

Five draft chapters cut from the published version of *Why Running Matters*

The power of words

Saturday 25 March

I've already been awake for an hour by the time the alarm goes off, watching the light grow around the edges of the curtains. As I lie there, I tell myself that I am going to try to break twenty-one minutes for the first time this year.

Perhaps it is that very act of setting myself a target that accentuates my morning anxiety. But the truth is that almost every race is preceded by that feeling of internal butterflies.

I go downstairs, make a coffee and read my emails on the computer in my study. A google alert comes up, indicating that there is a review of *The Time Traveller's Guide to Restoration Britain* in today's edition of *The Times*.

The butterflies suddenly go frantic, trying to escape.

I get up and walk around the room. This is the first proper full-length review of the book. Early reviews tend to set a trend, so they matter. Saturday and Sunday reviews in the national newspapers are particularly influential in raising awareness and thus affecting sales. This book's performance will dictate how much money we have over the next few years, and how much publishers in other countries around the world might advance for it, and for the next one in the series, and so on. Every time a first review is published, I feel nervous. It is just like the anticipation before a run – except much, much more intense.

I sit down again. The reviewer is a historical novelist whom I once met at a panel event in Reading in 2010. Otherwise he is unknown to me. This is not a case of one writer reviewing another writer's book in glowing terms because the two of them are old friends. This is a real opinion.

I start to read. Fortunately, it is very positive. 'This entertaining tourist guide brings the late seventeenth century alive,' he begins. He has some minor quibbles, which writers who pride themselves on their knowledge feel obliged to mention, but there are some very positive lines. My anxiety subsides.

It's time to go for a run.

For the first time this year I put down the roof of the car and drive off, with the sunlight smiling on me and the birds singing happily. Sadly today I am on my own; Oliver is off playing chess. Driving down the Wray Valley towards Torbay, I let my thoughts roam in this budding, wonderfully bright spring day, looking from the moor to the fields, from the cottages to the hedgerows. But when I reach Newton Abbot, two thirds of the way there, the traffic starts to build up. I feel my third anxiety of the morning: that I won't actually be at the run on time. I only escape from the sucking tentacles of Newton Abbot's traffic system with fifteen minutes to go. Then the worry about being late mingles with that of getting to my destination safely; you feel very vulnerable travelling at high speed in a Mazda MX5, which is only about five inches off the ground. But I arrive intact and park up with about four minutes to spare. After a very quick payment for parking I run down to the start, to join the crowd of 180 runners.

Due to the recent wet weather, we are told, the main route is impassable. Instead we will run three laps of the velopark and then a final 500m up and down a nearby path. Off we go. For the first half mile, I am running in fifth. The first 800 metres takes me 3:05. One or two people overtake me before the mile stage, which I go through in 6:27. Even more pass me by the two-mile point, for which I register a slightly disappointing 13:11. But I keep this pace up, and regain a place or two as people start to flag. The third mile takes me 6:49 – three miles in exactly twenty minutes – and then it's just the push to the end. I finish in eleventh place, in a time of 21:02 – just outside my 21-minute target. However, my watch also tells me I have actually run 3.15 miles, further than the measured distance. So I did run the 5K in less than 21 minutes, albeit not officially. That makes me feel less downhearted. Later, I discover that my time equates to 20:41 for 5K; which isn't so bad. Indeed, I am quite pleased.

So why was I anxious? Why am I nearly always anxious?

Obviously, our anxiety arises from our perception of what might happen. Reading a review of a book on which my fortunes depend – you can see why this makes me anxious. But why does the prospect of running have a similar effect? It comes back to that question of ‘does it matter’. If it doesn’t matter, then no, you will probably not feel any anxiety. But if it *does* – if you really want to do well – then it is probably inevitable. And as I learned from that ‘does it matter?’ run, it comes down to self-respect. I worry about not living up to my own expectations of myself, of failing to meet my own sense of self-worth.

That’s all very well but how does the connection work? Simply by thinking that I want to run under 21 minutes, I make my body feel anxiety. Similarly, by reading a review with my name attached – a purely intellectual process – my body has a reaction. Just hearing a few words can bring on changes in my physical state.

As we all know, words can provoke intense rage and grief, as well as anxiety. Who has not cried at the end of a great book? I can remember the most incredibly powerful pang of jealousy I felt as a nineteen-year-old when I kissed my very pretty girlfriend in her local pub in the Rhondda Valley after not seeing her for a couple of weeks and overheard a male voice nearby saying ‘that’s not the one she was in here kissing in here last night’. Likewise we have all heard descriptions of events that make us feel nauseous. Very simply, language is like electricity: it has the power to make things happen.

