

The Long Haul  
Rev. Linda Simmons  
September 11, 2016

I have been a runner for maybe 30 years. I ran through the years that I smoked cigarettes; I ran when I was in the last trimester of my pregnancy; I ran in India in the early mornings across the broken tar where the long, thick snakes would be sunning themselves and villagers would ask me in Hindi, "What are you running from?" I ran in San Francisco up those impossible hills and in France in the foothill of the Alps when the snow would be on one side and the green grass on the other.

I do not run fast. While I run, Gary fast walks beside me. I know I'm having a hard day when Gary outstrips me! I call what I do wogging, rather than jogging: a mixture between walking and jogging. I am slowing down with time but it doesn't matter, I love it deeply.

There is nothing else I do that engages every part of my body at once and that clears my mind with one clean stroke, like those old etch a sketch games we used to play. Remember those, when after you made a design you could shake the screen and it would go blank again?

That's what running does for me. It whites out my mind for a short time, turns the page. No better gift in the world for a thinker.

I have been thinking about our Meeting House Congregation a lot these days, after being here 3 years. Other ministers tell me 3 years is a marking point when many of us start taking this kind of longer view, congregants and ministers together reach a settling down time when we are both secure enough to start asking some bigger picture questions like: Who are we together, not only you and I, but you and all of you and all of us in relation to our history and our presence now as a Meeting House congregation on this island?

Those are weighty questions and though important and necessary to understand and reflect on and to not understate their effects on us, there is something else that matters more I think. Though we do all come from somewhere and bring with us fears and hopes, we are also a people who can dream, who create visions together and have a mighty will to live into those visions together.

And to do that, to really do that, we have to risk something together. We have to risk running this race, putting on the appropriate gear (I know if I let my running shoes get more than a year old I risk having my right knee blow out), and letting this road rise up to meet us, letting this Meeting House congregation rise up to meet us and agreeing, yes, these are my people, this is my race to run or wog as the case may be, this is my time to meet these goals we have set and we have the strength and the courage, when courage is as David Whyte defines it, Heart Felt Presence.

Rev. Laurel Hallman, the interim minister in Falmouth, recently had the great pleasure of interviewing a long distance runner who was racing in the Falmouth Road Race this past August. From this sermon she wrote her sermon, "In it for the Long Haul."<sup>1</sup> The following quotes are all taken from that sermon.

Chris is a British, elite, fulltime, sponsored, runner. His name is Chris Thompson. He is 35. He was in Falmouth because he intended to be running in the Olympics in Rio, but an injury earlier this year kept him out of the Olympics so he had reorganized his summer to run in Atlanta, Utica, and Falmouth. He is preparing to be in the World Championships next year, which will be in London.

Chris said, "Winning is as much preparation as it is in the execution of the race. I will fuel and rest so that my body can perform at its maximum in the race on Sunday."<sup>2</sup>

Chris loves to run, he is built for it; he knew this as a very young man. But being built for something doesn't mean it is easy. Having the ability to run doesn't ensure staying in the race or making it to the finish line.

Chris said, "Whatever state you are in at the beginning of the race...at the start line... the runner must put everything from before out of their minds. You have to look forward, not back...you have to be in the here and now."

As many of you know, I had lung cancer surgery this past January. It was a successful surgery and the cancer was stage 1a, non-metastatic and non aggressive. My oncologist even called it a beautiful cancer. The surgery took 10% of my lower left lobe away. About 4 weeks after the surgery, I was cleared to go back to running, or jogging as I call it.

I couldn't catch my breath. I would start very slow, and I couldn't catch my breath. I was panting and struggling the whole way.

At about 7 each running morning, Gary and I take a round about route to the docks at Great Harbor Yacht Club and we face the rising sun and each say 3 things we're grateful for. I wanted to be grateful that I could breath freely, and run like I used to be able to before surgery. I could not be grateful for that. But there were many other things to be grateful for, including that I was alive, and that my dear Gary was beside me urging me on to be grateful.

And then we turn on those docks from the rising sun and we see The Meeting House, standing on the hill so proud. From the docks, it looks left leaning and every single time we say, "There she is, our left leaning Meeting House." And we smile, no matter the day, no matter the weather, and it gets windy on those docks in the winter and

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<sup>1</sup> Rev. Dr. Laurel Hallman, "In it for the Long Haul" Sermon, Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Falmouth, MA, Sunday, August 21, 2016.

icy and cold. We always say it, There she is, our left leaning Meeting House” and we smile.

Chris went on to tell Laurel Hallman, “In a race I get constant feedback about how I’m doing. My body tells me how I am...My sub-conscious is asking how I can possibly get through this. But the most important skill for a runner is to turn the negative feedback around and make it positive. Experience has taught me that even though I’m on a roller coaster of positive and negative feedback, I know I can turn it around.”

I kept running. Gary, who gets up at 5am, would yell up to me when I wake around 7am:

“What do you want to do this morning honey?”

“Let’s go running!” I’d answer.

“It’ll just make you sad.”

“Maybe today it will make me happy.”

Somewhere around the 4<sup>th</sup> month after surgery, my breath returned. I cannot explain it except to say that I guess that day my lung capacity expanded with the continued exercise. One morning, I hit the road and could breathe. Just like that. We made it to the docks and my gratitude was that I could breathe fully and we turned and saw The Meeting House and I knew something that I did not know before and I sat down and wept.

Chris went on in his interview with Laurel Hallman, “Put your emotion into it...You have to believe you can pretty much face anyone or anything...When you’re running you find out who you really are” (and what you really belong to).

I knew in that moment that it was not just lungs expanding that returned me to myself, that brought back the 10% I had lost, it was all of you, it was this Meeting House community, it was risking staying in the game even when it hurts, it was risking writing a new story even when everything says the old story cannot be rewritten, it was putting everything on the line for a vision that there were enough pieces to imagine but not yet much proof to hold on to. It was because we belong to each other. And when you belong to something it can give you the possibility of a 10% just out of reach and fill you with a breath you thought you lost forever.

Every time we reach for a new vision, a new possibility we risk something: failure, success, change, letting go of pessimism, letting go of fear, letting go of whatever it is that keeps the old story alive.

I had become attached to that story of not having my full breath and considered who I was without it and talked to doctors about it and other people who had similar experiences who had had lung surgery. I was becoming aligned to that story.

But belonging to you asked more of me than that. Lifting my eyes and my breath to this left leaning Meeting House on the hill asked that I dream bigger, risk something, keep going, and let go of everything that kept me too small to live into the best I could be.

This Meeting House community calls us all to rise up and risk something for a story that writes us into our greatness, our beauty, our full breathing capacity until these pews are full of who we can be in our most dynamic, rich, fully envisioned selves.

These walls are full of stories, full of struggle, full of beauty and loss, full of fulfillment and sadness too. The story has all that every story has. The triumph includes its tragedies. Which will you carry along for the long haul? Which help you breathe? We must decide. Which stories will be carried with us into the long haul?

Which stories nurture the future, which stories allow your beauty and mine room to thrive, which stories will give us all enough room to become the people we can be for each other and this world?

What matters is that we get there together, with the strength and courage to go on well, whole, side by side, with enough imagination and ability to leave room for each other, so that we might be so much more than we have ever been, so that we might be each other's guides to faithful, nurturing, love.

Look up. The Meeting House and this congregation is always right here, offering us the love and hope and capacity to go on, to make it with hope to another day, to bear the beauty and the burden of this life with grace. Amen.