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Life at 6 Miles Per Hour: Running at My Own Pace for Mind, Body and Spirit and its Applications for Advising in Higher Education

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LIFE AT 6 MILES PER HOUR:
RUNNING AT MY OWN PACE FOR MIND, BODY AND SPIRIT
AND ITS APPLICATIONS FOR ADVISING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

A Thesis Presented

By
Elizabeth Dunbar

to
The Faculty of the Graduate College
of
The University of Vermont

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
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ABSTRACT

Growing up, I never considered myself an athlete. I did not participate in sports or compete on a track, field or slope. However, as an adult, I have chosen to step outside my comfort zone, exploring challenges that push me physically and mentally to grow as a person. In this way, I found running. Running, for me, is not a mere mundane exercise routine, nor a competitive sport by which to be judged. Instead, running at my own pace has been a physical and emotional journey that eases my mind, nourishes my body and replenishes my spirit. Like an old friend, it is always there, year round, anywhere, anytime, to get me outside, pick me up when I feel blue, keep me company while I make new discoveries and introduce me to new friends. Moreover, my body benefits as my heart gets stronger, my bones denser, my risk for disease decreases, my stress disappears and I burn a ton of calories. Above all, the skills I develop from running, including confidence, perseverance, perspective, resiliency, connection to others, setting goals, the bliss of solitude, taking notice and living in the present, transfer to all areas of my life. In fact, my experience with running has helped me not only be a better person and enjoy life more, it has given me new tools to use professionally, as an academic advisor in higher education.

It is my hope that my story, and the supporting research, will inspire others to explore running as an option for physical, emotional, social and, perhaps, spiritual presence in their lives. I share my story to all educators because the inclusion of exercise and mindfulness, for professional and student, can be a source of stress reduction, balance, cognitive focus and overall health. As a result of my own experiences with these activities, I think I understand their benefits and am able to impart the necessary encouragement to students to explore their options. In my opinion, the interesting relationship between writing and running, which I discovered and touched upon in this process, warrants further exploration.
DEDICATION

To my family, in the largest sense of the word, those who are still with me, and those whose memory lives on in me: my husband, children, parents, relatives, mentors, friends, colleagues and students. I appreciate and am forever grateful for your ongoing love, care, support, and encouragement in my life. You make me a better person and life a richer journey.

To all those who have ever considered running and need that extra push to start your journey, “You don’t have to be great to start but you have to start to be great.” – Zig Ziglar. Take a risk, find your passion, give it your all, and experience the journey with an open and full heart. I write my story of running because with every mile, I attest that I am capable of more than I ever thought possible. Find your courage and begin today.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Context

At the conclusion of the national anthem, hats are replaced and the announcer regains the attention of those gathered. Inside the cordoned off area, the runners huddle, rub their hands, and jog in place against the cool morning air. Outside the yellow tape, most onlookers wear appropriate weather clothing – coats, pants, and even an early season scarf can be seen. Excitement ripples through the crowd. “On your marks; get ready; set; GO!” …slowly the tightly gathered crowd begins to inch toward the start line, a motley crew of spandex, anticipation and requisite sneakers. Family members and friends cheer, wave, and hold cameras up to take the passing picture of loved ones. As racers pass the starting point, they begin to thin, some insert ear buds, eventually all seem to settle into their own individual pace. Thirteen point one miles, a scenic journey through the Vermont mountainous countryside, perhaps a personal-best, lay before each one. I never thought I would be on the inside of that roped off area; that I would be a “runner”.

This thesis is written to share my personal story of running; how I started and why I continue. Running did not come easy for me. It took time, commitment, and dedication. It also required me to overcome my own mental obstacle that it was achievable. My relationship with running is not a mere mundane exercise routine, nor a competitive sport by which to be judged. Instead, running at my own pace has been a physical and emotional journey that eases my mind, nourishes my body and replenishes my spirit. It has required me to push myself in new directions while opening up opportunities for new and old relationships, good health, stress reduction, resiliency, mindfulness, nature
appreciation, travel, and the chance to notice the world around me. Although running requires my time, hard work, flexibility and, sometimes even, sacrifice, it gives back so much more, replenishing me.

Additionally, I would like to share the personal and professional implications of exercise and mindfulness on my work as a seasoned educator in higher education student services. Not only has running been a source of personal fulfillment but it is something that I have brought into my work with students. As in my own life, the benefits of exercise and mindful activities for a college student are numerous and worthy of exploration as a tool for academic success, physical wellbeing and overall balance.

Lastly, I would like to begin a discussion of the parallels that I discovered while writing this thesis between running and writing. Before embarking upon my graduate education, writing, especially this kind of creative, personal writing, was not something that I regularly practiced. Writing in both my high school and undergraduate education was mainly of the typical research related variety. However, in several of my graduate classes, I have been able to explore a more creative format of writing. As in running, I never considered myself a “writer”. Writing, like running, did not come easy to me. Looking now at these two activities, I see many similarities despite their apparent disparities.

1.2 Why SPN/eSPN Methodology

“It is important to remember, however, that the SPN writer’s story is always the primary source of scholarship. All else is supplementary- important to be sure- but directly dependent upon the writer’s personal vantage point.”

(Nash and Viray 2013, 93)
I am primarily utilizing the Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN) genre because I feel my story about running is a unique one to tell. In addition to SPN, I have used Epistolary Scholarly Personal Narrative (eSPN), which allows me to address a specific audience in the form of a letter. There are numerous books, blogs, articles and even apps to help people run. Topics include how to create an individualized action plan to get started, forums for shared advice, and discussions on the common pitfalls of those experienced with this kind of physical activity. However, my goal is not to make my readers into runners. Instead, I would like to share my personal story of running, describe my emotional and physical struggles, explore the connection between meaning making and activity, illustrate that running (for me) has been a positive and productive outlet for good health (socially, emotionally, and physically) and perhaps inspire a reader to take a risk and step out of their comfort zone, as I did. Themes that a reader may discover within the broader context of my story could be connection (to others, nature, running), confronting fear (stepping outside your comfort zone, losing a loved one), resiliency, the imperfections of perfection, solitude, discovering your passion, finding balance and the desire for good health. I ask, you the reader, to be open, hear my narrative; discover a connection in your own life. Moreover, what sparks you may ignite a fire that leads to a flame. “The ultimate purpose of all research is to motivate people to take action. SPN writing is a call to action that combines both re-search and me-search.” (Nash and Viray 2013, 34)

SPN “is a methodology that effectively blends stories, interpretation, theory, and universalizable themes,” describes Robert J. Nash, University of Vermont Professor of Education, and creator of the genre. This type of writing allows me to use my personal
stories and experiences to explore a topic in a different way than a typical research methodology often used in academia. SPN identifies key themes that are connected to the writer’s personal stories in order that larger “universalizable” implications can be made by the reader. These “universalizabilities” are the themes, insights, and ideas that are larger than one’s own individual narrative and provide connections to others’ stories. A reader can identify with those themes and draw their own meaning. SPN signifies that my life, my story, matters. My story signifies. “A serious life, by definition, is a life one reflects on, a life one tries to make sense of and bear witness to. The age is characterized by a need to testify. Everywhere in the world women and men are rising up to tell their stories out of the now commonly held belief that one’s own life signifies” (Nash and Viray 2013, 10). My story of running creates new scholarship and has the ability to affect how people think. “Making research relate more personally can help readers find the common themes that may apply to their lives, and ultimately make a scholar’s work more accessible to a broader audience” (Nash and Viray 2013, 14). Using my voice, I hope to reach readers who can find their truth in mine.

SPN incorporates and draws upon relevant research and scholarship (articles, books, studies, and quotes), grounding and enriching the personal narrative. Personally, I have found this approach both accessible and meaningful allowing me to tell my own story, voice my opinions, unite with others who may have similar experiences, and to explore concepts that matter to me in a new and powerful way. “SPN writing begins with a nagging need on the writer’s part to tell some kind of truth. And the best way to tell a truth is to tell a story. A story is always profoundly personal and unique to some degree, never replicated in exactly the same form by anyone else. Your truth may be very
different from mine, and vice versa. But if I can hear your truth within the context of your own personal story, I might be better able to find its corollary in my own story” (Nash 2004, 55). Stories are how we make sense of our world. Stories can bring us together, teach us, and bind us to our past, present and future. It is through stories that we connect, to others and to ourselves. Jerome Bruner, a Harvard University psychology professor, who self-identifies as a “narrative constructivist” believes that it is not the empirical, data driven, objective truth that matters but the “narrative truth”, extolling that the “self” is “really a multiple telling of narratives.” We construct our “self” through our stories. “Self” is whatever story we construct about who we are, depending on whom we are with, and who we would like to be, at any given time” (Nash and Viray 2013, 5).

Using SPN as a methodology requires higher education to become more pluralistic in its approach to what constitutes acceptable scholarship. The two primary research methods are qualitative (case study, phenomenology, generic qualitative inquiry) and quantitative (primary data collection and secondary data analysis). Of course there are other methodologies, like SPN, that emphasize personal scholarship, including memoir, autobiography, autoethnography and self-authorship; each with its own similarities and differences, strengths and weakness, pros and cons. SPN is a unique cross-fertilization of the first person narrative with traditional academic research. SPN is in its infancy and, by its nature, without a proven research template. “SPN’s central purpose is to make an impact on both writer and reader, on both the individual and the community” (Nash and Viray 2013, 47). As a human, we each have a voice, a story, and insight to discover, savor and communicate to others. Running to me is a way to “live my life always open to surprise, novelty, vulnerability, adventure, and, most of all, to being
able to discover the extraordinary in the ordinary moments of my life” (Nash and Viray 2014, 85). What allows you to do the same? I would love to inspire others to run, but that is not my ultimate goal. Instead, I would ask, how are you able to find these things in your own life? For example, my relationship with running may be another physical activity, such as walking, yoga, hiking, swimming or meditation, for you. Or quite possibly, you may find truth in my story but your “running” is an entirely different activity, such as writing. That to be in the flow of writing, you benefit as much as I do by running. It sustains you. As Nash says, “You will know you are a writer when the pain of not writing is greater than the pain of writing” (Nash and Viray 2014, 55). What is your running? Or writing?

To note, writing an SPN, for me, is not an easy task to undertake. This kind of writing requires vulnerability, creativity, reflection and passion. As an undergraduate at the University of Vermont, I was immersed in the social sciences of economics, political science and psychology. As such, the methodologies used were always objective, research-based, data driven approaches. As a graduate student, I have had the opportunity to take several courses with Professor Robert Nash. Instead of submersion in data, format, citing and academic codes, I engage in the inside, tell my story, identify my truth, find my own meaning, and authenticity, first, and then move to the outside to discover the themes and connections with which others can relate. “Each of us has the capacity of transforming many living beings if we know how to cultivate the seed of enlightenment within ourselves” (Naht Hahn 146).
CHAPTER 2: MY STORY

2.1 Running is a Gift

Why am I writing about my own personal running story anyway? Is not the market flooded with books on the topic? What makes my story so special? My story is worth telling because I think that you, as a reader, may be able to relate to my experience and perhaps see connections to your own story or inspire you to make a change in your story. As Robert Nash says in his book Liberating Scholarly Writing, my stories can teach, “but only if (I) have the courage to put them into words, to narrate them with pride and enthusiasm” (55).

Running is not something that I have always done. You could say I was a late bloomer, starting at the age of thirty-two. I am not an elite runner, by any stretch of the imagination. I do not claim to be, nor desire to become one. My distance, pace and form are not all that important to me. I run at my own pace and for many reasons but usually not to win, or compete, or necessarily even for a personal best. Perhaps you are a runner and can relate to my experiences. Or maybe you have never thought of taking up running, and my story inspires you to give it a go. Possibly, you are just like me, you always wanted to run, but it has never quite clicked for you. You may even have doubts, as I did, if running is something that you even can do. “I also know it’s hard to believe in yourself and keep going back to the drawing board if you have no outside proof that you’re good. But ‘good’ is a judgment that others make, and ‘bad’ is what you feel if you believe them. This is not about good or bad. This is about ‘following your bliss.’ Your bliss is what you’re supposed to be doing- the thing you’re meant to do, the thing that nourishes you the most, the thing that harmonizes your inside truth with your outside life, the
bringing together of who you are with what you love doing” (Aronie 109). Taking those first few steps, or strides, was not easy. Finding your passion, and, sticking to it, is hard business. Even if running is not your passion, I think that my relationship with running is applicable to any other productive, healthy activity if done in moderation, with purpose, attentiveness and meaning. To do something that you enjoy, be in the flow of it, and with the freedom to do it for its own sake, is a beautiful gift, to oneself. Take a chance, believe in yourself, and give it your all.

2.2 Try, Try and Try Again

“The miracle isn’t that I finished. The miracle is that I had the courage to start.”

(John Bingham)

Growing up, I did not “do” sports. My brothers, one younger and the other older, did not either. It was not something that was ever discussed or role modeled in our home. My mother divorced my father when we were very young, necessitating her to work full-time and become a single parent. All three of us went to sitters after school, and later as teens, to work. Sports just did not seem to be on the table as an option for us. At age eleven, I babysat thirty hours a week in the summer (earning $.90 an hour!). Later, in middle and high school, I worked in a local restaurant thirty-five hours year round, first as a prep cook, then hostess and eventually a waitress. I would never have described myself as an athlete; an honor student, a dedicated employee, but not an athlete. I was not overweight, or out-of-shape, yet I was not slim, trim and petite. I was always the tallest one amongst my peers, and not of the bean pole variety. I had some heft, you know, husky. I rode my bike everywhere, played around in the waters of Cape Cod, walked the miles of dirt trails that traversed the woods, yet I was never on a sports team, competed in
any way or trained toward an athletic goal. I was self-conscious about my height, weight and lack of apparent athleticism. During my junior and senior years of high school, with the freedom of my own car and money, I was able to participate in aerobic classes (yes, think spandex and leg warmers, it was the mid-1980s). However, I never, ever, felt like I was an athlete. Moreover, never had it crossed my mind to take up running. Running was for Olympians.

