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Professor on the Run

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DYLAN KISSANE, NOV 6 2014

I'm typing this 30,000 feet in the air somewhere over Germany on the first leg of my journey to Prague. I am heading to the Czech capital to attend the 6th Annual Prague Conference in Asian Studies where I'll give a paper and dive a little deeper into the notion of borders and borderlands in Asia. It's my first visit to Prague and I'm looking forward to seeing the Metropolitan University, catching up with the team at the Central European Journal of International and Security Studies, and visiting a city I have heard a lot of good things about since arriving in Europe nearly a decade ago.

The early flight from Lyon meant an early start to the day and it also meant breaking up a pretty successful morning routine I have established in the last couple of months. I've been out of bed no later than 5am all of the Fall semester – from time to time even rising at 4:30am or even 4am – and making the mornings my own personal time. I read, I write, I plan my day, and I exercise. On this last point, I've taken to running with an eagerness that even surprises me a little, and I'm putting in 50km and 60km weeks running the roads around town before most people are out of bed.

The need to be at the airport by about 5:30am this morning meant that I couldn't fit in my run this morning but I'm ready to pull on the Mizuno's this evening in Prague and I've already picked out a few Strava segments to target while I'm getting over the day spent in transit.

At this point it is probably fair to ask the question, what has my morning run got to do with being a professor of International Relations? As unexpected as it might be, the answer is: 'maybe quite a bit'.

Over the summer Rachel Toor wrote a piece for *The Chronicle of Higher Education* comparing the process of academic writing with running. In response to the question 'what do writing and running have in common?' she offers answers like discipline and the material rewards that we might deny we seek but secretly truly do enjoy.

Discipline is certainly a common point between writing and running. Sitting down at the computer morning after morning with the blank screen mocking you is tough, but you push yourself to write that paragraph, finish that chapter, and round out that edit knowing that you'll be better for doing so. In much the same way, when the rain and the wind are lashing the hill I live on in Lyon it takes a certain discipline to pull hard on the laces, slide in the earbuds, and set off into the wet for another morning effort.

Toor is right on the material rewards, too. We win what she calls "markers of achievement" by completing our writing just as much as we win that finisher's medallion for crossing the line in the local 10K. The listing in the conference program, our name in the table of contents, the acceptance letter from a publisher, even the diploma that is handed over after years of writing a dissertation – these are material things that signify that we finished our writing and it was good.

But Toor also offers another answer: vulnerability.

She writes:

Both require bravery, audacity, a belief in one's own abilities, and a willingness to live the clichés: to put it on the line,

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to dig deep, to go for it. You have to believe in the “it,” and have to believe, too, that you are worthy.

That is hard because the results always seem impossible. At the beginning of every track practice, when the coach gives us a workout, I think: I can’t do that. No one could ever do that. When I line up at the start of a marathon, I imagine driving from Hopkinton to Boston or from Staten Island to Central Park and I tell myself that’s too far to run...

Which is exactly how I feel when I’m starting on a book project.

I was reminded of Toor’s essay this week when I read Gregory Semenza’s latest at *Vitae*. An Associate Professor at the University of Connecticut, Semenza’s article *How I Learned to Stop Typing and Love the Run* begins with an admission that I have come to identify with:

When I’m feeling stuck as a writer, my impulse is to cycle for a couple of hours. Or, if I don’t have that kind of time, to subject myself to a brutal trail run.

I haven’t always worked this way. Way back when, I might have gone to sleep, flipped on the TV, or poured myself a drink. I learned halfway through grad school, however, that such “coping” mechanisms were doing me more harm than good. They didn’t help me to lose the 50 pounds I put on after college. They didn’t help me to improve my focus, or relieve the migraine-inducing tension in my neck, or stave off the depression I’ve been fighting much of my life.

Running was the medicine to which I eventually turned, and it changed everything.

Semenza points to three additional benefits that arrive from making running part of his routine as an academic.

The first is increased productivity and, on this, I can agree. Since getting into the habit of waking up early and exercising every morning my productivity has skyrocketed. I was always pretty efficient and I could always get a lot done, but now I feel I have kicked things up another gear. It might be the development of new mitochondria that Semenza points to, or it might just be the fact I now have another hour in my day, but it has certainly changed things for the better as far as productivity is concerned.

The second benefit of running for professors is what he calls ‘the endurance mentality’. Like Toor – and Semenza does reference her essay in his – Semenza points to the way that runners develop a can-do attitude when faced with challenges in writing and research. I’ve run three out-and-back half marathons in the last month even if I am dying at the halfway point, I know I cannot and will not give up on the way back to the start/finish line. That’s the endurance mentality, and it will get me through a 6000-word conference paper just as it gets me through a 6000-metre session in the hills.

The third and final benefit of running that Semenza identifies is the way that running allows him to develop a different perspective on academic problems. He talks specifically about running with a partner, taking the time to listen, question, and discuss things outside of an academic environment. That’s valuable but as a person who runs and writes alone, I cannot speak to its truth in my case. The different perspective I experience is the one that comes from moving smoothly through the quiet streets, cutting a path through the fog on a Sunday morning, and tracing the River Saone back home after a long run to a village on the Mont d’Or. I can clear my head, concentrate on the very essence of life – breathing and movement – and return to my academic work an hour later refreshed and ready to go.

It’s for reasons like these that my first evening in Prague will include a run on the Vitkov Hill with perhaps a detour down a cobbled street or two. It’s also why I’ll be out of bed and running the streets of Prague early tomorrow before heading to the conference.

In the end academics are pushed to research, write, publish, and produce consistently high quality scholarship, and it might be that some of the most important work that a professor can do to assure this quality is not to tap on the keys of a laptop but to head outside and put one foot in front of the other on the road or trail.

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