When my father was seriously ill in his forties, he regularly visited a faith healer. That man managed to instil in him the belief that he could cure himself simply by believing completely that he was getting better. I was a teenager at the time and regularly expressed my disbelief in faith healing. To me it seemed absurd that you could simply believe yourself better and thus physically alter your state. But my father was insistent. ‘Why do you think your great-grandmother lived such a long time?’ he would say to me (she died in her late nineties). ‘Because she didn’t drink?’ I would suggest, believing everything had to have a chemical or mechanical cause. ‘No, it was because a gypsy told her at a fair when she was fifteen that if she washed her nose out with brandy every night, she would live to be a hundred. She *believed* she would live a long life – and so she did.’

Washed her nose out with *brandy*? That flummoxed me. And not just because she was teetotal.

Now, thinking back on this episode, I cannot honestly say whether my great-grandmother really undertook this alcoholic nasal rinsing on a regular basis. There are no living witnesses, so far as I am aware. I don't even know how you should 'wash your nose out'. However, I do know that, as the old lady approached her ninety-ninth birthday, someone snapped at her with the words, 'your determination to live to be a hundred is killing your daughter, don't you see?' My grandmother, who lived with and tended to her, was indeed ailing, being no spring chicken herself. But it was a cruel thing to say to a very old woman. The words cut into her like a slow-moving executioner's axe. She died two weeks later.

I don't think I fully appreciate quite how powerful words and ideas are, even though they are the tools of my trade. I know they can make us feel pains in our chest and make tears run from our eyes, and they can make our hands shake, and in some circumstances, they can even break our hearts and kill us. But if words can alter us physically in such negative ways, why should they not also affect us positively? If they can create mental images that make us sick or tearful, can they not also make us physically better? And if so, to what extent? That's what I don't fully understand, and probably no one does. I reckon I owe my late father an apology, for I can see now that it was only my own youthful narrow mindedness that made me flatly deny what he believed – that words can be efficacious remedies.

The multi-million-dollar question is, of course, what words would do the trick. They'd have to be much more powerful than 'you're going to do a parkrun in the morning' – that just produces anxiety. But in some ways it doesn't matter. It is the mechanism that is important. In fact, people might be saying or writing things that improve our physical state every day without us even realising it. There's nothing about this whole process that has to be conscious. Indeed, the very thought that it is *possible* to make people feel better through words is inspirational. No wonder so many people in the Middle Ages believed in the power of prayer. After all, if a mere idea of a parkrun can make me so anxious, a profound revelation might actually work a miracle.

The second flush of youth

Saturday 3 June

This is exasperating. I dutifully made sure I did not run or walk anywhere all week. My leg was improving every day, so I felt positive. But on Thursday, going to the literary festival in Hay-on-Wye, something went wrong. I had to change trains twice in order to get to Hereford in time for a festival taxi to get me to my event at 2:30pm. The second change allowed for very little slippage: four minutes, that was all. I arrived in Newport not knowing that the train to Hereford was already in the station. Only when I heard over the speaker system that it was about to depart from platform 2 did I realise I was about to miss it. I sprinted about eighty metres, ran up the stairs, dashed across the footbridge – dodging the other travellers – and leaped down the steps on the other side. I just made it. But when I came to get out of my seat at Hereford, my left knee felt bad. With every step, it felt as if someone was hitting my kneecap. Even swinging my leg was painful. I closed my eyes and cursed.

I walked across the carpark in the bright sun but it was as if dark rain clouds were emptying themselves on me and me alone. The driver was taking another author from the station to the festival. I smiled at my companion. She was lovely, very kind. She politely asked me about my train journey. I told her about the problem I had encountered. ‘We all have to face the fact that we’re not getting any younger,’ she said. I shook my head. ‘I don’t deny that I am getting older but I am trying *not* to ‘face the fact’. I’m enjoying my second flush of youth.’

‘Your *second* flush?’

‘People keep saying they’re no longer in ‘the first flush of youth’ so, by implication, there’s got to be a second one. At forty-nine-and-three-quarters, I reckon that if I don’t enjoy it now, it’ll soon be too late.’

‘Perhaps your knee is trying to tell you something.’

Yes, perhaps.

