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# On Becoming An Ally

Patrick Brown<sup>1</sup>

*Becoming an ally is a challenging process, especially if you are a middle-aged, white heterosexual male. In one sense the journey is like no other, yet in another sense it mirrors the arduous task of running a marathon. Becoming an ally and running a marathon both start with the same question - "Why do it?" This seemingly easy question is followed by a set of similarities such as the ever-present parallel realities of oppression and gravity, reading and roadwork, finding ongoing support, and acting as an ally and actually running 26 miles, 385 yards. Come join the personal journey of one who is working on becoming a better and more fit person.*

I am a white heterosexual male who is entering the mid part of his life. Some folks might argue that turning 50 is not really mid-life, but I plan to live to be at least 100, so 50 is right smack dab in the middle. I told myself, in those distant years when I was 30 or so, that I should run a marathon by the time I turned 40. I convinced myself that it would be a wonderful personal challenge - something good for my body and soul. Being a fairly experienced procrastinator, I was able to put off the attempt to run 26.3 miles until I was 47. Since that first attempt, I have been blessed with the accomplishment of finishing three marathons. The process of preparing and running a marathon has but few parallels. One such parallel, discovered and flushed out during a number of those three hour training runs, is becoming an ally. Likewise, I purposefully responded to the challenge of becoming an ally late in my life.

I am careful to define my experiences as a marathon runner, and as an ally, as a process. I hesitate to call myself a "marathoner" as that connotes the fact that I am already there. Personally, I am too old to assume that I will ever be one of those spry runners whose gait is long, whose stride is light, and who finish a long race with a relaxed smile on their face. Likewise, I view my efforts as an ally as part of a process a life journey.

Developmental processes are explored in various writings. Carl Rogers (1961) explores the principles in his classic psychotherapy book about the process of "becoming a person." Barry Stevens (1970) in *Don't Push the River*, combines Gestalt Therapy and a collection of Buddhist and Native American ways to create a definition of personal experience and growth. Sidney Jourard (1971) highlighted the importance of self-disclosure as an ingredient in knowing thyself and creating a full relationship with those around us. Michele Holt-Shannon (2001) recently speaks of her personal journey in becoming a more active ally. The links between becoming a more enlightened person and an ally are clear. The question is whether or not one acts on such enlightenment.

I grew up in a white suburban neighborhood in South Florida. My youth was spent on symmetrical streets and manicured yards from the mid-1950s to the mid-1970s. My town was called "Plantation A Dream City." Did I connect the name of my town with the oppression of slavery? No. Was the Dream of my City in tune with the dream of Martin Luther King? No. Our neighborhood, as well as the entire city, was white.

I remember water fountains marked "whites" and "coloreds." My friends and I would often drink from the fountains marked for "coloreds." Was that action one of white privilege demonstrating power and dominance? Or was it an early ally action, challenging the dominance of those who made the rules? We also did the same with public restrooms, noting that one always seemed to get the attention of custodial staff more than the other.

Other early activities were either actions of misdirected youthful vandalism or a beginning of my becoming an ally. Two neighborhoods over lived a visible and active leader in the South Florida chapter of the Klu Klux Klan. His house and property became the recipient of many a bored Saturday night. I wonder to this day if my actions were motivated by a sense of caring about people of color, or by a blind youthful energy. Or both?

Our physical vandalism developed into a variation I call verbal vandalism. The Dixie Restaurant was one of those traditional white establishments that proudly displayed a sign that said, "We reserve the right to refuse service to anyone." As a group of white surfer guys, we passed the Dixie numerous times before we decided to walk through the

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door and make fun of their stupidity. As white folks, even long-haired surfer guys, we received service. They received thoughtful, loud, and direct questioning of their values, ideas, and bigotry. Ally?

In my youth I saw privilege as a result of continuous overt racism. I did not like it, but the extent of my understanding was shallow and my actions, as highlighted above, usually immature. My junior/senior high school was an experimental countywide effort founded in 1963. Nova High School was a racially diverse school that also thrust me into a peer group with different religious practices. By the time I was a senior I had an eclectic, racially diverse group of friends. I thought of privilege, discrimination, and racism as a fading reality.

