

RUNNER'S

Motivation :Runners' Stories



A Trail Less Traveled

The author finds a special joy on the trails in autumn. Sometimes, he even breaks out in song.

By Don Kardong

"Two roads diverged in a yellow wood," wrote the poet Robert Frost. "And I took the one less traveled by." Most runners, given a chance, will do the same, at every juncture, over and over again, always choosing the less-traveled thoroughfare. If it weren't in our nature to do so, we wouldn't have embraced running in the first place. We'd be motoring enthusiasts, anxiously seeking the bigger, faster freeway.

Instead, we take the road less traveled, leaving cars parked and computers darkened, jogging lightly clad down narrow pathways, shedding ourselves of weight and worries, until we finally find ourselves racing along a twisting trail, hearts soaring primeval.

Yes, we run the roads and circle the track, but trails are our natural habitat. Is there any place on earth where we drip more cathartic beads of sweat than on a dirt path through the woods? Loads lighten, breaths rise belly-deep, demons flee. We run with ease and conviction, our minds inflated, airborne, drifting in the wind like zeppelins. We belong here.

Autumn is deemed trail-running season, but I'm not exactly sure why. Spring, after all, is when paths open for foot traffic. In spring, under brightening skies, snow melts into puddles, passageways reappear in the woods. Muddy yet passable, the reborn paths plead for our footsteps, an invitation to ease muscles and joints stiffened by winter. Shouldn't we salute the forest trail then?

And yet autumn is when, like other runners, my thoughts dwell on trails. Is it because access will soon be denied? Winter hulks astride the horizon, looming, brooding, fists full of snow. In a month, for many of us, routes will be buried. So we celebrate the footpath while we can.

Runners hoard trails like toddlers do toys, sharing with friends but never yielding ownership. My personal supply is in a state park not far from where I live in eastern Washington, where the Spokane River rumbles along, tumbling and pooling. The park is close to town yet isolated, varied, idyllic. Trails, miles of them, weave through the woods. Thoughts can leap here, full-blown and gaudy.

A few years ago, running down one of these park trails with a cadre of friends, I was struggling to hold something inside, and it had nothing to do with the prior evening's meal. Normally we talk a lot during runs, at least until the final miles, when tongues stop wagging and start dragging. On this morning, though, charging down a trail, less than halfway through a 16-miler, we had all fallen silent. It was a premature lull, and it hinted deep thoughts.

I didn't know what the others were ruminating on, but my "deep thought," the one I was trying to suppress, was a single clip of song, a lyrical phrase. No profundity here, just a dumb ditty. I had heard it the night before on a Jim Henson television special, sung by a Muppet owl, over and over. It had imprinted on my mind, and the words played, loud and clear, on my interior speakers. Had been playing, in fact, for miles.

"You gotta put down the ducky!" the song blared. "You gotta put down the ducky!"

I had watched the show with my two daughters, and now I couldn't stop the tape. I struggled to run silently. What would the others think if I suddenly cut loose in a rusty baritone? For reasons of perceived sanity, I wanted to hold this one back. Quiet, Don, I urged myself. No singing.

And then, suddenly, one of my running partners blurted it out.

"You gotta put down the ducky!" he sang with gusto.

I laughed, and he started to explain. But I already knew the source of his outburst. He had watched the same show. We had both, without mentioning it, been wrestling with the same line of the same song. For miles.

There is something about trail running that dislodges mental detritus, just as dreams do. The inane and the profound effervesce, shake loose, drift, pop. You gotta put down the ducky!

Would an outburst of song have happened in town, on asphalt, in traffic? It might have. But trail running is psychically powerful, evoking the weird, the rhythmic, the primitive. We're all descended from hunter-gatherers, after all, edgy drifters who peopled the planet. Australian aborigines learned songs as a cultural connection to migration routes, and "song lines" were the sacred trails they traveled. Maybe we modern sojourners need a good walkabout now and then, a time and place where we can sing the songs etched in memory, tunes that bedevil us. Trails exorcise demons.

They also reconnect us with the past, to the wanderer origins of our species as well as to our personal roots. Most adults remember a childhood when they played in the woods with their friends. Those woods may have been a half-acre of undeveloped real estate or the scrubby northeast corner of a city park, but they seemed limitless. Huck Finn, rafting lazily for days outside the clutch of civilization, had it no better.

One of my earliest memories is of racing along a path through woods like those, searching for a place to hide during a game of hide-and-seek. At first, I ran to hide from my playmates, figuring the more distance I put between me and them, the less likely I was to be discovered. Soon, though, I found myself running for the sheer joyful effort of it, deeper and deeper into the trees. It was, I suppose, a measure of the power I had to elude pursuers, a Jungian archetype from the collective unconscious, Darwinism manifest. Finally, breathless, I stopped and hid in some bushes, confident of safety. And at peace.

The philosopher Pascal insisted that all human evil was the result of man's being unable to sit still in a room. I would offer a contrary view: We shouldn't even try. It denies our heritage.

