

DEWITT HENRY

On Aging

The ninety-four year old Johnny Kelley is the patron saint of the Boston Marathon. Richard Wilbur once mentioned him in a poem called "Running." Every year for the decade of the 1990s, at least, he has appeared on the local news coverage at the start of the race in Hopkinton, beaming and in apparent good health, singing "here is the best part, you have a head start, if you are among the very young at heart." Several years ago a statue was unveiled in his honor at the foot of the renowned Heartbreak Hill, at mile 16, where Center Street crosses Commonwealth Avenue. The statue depicts an eighty-year old, shrunken, stringy Johnny Kelley running and holding hands high with a twenty-one year old Johnny Kelley in his prime, and is called "Forever Young." I find this inordinately moving, and on the eve of my sixty-first birthday, I had my son take a picture of me standing on the pedestal with one arm around each Johnny's shoulder.

Between the ages of 51 and 57 I struggled to run the Boston Marathon each year. I was encouraged the first time by a younger colleague at Emerson College who had finished it the year before and told me it was an unforgettable experience. I had only been running five, then ten mile loops around the Charles River bike path, but I started training day by day, week by week, and discovered that I could go farther and longer. From my home in Watertown, the river as it meanders into Boston is punctuated by a series of bridges. The Harvard bridge marked a 12 mile loop. The BU bridge marked a 16, the MIT bridge an 18, and all the way around the Science Museum and back to my house was 25 miles. I trained and trained, the longer runs taking me three hours. My friend told me that the adrenalin of the event, of the crowds, and of the other runners in the marathon would carry me the 26.2 mile distance even if in my longest run before the race I had only reached 18 miles.

I'm not a natural athlete, and certainly not a gifted runner. The goal here wasn't competition. I took as gospel the sentences from *Galloway's Book of Running*: "In your first marathon, don't worry

about time. Just run to finish. Staying on your feet for 26 miles is a feat in itself.” On my long training runs, I would sometimes hit my wall five miles from home, falter to a painful walk, call and ask to be picked up; or once, I actually had to take a bus. I was sweaty and given berth by the other passengers.

Race day, my friend and his wife picked me up at 9 a.m. Another young friend of his, Ray, was in the car. My colleague himself wasn’t running, as I had thought he would be, but this other man, Ray, had run the marathon twice before and would be running. They drove us out the turnpike to Hopkinton, then dropped us off and took our picture. I was wearing a red poncho which I would never take off and later would regret, with a bag of jellybeans in the bib. Ray led me from the drop off point. Hundreds of other runners seemed to materialize, walking the mile or two with us.

I didn’t realize it then, but Boston was the only marathon anywhere with qualifying times. Those who met those demanding times in another legitimate marathon were eligible to be “official runners,” paid an entry fee, were given a bib number, and were bussed from downtown Boston to Hopkinton. The thousands of others who were “unofficial” were so-called “bandits,” unable to qualify, but attempting to run off the record. As we had, they had made their way to Hopkinton under their own power.

Ray was friendly, but distracted. He had his own race to think about. He was looking out for friends. As my guide, he would at least show me to the start. He reassured me that the dreaded Heartbreak Hill wasn’t as bad as everybody said. He said to start out slow, and not to let the crowd force my pace. Everyone around us seemed nervous, some bragging and protesting too much, others taciturn. We passed a parking lot where some Canadian college kids joined us, first timers also. I worried that the trek to the starting point was sapping my reserves. People were leaving the road to go pee among the trees on either side. Gradually we came to Hopkinton Common, filled with commotion. Free samples of yogurt and sports drinks. Vendors with pennants, caps and balloons. Newscasters with cameras and microphones. Long lines of runners waiting to use a battery of portable toilets. Runners sitting or lying on public lawns. Runners practicing elaborate stretch routines.