### **Context**

As stated earlier, I am a white heterosexual male who is entering the middle of his life. I consider myself privileged on numerous fronts, but the two most important privileges are the fact that I fall within the most powerful grouping in our current social structure and that I am a relatively healthy, 50-year old who is privileged to even be able to think about running for four and a half hours. These realities provide me with the luxury of choice. No one is making me send my \$55 to a marathon organizing group to make that first commitment that translates to months of training and hours of roadwork. Likewise, no one is telling me that I need to take the oppression that exists in our society and institutions, and work to make a caring, humane history. So why do it?

Justice. Teacher. Role model. Change agent. Parent. There seem to be far more powerful rationales to support the actions of being an ally than there are for running a marathon. Yet both actions are undertaken to fight two equally powerful forces—oppression and gravity. Gravity is the bane of a runner's existence. Somewhere at about mile 16, I always start telling myself that gravity is not my friend, for without gravity I might have fleet feet. But here I am on planet Earth with its everpresent gravity. Male white heterosexual oppression is society's gravity. It creates the challenges and it must be fought.

Another rationale for becoming an ally, or running a marathon, is because it is the right thing to do. In my Race and Culture Class introductory session, I present several course objectives. None of these objectives are as important as my personal goal for the class—that after six weeks each student will become proficient in the process of moving theory to practice. Clearly stated, I ask my students to "stop, look, listen, think, feel, and then act." Likewise, I have to walk it like I teach it.

The parallels between marathon running and becoming an ally fall into several discernable conversation points. They are choice, research, planning, training, the race, recovery, and a return to choice.

### **Choice**

Why would anyone run a marathon? Does anyone really have to run 26.3 miles? Is it because it is there? The decision to run a marathon is a personal one that is based on several factors. One important factor is time. The amount of time it takes to train for and run a marathon is significant. For my first marathon I ran almost 300 miles while training, and I was a bit of a slacker in the training department. A second factor is tied directly to the concept of time—commitment. To take the first few steps of that initial

training mile, knowing how many more will follow in preparation, requires one to make a commitment to several months of work and many miles of asphalt. A third factor for me, recognizing that I have never been much of a runner and am approaching middle-age, is risk. Physical injury is always a specter in my peripheral vision. Shin splints. Bone spurs. Plantar fasciitis.

Another set of factors play into the process of deciding to run a marathon, especially in Vermont. A May marathon requires one to start training in January, usually a month of subzero temperatures and lots of snow. Without question, the environment also influences the initial decision to train and run a marathon. The environmental factors most important to me are the temperature, the wind, and precipitation (be it in any form). A windy and rainy 47 degree day is really worse for running than a five degree, clear blue sky, and no-wind kind of day—please believe me.

Likewise, I believe that there is usually an element of choice in the process of deciding to be an ally, especially for those of us who are in the majority or, by chance, are aligned with those who are in positions of power. Like training for a marathon, I see the factors of time, commitment, the environment, and risk as being important items to consider prior to making a major commitment to becoming an ally. A small ally effort, similar to an isolated three mile run, might not require the same level of thought and reflection as bigger steps, yet I know that one person's small step can be a major effort from another. I remember this every time I see the smiling faces of those front runners in a marathon they usually get done by the time I might be half-way.

### **Research**

What do I need to know? I am sure that I will need to know far more than I can learn. Then what? Will I fall into the abyss of analysis paralysis? Will I spend so much time reading and searching the web for training programs and tips that I will never slip my feet into those expensive, high-tech shoes and hit the pavement? To prepare for my first marathon I spent a number of hours doing free research at Barnes and Noble while sipping a cup of hot coffee. What I learned was that I could run a long way if I put my mind and body into the effort. I learned that I needed to set realistic goals for myself, deciding that my goal was to finish and not necessarily strive for a record time. I also learned that I needed to be serious about my effort and keep to a defined training schedule.