In my mid-teens, around sixteen or seventeen, I became bulimic. “Became” is a curious way to put it. It was not something that I set out to do. It was not something that I had any familiarity with at all, for that matter. I had no friends who were bulimic (that I was aware of). Eating disorders, in general, were not something that were ever discussed at home, in the classroom or at the cafeteria lunch table.

I cannot recall that first time I threw up after eating. I do remember the feeling of shame, fullness and regret after eating what I would consider too much. Relieving myself of the food made me feel better, for the moment. It made the regret of eating dissipate. I was not happy with how I looked. I saw myself as not fitting into the mold I imagined for myself or that I saw in others. The one so many of my friends seemed to fit. I was not fat, but I was not skinny (in my own mind). I just felt large. My bulimia nervosa was not something that I shared with anyone at the time. I do not believe that any of my friends, nor family ever knew, or now know of my eating disorder. Why would I tell anyone? I was embarrassed and disgusted by my actions. I knew that it was an eating disorder, but at the same time, I did not want to stop at that point. As much as I hated to do it, I did not want others to tell me that I could not continue. It was not until I was in my early twenties that I stopped purging, slowing first after I met my now husband at the age of eighteen.
Despite having boyfriends throughout the experience, he was the only one with whom I shared my troubling secret. His positive reinforcement, his actions and words, helped me see that I did not need to worry about my weight. He never told me that it was wrong, or disgusting, or that I needed to stop. He made it clear that he loved me for who I was, not what I looked like. As I became more confident in myself, I, too, saw that I was defined by more than a number on the scale.

My early experiences of body image, self-confidence and athleticism dominated my perception of who I was and what I was capable of achieving. However, while in college, I began to see the possibilities for my own health and how I was instrumental in the decision of my own wellbeing. I took a personal health education class as an elective. One of the requirements was a semester long project to benefit one’s own health which was self-dictated and directed. Since my exercising had lagged off considerably, I committed myself to design and implement a walking program. I devised a workable schedule with incentives to keep me motivated. It worked! I was able to incorporate walking into my daily routine. Walking could be done anywhere, anytime, with friends or on my own. It was flexible, inexpensive and fun. Achieving a daily exercise routine was huge for me. I demonstrated that I could dedicate myself to an athletic task and stick with it. Moreover, it increased my self-confidence, as an athletic person. I was capable of achieving physical challenges. What else could I do?

I began to try running. I had heard so much about the health benefits of the sport and wanted desperately to be a “runner”. Most of the time, I would make it to the end of the street, huffing and puffing, struggle to catch my breath, feel bad about my lack of ability, and walk home, leaving it for months at a time before I made another futile
attempt. Why did it seem to come so easily for others? Why could I not make it past a few blocks without feeling like my chest would explode? The walking was a good fit, yet I did yearn for more.

In 2002, I decided to give myself yearly goals, resolutions if you will. That year, I wanted to try piano lessons, learn to ski, and be able to run at least three miles. Like anything that requires you to learn a new skill, it took time, dedication, and making mistakes to discover that I could in fact do all these activities. As with almost anything, to learn something new, it takes discipline. You have to keep at it. Slowly, steadily, adding to it, building the foundation and staying with it until, one day it clicks. You find that doing it feels better than not doing it.

“Come, come, whoever you are, 
Wanderer, worshipper, lover of leaving. It doesn’t matter. 
Ours is not a caravan of despair. 
Come, even if you have broken your vow a hundred times. 
Come, come again, come.”
(Jalal al-Din Rumi)

It was not until May of that year that I began working on this last goal, running. It took friends to help me make it happen. When talking one day at a neighborhood social gathering, my friend and neighbor, Betsy, was telling me about her new venture, running. Truth be told, she was not particularly enjoying it. However, it was something that she was determined to embark upon and give her best shot. She had worked up to three miles. Several of us from the neighborhood decided to join her; become a “running group”, in a loose sense of the term. We started early that Monday morning, about five or six of us. Since we all had young children and many of us worked, we decided to run at six a.m. The sun was just rising, the dew was on the grass and a cloud of fog hung over the
meadow and river. Except for our excited chitter-chatter, the street was hushed, a new day, a new experience. I was excited, for me, for my friends, for the running ahead, for the possibility.

The running was hard, real hard. Betsy did a great job cheering us on (coincidentally, she was the middle school cheer coach), encouraging us to walk if we needed to, reminding us to breathe. It was a lot of fun doing it with my friends, all at our own pace. I could chat and run with one person, stop when I needed to catch my breath and another friend who had been behind me would catch up. We would chat for a bit, then both start running again at our own individual pace. That first day, I think I ran a total of one mile out of the three that we attempted. My lungs hurt, my face was beet red, my legs ached and I was a sweaty mess. However, I had a blast! It went by quickly and I actually looked forward to the next day. Having my friends join me, to support and encourage, helped me stay focused and engaged. We made each other accountable. In three weeks’ time, after forcing myself to go out and run or run/walk every day, I built up to running three miles without stopping. I could not believe it. Me. ME! RUNNING! I felt pure exhilaration.

As the summer went on, I was able to run on my own, without needing the constant support of a group to keep me going. Eventually, my husband saw my efforts and decided to start running himself. We were able to take runs together, catch up on each other’s days or even start them together in the quiet silence of the early morning. By October, the group assembled into a ten-person team and entered a 5K Reindeer Ramble benefit race to be held in December. This would be my first race, as well as my husband’s. Actually, for most of us it was our first race. We were not doing it to break
any records. We had one friend who was asthmatic in addition to a bad hip so we entered as a team into the costume contest. One of the pre-requisites was that we had to stay together as a group, so the fastest had to slow down for the slowest. We would all hold on to a long circular-tied rope and run the race together as “Snow White and the Seven Dwarves”. One member of our group had a knack for sewing and set to work. Our neighbor Andy, a marathon runner, was Snow White, black wig with a yellow and blue dress. He was adorable, well maybe not. The rest of us were dwarves, each in a burlap sack outfit and pointy colorful hat. We were quite the sight. We won first place in the group costume contest, a two-hour pool party with drinks and pizza at a local health club for forty people. Everyone’s family joined us one cold, January Sunday afternoon and we celebrated our “running” victory.

I have run ever since. Typically, I run four to five times a week with varying distances of three to ten miles. Many races ensued, not for a trophy but for the sheer joy of running, especially with others. This past September, I ran my second and third half-marathons in a year, one of my resolutions. Even though I do not win these races, I feel confident that I am a runner. I am also a “skier”, since 2002. As for the piano, meh, I am not so much a pianist. After eight years of lessons, I let it go. My practice fell off and so did my skills. Skills take time; dedication and repetition; practice, practice, practice; try, try, and try again. Like Rumi says, “come, come again, come.”

I continue to run because I enjoy it. Running has positively enriched my life in mind, body and spirit. It is my happiness, my exercise, my meditation. I run like I try to live my life, at my own pace, taking time to notice and enjoy the present. Exercise has become an intervention strategy not only for physical health, but also an effective tool for
mental health (Weir). It is a mind-body exercise. Do you have something that you do which impacts your life in this way? Makes your heart sing? In the subsequent chapters, I would like to explore the benefits that I have experienced in each of these areas (mind, body and spirit) with my running, as well as my commitment to take risks, step outside my comfort zone and seek new challenges. Often in conversation, friends, family and strangers have remarked, “I would love to run. I just have not ever been able to keep with it.” Or, more recently, “You are writing about running?! Can I read it? I really want to start!” To you, I say, keep reading. Take that leap and just give it a try, and then try again.
CHAPTER 3: MIND

“What happens to the body also happens to the mind.”
(Thich Nhất Hahn)

3.1 Mind over Matter

“Running is nothing more than a series of arguments between the part of your brain that wants to stop and the part that wants to keep going.”
(Unknown)

Running is 10% physical ability and 90% mental exercise. The physical constraint is being able to run, free of physical limitations, such as shin splints, hip problems or a torn meniscus. Those things can definitely get in the way of running and a different form of exercise may be recommended by a doctor. So clearing your exercise regimen with your health professional is, of course, a must. But given the clearance…the rest is really a mental game. Staying motivated, dedicated and focused can be a challenge, to say the least. As American philosopher and psychologist William James stated, “The greatest discovery of my generation is that human beings can alter their lives by altering their attitudes.” Mind over matter, right? In running, as in life, I use both positive psychology and mindfulness to help me stay focused, motivated, and positive. These skills help maintain my running, but also provide resiliency in dealing with my own struggles.

3.2 Positive Psychology and Resiliency

I am happy when I run. However, happiness is not the goal, it is a byproduct. Some days, it is hard to get started, find the time and motivate myself to go out and run. It may be cold, rainy, hot, whatever. There may be a hundred other things that I could, or should, be doing. Also, that first mile is always the toughest for me. My breath is more labored. I need to find not only my breath, but my pace. There is an acclimation to the
climate, whether it is hot and muggy, snowing sideways, or dodging puddles, that must be made. Yet, when I get out there, and just start running, the act of doing, observing, living, and being, all combined, in sum, do give me happiness. I believe that my life is what I make it. An existential-postmodern-constructivist centered approach to living a meaningful life where I create my own reality. Viktor Frankl, the creator of Logotherapy, which is a therapeutic approach that stresses health through meaning, believed that we choose our own existence. “Everything can be taken from a man but one thing; the last of the human freedoms – to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way” (Frankl 104) We choose from moment to moment what our life will become and, moreover, we have the choice to change at any instant. The meaning that we create for our lives provides the framework for the decisions we make about our existence. This deterministic philosophy is how I choose to create each of my own moments. I decide my reality and what perspective I will entreat each situation. Similarly, Positive Psychology is “grounded in the belief that people want to lead meaningful and fulfilling lives, to cultivate what is best within them, and to enhance their experiences of love, work, and play” (Positive Psychology Institute). This scientific approach has four major aims:

- Rise to life’s challenges, making the most of setbacks and adversity
- Engage and relate to other people
- Find fulfillment in creativity and productivity
- Look beyond oneself and help others to find lasting meaning, satisfaction, and wisdom

Many of the traits that are mentioned in the Positive Psychology approach are ways that I try to live my life. I feel very happy in my life. I feel that I have always been a very happy, content and positive person. I try to look more to the positive, than the negative.
Many struggles and challenges have come and gone in my life, as they do into any person’s life, but I feel that I have met them all with a positive outlook. As in the above quote from Viktor Frankl, we create our own meaning in our lives. I decide how I am going to react to any given situation. I am responsible and free to decide my own existence and how I want to live it, or through it. I also have the freedom to change my reaction, to go a new way. When faced with death, sadness, disappointment, frustration, what matters is how I face that struggle, learn from it and go on with my life in a meaningful way. This same way of thinking can be applied to a running program. If you can make the decision to run, and keep motivated, you will succeed. Similarly, I have found that running can also nourish my desire to see things in a positive light. While running, I feel that I am courageous, confident and meaningful. Those qualities help me see the positive in my life; the positive and the negative. Putting one foot in front of the other, I know that I can move forward, no matter the obstacle.

If we can change our thinking and perspective, we change the outcome of the situation. We become resilient, flexible to change, see things through another lens, full with gratitude for the possibility that opens up. The secret…it is all in how you think…“Where is your mind” (McCarty 299)? Choosing how to respond is within your power. Being flexible and letting the best paths appear is the way to serenity. Life is ever changing and there will be always be difficult times ahead, however “Serenity emerges from the human capacity to endure everything and the ability to persevere in any situation. Reason delivers tranquillity. Think” (McCarty 235). What we think, determines what we do, which determines who we are. “Our minds expand when they stand at
attention, observing the whole world with penetrating awareness. A mind full of concentrated energy sails us smoothly, joyfully through life” (McCarty 300)

3.3 Mindfulness

“Breathing in, I calm my body.
Breathing out, I smile.
Dwelling in the present moment,
I know this is a wonderful moment.”
(Thich Nhất Hạnh)

Running has given me many things, not the least of which is a healthy body and mind. Yes, mind. Exercise has been proven to prevent and alleviate such mental health conditions as anxiety and depression. Moreover, it boosts self-esteem, confidence, and body image. “The exercise mood boost offers near-instant gratification” (Weir 48). I use exercise, and running in particular, as a mindfulness practice, a technique used to maintain a moment-by-moment awareness of our thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations, and surrounding environment. Mindfulness involves paying attention to our thoughts and feelings, not judging them, and accepting them without believing, for instance, that there’s a “right” or “wrong” way to think or feel in a given moment. When we practice mindfulness, our thoughts tune into what we are sensing in the present moment rather than rehearsing the past or imagining the future. “To be practicing mindfulness is to be aware of the full range of experiences that exist in the present moment with acceptance and with compassion” (Geller and Greenberg 30). The neuroplastic nature of the brain supports the ability for us to train our brain. To train your mind in this way, takes time and practice, “repeated mindfulness and meditation experiences increases neural tissue, most likely dendrites and receptor sites” (Qunitiliani 10/16/2013c).
Running gives a variety of options for mindfulness practice. As I run, I am constantly aware of my present surroundings, my breath, and the enjoyment of my present being. I can focus on my breath, pace, mantra, or the scenery around me. The rhythm of each foot hitting pavement, my breath in and out, the swing of my arms, all help bring my attention back to the present. Thich Nhất Hạnh and Buddhism teach us that to touch each breath in mindfulness “your mind and body come into alignment, your wandering thoughts come to a stop, and you are at your best” (Nhật Hạnh 15). One technique that I learned from a friend, which has been a lifesaver during half marathons, is focusing on a person or group of people each mile that I run. Much like a mantra that you can repeat over and over again, this practice really helps me with the mental focus that I need on longer runs or in races. It is like bringing my thoughts back to my breath but in a very meaningful and personal way. For instance, for my last race, during the first mile, I thought of my husband Keith. I could see his face, repeat his name, recall a feeling and concentrate on him for the entirety of the mile. When my thoughts wondered, which they always do, and I became aware of them, I would gently bring my attention back to him. When that mile was done, I would move on to my next person. This was a way for me to stay in the present as well as focus on those whom I love.

