

Dear Sam Shaw,

I used to call myself a runner. And I guess I believed it, too. I used to tell anyone willing to listen the story of the fourteen-mile run my brother dragged me on in a snowstorm on Christmas break. And yes, I probably omitted the two miles we walked because the snow was deep and we were tired, and I probably omitted the ten minutes we spent convincing the cashier of a local Dunkin' Donuts to give us a glass of water. And I definitely omitted the fact that we tried, albeit unsuccessfully, to hitchhike home.

As I said, I used to call myself a runner. However, when a friend of mine handed me your essay "Run Like Fire Once More," I found myself confronted by what that word truly means.

The Self-Transcendence 3100 Race as you describe it in all its impossibility – now that is real running. To be honest, I can't even fathom what three-thousand one hundred miles look like stretched out in a straight line. According to the internet, such a line would stretch from my hometown of Ayer, Massachusetts, to the western coast of the African continent. And as if this figure were not daunting enough, every mile is run around a single city block in Jamaica, Queens! So not only are these runners dragging their weary bones over three-thousand miles of pavement, but they are dragging them over three-thousand miles of the same pavement surrounded by noise traffic and gasoline fumes.

And to think that the world's longest foot race is run in circles that measure .5488 of a mile. I can't help but see some irony in that – some sort of higher meaning. And what is the prize for all this? A fee of \$1,250, a plastic trophy, and a scrapbook. You were putting it lightly when you said that self-transcendence wasn't a "lucrative business." But perhaps all that is part of the self-transcendence component of the Self-Transcendence 3100. And I guess that is what really got to me about your essay.

The fact that some of the racers are merely trying to finish seems very honest in a world where flamboyance and ostentatious public displays have become the norm in sports. Usain Bolt's flashy celebration crossing the finish line of the men's Olympic 100-meter dash in a world-record time comes to mind. It really puts our society on trial in a way – here are these men overcoming enormous mental and physical challenges, all without the cameras and headlines that other professional athletes breathe like air.

And while we're still on the subject of honesty, I admit that even before my rude awakening, when I still called myself a runner, I wasn't complete ignorant of the fact that there were Iron Man Ultra marathons and other races stretching thousands of miles through deserts and over volcanoes. However, these were all very distant races that happened in other countries and on other continents by people who weren't really human. Even marathoners seemed unreal as they hobbled across the finish line behind the glass of my TV screen.

However, you managed to show that the runners of the Self-Transcendence 3100 are still human – superior physically and mentally perhaps, but still with flaws and doubts and aches and pains. I felt like I knew their stories and could *run* into anyone of them on the street. And in the end I almost felt like an insider in the cultish discipleship that has grown up around Guru Sri Chinmoy. As if I were part of an exclusive club just by knowing that these "self-transcenders" are out there – as if some of their sheer resolve and ability, some of their self-transcendence had somehow wiped off the pages and left its residue on my hands.

I guess I now classify myself as more of a humble recreational jogger. And while that title is not half as exciting as "runner," in a way it is calming to be able to more accurately categorize myself and what I do, because I certainly do not run for some higher purpose or spiritual empowerment. I run to lose weight, be part of a track team, and because there is simply nothing else to do that fits my very limited budget. And I must admit that despite the fact that your essay has made me realize that perhaps I am not what I once thought I was, I still enjoy when people call me that most sacred noun – a runner.

Adieu-va,

*Leah Smith*