard mile then hit the showers." It was unfair. We had done all that was posted. It was illegal for him to add something. Later I would think of it like if in Rocky II, when on the last round he and Apollo Creed knocked each other to the mat, then he struggles to his feet, the bell sounds...then the referee says "ok, one more round just for fun..." We groaned and lined up. "Go," he shouted and clicked the stopwatch. He always made a big show of clicking the watch as if that would motivate us. We moved out, relatively slowly, already gasping for air, slogging ahead. Louis dropped into the middle and I found myself momentarily in the lead half-way through the first lap. I mean, there was nobody in front. Nobody was throwing up clods of cinders into my face. It felt good. It was a new experience. Coming around the corner I glanced back. I had maybe six or seven yards on the pack, nobody seemed to care. It was just about getting through this and going in.

"Ninety" shouted Helm. I was actually pretty impressed, that was a six-minute pace and after all we had done that day! I pushed on and around the second lap, still in front. Glancing back I saw I had maybe ten yards on them now. Nobody seemed to care. They probably didn't even see me out there, since heads were down, eyes on the track. "Three 0-5" shouted Helm. Still not bad, all in all. I realized on the backstretch of lap number three that this was about it for me. There was one more meet coming up, the season would be over and I would probably never run in a track meet again. If I pretty much owned last place in High School, no way would I run in college. I was going to win something, even if it was an illegal mile tacked on to the end. I summoned my inner Ryun and tried to pick it up.

"That a way Hill!" shouted Helm. He shouldn't have done that. It awoke the sleeping Rottweiler's behind me. I thought I could hear Louis mutter something, like "no such luck..." or maybe it was another -uck word. But I was already around the corner pulling away with only a lap to go. It looked like maybe fifteen yards now.

"4-35- Go Hill." He said it so softly that only I could hear it. I knew he wanted me to beat Louis that day. Maybe that was why he had us doing this meaningless savage mile. He was handing me an opportunity for redemption. I thought of these last years since 9th grade, all the shame Louis had heaped upon me without even knowing it, of how he had kept moving the school record farther from me every year just to spite me. I reviewed my disgust of how he could not run all winter and still win without apparent effort. This was it, do or die time, my Showtime. Go baby.

I saw Louis break out of the pack and set out after me. It was scary how fast he could leave them behind. He was chasing me down like a cheetah pursuing a wildebeest in the Serengeti. But even a wildebeest can on occasion survive the attack. This was for Bunny and Mary and Kendra and...I forget one here... this was for my manhood...I ran for my life down the backstretch and came into the corner. I could hear him now, grunting with the effort, his legs gulping down the yards in great pulsating rhythms. Jill-, for her too! I came out of the last corner...no, I never had a Jill...my mind was in a cold fog... and could now see him coming up on me, starting to swing wide on the corner, but that cost him a step or two. Jane, it was Jane! I sprinted for the end. This contest is far more important to the wildebeest than to the cheetah, who can always kill again, but the beast can only die once. I was wheezing and gasping for air, the track in front of me had narrowed to small black hole. I thought I might just pass out and collapse before I got there. Louis was there too...

"Five fifty nine," shouted Hill, and it was over. "Six" he said to Louis. I bent over, hands on my knees trying to regain consciousness. Victory had never been so sweet. I was not only not last, but I was first! And for the first time I had run negative splits.

"Big effing deal," muttered Louis on his was by. I smiled. It was, actually a big effing deal to both of us and we both knew it. I had blemished his record against me. No longer would it be Something-to-zero in our relationship. I would always have at least "1" in the win column.

Helm came over and gave me quick pat on the shoulder. He didn't say anything. He didn't need to. I was people. I straightened up and staggered off to the showers.

And then it came to the last meet of my High School Career. As Louis had moved the school record down down down, I had just retained a goal of beating the record I first saw of 4:46 those years ago while licking ice cream in the cafeteria. So this was it. A cool sunny day, perfect for the mile. I was full of confidence after my annihilation of Louis the previous week. Who knew, maybe I could beat him today also. We lined up. Louis curled his lip in my direction ever so slightly. I smiled, raised my eyebrows signaling "what?"

It was fast that day, even for Louis. Those two Africans from Tacoma were there again. They jumped out in front and tore through the first lap in 65. Sixty five! Louis though was right behind them, but I could sense his fear and desperation. This was out of his comfort zone. I came around in 74. The math told me that I could break five minutes at that pace, but that I had already forfeited the old school record, which would have required about a 72 pace. But the thought that I could break five minutes, running in the "FOURS" was a holy grail for me as well. The four-minute mile was every runner's aspiration, at least I could say the "four" word when recounting my times! I was giddy and happy and tore through the second lap. I heard the timer yell "two twelve" as the Tacoma guys with Louis dogging them ran by. Two-twelve was a fast enough 800 to maybe even place in that event alone! In spite of myself I willed Louis on. Do this for the school, set a record that would stand forever, and beat Tacoma! I was deep into my existential death-wish in the third lap when I looked across the field at the front runners. I couldn't hear the times, but Louis had dropped back a couple of paces. He looked done. The Tacoma guys looked good, way too good. I finished the third lap in third place. But I counted my "Place" backwards. In other words, two guys were still behind me. I looked over towards Louis, somehow he had pulled himself back and was near them as they finished the backstretch. They were not going to lap me, my deepest fear ever, to be lapped in the mile run, but it wasn't that far away either. In watching the duel I almost forgot about my own race, and got passed. Now I was in second. But I was riveted on the final corner. Louis was right there, running insanely, living in some other dimension, arms flailing, head rolling around, legs not even going very straight, spittle hanging from his mouth. He pulled even with them and started to pull ahead. They fought back, it was going to be close. I could not tell from where I was who had won, too far to hear the time. I finished my lap, still in second place, didn't see or hear Kendra or whoever, stretched it out down the final fifty yards and concluded my track career.

"Five 0 nine," said the time keeper. No no no!!! I wanted to hear another "F" word, - "Four!" Four something, anything...not "five" something! I sagged to a stop, didn't bend over, but just kept walking. Alone around the corner. Then I saw Louis walking also, slower than me...head down. I came up to him. He looked up.

"How did it end, Les?" I asked him as if we were equals.

"Got third," he said.

"What was your time?"

He shook his head. "4:26."

He had just shattered his own PR and set a school record that nobody could touch. That time would be good enough for him to go to State, which he would in fact do and run a 4:21 in the State meet, finishing fourth overall. One of the Tacoma guys ran a 4:18 in the State meet. Well, Jim Ryun ran 3:58, so big deal.

OK, it's been a while since I shared my life-lessons with you. First, talent alone is not enough. Louis could

have won State and who knows, even broken Ryun's record had he really tried. If he had worked as hard as I did, I am sure he would have. In three years, he "only improved" his time by less than a minute. Me? I improved almost three and a half minutes. Second, for success, pick what you measure. Measured against last place, I was often victorious. Measured against my first time, I was phenomenal. Third, God will present you with a moment of truth when if you see it and seize it, you will soar. Mine was that soggy day facing the add-on mile. That was my State. Fourth, persistence, rigorous discipline, consistency pay off in the end, but sometimes not very much. In three years of track and cross country I had never placed and so had earned zero points towards my school "Letter." Louis had earned a letter his first year and wore a "letterman's jacket" that just added more and more buttons and insignia on it all the time. At the end of the year at our final assembly I had my name called to receive a Big R for Rainier and I went up and got it to thunderous applause, feet stomping on the bleachers, hooting and cheering. Well, there was a smattering of applause here and there, mostly from the track team and I think a couple of girls somewhere. But I never bought a jacket to put it on. What was the point? School was over and only losers wore their old High School letterman's jacket anywhere. Today I don't even know where the letter is. I thought Mom had it, but she doesn't.

I cleaned out my locker. I looked around the locker room where I had spent so much time with naked sweaty guys over the years. The smell of analgesic cream was in the air. The odor of molding jock straps still in somebody's locker assailed me. I could hear faint reverberations of Helm shouting "OK, ready girls? Time to suffer."

I wouldn't miss any of this. I didn't care about the Letter or even the times. Not really. I realized when I left and didn't have to run anymore, that I wanted to run. I loved to run. I went home and laced on my shoes and took off down the road with no plan in mind, just reveling in the wind, the body, the breathing, the life. So, that's the last lesson for now. Learn to love it and you will have no regrets.

And don't be last. Again.

My Collegiate Running Career

I figured that, being on Varsity Track, I could do pretty well if I took College PE Cross Country. The class would be full of people that had to fulfill their general credits. They would not be serious runners. So I ran all summer and looked forward to PE Cross Country.

We all car-pooled over the Green Lake, where we were to meet the Coach. It was about a three mile loop around the little lake.

"Probably don't need any spikes for this," said Gary, putting down his gear-bag and pulling on his singlet that had a number on it. I swallowed an ice-cube. Spikes, gear-bag, singlet, Gary was a real runner. I looked around and saw some others. It was also a mixed class. Some of the girls were stretching and getting limbered up. This all added up to bad news.

He gathered us all, pointed counter-clockwise around the lake and said, "OK, go..." And we went. Gary and group immediately pushed to the front. This felt very familiar. But I was there in the mix. I finished near them in around 18:30. All the real-runners had the same idea, get an easy "A" by competing against the general population. The bell-curve just got deformed. By the end of the Fall I had just broken 18 and to my complete stupefaction, got an A.

This was the Viet-Nam era. The military was drafting my friends and was about to raid the college campuses. The next year would be the "lottery system", but this year, anybody was vulnerable. So I enlisted in the Marine Corps, hoping I could play the saxophone in the band. That's another story...but all that year I worked hard at weights and was closing in on 50 push ups just like Jim Ryun. I had some muscle definition by now.

Having conquered college PE cross-country, I thought I would try College PE Track and Field. It was a lot of fun. I amazed myself by getting an A in javelin, but the mile was what I wanted and feared. I was not in peak mile shape but all I needed was a 5:45 for an A in that, and I ran 5:33. Two "As" !!!