3.4 Mind Expansion and Attitude Adjustment

I run for me. Running makes me feel good. Good about myself and good about my life. It lifts my spirits, gives me energy, and raises my self-esteem and self-confidence. Also, by setting and achieving goals I gain a sense of empowerment. My attitude can be changed by a run. I am uplifted by the beauty that surrounds me. I can take a break from the endless cycling of thoughts that cause worry and stress, in both my
personal and professional life. I feel as though I have accomplished something. I feel better. This positive energy generated by running can carry me through the day or turnaround a bad one.

Running directly impacts how and what you think. Cardiovascular activity, such as running, can actually change the structure of the brain. Aerobic activity has been showed to trigger the growth of nerve cells and blood vessels, a process called neurogenesis, as well as produces new blood cells, called angiogenesis. The new nerves and blood vessels pumping oxygen and glucose-rich blood to the brain leads to increased brain-tissue volume and promotes expansion of the hippocampus, the part of the brain linked to memory and learning. (Thomas et al.) Not only does your brain actually grow when you exercise regularly, it increases your ability to think and remember.

Personally, this is comforting since my mother (pictured with me in Figure 1) had been diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease fairly early in her life. Alzheimer’s is a progressive, irreversible degenerative brain condition with few treatment options. Running has been proven to reduce the risk of dying from Alzheimer’s disease as well as well as preventing it. Study author Dr. Paul T. Williams claims that exercise, and lots of it, is the best way to prevent the disease, “I think this and other research suggest that there are lifestyle choices people can make that will significantly impact their risk for Alzheimer’s disease” (Williams). Noting all the other added benefits of running, he adds, “There’s almost nothing you can do that is more effective in preventing disease than exercise” (Williams). Recently, I wrote a letter, an eSPN (a SPN written in letter format), to my Mom after having to transition her from assisted living to a nursing home. Alzheimer’s disease has taken so much from my mother, and our family. I include this
letter here because I hope that running helps me combat the very real possibility of suffering from this crippling disease. Further along in my thesis, I recount how my running has provided me an outlet to process my emotions with my mother’s illness. Lastly, this is an example of how SPN can be used to share and connect with others. For anyone who has experienced the long battle of losing a loved one to Alzheimer’s, you know my pain.

Dear Mom,

First and foremost, I love you. I am also sorry. If I knew then, what I know now, I would hope that things would have been different. Sad but true. I did not know. Actually, no one did. I mistook your withdrawal, non-communication and lack of involvement in our lives for something it was not. It was not for lack of effort on my part, and never with malice or intention that distance and time separated us for so long. I tried so hard over the years to reach out and connect with you, often left with heartache and a sense of abandonment. Now I know, Alzheimer’s had been robbing you for years, and in the process, we were all left cheated, none more than you. I did not recognize your slow, gradual withdraw from us for what it really was, a disease. Instead I only interpreted your choice to move, not to visit us, nor call, or write, to accept visits, connect with your grandchildren or allow us into your life as your wishes and my own fault. I saw only my own imperfections; if I were just more “perfect” our relationship would be closer, like it used to be when I was a teen and young adult. At first, when I thought it was me, I tried so hard to connect with you only to be left feeling confused, alone and unloved. “How could you not make time to see us when we traveled to the Cape?” “How could your
weeding be more important?” “Why will you not take the time to visit us…ever?” “What did I do to make you not want to be with me, or my family?”

After many years, and much heartache, I started to make the conscious decision to pull away. I could no longer put myself out there. I stopped reaching out. I knew that our relationship would never be the one that I had with my mother-in-law or even the one that you and I shared twenty-five years ago. I could not change you. I could only change my own attitude. How I react and see a situation is what I can control. As Viktor Frankl stated, “Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms- too choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way” (Frankl 66). Moreover, I was able to recognize my own happiness and really appreciate it. “Happiness depends partly on external circumstances, and it also depends on how you view those circumstances” (Rubin 234). My gift to my children was to share my gratitude, passion and love with them. It is up to them to choose their attitude and create their own happiness. As a humanist, my “spirituality does not necessitate a belief in a “God” or a higher power. What spirituality offers us is forgiveness and the understanding that all humans have shortcomings and defects in their character. That is what makes us human. Moreover, that the realistic goal of “being good” is finding a fit between self and reality. “A spirituality of imperfection suggests that there is something wrong- with me, with you, with the world- but there is nothing wrong with that, because that is the nature of our reality” (Kurtz and Ketchman 28). This is an amazingly powerful release. Over the years, I have come to realize that I do not have to be perfect. It is normal, human, to make mistakes. “Spirituality has to do with the reality of the here and now, with living humanly as one is, with the very real, very agonizing, ‘passions of the
soul.’ Spirituality involves learning how to live with imperfection” (Kurtz and Ketchman 18).

Despite my attempts to overcome your absence in my adult life, it pains me now to know that your gradual withdrawal over the course of twenty years was probably due to your symptoms and struggles with Alzheimer’s. I can understand why you did not, and still do not, see your own illness. That is the nature of this insidious malady. You filled the gaps in your memory, in your life, with routine, keeping the familiar, glossing over anything that made you appear vulnerable. You decorated and cleaned your house, pulled the weeds, walked the dog, fed the cats, went to the grocery store. These things you could still do to make it through the day without feeling lost, unsafe and alone. As you fell further and further into the disease, the few things that could connect you with us, your family who lived thousands of miles north, fell away. I wrongly interpreted the excuses for lack of caring. You stopped using the computer (“internet is too expensive”), the TV (“there is so much violence on there”), the telephone (“I had been meaning to call you”), and even writing (“I am just not good at sending letters”). Why did I not see what was really happening? Maybe, I did not want to see the truth.

Now, we know. Knowing of your disease does fill in the gaps in my own life. It helps explain your slow departure from our lives and inability to connect. It is the disease, not you, not me. Yet, this knowledge is with great cost, because we are left with the fact that you have Alzheimer’s. This disease will only rob you again and again, each and every day. It cheats us too. Since you have moved back north, I have cherished the time that we have together, more in the last two and half years than in the last two decades. Yet it is not the same. You are Sabra, my mom, grandmother to six, but you are
not entirely with us. Instead, we try to focus on the present, meet you where you are at right now. I see glimmers of the real you, here and there, but in a flash, you are gone again. What you show to us, to the world, is not necessarily what is real. You are trying to make sense of your new and ever changing world, moment to moment.

This week, I helped you move into your new home, your final home. I am crying as I write this because this is one of the hardest things I have had to do, not something any child wishes. I remember when I was a young, Dad used to ask me, ‘Will you take care of me when I get old?’ Of course, I always said ‘yes’, not realizing exactly what I was promising. Children do not want to put their parents into a secure unit of a nursing home. Andrew, your youngest, who has done so much for you through all of this, is beside himself with regret, second thoughts and guilt. After the traumatic circumstances of the last two weeks, no one, including you (the former you) would blame him. He has assumed the role as caretaker and it is a challenging task.

When I saw you this week, the reality of what lay ahead scared me even though I have known since your diagnosis. Your social worker at the nursing home asked you, “Who is this?” You took a moment, your big blue eyes focused on me, searching, thinking, trying to remember. You held my face in your hands and said, “Someone whom I love very much,” and then you embraced me. Tears sprung to my eyes. Faith showed me that your ability to match my face to who I am will soon be gone. She asked a few minutes later, before I had to leave. “Who is this?” You replied, again looking into my eyes for a moment, and I saw it, that glimmer of you. I saw your relief as you remembered and I saw the love you had for me. “That’s my daughter, Elizabeth, and I love her so very much.” You embraced me again. Will you be able to name me next time
I visit, or the time after that? I know that my name and memory lives, for the moment, in you, but how long will you remember that she is me? And that I exist?

Until that day comes, and even after, let us live in the moment with one another and enjoy each other’s company as best we can. Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot said it well, “The promise and potential of quantity time with our children; a time to just be together; a kind of attention that neither expects nor demands response; the permission to just sit side by side, eyes not meeting, allowing each person to be engaged in his or her own activity or be deeply immersed in his or her own thoughts; just feeling the diffuse light, just taking the time to be present” (210).

“Breathing in, I calm my body.
Breathing out, I smile.
Dwelling in the present moment,
I know this is a wonderful moment.”
(Thich Naht Hahn)

In deepest love, your daughter,

Libby (2016)
3.5 Stress Reduction

I run to de-stress. Exercise provides a positive outlet for stress, a way to deal with the frustrations of daily living. Running is a way for me to de-stress from both personal and professional pressures. As an advisor in higher education, the problems and situations my students face are often worries that can take a toll on my own mental health. Students face numerous difficult situations and I am there to help, advise, guide. Whether it is a graduating senior missing a requirement, a depressed student who is not responding, or a suicide ideation verbalized, the risk to “take my work home” is constant.

The serotonin that is released when I run calms me, relaxing my body and mind. Moreover, the meditative character of running allows me to re-center myself. When I first ran ten miles, I had not set out to run that far, not by a long shot. We were spending the weekend at a friend’s lake house and I was taking a four mile run with my husband. Just that week, I learned that my mother was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease and would be moved from North Carolina to New Hampshire, by my brother, that week. My mind was reeling from this news, on many levels. When we hit the two-mile mark, I could not stop. My husband, with a questioning look, agreed to go a bit further with me. At the two-and-a-half-mile mark, he grudgingly said he really needed to turn around and head back. Also, he adamantly told me that I was unprepared to go any further. I had no water nor had ever gone this kind of distance. Concerned, he warned me that I did not know what I was doing. I calmly asserted that I was not ready to turn back. I wanted to run, to keep running. I needed the run to process what was happening with my mother. I craved the meditative qualities of running, the mindfulness of it, the solitude, and the escape. Running provides me all of these.
3.6 Reduce Depression and Anxiety

In greater and greater frequency, I encounter friends, family, and students (who I advise) who suffer from the debilitating symptoms of depression and/or anxiety. These disorders wreak havoc on one’s ability to manage daily living. Exercise has been proven to alleviate and even improve these symptoms (Callaghan et al. 6). Moreover, depressive disorders are commonly diagnosed alongside physical illness, particularly heart disease, osteoporosis and diabetes. These somatic illnesses are often associated with a sedentary lifestyle, which can be both a cause and manifestation of depression. Exercise can address both the needed lifestyle changes, and have positive side effects in the treatment of and prevention of additional co-occurring physical diagnoses. Exercise has been documented to provide feelings of mastery, self-efficacy, distraction from symptoms, reduced negative patterns of thinking, and a designated space for social interaction (Knappen 82). Exercise therapy can also lead to improved self-esteem and positive body image reducing depression symptoms and negative mood. (Rethorst et al. 506)

Regardless of the form of exercise, running, aerobics, yoga or a walking program, it is important to be knowledgeable about where the individual is at to when beginning. Recording, tracking progress, and slowly increasing the frequency and duration of your routine can be helpful and essential for continued success. Above all, it is critical to find what works best for you and to remain consistent on an active journey towards health, happiness and wellness.
CHAPTER 4: BODY

I run for my health. Running has powerful physical health benefits. The World Health Organization recommends physical activity for all ages. It helps prevent high blood pressure, decreases risk of heart disease and stroke, fortifies the immune system, helps maintain a healthy weight (although definitely not a free pass on food), boosts serotonin levels, increases bone density, increases heart and lung function, reduces your chance of developing cancer, lessen or prevents types of dementia, improves HDL (the “good” cholesterol), reduces LDL (the “bad” cholesterol), as well as strengthens ligaments, legs and lungs. For women, running lowers the risk of breast cancer. For those in the early stages of diabetes, osteoporosis or high blood pressure, running is highly recommended. Both women and men improve their overall health and reduce the chances of suffering a heart attack. It seems that for whatever “X” disease you can think of, exercise can help relieve its symptoms.

My health is very important to me. I do not take it for granted. My father (Figure 2) passed away at the young age of forty-seven when I was just twenty-two years old. He did not take care of himself and I see the life that he missed out on. In a letter I wrote to him, in a previous class, I reflected on his absence in my adult life. I run because I want to live a long, productive life and see my family grow. A portion of this letter is shown below.