Ray explained that we were jumping in. I should follow him and do just as he did. There were temporary aluminum barriers along Main Street. The official runners were already lining up in pens, according to pace (6 or 7 or 8 minute miles), and wearing their race bibs with numbers. Ray nudged and shouldered his way forward with me behind him as far forward as he could. Near the starting line, the elite runners were warming up; wiry, lean muscled, small boned. They were famous, although I didn't recognize any of them. They wore bright colors and sponsor trademarks along with their race bibs, with two digit numbers. Some were just returning from warm up runs off a stretch of side road cordoned off for them; others sat cross-legged, waiting. The better runners gathered and packed behind them, hundreds, thousands, followed by a multitude of others stretching far up Main Street.

The day was chill and overcast, perhaps 45 degrees at late morning. Over the crowd from an elevated, sheltered platform, officials told us the clouds would clear off and that we would have a tailwind. A high school band was playing. Johnny Kelley made an appearance to cheers and applause and sang his song. The wheelchair entrants lined up and, with a shot of the starter's pistol and the crowd's cheer, they were off downhill for their early start. Runners started peeling off whatever disposable layers they had been wearing, trash bags, extra shirts, old jackets, and tossed them to the side. The officials announced ten minutes to the runners' start, then five. A TV news helicopter hovered loudly overhead. Ray pressed close to the barrier. "Come on," he told me. "When they start, you just climb over and jump in. Just do what I do."

Suddenly the loud speaker barked, "They're off!" Like water through a broken dam, the elite runners spilled. I couldn't see them. Just the shuffle in front of me, as the press of bodies pushed forward, quickening. There was a mounting cheer from the runners themselves, hats tossed. Ray heaved his ass up on the barrier, swung over one leg, then the other, jumped down. "Good luck! Come on!" he yelled. I did the same, though immediately I lost sight of Ray. I jogged and bobbed, working my way in, keeping pace behind, alongside, and in front of others, all those arms swinging, all those running shoes drumming. I was in a living river and as far ahead as I could see, bobbing heads, colors, human motion flowed. Racers filled the road across, from side to side, and all the way

ahead, already rising at a distant crest, and again at the crest beyond that. The pack began to loosen, picking up from a jog to a full running pace, some runners in my way, so I had to veer and weave to pass them, but mostly others jockeying to pass me, hundreds it seemed. Before long, I settled into my run. After three or four miles, there seemed to be about twenty-five runners at my pace, sometimes ahead, sometimes falling back. We were a constant. Others still might pass us, and we might overtake slower runners. There were bodies of every type, every age. Tall and short, overweight and lanky, men and women, college kids, roommate girls, midlife Moms, a number of people wearing Dana Farber Cancer Institute T shirts, some paunchy Boston Policemen, a scattering of white-haired seniors. Some runners were in pairs or in groups, supporting each other. There was casual chatter. There was even an element of clowns, as if running the race were no chore. One guy was dressed as Groucho Marx, bushy eyebrows, cigar and all. Spectators would call out as we passed. "Hey, Groucho!" or "Go, Mom!" or "Go, Dana Farber!" Since I had no identifying marks, the best I heard a few times was "Go, Red Poncho!" Whatever our pace, we were the "back of the pack," and behind us were hundreds, maybe thousands of others, whether bandits or official runners.

That first time, everything was a surprise. The mile signs came and went. I was running as well as I did around the Charles. Out of Ashland, alongside a lake, then into Framingham, with a depot station and train tracks to the left for miles and an engineer blowing a whistle to us and waving. Clusters of spectators; now and then water tables, where I swerved to catch a cup on the run, managed a gulp or two, then tossed it with the litter of cups underfoot. Little kids reached out to slap palms. Other kids or spectators offered orange slices or cups of Gatorade. Along some stretches residents stood with hoses, spraying runners who wanted to cool off. My friend and his wife surprised me in at mile 10, waiting on a bridge I crossed in Natick, and calling out: "Go, DeWitt! Hey! You're looking great!"