Becoming an ally also requires one to do research. One must learn about the issues of oppression and understand the impact it has on people's lives. One must understand the systemic nature of oppression and power, and how our institutions do so much to continue the status quo and resist changes to the existing power structures. Theory. One could spend months, or years, studying the parameters of power and oppression without ever making an effort to adjust what exists for what can be. Sounds a little like running a marathon in a theoretical sense!

### **Planning**

Applying theoretical principals should logically start with planning. Planning for a marathon starts with personal goals, equipment, and finding ways to maintain personal motivation. For my first marathon, I defined three simple goals: to reduce my weight to under 180 pounds, to not walk, and to finish the race. It took several weeks of extended training runs before I started to see any kind of weight change on the scale. I know that muscle always weighs more than fat, but I began to wonder if I would ever make progress. Slowly my weight started to move downwards, serving as one of many motivators.

On the day of the race it was very sunny. Being one with a fair complexion, I liberally lathered my exposed parts with sun block. Just as I finished, Frank Shorter, a former Olympic marathoner and guest for the 1999 Vermont City Marathon, announced on the public address system that it looked to be sunny all day and increasingly hot for the race. He suggested that runners drink lots of water (I learned that from my research, hydrate hydrate hydrate) and refrain from putting on sun block as it would clog pores and make your body overheat more quickly. Bummer. I looked at my slick arms, and stared a bit cross-eyed at my well covered nose, and wondered if I just wrecked my chances. By noon that day it reached a tad over 90 degrees.

As a planned motivator for my first marathon I devised a fund raising drive for the Green Mountain Habitat for Humanity chapter. I solicited funds from far and wide, creating challenge opportunities for the number of miles I actually ran with a bonus if I really finished. I even had one person challenge me to finish it in a time faster than I proposed. Although I think that I might have been able to make it to the end without such an effort, the knowledge that I declared my intentions publicly and had a number of friends supporting me did much to keep me going through training runs as well as the hideous heat of that first race.

Serendipity is not part of marathon training. One does not find themselves walking from one end of campus to the other and come upon a chance to clock off a few miles. Ally work can be planned or it can emerge at the least expected of times. I do believe that one can plan ally work in a method similar to marathon training, but one must also be prepared for incidents that immediately call one to support someone or act against another's action. I also believe that planning can better prepare one to act when the situation demands such action.

### **Training**

Preparing for a marathon has numerous components, some of which comprise the broad area of training and others that fall into the categories of stretching, nutrition, and support. Training begins to call upon the commitment that was first articulated when the initial decision was made. To don one's running gear, and hit the road when the wind chill factor is near zero, takes a high level of commitment that is constantly tested.

What was once a long run soon becomes one that is relatively easy. An eight miler feels like something that can be done without much pain later that day or the next morning. The progression of feeling comfortable with longer runs begins to build confidence that 26.3 miles might actually be possible. For me to leave my house and know that I will not return for three hours, because it is one of those long runs, is still difficult to fathom. But when that long run is completed, success for that day is at hand and possibilities become more real.

Another training tool is keeping track of the miles logged and the hours spent cross training. The reward received when the "long" eight miler was several weeks ago and you are now up to 15 miles for a long run are incredible. But distances are only possible with stretching, nutrition, and support.

I have never been much of a stretching kind of person. My idea of running was to put the shoes on and hit the road. I am still not much of a stretcher as stretchers go, but I learned early on that a few minutes spent extending my muscles, ligaments, and tendons might actually allow me to achieve my goal of finishing a marathon. I also learned that stretching can be done in a half-baked kind of way slouching in an attempt to extend my body instead of applying some of those yoga-type objectives I learned in my college years. Stretching is also important before and after a run, serving as personal time to see how my body is feeling and what appears to be tight. It still seems as a time for me to get in touch with my body (sort of thanking it for carrying me another set of miles) more so than actually stretching anything.