The pain did not subside all day. Nor did it yesterday.

‘The problem with knees,’ said Sophie last night, ‘is that they normally involve cartilage problems, and cartilage doesn’t heal itself.’

Okay, maybe I should admit that the second flush of youth is over. Bugger. All I have left to look forward to is misery, pain, incapability and death. Or, as my friend Eleanor once put it, with her inimitably dry sense of humour, ‘when you reach a certain age, life is nothing but a long straight road with death at the end of it’.

Here’s the question. Do you face up to growing old and embrace it – and ‘go gentle into that good night’ – or do you fight it? I knew at the start of this year that it would be a fulcrum in my life: ‘the beginning of a decade that carries with it the responsibility to prepare for diminishing physical ability and eventual death,’ as I put it. And yet I was surely right to add ‘it would be morbid in the extreme to prepare for my twilight years and not celebrate still being alive... Leave no race unrun!’

Therefore I’m not giving in that easily. My *third* flush of youth awaits. I’m just growing into it now – can’t you see? I’m like Ida, the mother of Sam Lowry in the film *Brazil*. You’ll probably notice me appearing intermittently though the rest of this book covered in bandages as my repeated attempts to recover my fitness meet with more and more complications, and then those complications have their own complications. I predict that by December I will be a mass of white linen, plaster and crutches, talking incomprehensible gibberish – punctuated every so often with the word ‘marathon’ – and recognisable only by my extreme optimism and black fedora.

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Both Oliver and I are volunteering today: me as marshal in the usual place by the bridge, he as the tail walker. We drive to Parke with the top down on the car. It’s a surprisingly small field for such a lovely day: just 126 runners. As it’s my third week in a row marshalling, almost everyone who regularly runs here says ‘thanks’ as soon as they see me. I say ‘well done’ to them all and cheer on good friends who are running. Among them are Bob Small, who is twenty years older

than me and who has recently read the first twelve chapters of this book, and John Legge who is the same vintage as Bob and who has also written about amateur running.

After the run, Oliver and I go to the café to chat to these two gentlemen. Bob has been passionate about sport all his life – cricket and golf as well as athletics – which is why I asked him to run his eye over the start of this book. His responses are fascinating. As I stir my coffee, and Oliver tucks into a bacon-filled baguette, Bob says, ‘the part in the first entry, where you say you can’t imagine people doing parkrun in 1961, I sort of agree with you. But only to a point. You see, the village where I grew up in the fifties and early sixties used to put out two cricket teams every Saturday and two more every Sunday. Families used to gather to watch and, dare I say it, the women and girls would sort out the cakes and tea, and everyone would get involved. Now, most villages have lost their cricket team completely.’

John agrees. ‘I sometimes go to support Somerset at the county ground and there are often spaces in the stands. Not even the professional game is supported like it used to be.’

‘Cricket is great,’ I reply ‘but it takes a whole day – especially if it’s an away match. What’s more, it’s a team commitment. I couldn’t do that with my career. What would I do if a match were to fall on the same day as a literary festival? I can’t just “Sorry, team, the muse Clio takes priority over the gods of bat and ball.” Running is so much easier to arrange around other commitments.’

‘Exactly,’ Bob says. ‘People simply don’t have the time for team sports anymore.’

After a little while discussing this subject, Bob turns back to my script. He is very generous, pointing out lines he especially likes, such as ‘a time... is something that can enrich you forever’ (chapter five). ‘Absolutely,’ he says, ‘the times I ran on the track in 1974 and on the road in the years following are indeed something that enriched my life.’ But some things he takes issue with. For example, on the question of equality, with which I start the book, he says ‘it’s very difficult to quantify. The golf handicap system comes as close as anything I know of in allowing people of different abilities the chance to compete on a level playing field.’

‘But what about the age grading at parkruns,’ I reply. ‘You’ve run 25:09 at Parke recently – that’s 69.3%, a good five percent more than I’ve run here. A golf handicap does not take age into account, merely recent performance. If you were as fast as me, your running handicap would be the same as mine – you’d get no benefit for being twenty years older.’

‘Fair enough,’ says Bob. He ponders his notes. ‘Now, this business of running a parkrun the day before you do a half marathon. What were you thinking? It’s madness.’

‘I was thinking – and still think – that if I throw myself into everything with a positive attitude, then some good will come of it. Maybe I’ll beat the man in the Iron Man t-shirt. Maybe I’ll run a half marathon in under a hundred minutes. I don’t know. But unless I try, and keep trying, I’ll never do any of these things. You might call it blind optimism. I prefer to call it my second flush of youth.’