Dear Dad,

You were so young. Yet when I see you now in pictures, you look older than you should have, paler, not your usual vim and vigor, spitfire self. Hindsight is a curious thing. Truth is that I am not sure you would have changed your ways even if you did
know what was coming. That is the reason why I was so mad at you, furious really. I kept asking, “How could you do this to yourself?” We both know that there were signs; the twitching you complained about in your cheek; your widening girth; your deepening cough. Yet you continued to smoke, drink, eat, to snort…to do everything that you could to feel better in the moment. I know that you did not want to die. I know that you did love life, and us. I am not angry anymore. I have forgiven you. Yet, I miss you being here, with us. Your family has grown quite a bit. There have been marriages, births, and believe it or not, no divorces. You should have been a part of this. You could have been and my heart continues to ache for your loss, and ours.

Love and miss you so much,

Libby (2012)

Figure 2: My Dad

I run for me but I also run for my family, especially my husband, children and future grandchildren, in order that I will live a longer (hopefully) and healthier life. I also run to model the practice for them in hopes that they too will exercise regularly for their own good health.
CHAPTER 5: SPIRIT

5.1 Running May Be My Church

Running is not my religion, per se. If I had to define my spirituality, I fall more among the humanist cohort. However, running for me provides renewal, transcendence, and release. I can dream, meditate, reflect, give thanks and commune with nature. Instead of a church, I hit the roads, trails and sidewalks to practice my devotion. I am not alone. “The spiritual benefits available in running- appreciating nature, developing a communion with others, seeing how things in the universe connect, meditating- can quiet the mind, facilitate introspection, and help you become more virtuous and whole” (Bloom). A heightened state of consciousness, sometimes described as “Zen running” or “getting into the zone”, can be experienced by runners. “Running ‘in the moment’ with a greater sense of awareness and appreciation can make you a stronger, more confident runner and perhaps a more content individual, in general” (Bloom). Running, especially outside in the natural world, allows me to be moved spiritually, create meaning and find happiness in the process. Are you able to find transcendence? How so? If not in a church, then where and how?

5.2 Meaning Making

What drives us to get up each morning and face another day? Why are we here? What is our purpose? These are timeless questions that at some point in your life you wonder about. Everyone does, do they not? Many may define their goal or purpose in life as achieving or doing specific tasks, such as attaining a college degree, earning enough money to live a certain lifestyle, or, perhaps, even climbing a certain mountain. Yet, once they finally obtain the degree, make the money, or reach the mountain top, they are often
disappointed. Happiness is fleeting. Something is still missing. “Where do I go next?”

Reaching a goal is a laudable act but do the goals equate to finding meaning and purpose in your life? “What is it about us humans that makes us so end-result driven? Why can’t we (pardon the well-frayed phrase) just go with the flow? Why does there always have to be a winner? Why do we always have to get someplace? Why can’t wherever you go, there you are be enough” (Aronie 48)? Sigmund Freud, neurologist and the father of psychoanalysis, may offer that the basis for such end-result, driven motives lie in the pleasure-principle – how we follow our urges for pleasure in order to satisfy our unconscious psychological and biological drives. We crave happiness. In the Buddha’s first teaching, he spoke of the Four Noble Truths on his journey to enlightenment: that life brings suffering (birth, loss, illness, aging, misery and death); suffering is a part of living; that suffering can be ended; and there is a path that leads to the end of suffering. He also spoke of happiness, that it is real but impermanent. As much as we want it to last forever, it does not, and when it fades we are left with suffering. The Buddha taught his followers not to be distracted by momentary pleasures, instead to look at the bigger picture of their life experiences (O’Brien).

The achievement of a goal is the product of your work. Yet the happiness that you get from this product is fleeting. Instead, it is the process of getting there which is what sustains and fulfills you. The journey of doing what you love is where the magic happens- where you are in the flow, doing what you love, learning from the mistakes along the way and making meaning. The process is more important than the product. When you focus only on the product (finishing the marathon; getting the job; having the child), you miss out on all the experiences along the way (the running for the sake of
running; why you love what you do; all the stages as the child grows). The accomplishment of your goal should be celebrated, but, likewise, and even more so, as should the process. Life is lived in that process. When life has meaning, it is significant and you feel fulfilled. A meaningful life can offer a sense of joy, fulfillment and satisfaction. On the contrary, those whose lives lack purpose are more likely to suffer from cynicism, depression, restlessness, self-destructive tendencies, and lack of passion.

5.3 My Own Meaning

Where do I find meaning in my own life? I agree with Viktor Frankl that what motivates us is how we choose to make meaning, through our love (relationships), work (deeds and values), and suffering. Values that are important to me are love, honesty, determination, altruism, education and equality. When I think of the parts of my life that mean the most to me, I think of the people in my life and the interactions that I have with each of them (my husband, children, friends, neighbors, coworkers, students, classmates, teachers, community members, etc.). Those relationships are the moments that I remember and cherish – a warm embrace from my husband, making donuts with my son, a nature walk with my daughter, a good laugh with a coworker, a cup of tea shared with a friend, helping to realize their passion. It would be so difficult to not have them in my life, yet, if I was alone, the hope to see them again would serve as a constant motivating force. Likewise, the work that I do – professionally, personally, communally – makes me feel useful, valued, and meaningful. I enjoy helping students, working in higher education, volunteering in my community as well as being a mother, partner, and friend. Without meaning in one’s life, where would one turn to when experiencing the struggles that we all endure throughout life (death, loss, remorse, sadness, grief, disappointment,
fear, illness)? “Suffering is an ineradicable part of life, even as fate and death. Without suffering and death human life cannot be complete” (Frankl 57). Adversity can produce positive outcomes. It can bring you closer to loved ones and friends. It can strengthen your resolve and how you look at and live your life. Without experiencing these feelings, how can you feel their counterparts—life, achievement, satisfaction, happiness, pleasure, joy, health?

Running, to me, is more than the physical exertion of the act. It is a way for me to bring everything important in my life together in a productive and fulfilling way. I feel this way when I am doing other things too—hiking, skiing, even walking. When I can be active, outside, enjoying the natural world, filled with gratitude, connected to others, especially those I love, I feel calm and alive all at once. Running, or any activity, that can be done mindfully, non-obsessively, and with purpose, can help create meaning in one’s own life. I am able to use running in my life as a means to all these ends. Running is a way for me to create, reflect, and enjoy my own life with mind-full insight to all that is good and positive. I feel deeply appreciative that I am able to run, each and every time I tie up my sneakers. I am filled with gratitude for my health, friends, family, work, opportunities and the world around me.

Annie Lamott wrote, “I think this is how we are supposed to be in the world—present and in awe” (Lamott 100). The feeling of presence does not always happen in our busy lives. I tend to get caught up in the daily tasks that need my attention, as well as planning for upcoming commitments. Yet, as Lamott reminds us, “There is ecstasy in paying attention.” For me, being outside, in the natural world, especially while being active, reminds me to be in the present, enjoy the tranquility and appreciate my place in
it. Running is an activity that allows me to fully experience presence. Putting one foot in front of the other, focusing on my breath, observing the natural world around me, feeling the wind on my face, and relinquishing obsessive thoughts, all work together to provide a release, from stress, from responsibility, from typical cycling thoughts of a daily life. Running helps me transcend. In this way, it could be said to be a spiritual phenomenon.

Running, for me, is another aspect of meaning making. It makes me whole, allowing me to de-stress after a long day of helping others. “When you empathize with someone who is in distress, you may initially feel some mental discomfort. But having voluntarily chosen to open yourself to the difficulties of that other person shows courage, and courage imparts confidence” (Bstan-’dzin-rgya-mtsho 54). Being present for students takes energy, focus and passion. I want to help them to the best of my ability, within the parameters set forth by the codes of conduct at the university. Although rewarding, the work can be mentally and physically draining. The problems that are presented to me range in degree, severity and urgency. I see students who are on the edge of suicide, the brink of despair and the verge of defeatism. I am not a medical health professional or a counselor; however, it is what I do. I counsel, if not in name, by act. I try to find my students help and reassure them that things will be okay. However, there are no givens in life and often I take their problems home with me – the worry, grief, isolation. Running is one of the positive ways that I can deal with those feelings while doing what I love.

5.4 Unites

Running also brings me closer to others. You say, though, that running is a solo endeavor, something that is done alone, without the distractions of the world. I, totally, agree. Most often, I run alone. Moreover, I enjoy it. I take pleasure in the solitude.
However, I also enjoy running with other people. I am a social person. I believe that my connections with others are what make life memorable, meaningful and worth living. This is at the core of my first moral language. Life is connection. What is a life lived alone? “I crave connection” (Nash 2002, 16). I do so in all aspects of my life and I believe it not only gives substance to my life but adds to others’ as well. I create meaning in my life through my personal relationships with family, friends, students and colleagues in my loving, advising, learning and service. I believe in love, hope and compassion. The “Good life for everyone…is to display a respect for self and others, to practice compassion, to act responsibly, to work with, and in behalf of, others, and to insist on social justice for all” (Nash 2002, 81).

I run to be socially connected and meet new people. Running, as a sport, hobby or workout routine can unite people at all levels and ages toward a common goal and provide a positive platform for them to establish, and maintain, relationships. “If we see people as interesting and special, our world becomes stimulating and open” (Ferrucci 171). Whether you are a new runner, an elite athlete, going it alone, doing it with a group, or cheering from the sidelines, runners embrace each other in a fascinating subculture that is built on respect and support.

I have bonded with so many through running. From that first running group of neighborhood friends to strangers met at organized races, running remains a language that we can all understand as runners ourselves. Conversations include such topics as nutrition, athletic gear, injuries, fun races in new places, and even past race stories. Often these topics are just the launch pad to learn more of each other’s personal story. I have had the opportunity to meet people while waiting in line for that last bathroom break.
before the start of the race, along a race route, at sports expos and celebrating post-race.
Some of these connections have been a singular occurrence that made a race memorable.
Others have been the start to relationships that still endure today. Running unites, electrifies and excites.

In running, I have been able to enjoy the company of others, whether it is family, friends, coworkers, and even strangers. It was with friends that I first became successful with running. My husband and I have enjoyed many runs and races together. We have run charitable and fun 5K races with our daughter and son. Our extended families gather to participate in a Turkey Trot every Thanksgiving on Cape Cod to benefit the local food shelf. Other friends and I have formed a women’s racing group that travels for destination races. Races provide ample opportunity to make friends out of strangers with so many experiences to bond over. If you are having a hard time starting a running program, gather some friends, or acquaintances, and make it a social event or join a local running group. A group, be it small or large, will keep you going, make it fun, be able to empathize with your setbacks and celebrate your victories.

5.5 Happiness

You may have heard talk of a “runner’s high”. This euphoric feeling is often achieved when the body releases endorphins after a short run providing a sense of peace and happiness. For me, and others, it is addictive and a positive motivator for regular runs, yes, even a compulsion. If I feel stressed, sad, or bored, I know that a run will pick me up and turn my day around. I run because it makes me happy, the process not the product. The following poem was written by a nineteen-year old English army officer, Charles Hamilton Sorley, during World War I. Despite the turbulent time in which this
was written, the writer expresses his love for running. Reading it reminds me of the run that I want to take today and puts a smile on my face, running without cause, without prize.

**The Song of the Ungirt Runners**

We swing ungirded hips  
And lighten’d are our eyes,  
The rain is on our lips,  
We do not run for prize.  
We know not whom we trust  
Nor whitherward we fare,  
But we run because we must  
Through the great wide air.

The waters of the seas  
Are troubled as by storm.  
The tempest strips the trees  
And does not leave them warm.  
Does the tearing tempest pause?  
Do the tree-tops ask it why?  
So we run without a cause  
'Neath the big bare sky.

The rain is on our lips,  
We do not run for prize.  
But the storm the water whips  
And the wave howls to the skies.  
The winds arise and strike it  
And scatter it like sand,  
And we run because we like it  
Through the broad bright land.  

(Robinson 2004)

### 5.6 Flexibility

I run because it is flexible. I do not have to get in my car and drive to a gym. I can do it almost anywhere, at anytime. It is flexible and can be squeezed in during my busy schedule. As a working mother of two children, I often was able to fit in my running in between other commitments. While they practiced at the Little League field, had dance
class or a lesson with the piano teacher, I was able to take a run, adjusting it to the time and location available to me.

I run because it does not have to be an expensive investment. Yes, you can spend your money on gadgets and gear, but it is not obligatory. I buy myself at least one or two pair(s) of sneakers a year and usually spend approximately one hundred dollars on each. Usually, whatever exercise you are doing, you need a good pair of sneakers (well maybe not for yoga). I have accumulated some of the gear and gadgets as gifts from my husband – a GPS tracking watch to track my pace, distance and calories, a portable music MP3 player, athletic wear and the like. However, they have all been gifts, pretty much, and what a wonderful gift to give and receive, the gift of health.

5.7 Family

I run for and with my family. Shortly after I began to run, my husband did too. Running together, sometimes at different paces, gave us an additional common interest to share. Often, we were able to share a run together. However, even if we ran separately, we could share the joys, discoveries and milestones of our individual journeys. We have two, now, young adult children who have always seen my husband and I as active adults who take care of ourselves by eating a proper diet and getting daily exercise, through running as well as other activities.