To lose weight one needs to manage what goes in one's mouth as well as the burning of those calories. Early on I started to watch what I was eating, trying to figure out how I could satisfy my delight in eating almost anything with the goal of getting my weight under 180. Not only is nutrition important on a daily basis, it is equally important while one is running. I had to learn about power bars and "bladder" packs. I had to figure out how to keep my water from freezing in my fanny pack while I was running in winter. I also had to learn how to actually eat and drink while I was running (which sounds easier than it actually is). A five mile run can be done without much consideration given to nutrition, but begin to get much above five or six miles and water becomes an important consideration. A ten miler begins to require some caloric intake, be it a power bar or a banana.

Once the training begins in earnest, it is important to have support. I was amazed at the incredible amount of time it takes to train for a marathon. Finding the time for training usually requires one to adjust their work or personal schedule. This requires support from colleagues or family. In addition to the time requirements, those numerous long runs require someone to meet me on the course and replenish water and food. It is difficult to carry the amount required for a three to four hour run.

Training. Stretching. Nutrition. Support. Becoming a successful ally requires all of these elements. Ally work requires practice. It relies heavily on the process of communication, which always benefits from practice. To continue with one's efforts in being an ally, one needs to consistently stretch their thoughts and actions, attempting to be prepared for all that lies ahead. The actions required for ongoing ally work requires one to be well fed literally, figuratively, and spiritually.

### **The Race**

The number is on. My identity is defined. The color of the number tells the world I am running the whole thing. I question my identity my commitment. Did I eat enough for breakfast? Too much? Butterflies swirl around inside. Why? It is just a race? I know I have trained for the last four months for this challenge. I am ready!

The four and a half hours spent on the road to cover 26.3 miles is unusual. There are bystanders on the street who seem to become my friends. There are other runners, whose names I do not know, who do become my friends and supporters. There are hills that look and feel a lot longer and steeper than they did in training. The Taiko Drummers provide powerful support as the Battery Park hill appears near mile 15.

The race is the application of all that I have learned and trained. It is important, but somewhere about mile 20 it begins to feel less important than all of my previous work. The emotional tsunami that begins to crest somehow takes over and blocks out any effort to find reality. Is this sort of like swimming upstream through a school of piranha? Is the challenge to finish as important as the work to prepare? Why is gravity so persistent? What can I really do to change the oppression around me?

The finish line is a love-hate phenomenon for me. It feels good to make it to the end, but is it the end? I know that there will always be more road to run. More power to be shared. More systems to be questioned and changed. Is my support for a student who is struggling with sexual orientation somewhat like one of those training runs? How come I can not find the reserve power to really question the policies of our military and their presence on campus when those military policies conflict with the values of the institution? I can make it 26 miles. I can plan and train for such an effort. I know I can work to make the bigger ally challenges more achievable.

### **Recovery**

Crossing the finish line, caked in the sweat of 26.3 miles in near 90 degree heat, I look out at all those who finished and who came to watch and support. The race officials put a medal over my head. It's weight is unanticipated. I wobble a bit. I try to stand still but realize quickly that I need to keep moving. Tears from the emotional process of training four months, running near 300 miles in training, and doing something very difficult roll down my cheeks. I can barely talk.

Caring is an emotion. Justice is an action. Commitment results in exhaustion. A few running books refer to PMS post-marathon syndrome. This syndrome occurs when, after 26.3 miles, your mind thinks you can run a short ten miler a few days later but your body knows another truth. Success one day does not guarantee success on the next. The context is a chameleon, shifting from situation to situation. Becoming an ally, like becoming a marathon runner, requires one to constantly assess success and the complex texture of our lives.

### **Choice Revisited**

Should I do it again? I have learned so much. Can I take what I have learned and improve on my actions? A personal best is one new goal. Being able to walk with but a little stiffness the next day is another. What is most important though is for me to remind myself that I am privileged and that I have a choice. I also need to remember that each step forward is but part of the process of becoming a person. And becoming is life.

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