‘And how many “flushes of youth” are there, do you think?’

‘As many as there are glasses of wine that you will drink from on all the tables in all the bars in the world, stretching away from you until you know the end is nigh.’

‘Ah yes. As you said in the introduction, “Why leave your wine cellar stocked with your finest vintages?” You and your alcohol metaphors. But I’m with you on this one. If you’re getting around a 5K course in a half-decent time, it doesn’t really matter how many years you’ve got under your belt. It’s like having extra golf clubs: they don’t matter if you’re able to do what you want with the one in your hands.’

The essential truth

Saturday 22 July 2017

I love strawberry plants. They just keep giving and giving. I look at the next crop of strawberries ripening and can't believe anything is so generous with its time and energy.

On Monday I decided that I would repeat my pattern of exercise from last week. So I set off to do the cycle path run. I started well but on the fourth mile, my energy levels collapsed. Seeing how slow I was, I thought, *I can't be bothered to sprint the last two hundred metres*. But then in my mind I heard Oliver telling me off. 'No, Dad, it's not just that no run is ever wasted, *no part* of any run is ever wasted.' So inspired was I by that thought that I *did* sprint. My final time for the whole distance was forty-three seconds faster than last week, a 2% improvement.

On Tuesday and Wednesday, I also repeated the previous week's runs. The results were very encouraging: I improved 4% on both occasions. If you are running at just 90%, and can improve 4% in a single week, then almost half your recovery takes place over just a few days. If the following week you go another 2% faster, and the week after that just 1%, then three quarters of your recovery takes place over the course of just three weeks.

Then Wednesday evening came around – and so did my pirate friend, Andy Gardner. Need I say, much alcohol was drunk. And verily – rather than merrily – my Thursday run was more of a drunken stagger than a measurable performance.

The hills shook their heads in despair.

Today the family are setting off for the south east, for a family gathering. We are staying with my mother in Lewes, which means that our parkrun this week is to be at Preston Park, Brighton. Oliver and I have run once there before, a year and a half ago, when neither of us was particularly speedy. When we arrive, we are both confident that we will set new personal bests. But then Oliver realises he has failed to pack his running kit.

'Oh, Oliver, what are we going to do with you?' says Sophie.

‘Never mind, I’ll walk it,’ he declares.

‘That’s the spirit,’ I reply. ‘See if you can do the distance in less than twice the time it takes me to run it.’

‘Okay, Dad, you’re on.’

It is a fine morning as we join the crowd of 381 people. Sophie and Oliver start at the back; I cautiously position myself several lines from the front. Alexander is boldly standing right at the front when the whistle goes. *What’s he thinking?* Straightaway he sprints off. It is another fast start – but he sustains this one much longer than the last. I am still ten metres behind him after a 6:44 first mile. Only on the second lap do I overtake, congratulating him on his bold strategy. Half a mile further on I start to lap the tail enders, including Oliver, who shouts encouragement and takes a photo of me as I pass. Nothing else of consequence happens after that until we are nearly at the end. Two men overtake me. One is about my age, the other in his early thirties. They seem to know each other as they exchange a few words. When we are about 300m from the finishing line, I speed up and regain my position alongside them. The older of the two shouts to his friend ‘you take him on,’ as I inch past. The younger man obliges and starts to sprint. I run wide, lengthen my stride and quicken my pace going up the slope, and finish a couple of seconds ahead of him, in forty-fifth position. My time is 21:41. Alexander slows up over his third mile and finishes 111th in 23:56. Sophie comes home in a little over half an hour. I run back to join Oliver who, bless him, is walking as fast as he possibly can. I am with him as he triumphs in our own personal handicap race, finishing 364th in 40:58, well inside the target of double my time.

I want to draw out from this something mentioned right at the start of this chapter, that ‘*no part* of any run is ever wasted’. You could put it another way: ‘every detail counts’. It is a philosophy that has caused England rugby coaches to lead the national side to World Cup glory in 2003, and Formula One racing teams to produce faster and faster cars year after year, and cycling team managers to shave grams of weight off bikes and seconds off their athletes’ performances on the track and in the Tour de France. But while that is very much in my mind, there is not that much more I can add to it as an observation. Every detail counts – that is that.

You can't do anything more with such mantras except repeat them. They are like the law of gravity: ignoring them won't help you, and actively working against them is waste of your time.