I had purchased a motorcycle. A couple of days before I was to leave for Quantico Virginia for basic training, I had an accident tore up my knee. Another story....I know I know, you want me to tell you all about it, but not now, ok? It had swollen up like a basketball and it was months before I could put any weight on it. The good news is that the Marines discharged me with an honorable "medical" discharge, wanting a few good men. I didn't run all my Sophomore year. I had another girl-friend by then, one Ruth Y Terpsma from Lynden Washington. Fortunately, she never had to attend a Meet and so she was more inclined to stay the course with me.

Slowly I got my leg back into shape, but interest in serious running had lapsed. We got married at the end of our Junior year, and all my senior year was too busy teaching and going to school and being married. Occasionally I would go out for a jog, get sore, then not do it again for a long time.

When we graduated we went to Brussels for a year to study French, drink beer and eat "pommes frites" with tartar sauce. We lived for a while in a "pension" or boarding house near Place Flage. The Place featured a little pond with about a mile promenade around it. I finally felt guilty enough about my "spare tire" that I went out to jog. It was slippery, mostly from all the dogs that used it. And then I discovered that we were only allowed one shower a week, so that pretty well ended my European running.

These five years taught me many valuable lessons. First, the Good Guys are always around. You can't escape them, those who excel are always just there. Second, you can look like a Good Guy if you have the right gear and vocabulary. Third, not all bell-curves are symmetrical. Fourth, the thing that almost kills you is what also saves you. Now that is very Tao. Had it not been for the cycle accident, I would have gone to 'Nam, and if not killed, at least never met Ruth. It may have limited my running but in the big picture of life, so what? It also gave me a ready excuse I could use any time for a variety of things. Next, recruiters always lie. I was about as likely to end up playing the sax as Mr. Rogers was of getting a part in Rambo III. I was also amazed to find out that a year of high-carb, high-fat, no-exercise life results in becoming fat and weak. It really does. I had yet to learn that it is harder to take it off than to keep it off. Seriously, at 60 I still don't seem to have really integrated that principle very well. Lastly, watch where you step.

My Congo Running Career, 1973-1990

I arrived in Gemena, Zaire, with a taste for Stella and Frites and something of an aversion to running. But the mission field was "dry" so that just left frites and the aversion. The heat and the generally fibrous diet did take off some pounds.

Then Dan arrived. Dan was an MK from the area and in great shape. He asked me to go jogging with him.

"Dan...maybe you haven't noticed but it is very very HOT out there..."

"Start slow..."

"...and very very HUMID..."

"Drink."

"...and how do you think the people will react to two white guys running down the street?"

"We'll run on campus...for now."

So we traced a route what seemed to be about a mile, measuring it on our Mobylettes, that took us through the gardens and tall sobi grass and around the houses and the dormitories. Day one: a mile, no time, a gallon of water. Day two, my knee hurt a lot. Day three, it still hurt but Dan made me do it. Day four, "it really hurts Dan!" "Don't be a wimp Hill." There was something in the way he said "Hill" that started all the old tapes rolling. I had thought my years of therapy had taken care of those tapes, but apparently they hadn't. The electro-shock treatments hadn't done a thing. "Hill..." - there it was. "OK, let's do this, Danny." And so the saga began that eventually became the Lore of the Ubangi.

We ran every day, added miles and speed, my weight came off almost overnight. I began to revel in running in 90 degree heat and 90% humidity. I loved the feel of cold water down my throat after the run and cold water over my body in the shower. Rarely did we drink during the runs, which was stupid, but I learned what the limits were. Times were slow because of the terrain and heat, but it was all good. The Marines would have been proud. The few, the proud.

"Hey Dan...let's walk to Karawa." It was about 50 miles from Gemena. The Africans did it all the time, not all at once mind you, but making the trek itself was not uncommon. No whites had ever done it before and we intended to walk straight through. We'd leave in the early afternoon and walk all night while it was cool, getting there around noon the next day. I may not have broken the school record, but this would be for the record books.

We packed a small bag of some water and food and started. At about the six mile mark we came to Boyademele.

"Hey Daniel!" yelled some folks in Lingala, "stay, and have some pondu with us!" So we stopped to eat. Dan, as it turned out, knew everybody along the whole road. A few more miles we had to stop for tea, then eat a whole chicken. A group walked along with us- for a while. Finally it got dark and cooler. A half-moon came up and we trudged along.

Up ahead a huge bonfire roared and group of men were dancing around, obviously drunk.

"Brad, let's try to skirt around this..." said Dan, but it was too late.

"What's that?- ...Look two mondeles-whites....!" And they all came down to the road. At first they seemed to just be in a drunken good mood. "What are you doing? Where are you going? Why are you walking?" My Lingala was not good enough to follow this, but this how Dan related it later. Then they started insults and pushing a bit. "What's in the bag? Give us some money!" came next. Then Dan said something to them, and they all backed off and drifted away.

"That was fun. But, ah, Dan, what did you say? Sounds like something I should learn."

"Never mind."

"Never mind? You can't just say 'never mind'-!!!" But he would not say.

Around 1am I was starting to feel it badly, especially in my knee. I couldn't keep a straight line down the road. Walking muscles were not the same as running muscles. Sand in the shoes had worn off the skin and created blisters. The water was just about gone. I wanted some more tea and chicken. I wanted whatever they were drinking around that bonfire. We continued on. Occasionally a truck would come by, the lights blinding us, and we stepped off the deserted road. One stopped to offer us a ride. "You boys ok?" Not really.

Sometime later we crawled into a little church and lay on the ground. I passed out, I mean, fell asleep. Dan shook me. A light shone in our eyes. It was the pastor. Dan explained to him what we were doing, which only

made things worse. But he made us tea. But my muscles had cramped up and the cold ground had leached from them any sense of flexibility. As the sun came up, we trudged down the road looking like those on the Bataan Death March.

About three or four miles from Karawa, we were done. Well, maybe I was doner than Dan. We sat on a log by the road and decided that we shouldn't have done this in the first place. A truck neared and Dan got up to signal it to stop.

"Dan, we are almost there now...what did you tell those men back there?"

"Forget it." Never never never. By the way, Dan says I am the one that signaled the truck, but don't believe him.

We climbed in the back and drove the last stretch. He let us out at the entrance and we staggered up the hill.

One of the missionary nurses came out onto her veranda, saw us, and shouted, "here they come!" I for one never felt I had to mention the truck.

Train for what you are going to do. Don't train for one thing and think that "cross over benefits" will be enough. Knowing people slows you down in life, but knowing people also saves you in life. Sand in your shoes can make you bleed, best to minimize all friction when you are in for the long haul. Don't sleep in church. There are just some things you can't explain to pastors. And if you know magic words, don't share them with anybody, they will lose their mojo. Finally, it is not up to you to correct everybody's misperceptions.

Eventually this would lead to my first marathon. Surely, running 26.2 miles couldn't be any harder than walking 60 or 70 like we had done? No, that is not a mistake. It is just that the more I have thought about The Walk, the more certain I am that it was also longer than we had estimated.

Gbado was about 26 miles from Loko. We lived in Gbado and Loko was a hospital station, so it seemed reasonable to run towards the hospital. I had made this trip many times in the Land Rover. As the rainy season wore on, the trip got slower and slower until I said in exasperation, "I could run it faster than this!"

I had no training program, but I remembered the principles of the 800 mile club and so started to ramp up, finally averaging about 50 miles a week. I switched to morning running, leaving the house about 4 am to go run those ten miles in the dark... with a flashlight. Sometimes it was exhilarating with the crystal-clear stars overhead; occasionally I would see a satellite or a comet. When the full moon was up, it breathtakingly illuminated the road and the villages. Finally I could run the ten miles at an 8 minute pace. I felt I was ready to go. Ruth felt it was just a bit too fanatical to go running at 4 am. But one person's fanaticism...I'll leave that for the lesson section.

I needed to plan carefully. There would be no way stations, restrooms, ambulances or other runners. No free T-shirts, but no entrance fees either. The run would have to be in the morning so as to profit from the coolness. I would need three consecutive days without rain or the roads would be too muddy. A light-weight flashlight would be a must. I then arranged for our African driver to follow me in the Land Rover and carry the drinks. He could also rush me to the hospital if I needed him to.

Finally, it all fell into place. I got up at 2:45, ate a banana, and spent some time stretching. At 3:30 a.m. the chauffeur arrived, and I was off. It was a cool, moonless morning. A cloud cover made it as black as night...well, it was night. My bouncing little flashlight showed up the puddles all right, but my depth perception was off. I continually stumbled, slipped, and slid until daybreak. Knees and ankles took a beating, but the Land Rover was a comfort.

As I jogged along at daybreak, the birds began to cheer me on. Various jungle noises caught my attention, such as the crunching of a millipede underfoot. I was blissfully thinking myself in harmonious relationship with God's nature when there was a savage snort and a ferocious rustling of bushes not a yard from me. I reacted with the startled yell and a personal best in the quarter mile. I probably wasted thirty minutes of energy.

At the halfway point, the truck pulled up alongside me. I tossed my flashlight inside and grabbed the bottle of lime Kool-Aid I had mixed up. One gulp told me that I should not have mixed it at 2:45. I must have quadrupled the sugar and maybe had several too many packets in it. The sticky, sweet liquid coated my mouth and throat, and no amount of expectoration would clear it.

Now all the villages were wide awake. As I entered a village, everyone would line up along the road and stare. Mothers would hide their little children behind them and point. A few would try to say hello and I wished I knew Dan's "words" just in case. I heard footsteps behind me. I turned to see a couple dozen youngsters following me, I felt like the Pooped Piper.

