

The Running Life: Always a Runner

A mantra for a friend, mentor, and coach

By Candace Karu

As featured in the Jan/Feb 2008 issue of Running Times Magazine

Studying Transcendental Meditation taught me the value of a mantra, a sound or word whose articulation and vibration resonate through body and spirit and manifest their energy into the cosmos. Repeating a mantra can help open a conduit from the individual to the universe, creating a channel from the physical to the spiritual. Though I no longer meditate, I have jury-rigged my own method of connecting to the universe, a system of thought, verbalization, and action that involves the repetition of positive words and phrases.

This week my mantra has been: "He will get better." The week before it was: "He will live." For nearly two weeks I have repeated these mantras on runs, concentrating on their meaning and intent, allowing the intent to become part of me, part of my run, part of my world. Thought into word, word into deed, deed into action.

My friend, sometime mentor, critic and coach, John L. Parker, Jr., is in the cardiac intensive care unit of a world-renowned hospital, having suffered a major cardiac event. As I write this, he is fighting for his life. His family, friends, and fans are keeping vigil. Some are by his bedside, offering words of encouragement and love, which, in these critical days, have become syncopated to the rhythm of the machines that are keeping him alive. Others are obsessively checking for email updates on his condition, holding him close to our hearts, offering prayers, orisons, and entreaties on his behalf. In the third week of June 1989, I walked into a rambling old dormitory at the College of the Atlantic in Bar Harbor, ME. I was new to running, new to Maine and new to the concept of an adult running camp. The first people I met at camp were two impossibly tall, impossibly lean runners who greeted campers at the door. Andy Palmer and John Parker looked like they might have shared a bit of DNA from a superior race. Both were well over 6 feet tall, red headed and dusted with freckles; both had a fluidity of movement that, depending on the task at hand, could be gauged either graceful or awkward. They are the two people who most profoundly shaped the runner I am today.

My scant running background and knowledge meant that I was one of the few people at camp unaware of Parker's rock-star reputation in the running community. I had barely unpacked my shorts and shoes before being thoroughly informed about the legend in our midst. A tattered paperback novel was grudgingly produced and that night I read Parker's cult classic "Once a Runner." In the 29 years since its original publication, it has become an almost sacred text for competitive high school and college runners and had been read by virtually every camper I encountered in Bar Harbor that summer and all the summers after.

In the 18 years since we met, I am still amazed at the passion Parker and his alter ego, Quenton Cassidy, generate in the running community. At the time of his hospitalization, Parker was putting the finishing touches on his long-and eagerly-awaited follow-up novel, "Again to Carthage," which picks up in the Vietnam-era 1970s where "Once a Runner" left off. This work has taken a very long time; long enough that running message boards and forums routinely post ongoing debates about the wait and reasons for it. For those of us who know him, we have learned to be patient. He is a man who consistently does things in his own time, in his own way. In an effort to help those of you who might be inclined to chant a mantra or say a prayer on his behalf, sending good wishes into the universe to speed his recovery, I offer my personal itemization of some of Coach Parker's most outstanding characteristics. This should by no means be considered an exhaustive inventory, merely broad strokes on the complex canvas that is John L. Parker, Jr.

He is funnier and smarter than just about anyone you know. He does not suffer fools gladly. He adores a sleek, grey parrot named Cosmo, who is also smarter than most people you know. He is essentially a solitary being. He is a devotee of "South Park" and can do a wicked Eric Cartman imitation. When he is on his game, he's dead sexy. He loves two-wheeled transportation. He's a great dancer for a really, really white guy. He reads prodigiously and retains most of what he reads. He is a cheeseburger connoisseur. Did I mention hilariously funning and devastatingly smart? The Parker you know is probably not the Parker I know; we all know a different facet of a complex organism. He can't hold his liquor, but he sure can make it sing. I've never once called him John, always Parker or Coach.

He has endeared himself to the local Bar Harbor population, no small feat for someone so decidedly "from away." He is stubborn to the point of intractability. He has remained my friend through sickness and health, through death and devastation, through bitter and sweet, through thick and thin. We have argued dramatically and made up without fanfare. We have stuck it out.

And now, selfishly, I am asking him to stick around for one more conversation on his back deck, one more motorcycle ride, one more slow, easy loop around Witch Hole. Godspeed, Coach, on your journey back to the running life. As of mid-October, John Parker was recovering at his home in Bar Harbor, ME. His novel "Again to Carthage" is available from Breakaway Books (www.breakawaybooks.com) and bookstores everywhere.

Copyright © 2009 Running Times Magazine - All Rights Reserved.