The reason for mentioning it, however, is that in one respect what I have just written is untrue.

Let me begin with the connections between running and writing. Just think of all the overtakings and threadings-through of 381 runners and walkers moving at different paces through the course of a race, some passing each other several times, all of them weaving around each other as the crowd spreads out. The relationships that emerge as a runner is first aware of this person and then that, and makes his or her way through the pack, are very much like the characters in a novel, all developing in connection with each other. A race is like a historical community too: the patterns in which we live our lives together are reflected in the racers intermixing with one another. However, when the race is done, and you are recovering with heavy breaths near the finish line, you can't remember more than a few people you overtook – you probably can't remember everyone you passed or who passed you. However well you did, you have little idea of what the other 380 runners have been up to. Recovering the truth of all those interactions and points of awareness is impossible. Thus the race illustrates how hard it is to recover even a little piece of the past in full. If 'every little detail' were to count historically, my, what a nightmare it would be to write history.

As you can see, a historian's job is like taking the list of competitors and their times at the end of a race and trying to recover what went on during it. A lot of what we say is inevitably conjecture. Moreover it is based heavily on tradition too. One thing I am particularly keen to stress when I talk about the philosophy of history is that the over-arching perspective we adopt when we write historical grand narratives is nobody's point of view. Think of it in terms of today's race: the leader had *his* view of what happened, and so did the tail-ender, and so did everyone in between. Every one of those viewpoints was different, and none of us had a view that encompassed everything going on. The impartial grand narrative is what I call 'a god's eye view', for not even a spectator could have taken in everything happening at every point in the race. But in reality a god's eye view is also limited. If someone were to tell you everything that

happened in the course of today's race it would take far longer than the race itself and completely obscure the drama, as the sea of facts would drown the *essential* truth, which is what we might actually want to know.

This idea of 'the essential truth' (as opposed to 'the whole truth') illustrates why writing about the past is an important exception to the rule that 'every detail matters'. Every detail *might* matter – but that does not mean that it does. Instead, the historian has to consider the whole, or at least as much as he or she can, and then cut out the mass of extraneous data while retaining sufficient information to give meaning to what is retained. The end result is, of course, an abbreviation of the truth. It might contain many individual truths but it is not THE truth. A good historian is not one who aims for comprehensiveness but synthesis.

This is why the most interesting thing about today's race from my point of view is that I cannot remember anything between lapping Oliver and the sprint at the end. That begs the question, 'what do I need to know about a race in order to describe it?' And that in turn leads to the far deeper question, 'what do we really need to know about the past?' I have written a truthful account of the race today and omitted almost everything that happened. This is what I usually do, as you know. It is still all true, despite its brevity, from Oliver's fast walking to Alexander's first mile in less than 6:44. Sometimes the *essential* truth of an event can be just a few little details – and different, according to individual perspectives.

What do we really need to know about the past? The answer to that question varies infinitely, according to who is asking, who is listening, what is being described, and why we are thinking about it. It is another jewel of the intellect, like the idea of equality: a prism of enormous depth. It makes me smile. There we were today running around Preston Park – and now I find myself considering one of the most beautiful and elusive questions in the whole philosophy of history.

The simplest things in life have the most profound consequences.

Race day

Monday 20 November 2017

Although I have still not run anywhere close to twenty minutes for 5K this year, I have been quite buoyed up by the improvement in my times recently. So, with the year fast coming to an end, I thought I ought to take on a couple of new challenges. Last week, Bob Small mentioned to me that there is going to be a 3,000m open evening at the athletics arena in Exeter tonight. I've never raced on a track before. No trees? No ruts in the path? No stones, leaves, mud, puddles, gravel, sharp turns, slopes, hills or inclines? Can that be called a run?

There are a hundred places at this event, split into five races. You are asked to estimate your time and placed into one of them accordingly. The nearest I have ever done to 3,000 is running the first two laps of Torbay Velopark, which is an outdoor cycling surface, where my best has been 11:45. On this basis, I am placed in the third race, 'C'. Bob has estimated his time at 13:25 and finds himself in the fourth race, 'D'. We chat as we drive into Exeter. I admit that I have no idea how well I will do. The wedding at the weekend saw me drink a lot of wine and stay up until 3:30am. I ate like a horse and weighed 4lbs more this morning than I did last Friday. I also slept badly after a long day driving back from Norfolk. Bob too admits he is not in great spirits – in fact, he would not have come if he had not already promised me a lift.