At about the eighteen-mile mark I entered a series of exhausting hills. My chauffeur was getting worried about me, so he pulled up to within three yards of my flagging derriere. I tried to signal him to back off, but he just waved and maintained his protective distance. The first hill was a mile long and steep. I did not dare stop for fear of being rear-ended. The downhill made my knees feel like a slinky toy descending steps. The next hill, short and very steep, was nearly my obituary. I jerked and clawed the air to the top. The quizzical villagers watched this utterly fascinating spectacle in silent wonder. Finally one fellow expressed the collective mind by asking, "Where are you going?"

"To the hospital," I replied.

"Thought so," he said.

Further along another agog African ventured a hopeful, "What are you doing?"

I had plotted this answer for some time. "Pulling the truck."

The chauffeur leaned his head out the window. "No, I am chasing him!"

Finally the hills were behind me and only a couple of miles remained. My jello knees could not hold me any longer, and even Visa couldn't carry my oxygen debt. I decided to quit, close enough. I signaled to the truck and he pulled alongside me. Maybe the devil made me do it, or it was the guilt over my secret failure of The Walk, or the voices in my head saying "Hill...." But I heard myself say, "go, wait at Loko." And off he went. His tire hit a large puddle and instantly I was covered in water green with frog eggs.

Then maybe thirty minutes later after four hours of jogging, I pulled into the hospital compound. I could not decide whether to go first to the emergency ward or to the maternity ward where they had the best beds and I could put my feet up. But just then our nurse came out. She took one look at me and exclaimed, "whatever happened to you!"

Again I had time to think of answers to these original questions. I managed a sickly-sweet lime green smile and said, "Didn't you notice? It must have rained."

The Land Rover is faster, even in rainy season.

You only need backup if there is a risk. In this case, I could have broken an ankle or been bit by a snake or just collapsed. If you don't need back up, then you are not risking enough. You are risking too much if nobody

will back you up. When putting your life on the line, know where the hospital is and carry ID with you. Nothing worse than having a stroke, being rescued, but since you can't talk or write, they don't know who you are. If you start early, you are more likely to get there. Life gives you extra credit if you finish looking like you had suffered badly from necrotizing fasciitis. Sometimes you don't need your best excuse at all...the bad knee was not the problem. And, lastly, sometimes it is not the devil that makes you do it at all.

Almost forgot. One person's fanaticism is another person's obsession. That doesn't really help does it? One person's fanaticism is another person's need to call for an intervention on you. So, real self-aware fanatics need to mask their obsessions by acting with casual indifference to their screaming need. I think I should stop this lesson at this point.

All this running got my students interested. I discovered a young man, Yango Mbalisa, who ran very well. I organized the students to run a 10K to Pambwa and back. It was run over rough roads, up and down hills. Yango finished maybe a half mile ahead of the others. I tell his story in another great unpublished book, The Runner. Yango eventually did make the Zairian Olympic marathon team only to have their trip to Seoul Korea cancelled. He went back home and worked as a guard for a Coca Cola plant, until it was demolished during the civil war.

Working with him renewed my absorption with running. For most of all our years in Congo, I ran either in the early morning or later afternoons. In some perverse way, I preferred the afternoons. I would come back drenched in sweat, panting, needing a gallon of water. I never wore a shirt...yuck, how it would stick and cut off whatever cooling the air might bring. I also learned that I never needed to get up at night to use the bathroom when I ran in the afternoons. I lost so much water that no matter how much I drank, I was "fine" all night.

I wanted to run another marathon. This time I wanted a nice easy course with lots of water and a chance to quit if I caved. That meant only one place, the air strip. It was grassy and near the house. I measured off a half mile one way, parked the truck with lots of water, lined up 26 rocks and just started to run. At the end of each mile I kicked a rock. I knew it wasn't exact, so that took the pressure off the times. If it seemed slow, it was only that that the distance was actually 820 meters instead of 800. Again I started about 4 am. By six am a number of school children were lined up along the side watching me solemnly. By 7 am Ruth and few missionaries were there by the truck. I think they were there to cheer me on for the last hour, but mostly they just talked and ignored me. A couple of missionaries joined me at about mile 21 and tried to encourage me on by running just a little faster than me. They wanted to talk and laugh and discuss mission issues, I just wanted to run in silence and suffer. "What do you think about that, Brad?" said Keith. "Ab...out....wh...at?" I answered. "You know, the elections coming up? Do you think the church president will be elected for a .....blah lah ahbl...." Finally, one more rock to knock off. I managed to pick up the pace, passed the guys on the back stretch coming back and managed to win my first marathon. It was actually the easiest marathon I ever ran. Right conditions, right conditioning, lots of water, but mostly a really slow pace. I only wish I could duplicate all that again but go faster.

Your best efforts and greatest sacrifices will probably come to naught, so you need a back up plan, like guarding a coke plant, and then a fall back plan for that too. Fate dangles carrots before us, only to snatch them away. Wear as little clothing as possible when you run, it is exhilarating and cooling and you have less to wash. Be proud of your body, even if people point and laugh. Hey, let's see them get out there and run, right? Drink like a fish, it's good for your liver and spleen. Control your environment and life is easier. Don't miscount your rocks or everything goes wrong. Friends are nice but in truth, it always just comes down to you facing your own road ahead. Don't forget what worked in the past. Start out slow and then taper off.

Furlough Running

During our Congo years, we would come to the States for furlough. Running continued of course, but was

very different. Mostly it was colder. As Fall faded into Winter and a great darkness settled on the land, running became an extreme sport. Running in cold rain was tough but it just took determination. Running in the snow and slush took obsession. Running when it turned to ice required all that plus stupidity. Going strait ahead on an ice sidewalk was not too hard, stopping or turning left to go north instead of east was a high risk endeavor. I tried running in hiking boots and I tried running in track shoes with spikes. As the temperatures dropped to the lower teens, I donned a ski mask that left only eyes and mouth exposed. In single digits my beard froze from the moisture of my breath and would form long ice sickles that were way cool and marked me as a dedicated runner. A few spills and bruised hips and twisted ankles were no problem, just more pain to run through. Chicago offered some kind of run for everything and every holiday: the Turkey Trot 10K, the Columbus Day fun run, the St Patrick's 10K Fun Run and Pub

Crawl, and of course the Winter Solstice 10K. This latter was a run along the lake front, but also took us across some of the frozen ponds. I actually skipped church to do this run and that is why I was not blessed. My time was terrible, but I still finished higher than usual in the "open" category mostly because of meager turn out. We were promised hot chocolate and cider at the end, but hot had turned to cool by the time we got back to Start.

Advertisements were out for the Ravenswood Chicago Lakefront Ten, that is ten miles, not ten kilometers. It was held in later Spring, so I had all winter to train for it. Another moron named Steve covenanted with me to train for this race. Steve was a really good runner, one of those Louis-level guys except he was nice, gracious, and willing to run with me. We trained hard all winter and into the Spring. Times came down. I was once again greyhound lean and running miles in the lower fives. I was 30 years old and ready to make my mark on the running world.

It was a simple down-and-back race, again along the now thawed lakefront. It was a cool day but not cold. Perfect. I set a goal of averaging seven minute miles. We raced along together, the first miles coming easily just under seven. I was building a bit of a cushion not knowing how the last miles would go. At the turn around it was 34:30 which meant I could do 7:12's on the way back. I slowly gave back the cushion and with two miles to go was deep into oxygen debt. Steve kept urging me on. "What's the matter Brad? Going to quit are you? Why are you gasping like that? You should have trained harder. Shall I slow down for you?"- things like that.

With about a half mile to go I knew I was a few seconds behind so when Steve surged towards the end I tried to stay with him. I crossed in 69:58.

I was of course very aware of the Chicago Marathon. It would have to wait for another furlough though. And so four years later I was back, taking summer Greek Intensive and gearing up for the Chicago Marathon in November. Finally real running shoes were being produced, so I bought Sear's "Winner II" running shoes. After Keds, they felt wonderful! I could step on a pebble and it wouldn't hurt! Supporting the arches was a new concept. I won't bore you with all the training details, any more than I have to anyway. It was a basic schedule of escalating distances, interspersed with some speed play and an occasional rest day. I was aiming at 50 miles a week as we neared the event. I took Greek cards with me as I ran and that tended to ruin both the Greek and the run. This was before little clip-on running radios and MP3 players, so mostly I just hummed songs. Life is a Cabaret My Friend for some reason became the rhythmic mantra. Whenever I run even today it still fights its way into my cerebral cortex and refuses to be dislodged for long.

Marathon training, as it builds, also builds dread. With ever increasing mileage comes ever increasing fear of injury. What if after months of training I strained a muscle? What if I got the flu? What if my weak knee became inflamed? All this would mean lay-offs, recovery time, then eventually slowly resuming running. It would put me behind the training curve. Any interruption in the program would mean I would toe the starting line less prepared, would have to run slower or maybe not finish at all. A long recovery from a cold might mean a dreaded DNF. It would mean I would fall short of my goals and my self esteem would be threatened.

Mostly I just lived in denial. I never had a head-ache, what cough? What inflamed knee? Ignore the stuffy nose. All this bad stuff is only an illusion anyway. I was an early adopter of "visualize your own reality"- long before Depak Chopra or Rhonda Byrne and The Secret showed up.

The day came. No running partner this time. Just me against the clock and 30,000 other runners. Mile times were posted along the street. Line up at 5 minute miles and you wee at the front. A few people were there. Then the six minute sign. A lot more people there. I finally lined up by the 9 minute sign. The gun sounded and nobody moved. It was like uncoiling a huge traffic jam. The first "Elite" runners took off. Then the Great runners. Then the Good runners. Then the ok runners, then the ordinary peleton type runners, among which I counted myself. Ten minutes later I crossed the starting line at a slow jog. But then it thinned out and I could find my own long-legged pace. It was again a perfect running day. Water was stationed along the way as we wound our way through the various neighborhoods. Bands were set up playing usually Rocky or some ethnic mix. I hear now they play She Bangs. Occasionally a runner would stop at a port- a -john, and some would grab the beers offered along the way. If you drank a beer you moved down a category then lost more time at the port- a -john and to barf. I was running mechanically, just under 9 minutes per, building that cushion in hopes I could break four hours. Perfect 9's all along would give me a time of about 3:55.

