

Running Downhill

I grew up in the foothills of the Berkshire Mountains in Western Massachusetts.

I don't mean that figuratively. I mean it literally.

If you looked out my bedroom window, across the lawn, between the maple trees, and over the pasture between the tobacco barns, you would literally see the first set of significant hills and forests heading west from the Connecticut River in Western Mass. There may have been others before, but development of the land for agriculture, industry and real estate had long since removed the trees and leveled the mountains.

So the gang of kids with whom I ran, all of whom were older than me, lived a charmed life building forts in those woods during the summers, diving into piles of golden leaves off the top of the forts in the autumn, creating ski jumps over boulders and between trees in the winter, and running like fools downhill in the spring.

I loved all of it, and it all left an indelible imprint upon me, but perhaps what influenced me most was running downhill.

I remember racing older kids from the top of a hill down through the forest toward an apple tree at the top of the pasture.

The trick was to learn how to run as fast as possible without falling or letting your opponent knock you off stride.

Being the youngest, I was the smallest and easiest to bully, but I also had the advantage of a low center of gravity.

Though I was only 9 or 10 at the time, and my opponents 12 to 15,

I remember feeling like it was they, not me, who was at a disadvantage because

I had an uncanny ability to stay on my feet

even as we neared the lower portion of the hill, our arms and legs flailing.

For me it was simple: just stay on your feet,

letting your body hurl you faster than it seemed you could possibly go.

I didn't win every race, but I certainly won more than those cocky high schoolers thought I would. And I suppose that I have, in many ways, drawn upon such experiences throughout my life. This is where things get figurative.

Since those early days growing up in the farmlands,
at the foothills of the Berkshires,
it seems I have often been running downhill, going just as fast as I could,
letting my arms and legs carry me faster than even I imagined that I could go.
This allowed me to climb mountains in Colorado,
serve as an intern with the LAPD,
become an editorial assistant in Manhattan,
backpack through Europe,
work as a journalist in West Africa,
and explore the Middle East all by the time I graduated from college.
In subsequent years,
I taught at international schools in Egypt, Ecuador and Malaysia.
Although I married young,
I didn't "settle down" or even think to buy a house until I reached my mid-30s and pursued a Ph.D. at
the University of Texas at Austin.

While there, I became involved with a program initiated by the World Bank Institute, designed to help teachers in developing countries learn how to use computer technology for teaching and learning purposes.

The next thing I knew I was serving as the Director of Professional Development, writing a curriculum and field testing it in
Africa, Asia, the Middle East and the Americas.

I just kept running and running and running...
barely staying on my feet,
but loving the race all the way to the bottom of the hill.

How many kids from those tobacco fields of Western Mass
had the opportunity to fly to London,
spend a night, then go to Entebbe to lead workshops in Uganda
and take a raft trip down the Nile before catching a flight to Johannesburg to lead workshops in
South Africa before catching another flight,
this time to Santiago, to work with a group of educators involved in translating
the professional development materials from English to Spanish?

By the time I got home, from stops on three continents in three weeks,
I felt like that little kid tagging the apple tree at the bottom of the hill.
I would catch my breath, however briefly,
then write at a frantic pace to finish two book projects,
a dissertation, and several essays that I always had going.

And I loved every minute of it.

Even when I took a bad fall, just over a year ago,
it seemed fitting that I was on a night flight from Amsterdam,
where I had spent two glorious days walking the canals
and soaking up everything that amazing place has to offer,
en route to Amman, Jordan, a place I had always wanted to visit.

When I woke from my nap, it was 4 am and my left leg was badly swollen. I thought I had just slept
with it bent awkwardly.

When the swelling refused to go away I worried it was something worse. Perhaps a thrombosis from
one plane flight too many?

What did I do? Instead of running, I tried swimming,
though I also took two long hikes on it to explore the ancient city of Petra.

Two weeks later, after my work with the Ministry of Education had come to an end,
I returned to my home in Honolulu
and immediately went to the doctors.

My days of running downhill had come to an end.

Within six months,

I would lose that leg to an inoperable tumor that had apparently been growing behind my left knee for many years.

"Indolent tumor," one pathology report described it,

meaning this was an insidious form of malignancy, one that didn't grow quickly and announce itself, but took its time and grew in fits and starts. What caused it? Nobody could say for sure.

Trauma in youth? Exposure to pesticides? A weakened immune system?

Some may say that I brought this upon myself

by running downhill for much too long,

without taking time to rest my weary bones.

I say: boy, it's a good thing I ran downhill while I had a chance.

Imagine if I had never made that hike through Petra?

Or what if I'd never hiked to see the lava flowing from Kilauea to the sea, last summer on the island of Hawaii?

Not to mention all those mountains I scaled,

from the peak of Kinabalu with my sons in Borneo, to the refuges in the Ecuadorian Andes.

And what about those ski trips we squeezed in during December holidays in New Mexico and

Colorado when I was rushing to finish my dissertation, prepare for a defense, and lead workshops in Uganda and India?

I sit before my typewriter now, an amputated man, smiling as I think back on all of it.

Happy as hell that I had so many chances to run downhill

faster than most people I've met, and so fortunate,

in spite of the tumble that I have taken,

to have the opportunity to catch my breath,

regain my balance and climb back up that hill to discover just how far one biological leg and one prosthetic will let me go.

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