

And a father runs through it

By Jana Alexander

I had just awakened from a long nap after a hard rain. It was sunny outside and I was ready for a run. I parked my car at the end of State Street in Marysville — a well-populated place for a woman to run alone. I felt safe there, surrounded by potential aid if the need arose.

First steps on gravel, feet pounding on cracked sidewalks. My lungs felt raw, sucking in air and pushing it back out. It's been awhile since I admitted a need for this specific kind of zen-time. The distance run musters up endorphins and shakes loose what's inside unlike anything else can.



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on the steps ahead.

There is a structure to my run. A distance run is a quest — pick a starting place, a measured beginning and end, and insist the body cooperate. Decide in the

JUST A THOUGHT

The run takes me to a meditative state hardly possible without its qualities: the pounding feet, rhythmic breath and deliberate focus

instant of the first step what the end goal will be, then insist the body comply.

To run and breathe outside in the rain or the hot sun is to revisit a primal urge — the fight or flight when fight won't work anymore, and a return to the role of potential prey that isn't willing to give up.

On an outside run there are barriers to get around, stops along the way that I never agreed to. I halt at a crosswalk and mash

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my palm onto a silver nubbin, pacing like a caged wildcat as I wait to see the iridescent stick figure that grants permission for continued flight.

As I run I remember the words of my cross country coach in high school, his gruff voice booming onto a track at any school where there was a meet. "Run through it, Alexander," he'd bellow, baseball cap shielding his eyes from the sun or the rain or the wind. Those words would give me a little more mental fuel to focus on the steps ahead, my vision creating a short tunnel of space there, peripheral view holding the people around me. My focus was the visible stretch of the next three strides, a mentally limited tunnel on the way to the personal goal — conquer the clock, pace for the entire stretch, then pour it on at the end.

I do that now. Feet pound-

ing, rhythmic breath, mind alert to people inside my run. I know at the end, I'll pick up the pace, running as if saving my own life, every bit of me engaged in the seemingly toughest part of the run. But the toughest part is really the longer stretch, the whole patched together from three-strided tunnels of space.

As I run, I realize my vulnerability in a society that hasn't dealt with its latent pain even as that pain reveals itself in sickness, violence and consumerist escapes. I run past graffiti that looks like gang tags and I wonder if they are, or if they're just a symptom of youthful rage. I run past buildings packed in a line with signs luring passers-by for food, drink and low prices.

Still, I'm thankful for the busy surroundings of passing vehicles and peopled buildings. In this setting, I can see potential help and potential harm in my peripheral vision. Hecklers roll past inside metal cages, shouting obscenities out of open windows, and

I ignore them. I quell my fear by running through it.

Yet as I remember the words "run through it" I know the push behind my need to run came not from the words, but from my father who never once uttered that phrase but practiced its spirit in all the years I've looked to him for quiet guidance.

Literally, he runs, with a personal checklist that includes two marathons, an annual benefit run on Thanksgiving Day, and a daily dose of five-to-six mile zen-time, pounding pavement, setting goals and running through until the end — the personal finish line.

I've run with him from the Everett YMCA on one of his many dog-free routes. I was still a teen on that run, and an active one, yet he slowed his pace for me on that day.

He has run through all of the major challenges in his life including the tumultuous teenage years of his daughters, all three fueled with equal doses of rebellion. When asked of those years, he'll talk about the good

times. He has run through all of it with hardly a word of complaint, wearing down the soles of hundreds, maybe thousands of pairs of shoes.

Fresh blood pumps through me cleansing my body and sending a tingle through my working muscles. The endorphins have kicked in and everything looks manageable now, even positive. My feet pound out the last steps of the goal. I don't pick up the pace at the end this time because of a stabbing pain in my knee. A runner knows that the next run depends on the ability to listen to natural signals, to distinguish between joint pain that needs rest, and a side ache that needs tightened abdominal muscles, and a steady pace to the personal finish line.

The sun is bright. I close my eyes and lift my face to its heat. On Father's Day this year, I think I'll thank my Dad for what his actions have taught me.

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