The "Elite" runners were coming back and we could watch them gallop by. I snorted, what is "elite" anyway? Just because they are running 4:45 miles for 26 miles? Does that make them "elite"? No big deal, really. I almost ran a mile under five once.

All went well until about mile 22. I had read about the Wall, but had never hit a wall. The wall hit me and crushed me under its weight. One minute I was running ok, but getting very tired, then I could not get enough air and my legs were refusing to obey. I hated to do it, but I had to. I would never forgive myself. I have never confessed this to anyone before but now that I am 60 the shame of it has diminished to some degree. OK, I need to unload this. I .....walked. I walked, got my breath, started to jog again, then soon had to walk yet again. This time there was no truck to come by and take me the last miles. I staggered along this way watching my cushion disappear slowly but surely. Then I could see the line and knew that nirvana was near. There was no sprint left in me, no surge, no run, no jog so I just kind of stumbled my way across. 3:54:30. But hey, I got a free quarter banana and some juice at the end.

OK, time for some lessons along the way. Working backward. The shame of failing to achieve your goals diminishes with age. The greater the shame the longer it takes, like radioactivity. The half-life of shame is persistent. Confessing it really doesn't help all that much, but people think better of you if have things to confess from time to time. Cushions and margins are key to just about everything because sooner or later you will lose them and if didn't have them, then you would be cutting into muscle and bone. The longer the race and the higher the goal require more commitment and more training and a greater risk of failure. The reward at the end is pointless, I mean, a quarter banana? The only rewards are internal and a sense of a job at least done if not done very well. Always line up lower than the truth. That way you can pass more people. The further back you start the more people you can pass and there is no satisfaction like passing up folks. Expect walls in life but best to avoid them. Elite is just a frame of mind. The more people in the race, the higher you will finish. Conversely the larger the race, the chances of placing in your age group diminish. We will cover this one again, but the older you are the fewer people in your group until at some point, if you are still alive and running, you will win your group. Don't bother explaining your obsession, it sounds irrational to people and they might think you are just rationalizing your behavior. I have tried to explain why I run in sub zero wind chills across ice and though the flu and ignore inflammation and enjoy oxygen debt. I no longer explain. Pick your songs. I should have picked Amazing Grace or The Church's One Foundation because life is NOT a cabaret.

Runners need to learn the art of timely peeing. Every decent race has a row or two of port- o -potties. They all have funny company names on them like Sanican, the Oui Oui and my favorite, Spanky and I am not making that up. Each race culture however is different. The most venerable races have taught their runners to line up

like in a bank or for "self check out" at the grocery store, that is one line and you go to the first open potty. However some races have their runners line up separately for each john. This is bad news if you are stuck in a slow line and the minutes are ticking down to the gun. The stress and excitement leading up to a race plus all the extra but unnecessary hydration leads to a condition called RPS or "runners pee syndrome." Every few minutes the urge returns and you rush to the nearest john and eek out a little more. Observing this can be great sport. It is proven that 22% of the runners forget to lock their door. Soon enough another runner comes by, sees the green color and opens it. Reactions just make you want to go more! People scream and cuss and grab for the door-ooops, the door is already too far to reach- while trying to finish the job and guard modesty, which can't be done simultaneously. The line up laughs good naturedly with the go-er. The trick to all this is to go early and go often, don't drink too much, and avoid the late line up of panicked peers.

Now into my mid thirties, again on furlough, I signed up for the Emerald City Half-Marathon . They run this race on Thanksgiving, which in Seattle is in late November. That is too bad because it always is miserable weather, unlike the other months. Again I felt very trained up and ready to rip a good one. A huge storm rolled from the Pacific having first come from Alaska and Siberia or something. It was a dark and stormy morning. When the gun sounded we could hardly hear it in the downpour. "Did you hear the gun?" We mulled around like sheep, then figured it was past start time so we all took off, all thousand or so of us. There were lots of no shows. This bad news for us "good" runners (Yes, I have advanced myself a category now) because all the out of shape, weak, infirm and old runners that push our percentile placement higher have opted out leaving only the fit and very vicious. This time I lined up by the 7 minute banner and held the low sevens through most of the race. I was running next to a very fine female runner and we chatted a bit early on. "Wet day." "Cold." "What are you doing tonight?" she asked me. Ha ha, that's a good one. Eventually she moved in front of me and was even more inspiring to follow. At about the ten mile mark I was only at 72 which was great given the conditions but a chill was setting in. I could feel it in my bones. I was drenched like I had been running under a waterfall the whole time. Eventually I crossed the 13.1 mile line in 1:34, which was about 7:10 per mile. Fine female had disappeared at about the twelve mark with an amazing surge. However I was shivering out of control like I had spent the night naked on top of Mt Rainier. I also learned that the storm had sunk the floating bridge across Lake Washington. So, you see, I am not just exaggerating. But, listen to this, a 1:34 time would make a 3:08 full marathon which would qualify me for Boston. I just had to run that fast twice as far.

Boston is the holy grail of marathoners. It is the stuff of Boston Davidy Rogers and Frank Shorter and my then latest hero who shattered their records, Alberto Salazar. I knew all about Heartbreak Hill...someday I wanted to break my heart there too! Maybe it was in sight...

The next year we found ourselves living near a school with a track. I did lot of my LSD (don't worry, that is "long slow distance") on the track for speed work. I was still only a "good" runner but now thought of myself as a "serious" runner. I could do ten 400 repeats at about 75 seconds, which was way better than my High School track times. I ran a 5:21 mile one day almost by accident. I mulled over the idea of working towards an all out timed mile to see if I could yet break five. Internal conflicts stopped me. The mile was such an emotional distance I could not bear facing it "for real." Twice I started to do it and stopped, once after the second lap (which was 2:28, the right pace) and once after three, which was 3:45, again right on, but I simply lacked the courage. The third lap had turned my stomach numb and I was seeing spots as I came by. I think I could have made it in a do or die, gun to the head scenario, but there was no gun.

I needed to work on pacing and see how close I could come to qualifying times of running a sub three marathon. I decided to do it on the track. It would be perfect. There was even a water fountain right there! I again lined up 26 rocks and started off. That is 104.8 laps. Around and around like a metronome I went. I settled in to 8 minute miles, mile after mile. If I slowed a couple of seconds, I would recover it on the next lap. In middle distance I varied my speed just to give my muscles some novelty. Run four laps, kick a rock, run four more, kick another, grab a drink, keep going. At about twenty I was expecting to hit the wall, but never did. I just got progressively more fatigued and my times faltered a bit. I finished in 3:36. Boston was still a

long ways off.

Somewhere in the chronology of all this came the SeaFair 10K. Seattle goes rather insane during the summer SeaFair. The race is in late July. It was a rare hot day for Seattle, but I felt I still had the adaptive advantage being mostly Congolese. This was not long after my 104.8 laps and I felt I was in great shape. I had added extensive hill training by then. Training going up hill is fine, training going down hill is not. I had read that Alberto trained also on down hills because, as he says, if you run faster you are faster. I must have picked a too-steep hill, which is easy to do in Seattle. After running down several hills, my shins and knees hurt. By the next morning I could hardly walk. I had to take several days off, then resume light running and so the edge was off for the SeaFair 10K. After a couple of miles I basically caved in to the voice of my Inner Whine, "see Hill, that was a slow mile, you can't make it up, you are sore, you should just jog along and have fun, this is a 'fun run', what part of 'fun' don't you understand?" So I did, finishing in about 49 or some dismal number.

Then there was the Seattle Mariner and Rainer Beer 7 miler. If you ran the race, you got a bunch of goodies including free tickets to the Mariner game and a Rainer Beer T-shirt. Ruth joined me for this one. I had recovered from my last dismal outing and was more or less ready for this. Dan Dungan was my partner for the race, so I had incentive to push it along. It was just fun from beginning to end. We cruised in close together at about a 7:20 pace. We got free beer mugs and seats in the stratosphere. All the sweaty runners were quarantined off to that section so as not to gross out the paying customers. When they called for the national anthem, we all stood, with a collective groan that caused the other sections to turn and look at us. We all then laughed at ourselves. Who said runners don't have a sense of humor?

Then I turned 40. Until then I had been in the "open" categories. Now I was at the top of an age category. Des Moines, my home town, population 20,000 sponsored a Waterland Festival every summer complete with 10K. It is very much up and down long hills. The whole Hill clan and church was out to watch the parade, which meant they would also watch the preceding 10K. I felt in my bones that this was my big day. I pushed very hard early on, especially since it was down hill. As we raced through the town, I could actually see the front runners and...there were no girls in front of me! The clan cheered. I hoped my old coach was out there and was saying "what ever happened to Hill? Why isn't he last?" We turned to go up the hill and I was actually gaining. I ran 39:39 and finished second in my age group, got a ribbon with a medal, my first ever. Finally all those miles and years of agony paid off! Whoohoo.

Lessons along the road less traveled. I know you were waiting for this part and I thank you for not skipping ahead. Pick your lines and don't wait too long or you will pay for it one way or another. It's safe to laugh at defenseless people when you are just part of a leering crowd. Always follow someone inspiring. Own your phobias. Try to face them down but if you can't, so what? Move on. Find others you can face down. Aim for your "Boston" dream but realize that all this stuff about achieving anything you want is mostly bunk. If you can't realize your dream, maybe you can realize your musings. Monotony might be the key to success, rhythms and cadence will get you there. Heroes can be wrong. I wasn't faster just because I ran faster, in fact, it made me slower for a long time. Beat yourself up over a bad performance because nobody else will and then you will have taught yourself a good lesson. Don't groan when you stand or sit. Toss your empty souvenir beer mugs. They don't fit on the shelf anyway. And hang in there, eventually your day will come and all your old detractors, nay sayers, critics and doubters will fall at your feet.