I had no idea that there were really five serious hills. The first was just after mile 12 up past Wellesley College, where a gauntlet of students loudly cheered everyone, even us, even me. Then Route 16

through Wellesley past parks and suburban blocks stretched on and on, a flat two miles, until a surprise steep downhill into Newton Lower Falls and then the second hill (was this Heartbreak? I wondered), a steep, $\frac{3}{4}$ mile grade that crested over Route 128 at the Wellesley Hospital. By this point runners were straggling. Instead of the inspiration of collective possibility, there was now the breaking of ranks, admissions of defeat, which were demoralizing. Footsore and cramping, clammy with sweat, mouth pasty from jellybeans and Gatorade, I continued down to the turn at the Newton firehouse onto Commonwealth Avenue, and was stunned to see a third steep hill, which I managed to climb, concentrating on my feet and passing scores of walkers, but after the downgrade, faced with a fourth hill at mile 18, I faltered to a walk, just to catch my breath, then ran, then walked, and cleared that crest, ran painfully downhill again past Newton City Hall, then had to struggle the mile up Heartbreak Hill, while others ran past me. When I was half way up, I was overtaken by a man not only running, but running while pushing his grown, paraplegic son ahead of him in a special wheelchair—these were the legendary Hoights, I would later learn, who had been running the marathon for years. Bystanders exhorted me, along with the multitude of other walkers: “Keep running. C’mon, you can run. Don’t walk! It’s the last hill. You are almost over the top. It’s all downhill from here.” I mustered a stagger-run for ten yards, then faltered. The uphill felt so steep that I could reach forward and touch the ground rising ahead of me. At the top, I started to run again, letting gravity pull me. I would finish this way, I reasoned; walking up the hills, running down. Boston College fraternity kids were swilling beer on the sidelines and yelling. Rock music blasted from their open windows. There were more and more stretches of walking, but never without running too. A long stretch from Boston College to Cleveland Circle, and then the turn on Beacon Street, and more sudden rises, mile 23, and coming into Kenmore Square, mile 25. I trudged up and over the punishing rise over the Massachusetts Turnpike, then ran some more, determined to finish. I finished the last mile at an agonized run, turning the corner on Hereford, and then onto Boylston, and even found a desperation burst for the finish line, at last, only to be passed and pushed over to the bandit exit where no one noticed or greeted me, except for a few Red Cross helpers asking if I needed water.

The race had taken me four and three quarter hours. If my friends had waited for me at the finish, they had long since given up. I was stranded, exhausted, wet with sweat and chilled, cramping in downtown Boston. Among the crowds, the official finishers seemed to be everywhere, weary, but smiling, wearing Mylar capes and their finisher medals and surrounded by friends. I had to walk another mile from the finish around the streets, and made it finally to my college administration building, which I hoped would be open, at Massachusetts Avenue and Berkeley. Walking there was as painful as the worst of the marathon course. Worst of all, I was nobody, had no money, not even for a phone call or a cab. Though it was almost 5 p.m., I found the door open, luckily, and as I stepped in I saw the President, Jackie Liebergott, sitting in a conference room at day's end ease with the Chief Academic Officer, Phil Amato. We had our history as colleagues and friends, and as Chairperson of the Writing Department, I reported to them both and felt like a team mate. I walked over, clammy, fatigued in my poncho, and blurted, "Well, here I am, the first Chair to finish the Boston Marathon! Can I sit down a second?" Jackie countered with "Not the first, Dave Luterman used to run it." I went on to explain to their tolerant amusement that I was marooned, had no money, and wanted to use the phone to call my wife and have her come pick me up. "Sorry to interrupt your meeting...." They offered me a chair and a bottle of sparkling water; then I called my wife, thanked them, and went to wait outside on the building's front steps, shivering now. Eventually she came.