We park and make our way to the arena, where huge floodlights illuminate the ground. The night is cool but not cold, and there is no wind. Conditions are perfect. People are very friendly and relaxed, standing around the brick-red running surface or in the clubhouse, drinking coffee and chatting in small groups. There is an under-11s' one-mile race in progress. The young ones look very sweet as they run, with their little legs going hell-for-leather. I take note that the winner would give me a good run for my money over that distance: he finishes in 6:09.

Looking at the order of races, I cannot help but notice that almost everyone else is a member of a running club. Of the hundred people who have signed up, only six have no affiliation. They are thus all very keen, regular runners. I bet none of them has attempted to

transfuse his entire blood supply with champagne and red wine over the last couple of days. Also, I suspect some of them are faster than the times they have estimated. I see my race includes a young chap called Xavier, aged eleven, whose best at Parke is a minute and a half better than mine. His father is running with him. I cannot help but think that they have estimated their performances at 12:00 with a degree of modesty, especially on Xavier's part. He is going to be much faster than me.

Great name, Xavier. Wish my parents had given me a name like that.

When 'D' race gets underway, I stand by the finish line shouting encouragement each time Bob runs past. Before he finishes, however, I am summoned to the start of my own race. I chat to Xavier's father, who is surprised that I know his name. Parkrun has the effect of making us all appear like stalkers, knowing so much about each other even though we have never been introduced. I pay his son some well-deserved compliments and talk about runs where we have previously crossed paths. But there is not much time for chatting. Soon we line up and the klaxon starts us off.

Immediately a tall man in his thirties sprints into the lead. Xavier's dad follows him, with his son in third. I am in fourth. We run the first bend in that order and head into the straight. The track feels springy and rewarding. At the end of the first 200m I check my time: my watch says 34s. What? That's ridiculous! I should never be running at this pace. But it is not easy to slow down. I have slipped into a groove following these others, and I can't just put the brakes on now. So I pursue Xavier around the course. At about 400m I almost catch him; then he starts to pull away. I am slowing up. I should not be surprised: I ran that first lap at a pace of 5:06 per mile. But my inability to calm things down means I'm still running at 5:27 per mile on the third time round the circuit. My body starts to slow of its own accord but I still go through the first kilometre in 3:37, my fastest ever. The tiredness is now seeping in, like water through a crack in a wall. Now it is gushing in. The bulkheads on the *Titanic* have given way. Heavens, I am finding this difficult. So is Xavier's dad. Runners start to pass me, three or four of them at a time. I just have to hang on and try to slow down as little as possible. A dozen others in total have gone past by the time I cross the line, in fifteenth place. My watch says my time is 11:50 and the electronic

clock on the finish line says is 11:50 but for some reason it is officially recorded as 11:55. I don't know why – and I don't care. I am just disappointed to have been so slow.

What went wrong? If I could do 11:45 in the course of a 5K parkrun, I should easily have done better than 11:50 on the track. As I said, conditions were perfect. But you know the answer: I went out too fast. No matter how many times I make that mistake, I still do it. Over-eagerness gets the better of me. And while it is possible to go off too fast and set your best time, as Alexander has repeatedly shown, it is difficult if you have just come back from a great wedding.

Bob comes over. He tells me his time was 13:15 – ten seconds faster than he did two years ago. He turns seventy on Saturday, so that's an age grade of 75.44%. I am impressed. But he is not happy. The reason? He was hoping to break thirteen minutes. 'I made the same mistake as usual, and started too fast,' he says. 'I went through the first two hundred metres in forty-four seconds... I knew then there'd be trouble.'

We never learn. We make the same old mistakes, time and time again.

Bob and I don't watch the next heat but jog around the track together until we meet a friend from Parke parkrun, who is here with his wife, leaning over one of the metal barriers, watching us. He asks us about our times. We each tell our story. He smiles at me when I give my excuses, 'Know your limitations,' he says.

'No, no,' I reply, having gone over this one before. 'It is important *not* to have any regard for your limitations. They only hold you back. They stop you from trying things you might otherwise be capable of doing.'

At home, I look at the official results. Of the eighty-six who turned up to compete, I was fiftieth fastest. I was seventh out of the eleven men in my age group 50-54. I didn't come last. That is something from which to take heart. So too is the new experience of running on a track. Actually, the more I think about it, the more grounds for optimism there are. My first 200m and 400m would have merited 65% age grades had they just been sprints and not part of a longer

run. My first mile tonight was 6:05 (69.81% had I just been running that distance). Had I only been running a mile, I am sure I'd have been under the six-minute barrier.