As a trail-running adult, I don't hide in the bushes anymore. In fact, now my friends are often along for the ride, laughing and spinning tales like a troop of scouts. And truly, our runs aren't much different from those youthful Boy Scout excursions. We travel along triple-time, admiring the view and noting the wildlife. We compare notes about the opposite sex, just like we did at age 10. Little has changed except the speed of travel.

And the footwear. No boots on these boys, just the padded moccasins known as running shoes. Homo sapiens could migrate across a continent in these babies, and more determined members of the species, the ultrarunners, have done just that.

I've never owned an actual trail-running shoe myself, but maybe I should. My favorite paths are fraught with peril, much of it skulking at shoelace level. A rock, a root, an errant pine cone. Wham, and you're down, choking in dust and picking pebbles from wounds in your forearms and knees.

Speed bumps of heavenly intent or accidents of nature, there are plenty of land mines everywhere that can bring the path plodder to his or her knees. The toughest trail I ever ran was the Escarpment in the Catskills of New York State. This was an 18-mile race through Rip Van Winkle country, routed through boulder fields, across angular juttings of granite and along a path with an unrelenting barrage of roots, rocks and mud, all of it hidden under slick leaves and dangling nettles. It was like a bad video game, only longer, and, well, more real, yet the race director had no trouble filling the field, year after year.

"We've had sprained ankles," he warned at the start, "and sometimes you get a flesh wound that opens up and needs some stitches. We've had broken sternums, we've had broken arms, we've had busted-up knees. And if any of you have a problem with that, now's a good time to bow out."

No one did.

The difficulty of it, after all, or at least the "wild" of it, is the point. We're not seeking pain and trouble, but we know it's there. Falling is only one problem we face when we're released on our own recognizance, fending far from the

madding crowd. We may see deer, rabbits and hawks, and feel delighted. But the wildlife spectrum can roar quickly down the line without warning, past the photogenic to the perilous. Rattlesnake, cougar, bear.

"Don't worry," a ranger at Glacier National Park in Montana once told me, "Grizzlies will only attack if you surprise them, invade their territory or come between them and their cubs." Three things, I explained to him, that a runner could do without realizing it. And then I went for a run, right where the bears were known to frolic.

I ran unchewed that day, but I've talked to one runner who suffered a grizzly-bear mauling in the Grand Tetons. He survived, and, after months of surgical reconstruction, managed to run again. But I know of others who weren't so lucky. Serious bodily harm on the trail is rare, but risks are real.

Most trail dangers, of course, are more mundane, like falls, twisted ankles, ticks, poison ivy, dehydration. More mundane, yes, but often with particularly nasty downsides. I know runners who have suffered a tick bite and ended up with Lyme disease. I'll take an angry moose any day.

And then there are the human predators. You may not be stalked by cougars on the trails in your neighborhood, but there could be something worse hiding behind the next tree trunk, something that speaks your language. There's no telling what you might encounter on the road less traveled, so remember: Be prepared, scouts. Blaze your own path, but pack water and a few friends to boot. You are responsible for yourself out there, unhooked as you are from the electronic drumbeat of modern life.

But that, of course -- the disconnection from today and the reconnection to ancient, unplugged instincts -- is the reason you're there. To explore unknown territory, the way a cat will when the door opens to the little-used attic or basement. Just to get a good look around.

And it's those views that entice us back. The spectacular ones that unfold like cinema, when you suddenly round a bend and the green curtains open, revealing waves of mountains to the horizon, ghostly cumulus clouds, the sweep of valley, a roiling waterfall. And the more intimate ones, too, of heron perched on rock, purple and yellow wildflowers in the grass, a turtle meandering midpath, a stand of aspen aging golden. No wonder our ancestors wandered. There was so much to see.

Trail views are earned, not given. You've proven your commitment through sweat and tired hamstrings, and the sight is sweeter for the effort. Yes, you can enjoy some great panoramas from your car window. But they don't belong to you.

It's not surprising, then, that the bond between runner and landscape seems mystical, a connection to the infinite. We travel ancient paths, ones our progeny will inherit. Landforms seem eternal, infused with spirit. Sacred ground.

My daughter once laughed when she heard I went to church in the woods. It was a metaphor, but her 10-year-old imagination quickly went to work, and she giggled.

"I can see you, Dad," she laughed, the image just too funny, "going to church with the squirrels and the rabbits and the chipmunks..."

I always liked that image: Pastor Dopey presiding over his congregation of critters, full speed ahead.

The image I like best, though, is of my pack of friends, out on our favorite trails once a week, telling stories and occasionally pushing ahead at full force. Testing to see who wilts first in the forest. Scouting the territory. A process, old as the hills.

And that, I guess, is why fall is the time to celebrate trail running. In winter, after the woods start to fill with snow, erasing the pathways, we are squeezed back to asphalt and concrete. We must once again spar with automobiles for territory. And that just ain't natural.

For now, then -- while you can, where you can -- enjoy the passage of dirt beneath your feet. Surround yourself in green. Sweat the good bullet. Be alert. Drink in the pastoral, the arboreal, the mythical views. And by all means, do not resist the urge to break out in song.