Running in Bellingham: Going like 90

We moved the Bellingham Washington in the summer of 1991 and stayed there for eight years. The 90's were good running years, especially because I was not killed by savage dogs, neither did I drown. So, you with me here? Let's do the 90's.

Age forty-one, still near the top of my age group. We lived atop Alabama Hill, so no matter where I ran it involved go down then up a very steep hill. My usual route took me first East, where I ran along the shore of

Lake Whatcom, then back towards town, then home. I always had to face the Hill. Even as I began the run, I was thinking about it. It colored my workouts, intimidated me, infuriated me, broke me. It was "brokeback" mountain for sure. If I ran too fast I would come to the hill exhausted and It knew it. It would speak to me, "Hill, you can't do it this time. You will have to walk and your church members will drive by and see you walking up the hill and will mock and despise you and you will know you deserve it." Three hills out of four, somebody would drive by and honk and wave. The Hill was right. So I never ever walked. But there were times when walking would have been faster.

On occasion I would conquer the hill.

The five miles felt good, even if fast. I was peaking for a race, the Hagen-to-Hagen 5k. Five K was like nothing to me, a few minutes and it was over. But I needed to run faster so my workouts emphasized oxygen debt. I came to the Hill and said "Today, I take the Hill or die" and started to sprint up it. It was about a half mile long, and I was still cruising at the midway point. Great gulps of air, pulse at 180, legs pumping, I was king of the world. But no cars were coming by. I wanted "my people" to see their iron-man pastor tear it up. As I neared the crest, all the systems were in the red zone but with only a hundred yards to go, sheer will power was sufficient. I even picked it up. With twenty yards to go I was seeing black spots and couldn't swallow. As I came to the top I realized that I could not feel my stomach, but I had done it! A new PR! I bent over, hands on knees, gasping, trying not to fall over.

A car slowed, window down, "Hey pastor Brad! Long hill, huh? Tires you out, doesn't it?" honked twice because they loved Jesus and took off. It wasn't fair. The Hill said derisively, "Hill, what's the point?"

Hagen is a grocery store. One is about 5k from the other. It is a good deal for them. Runners pay to run between them and wear their T shirts. It starts up a gentle long hill, then goes down hill for the rest of the way. Hills were my thing by then. Some folks from church always ran it, but nobody serious. First mile was 6:10, then two sub sixes. I ran it in 19 flat but no ribbon. The problem always was that @#@$#% college right there. Their runners would turn out and dominate every year. They did not do age groups either. But 19 was great for me as I headed into my official Midlife years. It was about then that I vowed to run at least one mile under six every year.

The Covenant Denomination owns a camp near Olympia. It is wooded with a lake, way out in the wilderness. A dirt road runs around the perimeter and gives access to some homes. These homes vary from country-squire to trash. It is about ten miles around. So I decided to run it one fine morning. My fingers tremble even as I write this. Nobody is on that road, you are very alone. I think of coyotes and wolves, bears and angry mother moose and the like. But I never see any. At about the six-mile mark I come into some homes. One is like the Clampet's home before they moved, but it has a dilapidated wooden fence along the edge. As I near it, Cujo on steroids gets up from the porch and barks at me. To say he "barks" is like saying the howitzer fired...vastly under-descriptive. His roar makes the fence shake and he comes off the porch at me. He hits the boards and they almost give under his weight. His roar turns to a savage snarl, something I might hear as Simba takes down an antelope. He keeps battering the fence. Here and there he can stick part of this drooling snout through. Long bared teeth and strings of saliva, blood red eyes. He hates me, he wants not just to bite me but to disembowel me and tear out my entrails. I look ahead. What if there is a gap in the fence? I whisper Life is a Cabaret My Friend...I told you I couldn't get that song out of my head. I need more theology than that. "Now I lay me down to sleep..." well, I just can't get prayers going, I am too frightened. I finally start "My Father who art in heaven..." I might soon be in that heaven. I figure that if he makes it through the fence I can vault it to the other side. Then of course he would come back, and I would vault it again. That game would be fun for only so long, but it is all I had. I come to the end, and sure enough, there is a gap. Cujo races ahead and manages to get his whole head through. The fence Blackles but holds. I go past, then stop, turn. He grows quiet. His eyes speak truth, "I smell your fear, I will drink your blood and play with your bones...just come by again." I stare at him, now safe. "Nice doggie." And then finish my route.

Bellingham had a very nice Civic Stadium where all manner of sports were played. Every year they held an all-comers track meet. I was now 45, once again at the top of my age group. I decided to work for the open mile. Injury free, I was running well, alternating long distances with repeat 800's and speed work. I wondered what I could do. I wondered why I needed to know that. I still loved the mile and feared it. I always will. Even now at age 60, if the mile comes on TV for some track event or other, my blood pressure goes way up. I am there and on lap three I usually drink a scotch.

The day came. The mile was the last event. The stadium was about a third full and it contained a lot of people from church. This was huge incentive for me. Rebecca was there to cheer me on. She was the youngest of the family and didn't know better. I warmed up, then waited, then waited more. Then warmed up again, stretched, jogged, did some short sprints, then waited. Then did it again. This was insane. People were starting to leave. Then "Five minutes to the mile." My heart pounded and palms got sweaty. I needed to use the PeeWee (yes indeed, that was the name of the portable john). Again.

Finally we lined up. There were about twenty of us. I confess, my pulse was starting to rise just by writing this....I looked around at my competitors. No obvious ringers from the college. Maybe a couple of guys from the High School. A number of young women, which always raised the ante for me.

"On your marks..." I bent over, hands on knee, ready to spring into action. I needed to go one more time but doubted if I could get there in time.

"Get set!" Hey, I was born ready. This was my event. I own the mile. Little did these people know that once I had come within twenty seconds of breaking the High School Record.

"Go!" No gun, just "go"- so we went. Fast. I was in the middle. Coming around to the start/finish. "1:20" he said as I went by. That would be a 5:20 pace if I kept it up. I doubted if I had that in me. Way too fast, I slowed but so did everybody. I was still in the middle as we came around the second lap. This was pretty amazing to me. Better late than never. I felt good, though I knew we had slowed a lot. "2:45" he said. That would be a 5:30 if I did that for the second half. But now Lap Three was before me. It spoke to me. "Hill, this is your Chappaquiddick..." "What?" I replied to the voice of Lap Three. "You know, Ted Kennedy...never mind. This is your Waterloo, Hill. You always fade, you die, you cave..." I said "depends on if you are Napoleon or Wellington! Today I am Wellington!" "Huh?" said the voice. But I was half way around before we concluded this conversation. I moved into the lead on the backstretch. Really, I do not lie, ask Rebecca. However I noticed that the stands were nearly empty and all the church people were gone. Now I would have to induce bragging. I had hoped they would just say on Sunday "Great race Pastor Brad!" Now I would have to say "Hey, sorry you left before the Mile..." and they would say "Yes, sorry, tell us about the mile..." Coming around I was actually pulling farther ahead. I don't know what that split was, I was delirious with excitement. It was my moment I had trained my whole life for. I was about to be validated. But I knew that somebody was going to pass me. "Not today" I muttered and stretched it out, pumping hard, going deep, reaching high, going within...that's about it I guess. Going wide, didn't want to do that. I glanced behind me on the back stretch. Three or four runners were about five yards behind me, but they were not gaining. Last corner, don't trip on the rail, don't stumble, sprint you coward, sprint, leave it all on the track. But with ten yards to go, guess what? Ha ha, got you. Nothing. I won. I have a blue ribbon. Rebecca was yelling "you won you won" - foreign words to me. Never heard them again, but I heard them once and once is enough. Well, not really, but it will have to do. 5:32.

Everybody has a "hill" in life. You actually do have to choose to die on it. Maybe your "hill" is a sports challenge, maybe it is that you are unemployed because you are unemployable because you did too many drugs in HS like some of my 60's friends, maybe you are lost on Mt Rainier in a snow storm and slowly freezing to death, maybe your anti-depressants give you suicidal thoughts (now that is depressing)-I don't know, but you know what it is. Most of the time the Hill will beat you, but not always. Sometimes you win. There is a law that says your friends will always be there for you when you are failing, but they are never

around when you are winning. That is probably why they think you are a loser. They don't believe you when you say "I sprinted up the hill" or "I won the open mile." They smile and think "whatever." If the hill doesn't kill you, the dog will. We are often just a few inches from death, sometimes we know it and sometimes we don't. When we know it, it teaches us about our selves and what our values are, the things that count in life, like "always pack heat." It is best to taunt death when you are safe.

There is another track a couple of miles from home, the one that goes with Whatcom Middle School. I started running that track soon after this as an alternative to Civic Stadium. I could never run there again, it would ruin the memory of the Sacred Day. It was a cinder track, the old black cinders that were ok when totally dry but in Bellingham, that happened about as often as the Lunar Eclipse. It would be part of my longer run. But it always felt odd. It was not an oval. The West curve was long and broad, the East curve much shorter and sharper. And it felt slow.

So I was going to do my annual "under six" run. Judging from my workouts, I knew I could do it easily. So I started out fast, but came around at 90 even. I blinked. It should have been around 83 or 84. Maybe I was just tired, or the cinders were sticking to my shoes. But I was still on pace. Half-way mark was 3:03. This could not be. I was still a young man with my whole life ahead of me...well, half anyway. I had vowed!!! I put my head down, but this was Lap Three. "Shut up already" I said to it and it stayed strangely muted. 4:33. This was enough already! I gave it all up and raced around that last lap like Seattle Slough with a burr under his saddle shouting as I went "but I vowed, I vowed!" 5:59. Whew.

