

The Fellowship of the Long Distance Runner
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UU Church of Minnetonka
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FIRST READING

Reading from *Leading Change in the Congregation*

By Gil Rendle

Leaders of congregations today need to develop the calmness of spirit and the skills and tools that address the needs of the congregation in the midst of change. Often leaders will not be able to define clearly the end destination of the journey. [But] managing change is not just about finding the new spot where you and your congregation are supposed to end up. Rather, it is often more critical to attend to and understand the steps and stages of the transition period that will, in fact, get us to that destination.

It may be neither possible nor sufficient for our congregations today to focus clearly on the goals or destination of our ministry...Although this is not a new idea to leaders who have been working with congregations for several years, it certainly is a challenge quite different from those that faced leaders a generation ago.

Yet as far back as 1960, Thomas Merton published a little book called *Bread for the Wilderness*. [The title comes from the story of Jesus asking his disciples to feed the great crowd of people who had come to hear him.] The disciples asked, “How can we feed these people with bread, here in the wilderness?” Merton’s response to that question was [his little book], which he offered as nourishment for the inner life of faith for those who deal with the mix and the mess of the journey.

[In] truly creative times, which prompt new behavior and new forms of ministry, what we often need from our God, and what our congregations often need from their leaders, is not a quick map to the final destination, the promised land, but “bread for the wilderness” – sustenance and strategies to help us find our ways.

SECOND READING

“The Most Important Training Principle”

Jeff Galloway

http://jeffgalloway.typepad.com/jeff_galloways_blog/2010/10/the-most-important-training-principle.html

Most of us know that if we want to improve, we must stress ourselves in some of our training sessions. Exercise stresses the muscles, stimulating them to grow stronger and work more efficiently. Without enough rest after the stress, however, the muscles are driven to exhaustion or injury. Stress must be balanced by rest in sufficient quantity and quality for adequate growth.

Hard or long runs must always be followed by several easy days in which the pace or distance is reduced. In addition, you must build rest weeks into your program: every second or third week, you should automatically reduce total mileage. This gives your muscles the extra time to “catch up.” Improvement is based upon the quality of your speedwork and the length of your long run. By taking a day off and then running easily between these two “quality days” you will recover, rebuild stronger and reduce the chance of injury. Common mistakes that lead to injury are:

- * Trying to attain a high mileage level week after week
- * Running daily runs too fast
- * Not enough rest

THIRD “READING” – VIDEO: “My 120 pound journey,” by Ben Davis

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8SbXgQqbOoU>

SERMON

The Fellowship of the Long Distance Runner **Reverend Kent Hemmen Saleska**

As far back as I can remember, if I could walk somewhere, I would just as easily run. I had so much energy bundled up inside. It was hard to sit still. I hated sitting at my desk and I couldn't wait for recess. In grade school and high school I had no clue about basketball and baseball and football, which at that time – before I met my football fanatic wife – were mystical, strange and foreign physical rituals with rules and regulations as arcane and inaccessible as the secret handshakes and covert signs of the masons. My family just did not do sports. But running wasn't a sport. It was just what I did to get from one place to another. And in grade school it was the part of gym class I loved the most because – unlike football – it was the one thing I could do it better than anyone else.

In high school, I joined the cross-country team in the fall, and the track team in spring. I feel compelled to brag just a little bit because I am proud of it: my best time for the one-mile race in track was 4:34, and my best time for the three-mile race was 16 minutes and 16 seconds. But the thing is, I didn't get there on my own. I trained hard with the team 2-3 hours per day, five days a week. And in some ways, more than our coach who gave us vision and drills, it was my teammates who pushed me to get better. Sometimes it was my own pride that made me want to keep up with them in training, and sometimes it was their support and encouragement, but always, it was our work together that drove me to be a better runner.

With the end of high school, though, came the end of my running career, partly because I no longer had a group of people around me to run with. It took 17 years and a challenge from

my brother before I ran again. I lived in Minneapolis then, and was nagging him for some time to visit me. Finally, for Christmas 2000, my brother Scott gave me a pair of running shoes. And with that gift he said, “if you train for Grandma’s Marathon, we’ll come up in June and run it with you.”

I admit, I was more than a little irritated that I had “do” something before Scott would visit. But because of my running past, I was also excited by his challenge. I had never run a marathon. A marathon was one of those things, like writing a novel or traveling around the world, that a person only dreams about, but never really does. Could I do it? *Really?* And begin from scratch, in winter? I wasn’t sure.

Along with the shoes, Scott also gave me Jeff Galloway’s book on running. If you don’t know, or don’t remember, Jeff Galloway was a member of the 1972 U.S. Olympic team in the 10,000 meters. His book on running, which has gone through many revisions and reprints, is a great guide that includes entire chapters devoted to getting started, training, injuries, food, and shoes. It even has pages and pages of training programs for different results you might want – so there is one training schedule for people who just want to finish a marathon, and several others for people who have specific time goals. It is very specific and easy to understand.