Subsequent Boston marathons, I knew what to expect. But even though I trained fanatically, even though I knew the Wellesley hills, still the following year I hit my wall at Mile 16, the Wellesley Hospital, even before I reached the turn onto Commonwealth Avenue. Many runners were dropping out because of the humidity and heat. I was running near one of the only African-Americans I had seen in the pack, a woman, and she was faltering too (one of the cops directing traffic called after her, "Way to go, sister!"). We would walk, then stagger-run, trying again, but the fatigue and the soreness of our feet brought us back to a crestfallen walk. I forget the words we exchanged, finally, but it was the hopelessness of finishing that day, and we decided to catch the trolley in from the T

stop down the block. I had to teach that night, and I had arranged with a colleague, who had an apartment on Newbury and Hereford Streets, near the finish line, that I keep a change of clothes there, would show up, shower and change and make my night class. The T on Marathon Day proved to be free (I only had a couple of dollars with me in my shorts). I was glad for the woman's company, which normalized the humiliation of publicly quitting. A few other riders said a few words to us. The Chestnut Hill stop came and went. I got off at Mass. Ave., only to find myself barricaded from watching the runners finish, or looking for friends. Again, fatigued and sore, I must have walked another two miles around the blocked streets to make it to my colleague's. He was sitting on his stoop smiling, "Hey, how'd you do?" As if he thought I had finished. I explained what had happened, and he graciously invited me in for a cold drink, then let me go off to shower and dress. I made my night class, aching and sore.

The Boston Marathon or any marathon is not the distinct occasion that it appears to be, the mark of uncommonness that compels respect from other, unathletic mortals, other runners, and from oneself. The training itself is the mark, the way of life. For each marathon, the four months or more of managing time, of managing relationships, of managing work, of managing nutrition, spirituality and health. The accretion, daily, of seven to ten to fifteen, to eighteen, to twenty mile runs, in my case, around the Charles River bike path. Runs at all times of day, all seasons, all weathers. The accretion too of one hour, to two, to three, to four sometimes each day, six days a week (one day for rest): dawn runs, midday in winter for the heat, twilight or darkness in summer heat waves. Where does such time come from? What gets displaced? The empty time? The brooding time? The television time? Spared injuries, the setbacks of hard colds or flu. The shoes run down, replaced. The running shorts and T shirts and sweatbands and socks. The daily laundries. The gradual weight loss and muscle development.

I enjoyed the personal and tribal distinction. The passion to run comes from confusion, fear, anger, and stress, unresolved emotional tensions. In my case those had to do with fear of aging, with frustrations in my teaching and writing careers. Runners can be like

dancers, expressing lives through movement. Runners have styles, and different styles at different moments. There are aggressive, angry runs, raging against limits. There are light, ecstatic runs, the runner's aura joyous, glad for life, for youth and strength. There are searching runs. There are lost runs.

My fifth and last Boston Marathon is the 99TH, March 23, 1995. I am still a bandit, incapable of making the qualifying time. I have, in fact, only finished one marathon running all the way, my first Bay State, in Lowell, the fall of 1992, for my personal best of 3 hours and 50 minutes. In other, different runnings of both the Vermont and Ocean State marathons, I have hit my wall at mile 20 and had to walk and run to finish, 4 hours, 4:15, 4:35. My third Boston, I had dropped out at mile 17 and limped home. My fourth, likewise, at mile 19. My wife has driven me from Watertown out the Turnpike to Hopkinton and we are directed, bumper to bumper to a drop off this time at a state park, where I climb on one of a series of school busses ferrying runners, nervous and pretentious, to the Hopkinton Common. At the Common there are thousands and thousands of runners (over 30,000 will run the course). More than *déjà vu*, I have a procedure by this point. I stretch on the lawn in front of a church. Though I look for familiar faces in the crowd, perhaps someone from Emerson, or regulars from around the Charles River bike paths, I recognize no one. I am anonymous here. I am simply a runner, an unbonded bandit. I tell myself to relax, nothing is at stake, just treat this like my week's long run. I have been training for four months on the Wellesley hills, until I know all five of them, landmark by landmark, in both directions. The temperature is prime, not hot like last year, not cold like the year before, or raining like the year before that. Forty-two degrees, a tail wind blowing. Clear skies. Countdown. Ten minutes to go! a loud speaker announces. I get up and edge through the crowd to the barriers. I glimpse again the elite, world class runners, athletes incomparable to me. They will finish the course in two hours and four to eight minutes, or roughly five minutes per mile, which is faster than most joggers can run a single mile, much less twenty-six of them plus.