Sometime later I mentioned this to a teacher there. She laughed. "That track is not 400 meters... it's a bit longer." "How much longer?" I asked. "Don't know for sure." So I measured it one day with my bicycle. I had measured the distance that one tire rotation would go, then counted how many for a lap then multiplied by four. It came out to about 1.12 miles. I am not good enough at math to figure this out. But if it was .12 too long, that is about 176 yards. Right? If I sprinted that distance, it would take me about 22 seconds. So I figure I actually ran a 5:38 or something that day, but I will never know and when I tell my friends that, actually, the track was too long, they kind of laugh. I probably even broke 5:30...who can say?

A number of Triathlons are held in the area every year. But I figured myself for a runner and really didn't want to do any cross training. But a friend gave me a 12 speed Trek racing bike, so I started riding some. The lake nearby was great in August so I swam some as well. Watching the Hawaiian "Iron Man", I said "I would like to try that someday." That is a couple miles of swimming, a hundred some miles of biking, and a full marathon at the end. Somebody said, probably Ruth, "you will need to build up to that..." Always somebody putting a damper on things. The "Tin Man" Triathlon was swimming a half mile, biking maybe 24 and running a 10K at the end. That was more like it. As Spring came around, I went down to the lake, alone. This is really not wise, but who am I going to swim with at 7 in the morning in 50 degree water? Who? Nobody, that's who. I swim along the rope in case I get cramps, and I can stand up most of the time anyway. I am totally safe. After about a half hour I get out and try to get on the bike, but am so frozen I fall over. Finally I get the blood going and start pedaling. Now I am really cold. Get off the bike, then try to run. Legs feel like an arthritic giraffe. I am just guessing here about how the giraffe might feel. This so far is not fun. I decide to actually read up on training and learn that I don't have to do all the events every day. This is good news. So now I have swim - bike days, and bike -run days and swim-run days and once in a while just a swim or run or bike day.

I did a couple triathalons in the area and enjoyed it. Swimming was the worse of the three legs. I gasped and felt as if I were drowning, which I was, as people kicked me and I took in a lot of water. I always came out near last, which was familiar. I could pick up some places on the bike and a lot on the final run, so I finished ok but nowhere near age group award territory.

Then Rebecca wanted to do it. It was fun training together. But I saw right away that she was going to beat me in the swim portion quite easily. So I doubled up on my swimming training. My Jr Hi daughter just was not

going to come out of the water before me. I would be there "for her" and shout encouragement from the shore where I already was, it would be unnatural to have it the other way around.

The day came, as it always does. We had all our change-over gear for the bike ready to go by the shore. I was swimming better than ever and was confident. We hit the water and off we went. This was great. I going strong, breathing well, kicking but not being kicked for a change, got close to the buoy only to see Becca going by me the other way. I made the turn and kicked for home but she was up and into her biking gear before I got out of the water. "Come on, Dad, way to go!" she shouted encouragement. That a girl. I got a rock in my shoe as I tried to change. She was on the bike and out of sight. I finally got onto the bike and took off and didn't catch her until half way through. I had come out of the water with a better time than ever before...now I had the dilemma. I could push on hard and see what I could do...or I could accompany my daughter and "be there for her." Now most dads reading this will think, "no brainer." Stay with the progeny, right? But when it comes to racing that is not my natural inclination. It is always about PR and age-group placement. If I stayed with her, I would read in the paper that in my age group I placed nearly last...but as I look at the top times, I know I could have been there and maybe got a ribbon. It is about the ribbon. I wish I could tell you that I did the right thing here, but just as I pulled alongside, she said "Hi Dad, this is fun isn't it." I knew that was it for me. I stayed with her and let the ribbon go. We started the two lap 10K together, but she was fading, got a side ache, but kept going. By the end of lap one she was in real pain, holding her side, crabbing along like a wounded crustacean or maybe a cockroach with only two legs. Ruth started to run with us on the last lap also. We said she could quit and walk, but she wouldn't, Rebecca either. Where did she get that from? We finally came around to the end and collapsed together.

As it turned out, she won her age group. That's Daddy's girl! And to think I helped her do it!

Now just in case my other daughter, Rachel, ever reads this, I want to say, you are Daddy's girl too! You won lots of things, including Ms Whatcom County and were First Chair Saxophone...but this is about running. And you both will me "my girls" even if you don't win anything, but winning things helps. There is more about you later in the story.

As we neared the end of our time in Bellingham, I realized I was again nearing the bottom of my age group, 49. That is the worst place to be. My times and distances were not really showing that though, so I had great hopes that when I turned fifty in Chicago (where we would spend the next twelve years), I could pick some races and bring home the bacon. I did one two mile on the track that year in 11:45 and thought that boded well.

Time for the Hagen-to-Hagen again. I had struck up a friendship with Tommy, who was just turning out for cross country as a freshman in High School that year. We talked a lot about running at church. He always enjoyed my story of beating Louis, every time.

"Pastor, think you can beat me in the Hagen-to-Hagen?"

"Tommy, you got that right." Why couldn't I just smile and walk away?

The day came to my surprise. Cold and windy with some light showers. We lined up together. "Take it easy up the hill Tommy, gun it going down" I advised. Then we were released. Tommy sprinted ahead and gunned it up the hill. No matter, I would reel him back in. My long long legs were a huge asset going down. I crested the top and didn't see Tommy anywhere. I still had two miles to get him back. I galloped down the hill with great bounding strides. With a mile to go I could see him ahead. He was glancing over his shoulder looking for me. I visualized an all out sprint with 200 to go that would carry me past him. However he was visualizing keeping his lead. Our visions collided. I got within a hundred yards when the end came up on us. I crossed, bent over and tried to regain my breath.

"Good run pastor!" People only say that when they have run better, it is condescending and a veiled put-down. I wanted to say that to Tommy. But that would have been immature.

I had a twelve mile course that went out along the Lake and back, I could add miles to it or subtract. It was gorgeous the whole way and no dogs. I would run out and back then do a couple of hills then some speed work near the house. It was all good. Except...a slight discomfort on the heal of my foot began to bother me. I rested it...a whole day and it didn't help. I got soft sole inserts, it didn't help. It got worse. But I had trained through broken legs and fractured ribs and a concussion before, this would go away. We moved, and I didn't run for a couple of weeks so it got a good rest. As soon as I started to run however, the pain got my notice. I kept at it, put ice on it, stretched it well, the whole thing, nada. Just worse. Finally the doc said "plantar fasciitis."

And so we come to the new millennium, 1999-2010 in Chicago.

If you know in your heart you can beat your young daughter, you don't have to. However if you have some doubts, maybe you do. Running through pain and injury is smart if in fact it does go away, but if it doesn't it makes you out to be a moron. The future is never what it used to be. But nobody can really verify the past either (that's my training in post-modern hermeneutics kicking in). Sometimes, however, you are actually better than you think you are. Sometimes the poor track is really the reason. But if you know that for a fact, just keep it to yourself and smile inwardly, don't tell. Cross training is a wonderful thing but don't let it confuse you as to who you really are. After you cross the half-century-of- life mark, don't ask yourself why you are doing things anymore, it is disheartening. Living vicariously is ok, but don't rob glory from another. Don't accept challenges from the young and hungry. The "day" does in fact not always come, sometimes you die first, but short of that, it does come. It is always good to have a "day" out there to aim for, that gets you up and out into the cold, that pulls you forward. It is also very good to get it over with.

The Chicago Blues

I had hoped that with the new millennium and once again being at the top of the age group, I could, if I picked small races, actually take away some ribbons. But first, there was the matter of this pesky plantar fasciitis. The doc tried anti inflamatories, stretching, ice, heat, therapy, then finally orthopedic inserts. This latter actually worked, but I was now into the Chicago winter and running came to a stop. The treadmill and the stationary bike just didn't do it. But as the snow melted and I got back out there, it felt good and so once again I began to build mileage and speed. North Park University had a track for that anaerobic work and the Chicago River had a long path for the former. Ruth was also picking up her running during this time and was in great shape. From time to time we would pass going in opposite directions on the path and hit hands and even stop for a quick kiss.

There are certain rules in effect for using these paths, and rules for using the track. They are not always written down, but they exist. Don't walk two or three abreast and block the whole path. Don't walk your dog on a leash and be on one side of the path and dog on the other. When I yell "on your left" it does not mean "move to your left." Don't stop suddenly, don't veer suddenly across the path. Walk on the outside lane, not the inside lane. Run counter-clockwise. All these common sense rules are violated continually. The last rule is that if you violate a rule and get hit or bumped, don't get all indignant. It was YOUR FAULT. There was not a day I went out when one or more of these rules were ignored. I became an expert on anticipation. I especially liked the woman with six little doglets on five leashes that spread out over the whole path. That left one doggie that was not leashed and he would go after me. One day he got my ankle and I kicked him. She started to yell at me in Polish or Russian or Romanian or something. I had faced bigger dogs before. This one I could take.

Every year towards the end of May, one of the many 'hoods offered The Ridge Run 10K. We have run it just about every year. It was always a good test of my "May" conditioning. First time out it was 47:30.

Then there was the Hot May Ridge Run. I had started running with David so we were there together. Ruth was there for the 5k run. It was sultry, hot, and humid like a sweat lodge. It felt like...Congo. I would be fine. I came into it with good training and good times. I thought I could average 7:30. We all got very hydrated. First mile was 7:25, so far so good. Second mile was 7:30 or so, right on pace. Then it hit, reminiscent of that "wall" so many years ago. No breath, heart racing, legs weak, hyperventilating. My times bled off like a race car out of gas. People along the way had turned on sprinklers. Without them we all would have had strokes. I drank at every stop- something I never did. David was just a few paces behind and suffering too. I came in about 51 and glad to just be alive. At least that would be an easy time to beat as the year went on. Ruth ran a great 5k and we all got high on Gator Aid.