My conclusion is that you should absolutely refuse to acknowledge your limitations. Don't define yourself by what you *cannot* do. Prioritise what you *can* – concentrate on your capabilities, your strengths. You should try to avoid your limitations altogether rather than get to know them. After all, why would you want to get to know any obstacle in the path of life except to avoid it?

Middle age

Saturday 2 December 2017

This week, I have been sorting out my archive. It is a curiously melancholy and yet rewarding thing to do. Dozens of notebooks and diaries, programmes for speaking events, large numbers of drafts of chapters, proofs, letters, contracts, royalty statements, bank statements, investments, posters, cover illustrations, images for plate sections of books, agendas for meetings, minutes, postcards, birthday cards – everything needs to be sorted and put in boxes, and listed so it can be easily located. The melancholy aspect is seeing how much time has passed and feeling that I am placing all that remains of the first fifty years of my life in its final resting place. In that sense, an archive is a sort of coffin. The rewarding part is finding things I had forgotten: objects like my Harrods staff badge from 1985, or the photographs on railcards and student cards, in which I look very similar to Alexander. It's odd to think that in another thirty years my handsome, long-haired son will probably look something like I do now: almost bald. Sorry, Alexander.

I pick up an old notebook from my twenties and open it at random. My eye alights on the following line: 'home is where you can listen to Jewish music while eating bacon'. I wonder what prompted that? I look around at all the boxes: there must be ten thousand similar aphorisms scattered amongst my papers. A writer's output consists of a small amount of published material and a vast mass of unseen notes – like all the training sessions that lie behind a runner's personal best time. How many junior races and training runs lie forgotten behind a single world record! How much more life experience lies in them than in the one well-known, best-ever race? In that sense, an archive is not so much a coffin as a mass of buried riches, like Tutankhamun's tomb.

Then I come across a piece of paper in my father's shaky handwriting. It is a letter to himself, just after he suffered his first stroke in 1978. He wrote his address at the top of the page and 'Dear John', and then just two lines more. The first is 'Robert will have to teach me how to write again.' The second simply says 'Something has gone from my hand.'

Sometimes everything in life can seem a struggle. As I said right at the start of this book, every single achievement is, in some small way, accomplished in the face of adversity. For my

father, the adversities were overwhelming. Eventually he succumbed to them – fifteen years after being told he had perhaps just six months to live. Those fifteen years were tough, though, and not just on him. We all struggled. Yet here I am, pushing on, heedless of such adversities. Indeed, you'd have to say that all this melancholia in surveying my past is somewhat misplaced. My coffin is not half full – it is not even half-empty. I haven't even got one foot in it. My outlook on life is more like that of my teenage sons than my father at fifty. Boyish optimism. I still scamper over the moor and sometimes along the streets. I often nip out and run to the local post office or green grocer's shop – not giving a thought to whether I still *can*. I don't need to worry about ill health and dying; such things are a long way off. Far in the future. Very distant indeed.

No?

The great conundrum that lies at the heart of being middle aged is illustrated by this inconsistency. On the one hand I have this complete disregard of time, as if I will live forever. On the other, I am intensely aware of the hours flying by. It's like having two personalities rolled up in one. The first is the boyishness referred to above: the youth who has no thought for old age and death, who is still blithely optimistic, enthusiastic, self-centred and curious. The other personality is an old soul who denies he was ever a boy but rather went straight from infancy to a preoccupation with the passing of time: leaning on a stick, looking out across the moor as if every day will be his last. Can I resolve this inconsistency? Can any of us? Should we try? Perhaps it is something that always lies beyond us – until the final blow is delivered by a medical professional specifying how much time we have left on earth in terms of a few months or weeks.

Preferably when we are over 102.

These thoughts are in my mind as I prepare for this week's parkrun. The boyish optimist in me wants to see how fast he can go. The more mature self wants to take things easy, and just treasure the time with my sons. Which will come out on top? Youth or age? I don't speak of such concerns with the boys, of course. Instead I simply ask them where would they prefer to run. We discuss the pros and cons. The forecast is a temperature of zero degrees centigrade overnight. At Parke the mud will be frozen into hard ruts which may well twist an ankle. At

Exeter the ground should be hard and the run fast. We decide on Exeter. We set off, with Beethoven's Fifth Symphony playing in the car, to get us in the mood.

