

# Reverse Engineering a Life Outside

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I've always said that farming is just moving things around from one place to another, otherwise known as material handling. This is also true of running, only instead of moving seeds, dirt, animals, potatoes, I am moving my body through space and time. Left foot, right foot, rock, root, splash, drink, eat, sleep, wake.

Endurance running can be like a word said too many times. If you stop to think about the stilted minimalism of any word, it won't make sense anymore. Neither will the idea of running six days a week, accumulating so many miles that you lose track of the days, only to find yourself at the starting line of a race surrounded by wild-eyed competitors. Then what's next is more miles, more than I can count on my hand so I use each digit to represent groups of ten.

Sometimes I have the haunting sense that I am trying to squeeze more life out of life. Part of living with running is living with the knowledge that you will get stronger, then eventually you will get weaker. And that hopefully by the time you start getting weaker, you will be wise enough to accept that reality. This is the crucible that turns runners into existential philosophers because we rapidly cycle through life with the looming knowledge that we are actually declining a little more each day. At a rate slower than sedentary humans, but fading nonetheless.

I've poured through old pictures, scrolled through early Instagram posts, scoured more than a decade of Facebook musings looking for the impetus, the beginning of the quest for more depth, more life. It's interesting how hashtags can

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PHOTO (BELOW) BY JESSE PERKINS



be like a trail of breadcrumbs to our most potent selves: #runwild, #runfree, #wildandfree, #selfpropelled, #eatlocal, #supportlocal, #eatthefarm. As if each hashtag was a little prayer to my future self to stay the course even if the course is unmarked and uncharted.

When I married into one of the Midwest's pioneering CSA (community supported agriculture) farm families, I was unprepared for the impact that the local food movement would have on the entire way I move through the world. The understanding that our food system is sick, and getting sicker, at first paralyzed me then spun me into a whirl of action. By the time my two children were born, I was fully indoctrinated as a local food advocate working on multiple levels of food insecurity and activism. Meticulous donation records detail how I moved an average of 41,659 pounds of second quality produce into the greater Madison, Wisconsin community each year between the years 2012-2018, through schools, food pantries, community centers, and food banks.

I know that my memory has a way of distorting the past, but I truly believe that the frenzy of farm life, raising two children, and the preoccupation with having an impact on my foodshed, drove me to seek solitude in the forest. But not stillness, that would come much later. First, I needed to sink my teeth into the running life and hold on tight until I learned how to go to the dark side and come back. Some say that runners are masochistic and self-indulgent, which is true, but we have good reasons. Humans are violent creatures with wiring to struggle and adapt. Without the need to chase down our dinner or battle with our neighbors, some people feel better with the physical and mental challenges of sports. And one sport isn't more virtuous than another, they are all echoes of our desire to overcome.

At 30 years old I found myself in the starting area of a 50-mile trail race, nursing my youngest baby in the back of a pickup truck. The idea wasn't mine, it was my husband who had told me I could be good at this sport after a podium finish at a 50k race a few months earlier. The uncanny part was that racing wasn't the hardest thing. It was easier than the farm, easier than being a mother, and much easier than childbirth. Racing has a way of quieting the rest of the world and drawing singular focus to pain but also triumph. For restless souls, this can be the antidote to overthinking and over-feeling in life.

Races and adventures tend to build on themselves and I was down for all of it. While many female runners are strategizing in their early 30s about when to slow down and start a family, I had closed that chapter. We packed up the truck and blazed across the country in the farming low-season. We went as far as we could in every direction except north: deserts, mountains, primeval forests, oceans, and islands. Pro-tip: winter camping is easier when the kids are babies because they don't know what's going on. Also, driving from Death Valley to Wisconsin in one push after racing a marathon only works if your kid is in diapers.

In the past two years, my family's farm has transitioned away from CSA and into organic seed potato production, shifting our growing seasons and making space for year-round balance. That's right, ask any CSA farmer if their

life is balanced; you may get delirious laughter or stunned silence. My year can now be shaped by racing seasons, snowpack withdrawing from the high alpine, and creative endeavors. But food and its seasonality is always at the forefront. Cultivation has grown into foraging which has grown into hunting. The procurement of food and of adventure have more in common than many people realize. These are things that need to be schemed, planned, dug up, tracked, earned, and searched out. If we give into

passivity in life, we are being domesticated by a system that will strip us of our wonder.

Running is a deep striving for something to be different and through this, we put up with the tedium of it mostly being the same. Now that I know this, I can sit with periods of stagnation, seasons of injury, and global pandemic holding me in place. Living outside is more than being out of doors, it is taking in the gossamer web of ecology

that surrounds us with the same reverence that we show to towering mountain peaks. My co-existence with adventure, food production, motherhood, and competition has finally settled into one livable life, one area not fighting for my attention more than another, and this is not something I could have orchestrated; it needed to ferment and steep across many years and many lessons.



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