Before I started to run, not one of us had ever entered a race. My daughter actually deplored running. However, six years after we started to run, we entered our first race together as a family, a Father’s Day Fun Run. My daughter would have come in dead last if I had not held back to allow her to cross the finish line first. It was an extremely emotional (yes, picture tears, proclamations of defeat, and shouts of “why are
we doing this!”) 5K, but not only did we all manage to finish, we won several prizes! To a ten and thirteen-year-old, that made the whole event much (much!) more tolerable. My daughter even talks about it with fond recollection now. Since then, we have run several races together, at least one a year. For the last six years or so, we have run in a Turkey Trot on Thanksgiving morning to raise money for the food pantry in Chatham, Massachusetts when we visit our family on Cape Cod, where my husband and I grew up (Figure 3 shows some of our family of trotters). It has become an extended family affair with loved ones participating from infants, in strollers, to the more senior among us (+seventy-five!) walking the course. In 2013, we dedicated our “run” to my mother-in-law who passed away suddenly that year, Team Carole.

Figure 3: Our family of Turkey Trotters 2013, Chatham, MA

Spending this time with my family is something that I am very grateful for and will always cherish. “The best use of our time is being generous and really being present with these last few years on her own, joining the high school long distance track team her senior year of high school, running on her own while in college and entering 5Ks with friends.
CHAPTER 6: COMPETITION

“Whatever you can do,
Or dream you can do,
Begin it.
Boldness has genius, power and magic in it.”
(W. H. Murray)

6.1 Perfectionism

When I first discussed my concept for this paper with my faculty advisor, Professor Robert Nash, he instantly liked the idea. “Running is a universal activity for so many people today.” As a former marathon runner himself, he knew the sport well. Generationally, running in his day was not as commonplace as it is today. “People would ask: ‘Running? For what? You mean, just running for the hell of it? Are you crazy, or bored, or masochistic?’ Or something like that.” Personally, for him, running was about achievement, winning, and competition. Although it is not that way for me, it can be for some.

For those who view running as a competitive sport or perhaps an activity to perfect, the act may not meet the goal of a meditative, mindful practice. Just like in other areas of life, perfectionism can be an impediment to running as well. “Perfectionism is the voice of the oppressor, the enemy of the people. It will keep you cramped and insane your whole life…I think perfectionism is based on the obsessive belief that if you run carefully enough, hitting each stepping-stone just right, you won’t have to die. The truth is that you will die anyway and that a lot of people who aren’t even looking at their feet are going to do a whole lot better than you, and have a lot more fun while they’re doing it” (Lamott 28). I know that I will never be the “best” runner. I do not have to win the race. Seriously, I am not that fast, as you can tell by the title of this thesis (“Life at 6
Miles Per Hour”). I also have no inclination to run a full marathon, at least right now. However, I do not have to be the “best” to get the “most” out of running, in life as well. Running is “good enough” for me. I allow myself the freedom to run, and live, without the pressure of being perfect. I can immerse myself in the process and not worry about the finish line.

Perfectionism may be something that stands in the way of successfully giving yourself over to running. Running to win, at all costs, to have the fastest pace, to strive for perfection without appreciating the process, to suck the fun out of the race…is that your goal. Perfection may, in fact, mask feelings of inadequacy, in which we strive to prove ourselves worthy of positive outside and inside feedback. Although I do not strive for perfection in my running, it had been an impediment in my own life. It gave me a false sense of control, over myself and over others. For me, it was a defense mechanism I used to persevere in the turmoil of the unknown. It allowed me to keep chaos at bay and feel secure in the order trying to be achieved. Yet, I have learned that to be human means that I am going to make mistakes along the way. “We are always and inevitable incomplete, on the way, slipping and sliding, making mistakes” (Kurtz and Ketcham 19). We are human and, as such, we are flawed, limited, and imperfect.

I have always tried to be the “good” girl. I was a middle child and the only girl of a divorced couple. My parents had a shared custody arrangement where we spent the weekends with my father, a functioning alcoholic, and the school week with my mother who worked full time. The life styles were very different. My father was bitter about a divorce that he did not want. My mother became increasingly aloof over the ensuing years (described in part above in my letter to her). My older brother was in a constant
state of chaos. In school, he acted out and eventually failed out. At home, he rebelled, self-medicated and struggled with his identity without a consistent male role model in his life. My younger brother was very close to my mother. He was not an underachiever, but not an overachiever, either. He did okay in secondary school and blossomed in college. I was the mediator, the star student, the responsible and mature one, or at least, that is the way I perceived myself. I am sure that the truth lay somewhere in between the grey areas of adolescence and the remains of a broken family.

I worked full-time throughout middle and high school, saving for college and to buy the things I needed (a car, insurance, and clothing). I graduated at the top of my class taking all honors and AP coursework. I was independent, single focused and going to get the heck out of dodge (the Cape). I thought I was perfect. I tried to be perfect. However, at the same time, I suffered from bulimia, partied hard, and probably put myself in precarious situations that I should have avoided.

During my first year of college, I made some changes. My education was always extremely important to me. I had worked very hard to save for my tuition and fees for a school that took me away from my home environment. I focused even more on school and starting a life for myself. I think that the thing that helped me the most was finding love. I found it first by giving it to another and then by giving it to myself. I trusted him with my story. “We seek help for what we cannot face or accomplish alone; in seeking help, we accept and admit our own powerlessness” (Kurtz and Ketcham 20). With his help, I learned to accept that I do not need to always be in control. I do not need to have all the answers. That it is okay to break down and say “I do not know.” He still reminds
I find that perfectionism is a habit. I still try to do my very best in all that I do; many times, I need to remind myself to be flexible, to forgive myself and others and tolerate things that are beyond my control. I am not perfect. I never will be. But I also know that no one else is either. I am good enough and that is all right. My journey is mine alone and for no one to judge. Moreover, I am filled with immense gratitude for my life and especially the people in it. I continue to strive to “be good” but I try to do something that I did not see as much growing up. I try to “do well” for others. “The purpose of life is not to get but to give, for only when you give, do you get” (Kurtz and Ketcham 96). It is those relationships that sustain and support me through my journey. I hope that what I offer them in love, friendship, and service helps them on their own journey. For, “What we do is important, but what we are is more important” (Kurtz and Ketcham 50).

As I said, perfectionism can be an obstacle to running for pleasure. Although competitiveness may coexist with a healthy and enjoyable approach to running, a perfectionist may focus more on the sport of running, than on the meditative qualities that running can provide. If your goal is to always be first, beat your personal best at every race, run the fastest mile and compete in races that demand more than your body can deliver, running may not serve the same purpose for you that it does for me. However, to those who do not find joy, peace and relaxation in their running, yet crave it, I do have some advice.
1. Do not wear a timepiece. It is too easy to become focused on your pace/distance when you have something that constantly reminds you of how you are doing. Leave it at home. Your pace is not the goal.
2. Try a new, unchartered route. Preferably one that you have not already mapped out. If you know what the distance is you will be more apt to know your pace.
3. A brief mindfulness exercise before you run may help you focus on the present instead of a goal. Perhaps one that focuses on breathing or a body scan.
4. Have a mantra that you repeat. Focus on something other than how fast and how far you are running.
5. Run to run, not to race. Forgo entering a race for a while. Redirect your focus from finish line to process.
6. Take notice of the experience. Instead of running toward a finish line, direct your attention to the details along the way, the scenery, the smells, the flowers.
7. Run with someone who has a slower pace and stay at their stride. For a perfectionist or someone who is focused on pace/distance, this will be especially difficult. You may find yourself wanting to run ahead. In time, the hope is to engage more with the person and the experience of the run and less with the goal of a faster pace.

6.2 Ready, Set, Go!

“That’s the thing about running: your greatest runs are rarely measured by racing success. They are moments in time when running allows you to see how wonderful your life is.”

(Kara Goucher)

Racing was a wonderful addition to my running experience. As I said previously, my first race was amongst nine other close friends/family and done in a fun, non-competitive way. I have done many races since, all of which I ran in a similar way. I choose not to compete with others and instead to enjoy the experience and have fun. For me, races are a social “active”-ity. Being able to enjoy an athletic pursuit, get a good workout, spend time with friends/family, meet new people and explore a new place or running route, are all positive reinforcements that make racing a positive experience.

Last year, one of my annual resolutions was to run my first half marathon. I had been consistently adding in monthly ten mile runs after that first one at the lake house
thinking about my Mom’s diagnosis. I really enjoyed the longer distance traversed. When the opportunity to join four girlfriends on the Cape for a half marathon came up, I jumped at it (Figure 4 running group post-race)! I grew up on Cape Cod and thought it very appropriate to cross this milestone in such a special place for me, amidst the sun, beaches and scrub pine of my youth. Just like Eleanor Roosevelt’s motto, “Do something every day that scares you,” I was nervous about adding over three miles on to a ten mile run. It is not as easy as it sounds. It takes time and endurance in training. I was determined to accomplish my goal, for the experience, and as a resolution for that year. After successfully completing the race late last September, this year, I resolved to run two more half marathons (Figures 5 and 6), the third one just a day before the year mark of my first race last year. I would run three half marathons in one year, a huge challenge for me, who was only going to do one originally. On September 26, 2015 I finished my third and final half marathon.

Figure 4: First Half-Marathon September 2014 Falmouth, MA
Figure 5: Second Half-Marathon September 2015 Manchester, VT

Figure 6: Third Half-Marathon September 2015 Falmouth, MA
CHAPTER 7: IT'S ALL ABOUT PERSPECTIVE

7.1 Take Risks

“Strength doesn’t come from what you can do. It comes from overcoming the things you once thought you couldn’t.”
(Rikki Rogers)

Every year I resolve to try something new; something that pushes me outside my comfort zone. I find that in that state of exhilaration and trepidation, I learn and grow more as a person. I love to try new things, whether it is an experience or meeting new people. It is always a rewarding adventure that stretches my limits. “The brain is stimulated by surprise, and successfully dealing with an unexpected situation gives a powerful sense of satisfaction. If you do new things – visit a museum for the first time, learn a new game, travel to a new place, meet new people – you’re more apt to feel happy than people who stick to more familiar activities” (Rubin 74). As I explained, running was one of those activities that pushed those boundaries. Being able to overcome my fear and succeed in something that I was not sure I could do gave me the courage, strength and resolve to try again. Over the years, I have taken the plunge, jumped the chasm and ventured into unknown territory. Most of these triumphs fall into priorities that I have set for myself. Some examples of resolutions I have embarked upon are flying a plane, traveling alone with a child to Europe, taking dance lessons, learning to ski, taking a graduate class at the age of forty-three, seeking a graduate degree, signing up for a class that studied and traveled to Kingston, Jamaica, running my first half marathon, and then deciding to do three in one year’s time. Although these resolutions are goals to work towards, it is the journey that makes them worth the effort.
These challenges make my heart beat a little faster and even question my decision. “Really do I want to have Lasik surgery and potentially damage my eyes? ...Willingly?” Yet, each and every time, I have not only been astounded with my own capabilities, but I have become a better person because of it. I gain a greater sense of self, realizing that I can confront an obstacle, work through it and learn from it. In this way, I have become more resilient. Running is just one of the things that I have resolved to do and it embodies every one of the top priorities that I have made for my life. Listed below are my life priorities and some of the things that I resolved to do over the years.

My children are a priority
- I volunteered in their classrooms, served as a guest teacher, chaperoned, fundraised and was an involved parent throughout their school years (daycare-high school)
- I chose to reconfigure my work hours to be home as much as possible
- Exposed them to a variety of experiences to show them all that life has to offer

My husband is my best friend and life long companion
- Take time every day to listen and talk
- Try new activities together. I have tried golf and even participated in a tournament this year. What a great day and the golf cart was a lot of fun too. We have also done dance lessons, traveled to new destinations, taken up running, skiing, and gourmet cooking
- Take time alone – to run, travel, hike, snowshoe, read, walk, or lay in a hammock

Family is not to be taken for granted
- Spend time together. Many of my resolutions have been family activities that we can all take part in (Segways, travel, skiing, flying a plane, running)
- Volunteer together (food drives, bottle drives, cooking at a shelter, Green Up Day)
- Stay connected in many different ways (visits, travel, Facebook, pictures, letters, phone conversations, lunch and breakfast dates one-one-one)

Friends are so important
- Create inventive, fun ways to spend time together (Bunco, Gourmet Dinner Club, dance classes, walking, running, camping, book group, host a murder/mystery dinner, travel excursions, playing games)
- Support each other in times of need and celebration

Travel more
- Europe, out west, down south, all over. Travel as much as possible and at least once a year to explore a new place, its people, history and culture
- All the more fun with family and friends
- Meet new people along the way
- TA a class trekking in Nepal

**Appreciate nature**
- Explore, hike, kayak, bike, ski and so much more
- Volunteer to help protect our natural environment
- Stop using plastic bags
- Quiet reflection
- Share with family and friends

**Explore**
- Try something that you always wanted to (fly a plane, ride a Segway, knee boarding, see a Broadway play)
- Be a lifelong learner
- Keep book group active
- Share reading with family
- Take a class
- Earn a graduate degree
- Write a thesis (this year’s resolution!)
- Learn to play piano
- Enroll in an on-line class

**Enjoy a healthy lifestyle**
- Join a CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) and support a local farmer
- Live a vegetarian lifestyle
- Lasik surgery
- Run
- Kayak
- Ski
- Vtrim – monitored my diet after becoming a vegetarian to ensure proper nutrition
- Participate in races – individual, as a partner, as a family, with friends/family
- Run a half marathon (3 in one year 9/2014-9/2015)

**Let others in**
- It is through relationships that connections are made and life is enjoyed.
- Reach out to others
- Strike up a conversation with a stranger
- Volunteer

**Live what I love**
- A career that I feel gives my life purpose and helps others. I love what I do as a higher education student services professional helping students on their education journey
- Balance work life and home life. After having children, I have worked part time (75%FTE) and I really enjoy the balance between work and home. I feel like I can devote all of myself in both areas with less stress and more personal fulfillment
- Take on new challenges
- Connect with others in my profession (conferences, on campus, in the workplace)
- Enjoy exercise while at work

Often in life, one is faced with a large and unexpected chasm before them. The question arises, what do I do? Do I turn back to the old and familiar? Do I travel along the precipice trying to look in, and guess what lies in wait? Or do I take a leap and explore the unknown? I say take that leap. Pushing myself to try new experiences has helped me make that leap when life requires it; giving me the strength, confidence and resiliency to face life’s challenges. As a native New Englander, I am also reminded of Robert Frost’s poem, “The Road Not Taken”, for I want to take the road less traveled and know that it has made all the difference.