There is the wheelchairs start. More countdown. Then the plunge of starting, the surge. I wait for a minute, then climb the barrier and jump in, joining the shuffle, which as we start downhill, moves to

an impatient mincing jog. There is the drum and pounding of the herd. When the pack sorts itself out I am running with a group faster than some, much slower than most, with ample elbow room. Three girls chatting with each other. An older, heavy man wearing Mickey Mouse ears and a Farber Cancer Institute T shirt. A duded out twenty something guy in colorful spandex, new shoes, wrap around sun glasses and a sloshing water bottle. We will keep company for hours, sometimes abreast, sometimes falling back or working ahead by fifty or more yards. Ashland, Framingham, Natick. The first Wellesley hills stretch ahead, with Wellesley College students cheering without letup, so that each runner feels suddenly special, and however silly, the cheers invigorate me and the others around me. I know from my other Boston runs and from training, that the killer hill for me is in Newton Lower falls, the sudden steep downhill, followed by the long grade up to the Wellesley Hospital. I try to save myself for it. I faltered here the year before, as others ahead and around me falter now. Walkers had begun as early as mile 12. But here, in my group, suddenly there are scores of walkers, exhausted, hands on hips. My feet are hurting and fatigue has set into my legs and hips, but I run steadily up and over the crest. So far so good, but now there is the long downgrade to mile 17 and the turn at the firehouse. The next five miles include the three hills I have trained on, back and forth. The first steep hill is from here to mile 18, then a dip and second hill and just after mile 19, the steep up, then flat, then steep up again of Heartbreak Hill, peaking at mile 21. In training, memorizing the terrain, I had been fresh, but now I am hitting my wall. I feel it happening. I know that once I stop running, my muscles will stiffen and I will have to walk, then run, then walk, then run, then walk. Give or take the crowded start, we began at noon; now it is three. My blood sugar is low. My feet refuse more pain. My legs cramp. What am I doing here? With that question, I falter. Starting up the incline, I have to walk, just to the crest, maybe, then I will run again.

This time, mostly walking to the crest of Heartbreak Hill, I feel that I can run and walk to the finish in something over four hours, but that I would then be exhausted and marooned in downtown Boston again. Nobody knows me. I have nothing to prove. Except I do, or why else would I join the ceremony of this race and all its company and public spectacle? Why not run alone around my river

path? I reason that veering left from the crest of Heartbreak Hill, and mostly running the five miles to Newton Corner, Galen Street, and then the mile up river to home, will count as a completed 26.2. I do veer off and run the five miles home alone. But it isn't the same. I haven't kept to the course. I haven't had the strength, or passion, or body of all those who have.

Running has its morality. Lessons that I needed to rehearse.

There is the lesson of self-awareness and acceptance, beyond unrealistic ambition. You need to settle within your capacity and perform there as well as you are given to perform, this time. This is a different matter from being better than you are, or can be, by accident or miracle.

There is the lesson of rehearsing a death: the callisthenic of having to falter, to fail against your will and dream and achieving. The mortification, literally. All the coaching advice about dealing with "the wall" and about psyching yourself beyond the wall doesn't apply for me. My lesson is in reaching and honoring limits, not in ignoring them.

There is the lesson that all activities, teaching, parenting, writing, sex, have their distinct karma and the point is to immerse will and effort into its inevitable nature. If it is given for the run to be ten miles, fifteen, twenty, then it is. If it is not given, then it is not. It is not for me to force or will the outcome. Strength is not the issue. The run itself is the issue.

