

A Centennial, but from a Different Perspective

The year 1996 has now been discarded on the tip heap of time, but in its day, several million people recognized it as a significant year. If you ever raced or ran, you probably have realized the reference. For everyone else, on April 15th, 1996, the centennial running of the Boston Marathon occurred.

For the approximately one million spectators who occupied every inch along the course, they cheered and hollered loudly at the runners who managed to qualify for this special race. For the millions, who watched the race on TV around the world, it was a time to sit back and relax while being enthralled by the lead runners who could be seen to fly down the road with apparent ease.

A group of running friends and I flew into Boston five or six days ahead of the race so that we could tour the area ahead of the event that took place on the Monday. After being bussed out to the start of the race in Hopkinton, we joined thousands of other runners, huddling in groups trying to keep warm. Pale sunshine struggled to penetrate the chill of the morning. Small banks of icy snow laid alongside the road holding the sun's warmth at bay. The crowds of runners swelled as the noon start time approached. Our gaggle of runners wished each other luck and separated to find the section of the start that we had each been assigned. I dropped off my bag of clothes that had kept me warm for the previous few hours. I joined all the other runners who had attained similar qualifying times in a roped off section of the road. We jogged in place or jumped up for periods of time, trying to keep warm while the final minutes wound down to when the starting pistol fired.

I heard later that over 40,000 runners lined up on that starting line, which required the start to be well managed. The fastest runners toed the start line followed by groups of slower (relatively) and then even slower runners. Following the slowest of the qualified starters, stood another 5,000 runners who failed to qualify but felt the need to be part of this unique event.

I had managed to qualify with a good time, considering my age, and stood in the crowd, awaiting the start. Being tall, I could look over the heads of many other runners. This allowed me to see the starter's pistol rise high above the heads of the elite runners

and be fired. We shuffled forward for a minute, before switching to an easy jog and gradually I found enough open road to settle into a comfortable rhythm.

I did wonder how I would fare on this race as my preparation had been different to all previous marathons. Normally, for a marathon, I dedicated the six months before the race to a disciplined schedule of training runs. Every run was a considered piece of a whole training strategy that took me to the start line in the best condition I could achieve.

But for the Boston Centennial, I had done absolutely no training. I knew that I was in good condition and felt I could finish a marathon without any problems. My reason for not training was based on my becoming a Buddhist about a year before. I took lessons on Buddhist philosophy and one of the first lessons that resonated with me concerned ego. It is not seen as a strength, but rather a challenge. When I looked at my life, I realized that my road racing was a constant source of fuel, supporting my ego. I literally quit racing in an instant and, despite my years of avid racing and training, I never missed it. I had found my real self.

As I passed the halfway point of the marathon, I checked my watch and, without any conscious thought, knew that I was running at a personal record pace. What an amazing boost for my ego? Could I maintain the pace? Off went my ego, seeking any pat on the back that it could gain, at any point in time. But, did I want to? I let go of these thoughts and supporting my ego. I just continued on to a Wellesley College.

This college had a reputation as a huge number of the all-women student body packed along the race course, outside the campus, to scream encouragement to all of the marathon runners. Their unbridled energy and their numbers that restricted the runners' pathway to barely three feet lifted the spirits of all runners.

As I departed the energy and noise, I returned to my steady pace, but an unexpected thought crossed my mind. I had just witnessed and felt so much focused and unchecked energy. My thoughts extended to the entire mass of people standing as spectators. I wondered how much money they had spent to drive to the race, paid for hotels, and the cost of their flights. I added in all of the costs of the racers. How much time and energy had those racers expended to be ready for this one event? How deep

had the race's corporate sponsors dug into their coffers to pay for the race planning and arrangements?

What could all of that money, resources and people's energy have achieved if it had been focused on those in need? Instead, it had stroked the ego's of about 45,000 runners. And there, I ran in the midst of it all.

Tortuous, conflicting emotions surged through my mind and heart. I could not contain my sense of grief and inner pain. Tears torrented down my face. I had no where to hide. This was a time of reckoning for me. I ran on, with emotional pain running free down my cheeks and dripping onto my sweat drenched race shirt.

When I reached Heart Break Hill (a point of infamy on the course), my tears still flowed. Larger crowds lined this section, as many runners faltered on these three uphill climbs. I felt that my tears only seemed to whip the crowds into a higher frenzy. Their cheers and reactions may have been to encourage me up the hill, but they did not feel great as none of them understood the inner pain that caused my tears.

At the top of the hill, I was emotionally and physically spent. I decided to simply jog to the finish line. I eventually joined thousands of other finishers, walking down a main road, all sheltering under silver Mylar blankets as the breeze felt frigid after hours of sweating.

I never talked with my running buddies about my experience, as I am certain, they were hooked on the egotistical elements of the race. Later, I talked with other friends about my reaction to the race. They knew me well and have not been surprised.

Looking back, I think my reaction to the race was based on my learnings about ego that were still new to me. I had not fully integrated them into my thinking and daily life. That is not to indicate that I have changed my attitude to ego, but the race was the first time that my changed thinking had been exposed to our normal societal behavior, but it happened on a grand scale.

Not wishing to convert or change any people, I will simply offer the following as a brief explanation of how I saw and still see ego. Ego focuses on oneself, whereas Buddhist philosophy teaches that we need to support and care for others compassionately. It is only through caring for others that we can truly care for ourselves. In conclusion, let me ask the following. Do you feel better having given of

yourself to help another, or having spent time being self-centered? Be careful in considering these options because the phrase “given of yourself” is very significant: it implies that the giver has no expectation that there will be something in the exchange for themselves. The ego would probably vote for the second option. Will that bring happiness and real satisfaction?