So I followed Jeff Galloway’s training schedule, got in shape, and in June 2000, I ran in, and completed, Grandma’s Marathon in Duluth with my brother and his wife. And here is my finisher’s t-shirt to prove it! (held up t-shirt). And now that race is one of the happiest and most satisfying memories I have of being with my brother. Even though Scott was not with me physically in my training, I constantly thought about him, and was inspired by him to run because I wanted to be in good enough shape to run with him in the marathon and not get left behind. I could not have done it – and certainly not as well – without him.

Training and running the marathon was easier than I thought it would be. This is not to say it was easy! In fact, it was one of the hardest physical challenges I have ever faced. It’s just that it was easier than I thought it would be. Each week has one long run, which you increase by one mile each week. But I was surprised to discover in Galloway’s training manual that all the other days involved running only 2-6 miles, with two or three rest days built into the schedule with no running! That means I could be sitting there on the couch some days, and I would be training for a marathon! As Galloway says, “Stress must be balanced by rest in sufficient quantity and quality for adequate growth.” It is a simple concept, but it revolutionizes both marathon training and racing, and makes running much more attainable.

This whole story of running and marathon training has been simmering with me for the past few months. As many of you know, and as you heard from Kate earlier, our church is in the midst of pursuing a lawsuit against the City of Wayzata regarding zoning laws. For the past three years our congregation has pursued a piece of property at 2030 E. Wayzata Blvd, across from Village Chevrolet on the south side of Hwy 12/394. The city refused to allow us to build there, and it is our contention that the city engages in unfair zoning practices. We have an attorney working for us *pro bono*, and last spring, the United States Department of Justice even opened an investigation into the city’s zoning policies and practices.

Our decision to sue the city in Federal Court did not come to us easily or quickly, or even with unanimous agreement. It has been a year now since we voted as a congregation to pursue this course. Before the vote, the Board took months of preparation and engaged the congregation in many small group meetings. The Board then asked for a super majority of at least 60% in favor of pursuing litigation. After a meeting that was amazing in its transparency, passion, depth, and respect, on February 7, 2010, the congregation voted 75% in favor of pursuing

litigation. It is not that we don't have disagreement or some unease about this direction, but as far as I've seen, we do still hold one another in a place of respect, and relationship, and love.

So now what? Well, our case is currently in the legal netherworld. A legal team was appointed by the board and meets regularly with our attorney, and together they are nurturing the case slowly through the legal system. They also regularly report back to the Board. Even though there is not a lot of drama – certainly not like the legal dramas you see on TV – many people from our church continue to monitor our case and work diligently on our behalf.

Aside from some of the obvious issues, the reason this has been sitting with me and simmering with me for the past several months – well, for the last year, in all honesty – is because I see in your faces and hear in your questions a longing for some kind of announcement that we can either go ahead and build a new church on the site we chose, or look elsewhere.

But the unfortunate and hard reality is that there *is* no quick resolution, and there *will be* no quick resolution. Even if, by some miracle, we discovered next week that we are free to build on the land, we still need to go through the long process of raising the money and working with the architects and contractors, and all the other headaches and joys of building our new home.

I say this not from a place of being disheartened, but simply as a reality check. The thing is, we're in the middle of this now. We are living our story. When visitors walk in our doors, when friends decide to become members, or when you talk with each other, we each will tell some version and variation on this story. So the question now isn't whether or not we should start, or whether or not we will finish. The question is: how do we maintain our energy and creativity in the middle of our story? The question is: how do we keep the vision immediately before our eyes, and how do we keep ourselves inspired by our vision?

For all of us who have a stake in the purpose and direction of this community, we are in the middle of a marathon. The metaphor of a marathon is, I think, a good one. If we know we are in this together for the long haul, and if we aren't expecting a quick fix, then we are less likely to suffer from burnout because of unrealistic expectations. And we also have each other: our teammates in this spiritual marathon.

Ben Davis, the guy in the video who lost 120 pounds, said he was inspired to action – he was inspired to run – because of a question his grandmother asked him. She said, “Ben, are you happy?” And that got him to thinking that he probably wasn't. So he decided to do something about it, and started documenting his journey to a healthier life. His journey began one step at a time. First he walked. Then he jogged. Then he ran, on a regular basis, and the whole time, Ben had his brother and his dad right beside him. He said of his experience, “To have someone to help keep you accountable and just to run with is huge.”

In his video, Ben says, “If you want to do it, all you have to do is do it.” I love that attitude. It is very powerful and inspiring. At the same time, not everyone can just get up off the couch and do what they want to do. Some of us have limitations around our physical capacity, some of us are restricted by time or responsibilities. After all, Ben was single and had no children when he began his journey! Nevertheless, Ben Davis' 120-pound weight loss journey is inspiring. And his journey surfaces a few different things that are crucial in our ongoing journey as a church community.