There is the lesson of celebrating, from your individual limits, the glory of full human possibility. The constant flow of runners, thousands and thousands of others—not just the elite, but the good, the average, the lucky, the dogged (each has a life, each has negotiated a way to spend two or more hours for training each day for four months while still parenting and still holding down a job, each has fought snows and freezing temperatures through the hard winter)—as they continue up and over the hills and close the last six miles to the finish.

The year of the 100th Boston, I was a spectator for my first time, stationed midway up Heartbreak Hill. I was with my wife Connie and family friends, the Farrens, Pat Farren, the father, groggy and weakened by his chemo treatments. Far off, we saw the red television

blimp, following the leaders. Portable radios up loud announced they were near, nearer. Then we saw the wheelchairs. And fifteen minutes behind them, the motorcycle cops, the television car, and the elite men, first the tight pack of Luiz Dos Santos, Cosmas Nedeti, Lameck Aguta, Sammy Lelei, Johan Kagwe, Moses Tanui, Ezekiel Bitok, all of whom passed my watching, running in rhythm as if choreographed and never slowing from their five minute pace. Perhaps a few minutes behind them came scattered more of the elite men, and more, and more. I recognized Bill Rodgers, a small, slender man, who waved and smiled at the crowd. They streamed by, topping the hill, three and four abreast for ten minutes, and then we saw another TV car and motorcycles coming for the leading women runners, in amongst the men. Word was out on the radio that Uta Pippig, the favorite (and my idol), was in trouble; she was suffering from flu, diarrhea and menstrual bleeding. Tegla Loroupe, her rival, had a lengthy lead, perhaps one hundred yards. As Uta approached and passed our vantage point, Connie said, "God, look, she has blood on her legs!" Uta looked as if she would drop out. She was drenched, haggard, and she shook her head apologetically in our direction, mouthing, "I can't!" After she passed, we stayed for half an hour, perhaps, watching throngs of men and then men and women, all sizes, all running styles, all shapes, a constant stream, each cresting the hill and destined to finish in under three hours. Before we left, we heard the excited radio reports, first that Moses Tanui had won in 2:09:16, and second that Pippig was overtaking Loroupe, then passing, then far ahead for a third win in 2:27:12. Amazing! Humanity itself!

In recent years I have only managed one 10K race each April, the James Joyce Ramble in Dedham, and this year I haven't even managed that. I work out in the gym with weights and abs machines for half an hour, then half an hour on the treadmill. I developed problems last summer with my hip and spent months in physical therapy. I can no longer run 30 straight minutes on the treadmill at my nine minute pace. I need to stop every three or five minutes for water, then start again. I do run seven miles around the river path without stopping once or twice a week, but I doubt I could make ten anymore. And in other ways, my life has changed. Others have taken over the stress of leadership at school and now I only teach.

After years of struggle and rejection, my work is being published. My daughter at 24 flourishes on her own; my son at 16 is coming into his own. He is a sprinter, and when we have tried to run together, he takes off alone and by the time I struggle home, he is showered, settled and watching TV. My marriage is sound. I love my wife. We've all lived life's losses of parents and friends, and the death of my older brother three years ago.

Still each spring marathon fever fills the air. I see runners pushing for distance around the Charles as I drive to school. Come Marathon Monday, I watch the coverage on TV, beginning in Hopkinton. I feel the anticipation. And there again is Johnny Kelley, no longer able to run even the final mile of the race, and barely able to make it to the microphone, but he does, one more time, singing "Young at Heart." The announcer recounts Johnny's 61 appearances in the Boston Marathon, his two wins, his seven finishes as second.

As the race gets underway, with cameras following the leaders, I am in fact in the gym, on my treadmill with a TV console at eye level and earphones plugged in. I am remembering. The sights, the smells, the company, the pain, the dream. I watch the leaders, the men passing familiar landmarks, then the women. I can feel the race happening. And even as I drive home, I listen on the radio.

This is aging. Life itself is our glory and ordeal, our measure of heart, and of passion. We do our best. There is no finish line.