That "failure" spurred me on. I found another 10K in a little "village" called Glen View. The various suburbs are often called "villages" in Chicagoland. I should tell them about real villages. I found the start in the parking lot of an elementary school. There were maybe two hundred people milling around. But some were for the one mile fun run, some for the 5k. When it came time for the 10K, there were about 50 of us. I scoped it out. Some were very young. Some were female. A few were too old. I lined up in the middle, which is where the middle-aged line up. There were only a few of my "peers." A couple were too fat. One wore actual tennis shoes. That left maybe six or seven to worry about. This race was pretty uneventful, I felt good, vaguely aware of my plantar lurking, knowing I could not train full-on, but I was cruising along in the mid 7's. With about two miles to go, I realized I was pretty much alone. There was a guy twenty yards ahead, nobody behind me. I thought "what if that guy gets third in my age group?" Awards only go down to third place. So I started to work hard at reeling him in. But as if sensing this, he picked it up. He was thinking "what if that guy behind me gets third?" We crossed the line with him still about ten yards ahead. I waited until the results were posted. And there it was - 2nd in the 50-55 group. I was rapidly collecting trophies now! I mean, one at the Waterland Festival, then another five years ago in the Open Mile and now this one. I momentarily wondered how Louis was doing.

If you feel like you are on a treadmill, maybe you are. There is no substitute for the real thing, though often the substitute is better than nothing. Injuries just give us more to overcome and so offer another source of pride and even bragging. Awareness of mortality is sobering and should be buried as much as possible. Rules of the Road are there for a purpose, to keep people out of your way. Stupid is as stupid does but mostly it is just about being oblivious. Be gracious but kick dogs when you can. Suffocating can kill you. Failure is only fuel for a focused future. I like that one. Attrition over time will eventually place you among the elite if you are not one of the attrited. Pick your races. The guy in front is not your friend. Friends start about a hundred yards back.

I have mentioned David. He has a wife, Rose. They were both runners. Rose joined a marathon training group. So what could David and I do except also train for the 'thon....but being men we didn't need any "club" or "group." We just went out and ran, then ran more and more. The moment he suggested that we train up and run the marathon, I knew I would but I had to fight it for a while. I had sworn off just such things about 15 years before. I was getting kind old for that. I had suffered from plantar fasciitis. I had a bad knee. I didn't have time to devote to training. I knew what it took to run it well. I was a miler at heart and not a marathoner. And mostly, what if Rose beat me? David was a mensch and he indeed might beat me, but that was ok. He was also younger (well, a couple of years anyway). But the lure and the allure was still there. Could I still do it at age 54 (oh no, bottom of age group again, so forget any ribbons). Could I break...four hours? What would Ruth say? So I said, casually, sure, why not.

So we started training for the Traverse City (MI) marathon which would happen in at the end of May. We had about three months. The Chicago winter would let up sometime in February, then we could get started seriously. I had done treadmill and bike during the winter so was not totally a wet noodle, but I had a long way to go. David was biker and somehow was lean and mean the first day we set out for a six mile jog. Week by week we escalated our runs. Then the weather turned for the worse. It snowed, but we ran through the park trails anyway. Temps dropped into the 'teens but still we ran. I prayed before we took off each day, "Lord

don't let me slip and tear anything!" Weekday workouts were in the six to ten mile range, then on Saturday we did the "long" run. Steadily it went up and up and up until we were doing 20 then 22 miles on Saturday.

David had this very strange training routine. He had "bad knees" and so he would run hard for six minutes then walk for two or three. Then off he would go again. This was totally twilight zone for me. We would start out together but he was pushing hard and moved way ahead of me, then suddenly he would stop and walk and I would zoom past. Then he would catch up and tear past me, then stop. It was like a yo-yo. We really could not talk very much doing it this way. I had about three seconds either when he went by or I went by. "Hey David, you ok....." "Hey David, how is..." and so on. Meanwhile

Rose was doing it the right way.

Judging from my training times, I figured I could run about 9 minute miles for the 26.2 distance. This would get me in about 3:56.

We went up to Traverse City. Ruth was going to do the Ten K which was prior to the Marathon. She did great, running about 50 minutes, a new PR for her. Then inevitably inexorably it was our turn. We started off, David took off, but I knew I would pass him in about 7 minutes. The first mile was about 9, then I stepped in a pothole and twisted my ankle. I thought "fiddle sticks" - there went my whole life. But it felt ok, I gingerly ran along and could feel the strain but it went away. I yo-yo'ed with David for a while then forget even where he was. I didn't see him until the end. It was truly beautiful. The peninsula that jutted out into the Lake was gorgeous and I loved every second of the first half. I made the turn back at 1:55 and thought I had it made. It felt even easy. I did a systems analysis. Breathing was easy. Pulse was low. Legs felt great. Arms swinging easy. On the way back I saw David and waved, I was way ahead of the yo-yo. Rose was ten minutes back. I was safe. After the turn I found myself in a pretty consistent nine minute per mile group. We ran together and bantered, shared our stories and our lives. "How you doin'?" "OK, you?" "Pain in the left quad" and so on. Great male bonding.

A guy came up to me. "You doin' nines right? Mind if I tag along?" "No," I grunted. I was flattered. Sure stick with me kid, and you'll break four. We ran alongside each other for a few miles.

At about mile 20 I felt the first premonition of disaster. My quads were hurting a bit, but tolerable. Fatigue was building but that was normal after twenty miles of running. At mile twenty-one it was worse. At mile twenty-two the pain was, well, painful, very. I could feel myself slowing. The pain was growing rapidly. This was not the wall. I had done the wall and knew what it was like. In terms of exhaustion and fatigue I felt relatively ok, but the pain....wow. It grew and bit into my legs like a viper sinking its teeth into my muscles. I soon wanted to cry and sob but people would hear. Was this like childbirth, or passing a kidney stone? My times slowed, I knew it but had lost track of the mile markers and so my pace. I was reduced to barely jogging. People could walk faster than this, but I kept at it. I WOULD NOT WALK. With a mile to go I thought my legs would seize up. How could they keep on when there was no feeling and my whole body felt like it was continuously tazered? And...where was David? And most importantly, where was Rose?

Finally I came into the track. Only a quarter mile to go, around the track and to the end. Ruth was there, waving and shouting something. Probably encouragement. I was literally or maybe metaphorically staggering along, like Julie Moss in the 1982 Ironman. You remember. She collapsed with only yards to go, and crawled along still in first place. She managed to get up only to fall. He legs were jelly. With only feet to go a couple of runners passed her, but she finished, basically brain dead. That was me. I made it around somehow, unconsciously, then it was over. 4:06. !@#$#Q$% Most of that ":06" was given back in the last mile or two. I must have run, then "twelves or thirteens" to lose that much time.

David finished. "Great run David!" I lauded him.

I also beat Rose. And I finished. And I didn't walk. And I wasn't last. So I had lots of "wins" to check off. And...it felt good except for the pain. Satisfying. Endorphic. Euphoric. Xenophobic. No, not that one. Never mind. I had done it, finished and done pretty well. So what if I had fallen short of my goals? I had fulfilled another goal, just finishing another Marathon. At my age! Louis was no doubt a fat unhealthy slob by now, and certainly I could beat him. After all it is never what "could I do" but "what can I do now" that counts.

Ruth was ecstatic. "You did it!" She was not all that clear about what "it" was, but I assumed it meant "you finished!!!!" Finishing is really what life is all about after all.

The Traverse City Marathon was a great teacher. It taught me a lot. Huge variations of pace in life are not good, all things considered. It is like freezing and thawing too often. It makes you mushy. Better to keep the pace even. Old guys can still do it, but just not as well and the definition of "it" shifts. And it is not true that "nobody does it better." Lots of men do. Women too. The first half might feel good, but you will always pay in the end. Early margins are always paid back later with interest. But also, enjoy the first half. Revel, bask, enfold it into yourself. Why not? Pain cannot stop you. Maybe it should but if you are insane and driven enough, it will not. Ignore it as long as you can. Then plea bargain. The older you are, the shorter are the distances you should race. Love an enthusiastic wife. Believe her. Believe in her.

After I recovered, I took aim at an easy half-marathon. David and I were still running together. We were also biking together. I could not keep up of course. David was semi-pro with big strong thighs. I worked hard to keep up but basically he had to slow down. He also rode his bike right through Chicago traffic. You should not do that even in a car! But I followed and gained confidence, then arrogance. Then some cheese-brain opened the door of his car right into my lane and I hit it. Not too hard, but enough to spill me and bounce me on the pavement. Thanks David. It was not, technically speaking, his fault, but he was my biking role-model. No more. Now I ride on sidewalks.

Training for the "half" is nothing. You can do a Half with only doing an occasional 10K and some longer distance. We ran the half, again David was doing this crazy "save the knees" thing, but only for the 10K. He was done and now it was my turn. This was the best "feeling" run I had had for a long time. I cruised along way too slow. Then through a bunch of water, which gave me blisters later, but no matter. Pushing to the end, passing people, harder with two miles to go, harder yet, then sprinting, passing people, finishing in 1:55. Not bad. For me. At that point.

In an effort to catch up to my age group and be a "contender" for some kind of ribbon, I worked hard at speed work on the track. Nothing improved my running faster than running faster. Train faster, run faster. It is an axiom, take it to the bank. Quarter miles were great. I got back to doing eight at under 90 seconds (alternating a run/jog pattern), with a couple around 80. I could do a half-mile well under three minutes. I was doing over-distance, running six to ten miles a couple times a week. I weighed in at 186. Once again I could count ribs and see muscle definition.

Remember...six minute miles was the measure and the Vow. Every year I had beat that time, some with more cushion than others. I was now 57. It was time for my annual mile check up. Given the above training regimen I knew I could beat six. So I ran hard, but once again the Satanic third lap sucked my blood of oxygen and even though I gave it 110% on lap four, I came in at 6:09. I was astounded. I was flummoxed. I was depressed. Not suicidal, just shaken to my core. I was back to Sophomore PE class. So I redoubled my efforts, trained harder, and put my name in for a mile run, organized by the local college. It brought me back to the "The Run" at Civic Stadium. This was it. And it was. I ran my spleen out, kidney, liver, stomach and heart also and only did 6:04. I had crossed the Rubicon. I was now on "the other side" or maybe the "Far Side" of life. I would never cross "six" again.

