

Running Deeper

Runners have a unique opportunity to learn about themselves. The daily run, the training session or the race provides the runner with a chance to find out something about himself that he did not know before. How can you utilize this golden opportunity?

“I am bored when I run” is a comment that I have heard from several people who have tried to begin running on a regular basis. As a psychologist who has been running for many years I know that a feeling which surfaces during a run may have been lying dormant in the personality. So I would suspect that the person who is bored while running is suffering from boredom with his life. He is in a rut or has become stuck in his life, and the boredom in his life hits him in the face when he goes out for a run.

Similarly, there are times when my run seems to be full of aggression. I feel competitive, have a vague feeling that every car is out to get me, and get suspicious about the motivation of strangers on my route. If some perspective helps me become aware of this attitude during the run I can give deeper thought to the sources of my aggression. What is going on in my life that I am dissatisfied with and is getting me angry?

Boredom and aggression are feelings that have been lurking in the recesses of the personality and which surface in a full-blown fashion during the run. We can learn important lessons about ourselves if we attend to these and other feelings that percolate into our awareness while running. We need only to keep one eye focused on the road while the other eye is focused on our inner process, our soul.

Some of the lessons in life that come to us as we run are small, and some are large. The major lessons that we learn about ourselves are fixed in our memory for years. When I began running about 20 years ago I did not own a pair of running shoes. I ran in an old pair of work-shoes for several months until I decided that I had to buy a pair of athletic shoes. Since I had never viewed myself as an athlete or sportsman I felt terribly awkward as I slinked into the sporting goods shop to buy a pair of shoes. Feeling totally out of my element, I settled for the cheapest pair of shoes in the store, took them home and began running in them. Some months later a particularly perceptive woman who was in therapy with me told me that she had seen me on my run, and wondered why I was running in a pair of ballet slippers! The next day, while running by Rachel’s Tomb I landed on a stone and

sprained my metatarsal arch. Then I made the serious mistake of trying to run the 5 kilometers to my home in spite of the sprain. By the time I got home my foot had swollen to twice its normal size, and the result was that I could not run for about three months afterward.

While my foot was healing I had plenty of time to mull over my macho attitude that transformed a minor sprain into a much more serious injury. I became aware of my disrespect for pain that kept me going even though my foot was throbbing pretty badly. I also thought of the “ballet slippers” that my patient had seen on my feet, and resolved to acquire shoes that were more appropriate. The cheap running shoes were an expression of my sense of inferiority as an athlete, and the macho attitude was a crude attempt to compensate for this sense of inferiority. Clearly I had to come to a better balance in my view of myself. Now I run in state-of-the-art running shoes, which I see as the one and only expense incurred in running.

Some years ago I learned something important about my own priorities in life. I had been invited to participate in a live TV show dealing with the psychological aspects of mid-life crisis. The program was to take place in the evening, and that afternoon I lay down for a short nap. I could not sleep, feeling suffused with anxiety about appearing on national television. As I was tossing and turning with the dread of making a total mess of my TV appearance, I had a liberating thought. I wondered how I would react if the phone rang and I was told that the program had been canceled; and I assumed that I would be disappointed for a few hours. In contrast to this, if I was to sprain my ankle and not be able to participate in the marathon that I had been training for, I would be absolutely miserable for many many days. This realization of what was really important dispelled my anxiety and I was able to nap and wake up refreshed.

Races, and particularly marathons, provide great opportunities for in-depth learning about life. I achieved my personal best time in the first marathon that I ran, and was never able to better that record. I trained hard and ran in many marathons, but was never able to finish in a better time than my first marathon. Frustrated, I realized that confidence was paradoxically keeping me from surpassing my marathon record. In my first marathon I was not at all sure that I could complete the race, and so I poured every ounce of energy, heart and soul, into the run. In subsequent marathons, being confident that I could finish respectably, I did not really give the race my maximum. Confidence in this case had a negative effect and kept me from bettering my best.

So far I have spoken of unpleasant feelings, boredom and aggression, anxiety and frustration. There are also pleasant feelings that emerge during

a run, and these range from the delight in enjoying a beautiful day to a sense of elation and exhilaration. Some years ago, before the “intefada,” my daily run took me around the Old City of Jerusalem. As I ran around those majestic walls I felt blessed twice, both as a Jew and as a runner. Jerusalem has been at the center of Jewish consciousness for thousands of years, but not many Jews have had the opportunity of making Jerusalem a daily living reality. In addition to this, being able to run around the walls, to circle the Old City in one swoop, felt like a special privilege reserved for a select few.

We need not be in a special place, such as Jerusalem, in order to learn about ourselves as we run. Any country road, city street or track can be a fine tutor as long as we are willing to keep one eye on the road and the other focused inward. To paraphrase Socrates, the unexamined run is not worth running.