### 7.2 The Chance to Notice

I run to discover new places and become familiar with the natural world around me. Running is a way to explore your environment, whether it is in your local community, your work place location, or a travel destination. I live in an absolutely beautiful corner of the world, Vermont. Mountains, lakes, rivers, dirt roads, farms, apple orchards, scenic byways, lush valleys… all out there for me to enjoy. Running as the sun sets casting a golden glow over the fields, as the early morning fog emerges against the back drop of the majestic mountains, in the cool pine forests or through the lush and fragrant meadows, there is so much to see.

Trucking along in a car, or even a bike or kayak, does not allow for the careful observation and close looking afforded when you run. Running at my pace, whether that be at a constant speed or stopping to enjoy a special moment, allows me the opportunity to take it all in, to notice the world around me. The wildflowers, animals (granted,
sometimes road kill), houses, views and people you meet along the way make life interesting. If I start a run from home, I have a “go-to” route that travels along a couple of paved streets and then on to a dirt road (Figures 7-9). I pass fields, streams, pastures, houses, farms, and even an apple orchard. I have seen deer that stop right in front of me before they hop across the road; hawks who soar overhead or perch in trees sighting their next prey; river otters that swim down stream, their sleek bodies navigating ever so quietly the slow moving water. I see the older couple who walk together every day, with their muck boots, orange vests and bag, collecting stray bits of trash along the roadside. I know the route so well, yet there is always something new to observe, such as the ever-changing flora throughout the seasons.

Figure 7: View from my run in Essex, VT
There is one lady by the name of Flo who I see often on my usual route. She wears a green Philadelphia Eagles jacket, old and worn, that is many sizes too big for her diminutive, hunched frame. Often times, she carries a tape cassette player, like the Walkman of my youth. She shuffles down the road listening to her music, but stopping along the way to admire the mountains that surround the area, Camels Hump, Mount Mansfield and, in the far distance, the Adirondacks. She always stops at a certain place in
the road where the river bends to it, allowing a glimpse of the depths below. When passing, I take out my earbuds and say “Hello”. However, I have learned that she really likes to talk. After my casual “Hi”, “Good afternoon”, or “What a beautiful morning,” as I continued to run, I noticed that she continued to talk, to want more conversation. So one day, I decided to take the plunge. I stopped my run to talk longer than the cursory greeting. I learned that indeed she loved to talk, as she relayed, pretty much, her whole life story – about her mother’s death, her children that live near by, what she did for a living and how she desperately missed her husband when he died. It took time, and interrupted my run, but it was worth it. I remember her “life story” to this day. I do not stop every time, but I do once in a while. And I always call her by name and have more to say to her than just “Hi”.

I love my usual route. I know how far I need to go if I want to do a 3, 4 or even 10 mile run. However, another great thing about running is that you can explore new places. Wherever I travel, I run. Not only do I get a workout, but I can check out the location. I investigate where side streets take me. I get a lay of the land, not as far as perhaps I would in a car, but much farther than a walk would provide, a very up-close and personal preview of coming attractions. I have run the one-mile blocks of Las Vegas, along the winding sandy shores of Cape Cod (Figure 10 and 11), the hills of Rocky Mountain National Park (Figure 12), the beaches of Marco Island (Figure 13) in Florida, the University of the West Indies campus (Figure 14) and the streets of London (Figure 15). I find the hole-in-the-wall cafes, the tiny museum that we never would have noticed, and the riverbank that would be perfect for an afternoon picnic. Running provides me a
chance to notice the life going on around me, especially when my pace is six miles an hour. At my pace, I can appreciate all that surrounds me.

Figure 10: Beach run South Harwich, MA

Figure 11: Afternoon run through Harwich Port, MA

Figure 12: Trail run Granby, CO

Figure 13: Beach run Anna Maria Island, FL
7.3 Seasons Change

I run year-round. Yes, some people may call me crazy, but I love it. I live in Vermont where the temperatures in winter plummet to below zero before the wind-chill is even factored in. Snow covers the ground, usually, late November through sometime in late April. We do get snow in October and sometimes May, but that snow does not typically stick around, so it really does not count. If I limited my running to the warmer months, there would not be a whole lot of running going on or I would have to resort to indoor running, on the track or treadmill. Those two options are always my contingency plans, B and C respectively. I despise running on the treadmill and usually resort to a fast pace walk. However, running outside, feeling the wind on my face, seeing the changes in the landscape over each season, makes me euphoric. I love the seasons and running provides a hands-on, if you will, way to experience them, up-close and personal, at my
own pace. Each season has its own unique beauty, discoveries and pleasures. Beyond even the season, even the incremental changes can be seen between the days.

Looking at the calendar year, January is the darkest and coldest. The snow banks are high, the ice is thick and dangerous, and the temperatures are -30 degrees to 20 above (if you are lucky). Probably not your ideal conditions but once I get outside, after the initial shock of cold, and start to run, I warm up and appreciate the beauty of being outdoors. Running, like skiing, snowshoeing and sledding, permits me to be outside and enjoy those dark winter months when so many hibernate, curling into themselves. Running is something I can do on a regular basis without much effort or cost. And it is so beautiful, my senses are heightened. Snow capped mountains, the setting or rising sun, the azure blue sky, or the naked waving branches all fight for my eyes’ attention. At the same time, I smell the smoky wood of a burning chimney fire and breathe in the quick cold air. Outdoor runs are harder to fit into a busy schedule; there are only about eight hours of available sunlight.

Attire is the most important part of the run when temperatures are dangerously cold. I wear padded long running pants, cover my torso in multiple thin layers, and wear form fitting gloves and hat. Sometimes, on biting cold and windy days, I wear something to protect my face as well, a balaclava or headband that I can drop over my mouth, cheeks and nose. Another important safety consideration is color. It is critical to wear a bright article of clothing or reflective gear at all times of the day given the variation in sunlight, chance of snowfall and possible high snow banks. Lastly, I have not opted for specialized footwear in case of ice, but it may be something to consider. Ice can be anywhere, under a thin layer of snow, unseen on wet pavement or even on the frozen dirt
trail. I am always vigilant as a runner, anytime of the year, but winter poses an even greater number of possible risks.

August juxtaposes well with the frigid, crisp months of January. Vermont’s beauty truly shines through in almost every month, even during March, the height of “mud season” as the ground begins to thaw and the landscape is painted a monochromatic, lifeless brown to the untrained eye, sugar making is in full swing, birds return from their southern vacations and buds start to form on the ends of branches. However, August vibrates with the colors, sounds, and smells of summer in the green mountain state. Black-eyed Susan and Queen Anne’s lace border the roads, bright orange day lilies dot the landscape, and there is a deep green covering every field, forest and hill. The sounds of summer are abundant as well, birds sing, rivers and streams babble, bees dart from flower to hive, frogs and cicadas orchestrated calls surround you with their melodies. Varied aromas abound as well – the drying of hay freshly cut in the field, the smell of rain after a brief afternoon shower, and the tang of barbecue filling the evening air. Whatever time of the day I run, the sights, sounds, and smells change. For instance, a morning run, in the cooler part of the day, strikes of solitude, feels less humid. There may even be a light fog lifting off the meadow. The sun is just coming up over Mount Mansfield casting slightly orange hues, and the smell of dew is still pungent in the air. Whereas, the same run later in the afternoon may be staged with an oppressive heat, the sounds of children playing, a brilliant cerulean sky with the hot odor of cow dung hanging in the air.

My warmer weather running attire usually consists of as little as possible, spandex shorts, athletic tank, always a bright color, and lots of water, even if only for a five mile
run. The days are long which makes scheduling much more forgiving. However, they can also be oppressively hot and humid, sapping energy and testing stamina. During hot spells, an early morning, dusk or starlit outing looks and feels like my best option. I opt for a fuel belt which holds three eight-ounce bottles as well as a zipped pouch for food on longer runs. My choice is water, not Gatorade or other power drinks. When on longer runs, I choose to carry a few pit-less dates for a boost. The sugar content, ability to suck on it and ease of chewing and swallowing allow for a quick pick me up. I have tried nuts and other dried fruit; however, the dates are by far my current favorite. For me, sneakers and socks are constant during the seasons. I stick with comfortable, absorbent, crew socks and a stability running shoe. The shoe has to have room in the toe box for my pinched nerves and provide good support for heals and arches. When the weather changes, usually sometime in April and October, I have a threshold for transitioning from shorts into long pants, and vice versa. At 50 degrees or less, I wear pants, any warmer, and it is shorts for this girl. Also, if snow banks are too tall to see over, I do not run outside. I can take the ice, the colder temps, and even sideways pelting snow, but I find it far too risky not to see an oncoming car and they me. Lastly, sunscreen is important on longer runs, winter or summer, if the sun is shining. Winter sun can bestow an awful burn when reflecting off the crisp, white snow.
What is solitude? The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines solitude as “the quality or state of being alone or remote from society”. However, alone does not mean lonely. Solitude is a state of being, alone with your thoughts, free of worldly entanglements, distractions and commitments. It is a vital state of being for most, if not all, people. It is an opportunity to unwind, de-stress, think, or not; to just “be”. What is your solitude? Where is your solitude? For some, solitude is meditation, a practice that promotes relaxation, builds internal energy, develops compassion, and allows the practitioner to be fully “in the present”. For others, it may be enjoying the flow of a passion, perhaps an artistic pursuit like painting or writing. For me, it is being outside, surrounded by the beauty of nature. Whether it be on a beach with the waves lapping the sandy shore or crashing against the rocks of a jetty, on the trails of a hiking trail leading up to a rugged Vermont mountain summit (Figure 16) or comforted by the babble of a stream and the shade of a tree in my own back yard, I love being in my “solitude” in a natural environment. Running, for me, is an extension of that. Running allows me to
enjoy my solitude, outside, admiring the natural world, in a stress free and untroubled, relaxed state of being.
CHAPTER 8: OVERCOMING FEAR

“There everything we want is on the other side of fear.”
(Farrah Gray)

There are many reasons why I do run and I have mentioned many in the sections above. However, there are some drawbacks to running. It takes time, sometimes even two to three hours if you are training for longer distance. That is a lot of time, which can be a very precious commodity. I suppose you could get caught up in the expense of the sport-gadgets, athletic apparel, race fees, books, perhaps travel costs. There are many products available to “help” a runner “be their best”. However, overwhelmingly, the biggest danger is the ever present risk of injury. Research varies but it is estimated that about two thirds of runners incur at least one injury a year that interrupts their training. For all the good that can be gained from running, it is fraught with many potential dangers to your body. I have had many friends who have suffered from running related injuries, pulled muscles and groins, torn meniscus in the knees, shin splints, planter fasciitis, and other such complications. When injured, not only is your running put on hold, or even worse, not possible anymore, but your exercise possibilities in general may be thwarted, a serious consideration for those who enjoy the daily engagement in physical exercise/movement. Injury is, overwhelmingly, my biggest fear with running. Why? I do not want to be in the category “former runner”. Many injured runners fall into this category because their symptoms are treated, not necessarily the underlying cause(s) of the running injury, often leaving them no choice but to stop running. Below is a letter I wrote about my recent experience with an injury and how I worked through it to get at the cause.
Dear Estelle,

Thank you from the bottom of my heart. Thank you for helping me in my hour of need. I had been doing so well. Truly, this is one thing that I dreaded most in my running…injury. I was so happy to have completed my goal this year of running three half marathons (two with you!). As you know, the last two were only two weeks apart. I felt that I had trained and run them beautifully. However, three days after we returned from Cape Cod (my final race of the three) a pain could be felt in my right foot. As I walked barefoot in my house, with each step, I felt a stab of electric shock shoot through my foot and up the side of my ankle and leg, something I had never felt before…ever. At first, I thought, “Hmmm, that’s odd. I must have hit it.” I had been fine throughout the race. I had not run in the days since the race. In fact, it was the best race of the three. Post-race I had done yoga on the beach, had a massage, and even went dancing that night. I had felt fine and so did my foot. I really did not connect the pain with running. I thought it would go away. I have always been in good shape, no injuries whatsoever. However, after the third day, an excruciating painful day wearing clogs at work, the first cool Vermont fall day that necessitated closed toe shoes, I changed my mind. This pain was, indeed, not going away and, furthermore, it was getting worse. My first thoughts…Damn it! What have I done to myself? Is it permanent?

Thank you for responding immediately to my urgent text. I trust your expertise as a physical therapist and am so glad that you had an inkling of what I was describing. You were spot on! It was peroneal tendinosis, an inflammation in the tendon which usually occurs due to overuse, especially when an athlete does a repetitive activity that irritates the tendon over long periods of time. The cause can be a new exercise, a marked increase
in activity (like marathon training), poor shoe wear, or improper training. I think I was guilty of at least two, maybe even three (the back to back races and my new sneakers provided less support).