First off, we don't just get off the couch and run a marathon. It takes practice. It takes a vision. And it takes a decision each and every day to get up off that couch to follow the vision. And then, if you actually get to the place where you run in a marathon and complete a marathon, you don't come back the next year without training and say, “well, I ran the marathon last year, so I can run it again this year”! No – you have to keep running. You have to keep practicing.

The same is true for a spiritual practice. You don't just sit down and meditate for an hour and become all holy or enlightened. You don't just say, I'm just going to join this church and then we're all going to love each other. No – it takes practice. It takes a vision, and then awareness and intentionality about that vision with each day and with each interaction with each person you talk to or engage.

Secondly, and especially in a church community, we don't do this work alone. Ben Davis says, "To have someone to help keep you accountable is huge." As a church, as we work together to articulate and follow our vision, it is crucial that we keep ourselves accountable. If one of us stumbles, or gets emotionally hurt in our movement together, we need to use tools like our congregational covenant of right relations to hold ourselves accountable for how we behave with each other, and how we engage the city, and how we engage the world.

We need to hold our vision immediately in front of us. It is important to remember, though, that just because we have a vision doesn't mean the real world won't interfere. On the other hand, just because the real world interferes doesn't mean we can't have a vision!

And you know, as important and as crucial as this legal case is for us, and as important and crucial as a new church building is for us to fulfill our mission, we also need to remember that the new church building is *not* our mission. Our mission – in the various ways we may articulate it – is to be a force of transformation: in the lives of our individual members, and on the world we serve outside these walls.

Gil Rendle, a church consultant, says, "Often leaders will not be able to define clearly the end destination of the journey. [But] managing change is not just about finding the new spot where you and your congregation are supposed to end up. Rather, it is often more critical to attend to and understand the steps and stages of the transition period that will, in fact, get us to that destination... what our congregations need from their leaders is not a quick map to the promised land, but "bread for the wilderness" – sustenance and strategies to help us find our ways."

So, being mindful that I am a leader in this congregation, and being mindful that I don't know – exactly – where our congregation needs to be, I want to offer some "bread for the wilderness" in our journey to find our way.

This morning I offer an invitation and a challenge to the people of this congregation: as a physical manifestation of our journey together, I invite you to join me to run the Twin Cities Marathon this fall. Though my choice is to run in the marathon, my challenge to you this morning is not just to run the marathon, but to participate in any event that day. That means you could run the entire marathon, you could run the half-marathon, you could run the ten-mile race, the 10K or 5K races, or join in one of the many family-friendly events held on the grounds of the state capitol, with names like "the Family Mile," the "Toddler Trot," or the "Diaper Dash"!

The point here is not necessarily to race, but to participate. The physical discipline it takes to train for and run a long race is a reminder of the spiritual discipline it takes to move together as a voluntary and intentional community. As the line from the choral anthem we heard earlier goes, "serve each other and reap the bountiful harvest." There is a role for those who don't run as well. We need people who cheer us on, who bring water, who encourage us, support us, in times of cold or rain or weariness, to remind us of our goals and vision. The sustenance that kind of support provides is incalculable.

I admit, this scares me. It's been ten years since I ran my one marathon. And my lifestyle is vastly different than it was back then. I have children now, and I sit a lot more now, in front of a computer and at meetings... and who knows what could happen between now and

then? I could get injured, an unexpected event could come up, here I am telling you I'm going to run this but what if it doesn't happen, and what if...

But then, I remember that this is the same spot we find ourselves in church, and I am reminded once again that this is why running the marathon together is a good fun idea. This is a journey of faith, it is not a journey of knowing. If we knew what we were supposed to do with our relocation we would just do it, get it done, and move on. But this is not a journey of knowing. It is a journey of faith. Just because we have a vision doesn't mean the real world won't interfere. On the other hand, just because the real world interferes doesn't mean we can't have a vision!

Last week I sent out an email to several people in this church I know are runners, and to my great delight and amazement, all of them – ALL of them – readily and happily agreed to accept this invitation! Those people are (and if you are here, please stand up):

Alison Albrecht – marathon
 Kevin Johnson – marathon
 Stephanie Wallingford – half-marathon
 Scott Oremland – marathon
 Jami Stromberg – 10-mile race or marathon
 Lisa Powell – 10-mile race
 Kris Severson – 10-mile race or half-marathon
 Margot Barry – marathon

If these people are the only runners we have, this will be a great group of people to represent our church. But this is an open invitation to anyone – member or friend – who wants to join us! In his book, Jeff Galloway lays out a 32-week training schedule. The Twin Cities Marathon takes place on October 2nd. That means 32 weeks prior to then begins on February 27. Part of the reason I'm giving this sermon today is that this gives anyone who is interested a month to get in shape before marathon training begins! And the timing is great, too, because registration for the marathon begins this coming Wednesday, February 2nd!

May we face this change and our future not as a threat, but as a challenge and an invitation for all of us to run together in the same direction.

[And then – the musical reflection after the service was the Vangelis piece, “Chariots of Fire”!]