The honor of struggling and failing

By Arthur Remillard

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The miles of steep climbs were passing by like speed bumps. The surplus of downhills ahead of me foreshadowed a strong finish.

Then, just over halfway through the marathon, I felt a twinge in my right achilles. It began as a minor nuisance, but the pain amplified with each step. My stride went from an easy glide to a laboring lope. I walked. I stretched and then walked some more. It got worse.

At mile 19, I stopped. “I’m done,” I lamented to my wife, who along with my two children had been my traveling cheering section. This was my 15th marathon, but that didn’t make this an easy decision. As I sat in our car at the side of the course, I deliberated on the merits and consequences of pushing forward. Finally we drove off, my mind swirling with doubt.

I have run hundreds of races, and more than once I’ve contemplated quitting. But this was the first time I didn’t cross the finish line.

I did go to the finish line that day, but only to hand over my timing chip. I perceived a quizzical look from the volunteer I gave it to. Normally, chips are stripped from sweaty bodies that are both physically depleted and overflowing with joy. My chip came from a broken body that *did not finish.*

Distance runners dread those three letters—DNF—and now they metaphorically marked my race singlet. They were my scarlet letters, separating me from the community of runners who finished. I watched the marathoners exchanging stories as they replenished calories. Some sat in a kiddie pool filled with ice, soothing their sore parts. The mood was festive and playful, but I couldn’t partake in it. The finishing area is for finishers.

To be clear, no one outwardly alienated me. Runners are famously empathetic, lacking the hubris to judge the injured. My Puritanical accusers came from within,

casting aspersions on my commitment, toughness, training, age, and goals. Their shrill voices resurfaced in days that followed, each time someone asked about the race. When I reported that I didn't finish, this was always met with kindhearted replies. But the self-imposed shame of failure continued to haunt me.

I began to wonder why I do this. Why do I commit the time, money, and resources toward running an arbitrary distance that even on a good day will wreck my body for weeks? Why do I run?

The great miler Roger Bannister had an insightful answer. We run "not because we think it is doing us good," he said, "but because we enjoy it and cannot help ourselves." Bannister added, "It gives a man the chance to bring out power that might otherwise remain locked away inside himself. The urge to struggle lies latent in everyone."

On the roads, tracks, and trails, runners find an outlet for this primal, spiritual impulse to *struggle*. As we run, we struggle not just with our competitors but with ourselves.

Jacob offers an archetypal expression of this in his nightlong wrestling match with a shadowy stranger. As dawn breaks, the man releases and blesses Jacob, before renaming him Israel—"because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome."

Here, Jacob realizes his opponent's identity. "I saw God face to face," he marvels.

Jacob has a checkered past. He stole the family birthright from his brother. Estranged from Esau for two decades, he has resolved to reconcile. So in the story beyond the story, Jacob is also wrestling with the competing forces within him. The person he is confronts the person he hopes to become.

Re-reading this story, a detail jumps out at me: Jacob departs the scene limping from a dislocated hip. He failed to overpower his divine assailant, and he was wounded by the struggle—but not defeated. And it is Jacob's wound that tells this redemptive story.

Thinking about this hobbling hero helps me to quiet the moralizing critics of my imagination. Our culture tends to cherish success and spurn failure. This is a poor habit of mind. Failure can also be honored as a means for growth. In unashamedly

displaying our wounds, we celebrate the courage to step into the margins of life—and to accept a challenge that might break us.

So yes, my DNF is a failure, one among the litany of failures that we all face. But these wounds to body and ego can be badges of honor. At the starting line, anxiety creeps into my throat as my deepest insecurity meets my highest aspiration. But the finish line doesn’t have to define me. There’s meaning in every mile, even if I limp to a stop.