For all our discussion, however, we have made a mistake. When we arrive in Exeter, the temperature is six degrees, and the ground far from hard. We line up with about three hundred people as the run director pedantically insists that every last one of us starts on the grass and not on the path. Then, suddenly, he says 'one, two, three, go' very quickly – surprising most of us. Alexander charges off in about tenth place and I chase after him. In the first few hundred metres, some of the faster people come past us. At the bridge I glance at my watch: 4:52. *That's disappointing.* So I speed up. Through the woods I am right behind Alexander and a woman with her blond hair in a ponytail. Six or seven well-built men come past us in a stream, as if a rugby club has joined us for the morning. My first mile is 6:26. That's sixteen seconds slower than I was hoping to run. But Alexander is slowing up too. I pass him, decisively, and overtake the woman with the ponytail too. Into the field. The grass is not great to run on, especially where earlier runners have trampled the turns. And look – damn!. The course has once again been laid out far inside the perimeter, leading to a shorter run. Oh well. I run around the very edge, to make sure I do the full 5K. Alexander sees his chance and sprints ahead along the laid-out course. The woman with the ponytail goes with him and overtakes him. Two more men running the laid-out course go past me before I re-join the main line. Now I have a hard task ahead, to catch up with my rightful place. But I manage it, passing Alexander again just short of the two-mile mark. That second mile was 6:52. My fear is now that Alexander will latch on to my shoulder and sprint past me at the end, like his cousin did a year ago. *More speed, Ian, more speed.* Back on the bridge at 15:40, and everything to run for. This feels good, I am running smoothly. Someone, however, is on my shoulder. I snatch a glance: it is not Alexander. My fifty quid is safe for another week. I cross the line in twenty-eighth place, in 20:46. Alexander is thirty-ninth, forty-two seconds behind me. After he has recovered, we go back and find Oliver, who has pulled a muscle but still manages 25:48 despite limping over the line.

As we walk to the car, Alexander is very excited. 'I'm definitely going to run on my birthday. I can't wait to pass Tom. He'll be so surprised.'

I am much less upbeat. ‘I can’t understand why I was so slow. I’ve lost weight, I’ve run a hundred miles over the last month, and I’m not suffering from an injury. I should have been under 20:20. What went wrong?’

‘Maybe you didn’t sleep well. Or were just tired from all the training?’ suggests Alexander.

‘Never mind,’ says Oliver. ‘No run is ever wasted.’

‘Hey, that’s my line,’ I say with a smile.

‘You’ve got to agree with me, then.’

When the results come through, we see there were 290 runners in all today – so that was Alexander’s best run in terms of position as well as time and age-grading. It is uplifting to see that the first finisher was a man in his fifties, which gives us ageing folk hope. As for me, I was in the fastest ten percent, with an age grade of 71.03%, but it was not a great result. It annoys me a little. Today was one of my last opportunities to do a fast run this year, and I let it slip away. It brings out the old miser in me, clutching at every last second, shaking my stick. Where is my boyishness now? Ah, but it was there, in that competitiveness with Alexander. There was no point at which I felt I was going to take it easy and let him win. And you can see it now, in this very act of writing. There is a sort of demented curiosity at work, cutting a swathe through life, looking for discoveries. Where does that come from? Maybe it is the impishness of the whole activity of running and *not* sedately walking that appeals to me? Maybe I identify with the devil-may-care attitude that that rebelliousness reflects? Maybe it is the last strand of my boyishness, to which I am clinging? Maybe it is all of these things.

I don’t know. But one thing I do know is that the great curiosity we have as children can extend into adulthood and even into old age – not least in terms of curiosity about what it is like to grow old. The great inconsistency that arises from this – of being youthfully curious and yet ageing fast – is a precious thing. It is volatile. It has power. It means that I surprise myself. It makes sparks fly. It makes me laugh too. For it turns out it is easier to be boyish now, at fifty, than it was ten years ago. As I grow older I have fewer and fewer reasons to act my age. I can

run down to the shops and smile as people raise an eyebrow, wondering why I am not more sedate and dignified. I'll pick up a guitar and sing in the street if someone dares me to. I don't worry if people look askance at me for acting like a maverick or a scamp. Why not? Who cares! Let's face it, I am not going to change for the sake of appearances, not now.

Now that I'm fifty, I am far too old to grow up.