Back up for a moment about the track workouts. I went out as usual one early morning but half way around the lap I saw a man laying on the inside lane. Normally I would have been irritated by that. I mean, the inside

lane? People should collapse or lay or whatever on the outside lane. Remember, this is Chicago. Bodies are everywhere, but usually not on the track. But, there he was, and I had to move to lane three to go around him. He didn't move a whit. On the next lap, he was still there. I wondered if he was dead, or comatose, or sick. I asked myself if I should do anything. But I was in the middle of my work out. But, and I hate to admit this, as I passed him again I stopped and decided to do the right thing. I paused my stop watch. I know that is hard to believe, but I did. I walked over to him. Now what? Kick him lightly? Say something? So I said loudly, "Are you Ok?" No reaction. I bent over and then suddenly he sat up. "What? Who are you? What do you want?" He stood up. "Leave me alone!!!! What you goin' to do, call the cops?" He approached me and I backed up. "F-you!" he shouted. He kept shouting that at me! That is not how the Parable of the Good Samaritan should end.

OK, I could take a hint. So I resumed my work out. But he did not vacate the premises. He stood there and shouted obscenities at me at each lap. So, astutely, I left and headed elsewhere. Amazingly, fate kept putting us together. Every time I went out to run, there he was, somewhere, and he would shout something vulgar at me. People turned and looked at me. Years later I see him around the 'hood and cross to the other side.

These runs on the track were always interesting. Every spring the geese and the ducks would bring their newly hatched foul onto the track. Then they would defend their turf and hiss and even attack me if I came too close to them. So I had to veer way around the little goslings/ducklings. That would ruin my lap times. But ever since I had failed the six minute test I progressively cared less. Once, and I am not proud of this, I kicked a mother duck that came after me. She made some very inappropriate sounds. But it made me take stock of myself...but hang on for a moment until we get to the next lessons.

So, here we are at the next lessons. If you are going to kick someone, pick on the "ducks" and not the "geese." The geese will tear you apart. Take note of the less fortunate, but remember, they may not appreciate your noble efforts to help them. Learn to ignore deprecating comments. Not everybody wants to be rescued.

Don't try to compete with true athletes. David was a biker at heart, but I could beat him at running, but never in biking. Pick your terrain. Set markers and goals, but when you fail them, give yourself grace. They are, after all, arbitrary. A "6:04" compared to a "5:59" is really nothing. Admit that you fell short, then move on. It happens. With life, with sex, with any achievement. MOVE THE GOAL POST. Don't think people will care about you caring about them. Motives are always open to interpretation. Just be sure of what yours are.

I noticed that a community service organization was sponsoring a 10K out in the 'burbs.' I was a hard-core city of Chicago runner and figured that, now, being 56, I was near the top of my age group. And once again, at the line up, I looked around. It was possible. I was once again coming off an injury but was doing well. I ran well I figured. It was fun. I actually met a guy and talked with him for a while. I got a free quarter banana and a half bagel and some Gator Aid. What could be better? After the race I started back to the car. Then...I paused as if Fate had tapped me on the shoulder and I went back to the postings. When the results were in I was second. I was amazed. What was the matter with these people? But when my name was called I went up and had this ribbon placed over my head. I bowed to the thunderous applause of the plebeians. I hung that medallion in my office where nobody could escape noticing. However, help me on this...nobody has ever commented on it.

I am almost at the end here, so bear with me. I continued to run some, do a race here and there. My objective was to beat my daughters when I visited, but then as they came into their own as Young Adults At Their Prime, I gave that up. I take pride in their achievements. Now at age 60 I have tendonosis. This I am told is worse than mere tendonitis. So I saw the doc and got PT. I stopped running and doing anything that was impacting. He put me into a boot for three months. I gained weight and gave up on breaking six, then seven, then eight...for the mile. I walked and biked. But after a couple of months of PT...it made no difference. Eventually the doc said I could run again, take it easy, every other day, not a lot, don't do speed work.

So, as I write this, this is my running life. I run a few miles every other day or so. I don't wear a stop watch most of the time. I am happy to run at all. Maybe I can do another 10K but not care about the time or breaking "50". But...today I ran 8:30 as part of my workout. I did weights and swam. And, oh yes, I forgot, I have taken up Scuba and now am 'Advanced'...Maybe, just maybe...I can still break 8!!!

Pay attention to your wife and your doctor. They are probably right. This is a hard lesson to learn. But learn it anyway. Self-worth should not be tied to performance. What exactly it is tied to, I am not sure. Maybe being created in the image of God. Or maybe found in the love of Another. Allow for time and age and infirmity. Nobody is asking this performance except you.

As I turn sixty, Rachel, who I mentioned earlier as being a "non runner" has taken up running and has done a 10k and now is training for a half marathon. "Won't you run the race with me daddy?" she says. With "daddy" they can get me to do anything. She waits until she is at her absolute physical peak, trim, svelt and limber...meanwhile I am sixty and injury ridden and working on just touching my toes...*now* she challenges me. Well, she doesn't think of this as "challenging me" but all runs for me are challenges. We boomers tend to think of everything in terms of ourselves. Now I need to push myself and see what I can do. We'll see who says "Great run" to whom.

Now let me "zoom out" as the Gen X'ers say. GenY is way beyond that. For them, there is simply no zooming at all, but I digress. Google Earth all the above. In five decades of running, running has taught me a lot. I will not here recap all the lessons mentioned above. But here are a few "meta lessons" that I am sure will bless you.

Love what you are doing in the present. If you don't, maybe you should change.

Don't be goal driven unless it pays very well.

Embrace aging, and change the definition of "competition."

And let "Louis" go. Erase the debilitating tapes of your past, like "don't be last again Hill..." Create new debilitating tapes.

Push to the limits, even beyond, then accept where you are.

Allow that adversity changes you but then rise to meet it. Avoid adversity if you can.

Forgive your coaches.

Remember your girlfriends' names.

Mary the one you love. Then forget the above.

Vary your pace.

Run with friends.

Run with your children and wife.

Face the pain.

Enjoy the running itself.

Periodically reset your goals.

Praise God for how he has created you.

Know who you are....a miler!

Postscript, the Champoeg 10K, Oregon

Rachel and I drove down to Champoeg (pronounced, s*hampoo,* as in the French pronunciation) to compete in, I mean run in, our first ever father-daughter run. Rachel is a running novice, this being her second race ever, but I refrained from saying such things as "double knot your shoes" and "stretch out those calves...." And "do you need to go?" I did not advise her on drinking along the way but did offer that I would not, this being a cold morning and such a short race. I like saying that six miles is short...kind of intimidating don't you think?

We arrived at the state park along the Shampoog river. Other cars were pulling in. One SUV offloaded four women, ages mid-twenties to mid-thirties, I would guess, but I could be off by ten years either way. It seems nobody can agree on attire. Short shorts and running bra, or complete head-to-toe gray sweats, or that stretchy lycra stuff. Who will be right? It is cold now but the sun is coming up! Bra babe ran up and down the parking lot to "warm up" looking like she was a fit vet of the 10K circuit. One said "I carbo loaded on beer last night." She was probably dehydrated and didn't even know it.

A Smart Car disgorged a tall man with an overhanging belly. He carefully fastening his number over his stomach with the four little pins. It was hard to read on the down-slope. He warmed up, mostly by pushing against the car. I hoped it wouldn't fall over.

We got our numbers and eventually made our way to the start with about two hundred other runners. People were not lining up according to ability. A woman with a cane was pushing her way towards the front. Small children were in front of me. A very nice couple that were pushing maybe seventy stood just to one side.

"Rachel," I said, "what do you think about sticking together until about mile 4, then whichever of us is feeling frisky can be free to take off for the last two miles?" I didn't want to hold her back, is what I said, but secretly I was thinking the opposite. But, I reminded myself, I am twice her age, I am old enough to be her father. "Let's move up a little. I just can't start behind a cane, sorry."

We both had mp3 players. We agreed to not put them on at first so we could talk. Then we were off. The trail was narrow and so everyone was moving slowly and cautiously until it spread out. We jogged alongside each other. A mile passed in 9:10.

"Feeling ok Rachel?"

"Fine, you?"

"Fine....

Time went by.

"Are we going to talk, or shall we plug in?" she asked.

"Plug in."

I think I embarrassed her because I started to sing "Love me do" by the Beatles as I ran.

Water stop...at a mile and a half? We passed a lot of people jammed up at the table. One older man was speed walking. We finally passed him when he stopped to drink. I also taught her to cut the corners, saving whole yards. Mile two was 9:15. We came to a long sloping hill. Now, I run in Chicago. The only hills around are overpasses. But Rachel suddenly sprinted up the hill. She said later she was just trying to "maintain pace" but she was lying. She took off. I tried to follow but couldn't. At sixty, my accelerator is a bit sticky. I finally caught back up to her, just in time for another hill-sprint. We rounded the 3.1 mark - and she had to stop and retie her shoe laces!- and headed back, still right on the same pace. Just ahead of us was Bra-babe, and we reeled her in and passed her. Lycra Lady was still ahead and we never did catch her. Beer Belly was never seen.

Mile four. "Rachel, ready to roll?" She said no that she was running at max pace. Because of injuries and a rather anemic training schedule I was not sure what I was capable of doing, but I did say "see you at the finish" and managed to pick it up. I ran the last two miles in about 8:15 each. Rachel cruised in about a minute later looking foxy and with that 10K glow about her. She had done it and done it well. I swelled with pride. We got T shirts and had our pictures taken.

So, sprint the hills if you can do it. Life is tough so be sure to "double knot" the lose ends. Take pride in your progeny. Dress for success. And when you line up for the race of life, take a good look around you...and don't start too high lest you be passed, don't start too low, lest you never catch up. Carpe diem.

A free ebook from http://manybooks.net/