I am so appreciative that you were able to fit me in with one of your coworkers the next day. It looks like the main reason for this inflammation lies in my posture. Apparently, my hips are very tight and some key muscles lack the strength they need. If I am able to loosen the hips and strengthen these muscles, my running stride will improve. I will not rotate, or swing, my right foot in my gait, as apparently is the case now. It truly is amazing how a daily hip exercise will transform the way I place my foot on the pavement. Not only that, the therapy that I am undertaking may be able to increase my speed and will allow me to expend less net energy. Maybe I should have learned more about proper form in my running earlier?!

Thank you for being honest about your fears of a possible avulsion fracture if left untreated. I am really glad that I sought medical attention immediately. I am grateful to have you in my life, as a friend, fellow runner, race buddy…and physical therapist! I am hoping that with patient, hard work, I can work my way back to running.

Your friend and running buddy,

Libby (2015)

There are important lessons for me with regard to this setback. First and foremost, it is important to listen to your body. Although I felt no pain in training or running my races, when I had pain I sought medical attention. According to Doctors Jeffrey McAlister and Terrence Philbin in Podiatry Today, “Prompt diagnosis and timely intervention are keys to preventing chronic peroneal dislocation, instability and tears”
(McAlister and Philbin). By not seeking medical treatment, I could risk permanent damage and physical limitations. Second, finding alternatives during the ensuing rest and recovery phase is a must. Not being able to run on a regular basis is difficult. After a few days’ rest, with permission from your office, I was given permission to walk at a brisk clip. Additionally, I took an easy three-and-a-half-mile hike around beautiful Colchester Pond. I love to hike and I thoroughly enjoyed the chance to get out, enjoy the natural beauty of an early Vermont fall day and get my heart rate up on some good hills. I wore supportive hiking boots with an extra insert. Fortunately, my foot did not start to hurt until almost the end of the hike. I think it is important for me to find activities that are within my ability but do allow for the healing process to occur. After two weeks, your staff gave me permission to try a short run. If I felt any pain, I would have to stop running, and walk back.

Lastly, I am hopeful that the work I dedicate toward my recovery will help make me stronger, healthier, perhaps faster, and more resilient in the future. I am putting my all energy into doing my physical therapy (PT) exercises to meet my goal of being in top shape so that I can continue to run in the future.

After the requisite time of faithfully executing my PT exercises twice daily, I attempted my first run. The deal that I bargained was that I would do a relatively short run and walk back if it were to hurt. I laced up my sneakers with eager anticipation. Would it hurt? How far would I make it? If it does hurt, will that set my progress back? After doing my PT stretch first, I took a step outside, breathed in the fresh fall air, took in the colored panorama around me, and felt the excitement, and trepidation build. I started to run. I could feel the tendon, but it did not hurt. It just reminded me it was there. I kept
running. In my mind, I was thinking, maybe I would just run to the end of the street and back, a mile total. When I reached the half mile mark, it did not hurt, so I kept going. The other mile markers that I set for myself came, and went. I really did not want to stop. I thought I would run to the orchard which is about two and a half miles out, take a few pictures of the beautiful colors that painted the landscape, and turn back toward home. I had actually brought my phone for the potential picture opportunity, not for a phone call home. However, after three miles, I felt the pain. And it hurt! I stopped, called my husband and asked to be picked up.

It is a fine balance, pleasure and pain. I absolutely loved being able to run, but was desperately worried that I slowed my healing. I kept off my feet as much as possible that night. The next day, I awoke, swung my legs out of bed and, amazingly enough, no pain when I stood. I decided to try another run that afternoon. This time was different though, same blue sky, warm temps and bursting fall color but as I started out. I did not feel the tendon, nothing. I kept running. I ran three miles again, but absolutely no discomfort, or pain in my foot the entire time, or after. I am beside myself relieved, happy, and grateful.

The treatment method that I received focused not only on relieving the symptoms but also on the underlying cause of my injury, bad posture. By addressing this issue, my running can be more efficient, easier and, hopefully, injury-free. This approach reminded me of ChiRunning, a technique based on T’ai Chi principles over strength training, which promotes good posture to prevent injury and enhance performance. Danny and Katherine Dreyer, authors of ChiRunning: A Revolutionary Approach to Effortless, Injury-Free Running, explain that running is actually a balance of energy in your body. “When your
posture is aligned, chi can flow up and down your spine and into your whole body” (xix). By listening to your body and making adjustments, a runner may continue to run without the fear of injury. Additionally, ChiRunning focuses less on being an accomplished runner and more on having a centered, mindful approach to running and life, much like my relationship with running.

Although running offers numerous benefits on many levels – physical, social, emotional and spiritual – it does have the potential to become self-medication. Life is made up of both happiness and suffering. When we suffer, and want relief, a run certainly is a positive, healthy activity to relieve the suffering. However, when the running is excessive, harming the body, and more than one can endure, or becomes an addiction that pushes you past the acceptable health benefits, it can be self-medication. Self-medication habits provide short-term relief from suffering but produce long-term problems. The same brain plasticity that can form the healthy habit of running can lead to a self-medication cycle where one is stuck. Long-term consequences can include physical deterioration as well as psychological health implications without resolution (Quintiliani 2013b). Although injury, and the loss of running, is a great personal fear of mine, the coping skills that I have learned through my running journey as a meditative process guided me in my recovery and healing. It is so important to listen to your body and take action when needed. The resiliency that I have learned through running not only helped me face my fear of injury, illustrating that I can dedicate myself to healing, but demonstrated that I can overcome other obstacles in my running and life.
CHAPTER 9: APPLICATIONS TO HIGHER EDUCATION ADVISING

9.1 Meaning Making in Higher Education

Yesterday was a typical day at work for me. Among other things, I updated a PowerPoint presentation for a workshop that I will soon be doing for students who have not yet declared a major entitled, “How to find a Major”, met with a student who is on academic trial who I see weekly for intensive advising sessions, drafted a four semester curriculum plan for a junior who is changing his major, helped a student craft an appeal to Student Financial Services for a full refund due to a medical condition, and fielded a call from a distraught first year student who had just learned she was pregnant and was traveling back to UVM from home on a bus, scared and alone. My career as an Academic and Student Services Advisor in the College of Arts and Sciences is anything by typical and, most days, I enjoy every minute of it. No day is the same and each student has their own story.

For almost three decades, I have worked as a professional in higher education at a liberal arts college within a medium sized land grant research university. I have had the pleasure and honor of guiding hundreds of students on their journey to achieve a college education. I find the work of advising not only an immensely rewarding career, but a source of meaning in my life: “Service is advantageous to those who do it, not only to those who receive it” (Ferrucci 241). Service to others brings meaning to the givers life, increases self-esteem, makes you find value in what you do and feel useful. It brings out the best in you. I love to help students on their educational journey.

According to Nash and Murray, “Today’s college students are asking for their own existential questions of meaning. As Frankl suggested, they are in search of a
‘meaning to live for’. Their questions are timeless, yet they reflect the age in which they live. These questions are a fascinating admixture of the abstract and the practical, the universal and the particular. They represent well the tensions that exist for so many college students who seek to find the delicate balance that exists in the difficult space between idealism and realism” (xv). College age students are in the midst of pivotal decisions for the first time in their lives and need direction. Some of the questions that I field on a daily basis include:

- What major do I choose?
- What are my values?
- What kind of career do I want to pursue?
- How will what I am learning be applicable to my life and vocation?
- How can I find a balance between doing what I love and earning a living to support myself and a family?
- Why am I not happy with what I am studying?
- I was academically successful in high school, why not in college?
- Do I want to pursue a graduate degree and if so, which one and why?

I help them navigate not only these fundamental academic decisions, but serve as a resource for them when their personal life impacts their academics. It is a common occurrence for me to speak with students about depression, grief, anxiety, abuse, learning disabilities, racial discrimination, sexual orientation, eating disorders, rape, pregnancy, terminal illness, the loss of a loved one, spirituality, relationships, exercise regimens, suicide and assault, to name a few. My job is to advise them to the best of my ability, assess their needs, and refer them as necessary so that they can determine their next course of action. Often, I am the first person with whom they share their story. I try to give them the space to do so. If students have the opportunity to contemplate their beliefs, assess their values, identify their purpose and promote their own self-care during their
college lives, they are more apt to make value based decisions and lead a more meaningful and fulfilled life.

At the same time, those who are educators, who help students build their educational foundation, are often asking similar questions in our own lives, perhaps for the first time, perhaps for the tenth reiteration. “The Truth is that as the struggle for survival has subsided, the question has emerged-survival for what? Ever more people today have the means to live, but no meaning to live for” (Nash and Murray xiv). In order to help students through this process, educators need to self-assess as well so that they can provide support, guidance and opportunity to those they advise, teach, mentor and guide. Moreover, is not the process of meaning-making something that everyone needs to address, young and old, professor and student, parent and child, employer and employee? “The ‘will to meaning’ represents a hard-wired, psychobiological drive to ‘find values for the sake of which to live.’ These might include a political cause, service to others, righting injustices, a commitment to a religious faith, or a loving relationship” (Nash and Murray 242).

9.2 Aerobic Exercise to Support Academic Success

As an academic advising professional, I meet and advise many students, in scheduled appointments, office hours, over the phone, via email and even walking across campus. Mainly, the students are of traditional age, eighteen – twenty-two year olds, with some non-traditional students occasionally. Each comes to me with their own story, obstacles and questions. Each student is unique, despite the commonalities that they share as students. However, one characteristic that many of them share is their need for balance. College life presents many stressors that cause students to feel vulnerable:
• Academic expectations: exams, papers, reading, writing, quizzes, presentations, class participation
• New social constructs
• Lack of support
• New independence
• Loneliness
• Roommate troubles
• Transition
• Living away from home for the first time
• Financial burdens
• Social pressures
• More challenging curriculum
• Need for self-advocacy
• Adult demands

The ability to deal with these new stressors varies from student to student, but many exhibit symptoms that require self-care, as well as professional medical attention. Some students present more severe symptoms, perhaps existent before they began college, such as depression and/or anxiety, while others have trouble focusing, feel isolated, suffer from grief, have trouble sleeping, have gained or lost weight or are experiencing relationship difficulties. I refer students to seek help from the university’s Center for Health and Wellbeing which includes counseling and psychiatric services as well as the Mind-Body Wellness Program. Additionally, I encourage students to consider the benefits of both exercise and mindfulness practices which reduce anxiety and depression, foster greater self-awareness and self-esteem, enhance attention, increase happiness, and contribute to improved health and immune function. For many students, exercise was done regularly throughout elementary and high school through team sports, gym classes, and family outings. However, the transition to college requires students to figure out how to incorporate exercise into their new schedule. This does not always happen and can contribute to a student’s overall lack of good health, physically and
mentally. They lack this necessary balance, between their overall health and the commitments required of them as students.

As a runner, I know the importance of regular exercise for one’s health. My experiences have served as a helpful launch pad to have discussions about exercise in their life and how their inactivity may be impacting their life in college (academically, socially, and physically). There have been several studies that have established a connection between the mind and the body showing the benefits of intense aerobic exercise on improved student performance. The underlying principle is that physiological variations in the body impact cognitive function and performance. Although, intensity, duration, participant fitness level and the cognitive task at hand were all significant factors, it was concluded that “exercise benefits performance on cognitive tasks performed during or following the exercise bout. The size of the benefit is dependent upon a number of factors, but results indicate that benefits are larger for more fit individuals who perform the physical activity for twenty minutes or longer” (Chang et al. 96).

It has been shown that there is a positive correlation between exercise and academic performance. Students who exercise are more likely to boost their exam score by an average of two to three percentage points. Moreover, it was found that students who did well on their exams were more likely to increase their exercise usage. Additionally, not only has the use of exercise been shown to positively impact the results of a student’s performance on a test, but the reciprocal is true too. Students who decrease their exercise are more likely to do decrease their exam score by one percentage point. Students who perform poorly on an exam and cut-back on their exercise activities to
devote more time to studying may actually decrease their performance, doing more harm than good (Slade and Kies).

Exercise has also been used as a “prescription for at-risk students” in primary schools to improve student behavior as well as academic success. “Several studies have shown that running, in particular, can dramatically improve the classroom behavior of some children. Moreover, general fitness levels have now been linked to academic achievement” (Putnam et al. 27). The Wilson Central School District, in Wilson, New York, utilizes “exercise labs” as an alternative intervention for “at-risk” students which they broadly define to include a diverse segment of the student body. “Lab” sessions focus on aerobic exercise offering a wide range of activities and equipment both indoors, such as treadmills, elliptical machines, and a rock-climbing wall, and outdoors, including soccer and running. This exercise model aims not only to positively impact student behavior and academic performance, but to increase overall fitness levels, decrease the stigma often associated with at-risk and special needs children, and provide an alternative to students whose parents refuse other treatments or medication.

