

Lost in the Rush

I hoped that the faster I ran, the less my mind would race. But I learned it's often better to let your thoughts catch up with you.

By Juno DeMelo

I wanted to run my first half-marathon in less than two hours. My time: 1:59:06.

You would think that I crossed the finish line jumping for joy, or at least doing an approximation of that on wobbly legs. But even before I got to the box of bananas at the end of the finishers' chute, I didn't feel elated or even proud, just productive. I had completed a task, and there were plenty more to tackle: finding my friends, finding my bag, finding a place to grab brunch.

I had trained hard for the race throughout the summer, during the mad rush of planning my wedding and between the cross-country flights home that preceded my father's

death from pancreatic cancer later that season. Running gave me a reprieve from worrying, but for me, it was the opposite of meditation. Instead of focusing on my breath, I looked at my GPS watch constantly, willing the mileage to fly by. I thought about how good it would feel to be done so I could check “go for a run” off my to-do list. The drill sergeant voice in my head yelled “Pick up the pace!” if my attention strayed from finishing my workout to thoughts of who would walk me down the aisle.

For as long as I can remember, I’ve lived not in the moment but for the future. In college I spent many Friday nights at my desk, trying to make sense of *The Canterbury Tales* instead of drinking jungle juice at a frat party. I didn’t go abroad or join any clubs because both would have cut into study time.

But while my GPA helped me land my first job at a magazine, I eventually deleted it from my résumé, and not a single human resources person seemed to notice. I bought a new computer, and out with the old one went

some reason, it hit home: If these guys could dead-lift 500 pounds in an un-air-conditioned warehouse and have fun doing it, I could certainly find the joy in jogging.

While the old me had discouraged a friend from tagging along on a fun run because she would slow me down, the new me agrees to do a nine-miler with a 60-year-old woman from my running group. During solo runs, I listen to hourlong *This American Life* podcasts instead of hip-hop songs with triple-digit beats per minute. And at home, I stop speed-reading just to say I finished a book and fast-forwarding through DVR’d episodes of *The Voice* to see who wins the battle round without listening to a single note of music.

At the starting line of half-marathon number three, I wait in my corral with a friend who’s running his first race. When he rises on his toes to get a photo of the starting line with his iPhone, I rise too, marveling at the tens of thousands of excited runners.

During the first couple of miles, I get a side cramp, then a blister. My Achilles tendons feel as if they’re

It hit home: If these guys could dead-lift 500 pounds in an un-air-conditioned warehouse and have fun doing it, I could certainly find the joy in jogging.

all those college term papers I had slaved over. I swore I would start taking delight in the means instead of hurtling toward the ends. I would bake cookies and explore the bike path along the river. Yet somehow I was always rushing to meet a deadline and couldn’t find the time for either.

After my dad died, I hurried through my grief too. The day he died, I called crematoriums and invited his friends to the wake. A few days later, I returned to work. “You’re so strong,” friends told me. But really, I was afraid that if I slowed down, I would realize the enormity of my loss. A month later, I ran that first half-marathon, then an equally unfulfilling one six months down the road.

I had just begun training for my third when I showed up at my husband’s CrossFit class. He and his classmates were doing a “total,” a competition in which they each try to lift as much weight as possible in three separate exercises. I stuck around until the end, when his coach gathered everyone for some parting thoughts. “It’s not the PR that matters, but the work you put into it,” he said. “The reward has to come from the activity itself, not just the results.”

I had long suspected this, of course. (After all, no one says “Seize tomorrow.”) But it’s one thing to read it in a self-help book and another to hear it from the mouth of a burly bearded man over the din of heavy metal. For

going to snap as I climb the course’s biggest hill. But instead of zeroing in on the finish line, I attempt to follow the advice everyone gave me before my wedding, which was to break the time down into “mental snapshots” so it doesn’t become one big blur. I assign each mile a story: I high-fived a police officer around mile three, a pit bull got loose between miles six and seven, and I slowed down to congratulate a running buddy I spotted around mile 10. I feel the thrill of running along a closed-off highway and wave my arms like a crazy person when I spot my friends cheering on the sidelines.

Still, I wish my dad were there to cheer me on, and I worry about my blister popping and about having to make a pit stop before I get to the finish. But instead of forcing my fears down, I take note of each one, then let it go. I discover that I don’t have to ignore my discomfort for it to go away and that paying attention to it is actually more freeing than always trying to outrun it.

After I cross the finish line, I ham it up for the race photographer as he takes my picture and catch myself fist pumping to “Party Rock Anthem” on the Coney Island boardwalk. I breathe in the salty air and the smell of hot dogs, reliving the miles I’ve just run instead of rushing home on the subway. Later I check the official results. Despite being my fastest time yet, the 1:54:26 it took me to finish didn’t fly by—but I felt as if I were soaring. ●