In conclusion, when meeting with a student advisee, if relevant, we discuss their exercise regimen, or lack thereof. My experiences with exercise have helped make this conversation a natural topic to explore. I am able to empathize with those that are finding it difficult to begin an exercise program. While at the same time, I connect with students who have had previous experience with aerobic activities. Without running in my own life experiences, this is not something that I would feel equipped, nor relevant, to discuss.
9.3 Mindfulness Practices in Student Services Advising

Students are not always aware of what mindfulness is and how it can help them. They may or may not have had prior experience with the techniques. In our conversations, I talk to students about how to integrate not only exercise, but mindfulness into their busy lives. We talk about how mindfulness can help them and the wide variety of options available to them on campus, in workshops, classes and even through apps on their phone. The use of mindfulness practices, as well as its greater acceptance, over the three decades I have studied and worked in higher education, has increased significantly. In 1987 and in the ensuing fifteen years, I had never heard of mindfulness. However, on the University of Vermont campus, today, it is a well-known option for students at Counseling and Psychiatry Services, the Living Well Center, residential housing and even in some classes.

Mindfulness, as stressed above, includes practices and skills that improve awareness, circumspection, discernment, retention, and equanimity. Paying close attention with complete awareness and concentration in the present moment without judgment (non-judging, patience, open-mindedness, trust, non-striving, acceptance, and letting go/letting be) are all important to mindfulness meditation (Kabat-Zinn).

Mindfulness practices have the ability to improve emotions, quality of life and relationships, access the energy of your true presence, increase self-love, loving others and longer-lasting happiness. For the greatest benefits, it must be done through ongoing, regular daily practice.

When advising students who have trouble focusing, experience test anxiety, suffer from depression or anxiety, or are experiencing heightened stress, in addition to referring
them to the appropriate support office on campus, I encourage them to consider mindfulness practices. Some of the benefits for students include (Quintiliani 2013a):

- Regulation of the body
- Emotional balance and self-regulation
- The ability to pause prior to action
- Modulation of fear
- Empathy for others
- Standards of social good and morality
- Cognitive empathy

My experience with running, as well as my work in several graduate classes, has made me much more comfortable in having this conversation. As I mentioned, many of them have heard of mindfulness, some have experimented with it already, and many express interest in pursing it. For a college student, regular practice is not always feasible given their hectic and stressful schedules, current motivation and lifestyle situation. Being able to have open discourse about the potential benefits of mindfulness has added a dimension to my advising “tool belt” which had not existed before my own exploration through running.

9.4 Helping Myself and My Students through Writing

Worthy of note, in writing this thesis, I have found there are many parallels between running and writing (mentioned below). Although the incorporation of writing as an equal theme in my thesis seemed a daunting task, I think that it does warrant some observations to provide thought for additional discussion. As with running, writing can be a meaning making activity that is done with purpose, presence, reflection and creativity. The process of writing has the ability to be energizing, cathartic and serve as a release, for mind, body and spirit. It can be just as mentally and physically draining. As with any activity, writing has the potential to become a product, instead of a process, a goal versus
a journey. For me, writing has been the latter instead of the former, a journey instead of a goal, within itself. I have been able to express myself through writing as I experienced personal struggles in the last three years including the unexpected loss of my mother-in-law, my mother’s diagnosis with Alzheimer’s disease, and a close friend’s traumatic situation with the murder of her teenage son by her husband. The ability to write about these heartbreaks has been a therapeutic and liberating experience, a creative tool to understand and ease my own suffering. By using SPN, I have been able to write about what I am learning and apply it to my own life, personally and professionally. SPN helped me write, reflect and deal with a professional and ethical struggle involving a student who was sexual harassing me, resulting in both a UVM conduct hearing and a civil action in court.

Although I do not utilize the SPN or eSPN models of writing with my students, I employ two strategies that SPN promotes, the “P” and the “N”. Many of the students that I advise are in academic distress, in danger of failing out of school or are returning to the university after a period of mandatory time away due to their poor scholarship. They come to our office for academic guidance, support and a desire to succeed in school. These are all bright, capable students who, for one reason or another, have not been able to balance school, stress and their personal life. Our staff offers to meet with them on a regular basis throughout the semester so that they can work through and overcome their personal obstacles.

The “P”, Personal – During our first hour long meeting, I get to know the student. I start with easy questions. Where they are from? What brought them to UVM? Are they happy here? Then I invite them to talk. I have their transcript, but I want to hear their own
“story”. What happened? What did not happen? What is going on for them? What are their obstacles? What is going in their life? Then I ask some questions of my own based on cues from their personal narrative. What did they do to help themselves when they encountered difficulty? Is there a medical history, physical or mental health related condition, that I should be aware of? Is there any history of a learning style difference? Is substance abuse an issue for them? What happened within the courses that did not go well? What interests them most? What are they passionate about, in school and outside of school?

The “N”, Narrative – When we are done, I ask them to do some written homework before we meet again next week. I invite them to think about their goals for this semester. What do they want to accomplish, specifically? And how will they make that happen? What can they do to work towards their goals on a daily, weekly and monthly basis to make their dream a reality? What do they want to work on? I suggest that they consider at least three goals and tell me more about each. It may be an academic ambition, such as study skills and time management, to speak up in class, identify a major, or utilize a professor’s office hours. However, many times their aims include personal longings, such as to exercise on a regular basis, participate in a club, be more social, seek counseling or explore the surrounding community.

These exercises are not the same as an SPN, as I have done here. There is no “S”, Scholarship dimension other than the fact that this is their story, a story that signifies. I am not encouraging them to have a theme, or a universal meaning to their writing. However, we each gain from this experience. The student is able to tell their own story, and how that story impacts their academic life and goals. I hope that they feel validated;
that their story matters. “A life that signifies is a life that matters” (Nash and Varay 2013, 10). I gain valuable background knowledge that I can use to help them succeed. These exercises are tools to learn what is most important to them. I want to help them reach their goals but also discover that the process is important. Identifying their truth, what is important to them, and then making that happen are important lifetime skills. Throughout the semester, I advise them, keeping their aspirations in mind. Along the way, they learn self-advocacy, how to use resources on campus, and study skills. At the end of the semester, together we look at that writing exercise to reflect on what they accomplished, as well as what they can continue to work toward. My hope is that they realize that they are a crucial part of their own success story. The first step is to voice their own truth, what they really want and then work toward their goal. As an educator, how do you call forth a student’s story, their truth? Do you?

9.5 Writing to Run; Running to Write: The Interplay of Two Disparate Motions

“Racking up mile after mile is difficult, mind-expanding, and hypnotic – just like putting words down on a page.”
(Nick Ripatrazone)

In “Why Writers Run”, Nick Ripatrazone explains that many writers use running as an escape. “Running offers writers escape with purpose” (Ripatrazone 2). When faced with the challenges that writing presents – writer’s block, structural problems, new material, sitting in a chair for hours on end, and the like- running provides an opportunity to reenergize, refocus, percolate novel ideas and distress; let their creative minds wonder without inhibition. Moreover, he compares the physical act of running as a natural extension of writing. Haruki Murakami, avid novelist and marathon runner, cannot imagine one without the other, each requiring talent, focus and endurance, “Exerting
yourself to the fullest within your individual limits: that’s the essence of running, and a metaphor for life – and for me, for writing as well” (Murakami 83). I have found this symbiotic relationship in my own experiences with my writing and running. When I write I become engrossed in the work and crave a run to break up the monotony, give me time to process the writing or provide additional inspiration. I tend to approach each ritualistically, looking forward to the experience that lay before me. “Through running, writers deepen their ability to focus on a single, engrossing task and enter a new state of mind entirely- word after word, mile after mile” (Ripatrazone 2). Running offers the freedom of distance, solitude, and a meditative pace in each breath and stride as foot hits pavement. Indeed, these two activities can be mutually beneficial. Running can provide the organic material that can feed a writer’s imagination. Murakami probably nailed it in this 2004 Runner’s World interview: “The most important qualities to be a writer are probably imaginative ability, intelligence, and focus. But in order to maintain these qualities in a high and constant level, you must never neglect to keep up your physical strength. Without a solid base of physical strength, you can't accomplish anything very intricate or demanding. That's my belief. If I did not keep running, I think my writing would be very different from what it is now.” By the same token, in this process, my writing has fed both my desire and need to run. “Writers and runners use the same phrase – ‘hit my stride – to describe the moment when exertion and work become joy” (Ripatrazone 5).

Just like in running, writing is mostly a mental exercise. Your intention has to be to write. “‘It’s all intention: I want to write, so I will write. I want to paint, so I will paint. I want to make music, so I will make music.’ I want to run, so I will run. ‘And don’t
forget – none of it has to be good; it just has to be’” (Aronie 49). As Annie Lamott, and most other writers agree, writing is done by putting “butt to chair”. That is the physical aspect of writing, despite Ernest Hemingway’s approach to standing and writing. However, the rest of writing is truly a mental state – confidence, commitment, focus, creativity, perseverance. It takes the same tenacity, discipline and constant attention that running necessitates. Aronie, again, draws parallels between running and writing, “For those of you who have stuck to something, anything that required your fierce devotion, remember the baby steps you had to take before you were a full-fledged marathoner? In the beginning, maybe it was the hardest thing you’d ever done: getting up at the crack of dawn, forcing yourself out of a warm bed into the cold, dark morning. It took forever to push through the initial misery. Then as the joy of accomplishment, the thrill of completing something started to seep in, it got less miserable. It was still horrible, but now there was a reason. Each morning you would forget the reason, but some dim memory would start to knock at your brain and you’d be able to do it – one more time – and one more time – and one more time. And pretty soon it became impossible for you to go a day not doing it” (111).

In running, it can be a challenge just to get started. The same could be said for writing. The first page, the first “shitty draft”, as Lamont calls it, often is the most difficult. There are so many other things that pull at a writer’s attention – the laundry that needs to be folded, the dentist appointment that needs to be scheduled, the phone call to Mom that should be made, and those ever so pressing dust bunnies that are hiding under that refrigerator. And it is not only difficult to start these practices, both require the commitment to continue and maintain momentum. I do not always feel great throughout
my run either, sore feet, pains, cramps, muscle aches or blisters. In those times, I can falter. Even within the flow of writing, I can hit road blocks or I have trouble getting that perfect descriptive phrase that is on the tip of my tongue.

I have experienced writing as both a solitary and communal activity, both providing sustenance to mind and spirit. Most of my writing, as in my running, is done in solitude; me, a desk and my computer, “Butt to chair”, plugging away, little by little, “bird by bird”, while usually taking a break to take a run, mull over my writing and brainstorm ideas. However, as in my experiences with running, I have really enjoyed the communal aspect of writing. In class, we share our writings, as a whole, in dyads, triads and small groups. Through the process of writing from the heart our own personal truth and then the sharing of our stories with each other, we have created memories, forged friendships, inspired one another and built a supportive writing community. For me, in the past, writing had never been a communal activity to connect with others. My writing was submitted to an instructor who would assess and grade it based upon the merits of my research, argument, grammar and composition. Rarely was it shared as a work within itself, as my personal story. If peer reviewed, it was corrected, modified and edited to satisfy the requirements of the assignment. Instead, in these classes, everyone was rapt with attention listening to the reader, tears were shed and positive feedback given. I have felt transformed at the end of each class, as a person, a student and an advisor.

Writing, especially a SPN manuscript, and running both have the ability to be an outlet for self-analysis, cathartic release and resiliency. Reflecting and writing your truth makes it possible to heal from that truth, to move through the pain and, hopefully, find understanding and move on from it.
IN SUMMARY

“Let yourself be silently drawn by the strange pull of what you really love. It will not lead you astray.”
(Jalal al-Din Rumi)

As a non-athlete becoming a runner later in life was triumph of courage, stamina and commitment. However, it was the process of achieving this feat that I write about today. Running has been a positive, noncompetitive activity that has added new dimensions to my life. I choose to run, and live life, at my own pace, enjoying the journey and noticing the scenery along the way. In life, running and, even writing, I do not have to be perfect. “Good enough” allows me enjoy the full spectrum of the experience, in all its vivid richness. Although others may or may not find similar rewards in running, my practice, and the meaning that I make from it, is my own unique story. I have appreciated the opportunity to share it with you. I am grateful that I took the leap into the chasm, pushed myself and found a passion that has touched my life beyond measure in mind, body and spirit, both personally and professionally. I hope that others will find strength, inspiration and connection to discover their own meaning in my narrative. Some of the themes that came to the forefront for me while writing of my relationship with running included the importance of social connections, facing fear, the appreciation of nature, resiliency, perfection, the importance of solitude, and having balance in my life. I am sure that there are many more which can be identified, depending on you, the reader. Moreover, if you have ever considered running, just start. Give it a go. The only thing you may regret is not starting sooner. If it is not the right fit, try something else, discover your own passion and appreciate the journey along the way.
If you are an educator, I hope that you find ways to connect with your students, hear their stories, encourage their voice and help them on their educational journey. Running, writing, and mindfulness help me to connect with students. Brené Brown defines connection “as the energy that exists between people when they feel seen, heard, and valued; when they can give and receive without judgment; and when they derive sustenance and strength from the relationship” (Brown 19). Given the one-dimensional nature of this writing, I crave discussion of the concepts I raise. To that end, there are still lingering questions for me:

- Do others have the same relationship with running as I do?
- What other similarities exist between writing and running?
- Do other educators use their own experience with running to help their students? If so, how?
- In what other ways does running add to your life?
- What have “former runners” used to fill the emptiness?

I realize that my relationship with running may not last my lifetime. When the day comes that I no longer enjoy running as a positive outlet in my life, I will strive to find something new to fill that void. I know that I possess the capability and resiliency to explore other options. Until then, you will find me on the trails and roads of rural Vermont as well as in distant lands that call to be explored, enjoying the journey of running at my own pace.
REFERENCES


