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Review

We start by making an honest assessment of our situation and our need to improve.

Why in the world would I want to take up running? That question is a great place to start this book. Perhaps you have never run a mile or even a block in your life, but you have watched other people run and wished that you could do that too. Perhaps you are already a runner but are looking for some tips and inspiration on how to take your running to the next level. Even if you have been running for years, it is good to look back to when you started and ask what motivated you to begin in the first place.

My interest in running was sparked by the fact that three of my grandparents died in their fifties from heart disease before I was born. When I was in high school, I began to comprehend that my gene pool likely meant I was predisposed to heart disease myself unless I did something to prevent it. I began learning about the cardiovascular benefits of aerobic training by reading magazine articles and books such as Dr. Ken Cooper's *Aerobics*, and I decided that I had better take up some form of aerobic exercise if I wanted to live past my mid-fifties.

Jim Fixx's book *The Complete Book of Running* helped persuade me that the aerobic activity that I should take up was running. The fact that Jim Fixx died of a heart attack while jogging at fifty-two years of age just seven years after he published his book did not dissuade me. It was later learned that Fixx was genetically predisposed to heart disease, since his father had died of a heart attack at the age of forty-three after suffering a previous heart attack when he was thirty-five. Fixx's lifestyle factors before he took up running did not help: he weighed 214 pounds and smoked two packs of cigarettes per day. If anything, the reports of the factors contributing to Fixx's death only prompted me all the more to make the commitment to running at an early age if I wanted to try to overcome my own genetic predisposition to heart disease.

So when I was a senior in high school at Quigley Preparatory Seminary South on the south side of Chicago, I decided one day to go out and run a mile. We didn't have a real track, so I just did four loops around the parking lot. It felt awful. My lungs burned. My legs felt heavy. My heart was pounding. In short, I hated it. Yet I told myself that I had to try to keep doing this if I wanted to achieve my goal of physical wellness into old age. I also hoped that I would get more accustomed to running the more I ran. So began my running career.

My other motivation for running was to keep in shape to play hockey, which was and remains my favorite sport. My dad introduced me and my six brothers and two sisters to the great game of hockey when we were growing up, taking us to the Chicago Stadium to see the Chicago Blackhawks play. My brothers and I used to play floor hockey with some friends from the neighborhood in the basement below our dad's pharmacy. I began playing organized hockey when I was in eighth grade at the local Boys' Club. We played floor hockey in the gym. The first time I played there, the teams were picking

sides and someone said we needed a goalie. I volunteered and loved goaltending from the start. It is a unique position with a lot of responsibility, so players tend to either like it or shun it altogether. I liked it, and thus began my hockey career!

In addition to floor hockey, I played roller hockey and eventually learned how to ice skate, but I didn't start playing ice hockey until I was about forty-five years old and joined the Masters Hockey League, an over-thirty, no-check hockey league in Chicago. I wrote more about playing hockey in my other book, *Holy Goals for Body and Soul: Eight Steps to Connect Sports with God and Faith*, but I mention it here because, as I said, a key motivation for me to start running, in addition to health reasons, was to stay in shape to play hockey.

Through college, I would run one mile a few times per week. I was chairman of the Athletic Committee at my college seminary, Niles College of Loyola University, where I was studying to become a priest. As chairman, I organized all the intramural sports, including touch football, softball, basketball, volleyball, and tennis. Naturally, I introduced floor hockey to the program. But running was still just sort of a hobby that I did in my spare time.

After college, I went to St. Mary of the Lake Seminary in Mundelein, Illinois, the major seminary for the Archdiocese of Chicago. The seminary campus at Mundelein is quite large and has a lake right in the middle of it. There is a road that goes around the lake and the distance around the lake on that road is about three miles. So I began to increase my running mileage from the one-mile runs I had been running in college to three-mile runs around the lake.

I continued to run no more than three miles at a time until my last year of seminary, when I was ordained a deacon and assigned to do my internship at St. Catherine Laboure Parish in Glenview, Illinois. There I met some high school students who ran on their cross-country team. As I began running

with the team, I increased my mileage to include some six-mile runs.

Increasing My Distance and Overcoming Pain

Something rather significant happened when I increased my mileage: I began experiencing pain in my legs, particularly in my knees and shins. This is a common experience for beginning runners as they run longer distances. This kind of pain can also come to experienced and older runners, causing some to give up. I found a solution that is important to share with any runner who is experiencing this type of pain.

The father of one of the high school cross country runners was a podiatrist. When I told him I was getting pain in my knees and shins from my increased running mileage, he said I should come to his office and he would look at my feet. I replied that my feet didn't hurt; it was my legs that were causing me problems. He suggested that I come anyway, so I went to his office and he examined my feet. He told me I had fallen arches, which were causing the pain further up my legs because the biomechanical structure of the human body and all its various parts are related. A weakness in one area can cause pain further up the skeletal infrastructure. He said that my feet were as flat as pancakes and that the solution was for me to wear orthotics, that is, inserts in my shoes that would provide arch support. The podiatrist took a plaster cast of my feet and ordered the orthotics accordingly.

From the first time I started wearing the orthotics, they began working immediately. I could run longer distances with no pain in my legs. At the recommendation of my podiatrist, I began wearing the orthotics in all of my shoes, my dress shoes as well as my running shoes, and even in my ice skates. Over the years, I have had several new pairs of orthotics made. The

technology has gotten more sophisticated as they can now be designed by X-ray and computer scans that provide the design specifications, rather than using a plaster cast of the feet. I am convinced that I would not have been able to run marathons or perhaps even continue running at all if it were not for my orthotics.

I have heard too many people say that they used to run but quit because they had pain in their knees or elsewhere in their legs. If running is causing you pain, I suggest that you see a podiatrist or chiropractor to check out your biomechanics. It is important, however, that your doctor have an appreciation for sports medicine, too, and not just tell you to stop running.

Considering a Marathon

After you have been running for a while, you may begin considering attempting to run a marathon. It took many years for me to even consider the idea of running a marathon. After I increased my usual running distance from one mile to three miles to six or sometimes even eight miles, that was the most I did for about twenty-five years, from 1970 to 1995. When the marathon boom began in the 1980s, people who were taking up the challenge of running a marathon and knew that I was a runner began asking me if I wanted to run a marathon. My answer was always a consistent and emphatic “No!” I would run an occasional 5K or 10K race, but the idea of running a marathon simply had no appeal to me. The distance of a marathon seemed overwhelming as did the time it would take to prepare.

Then something unexpected happened one night when my brothers and I went out for pizza after playing hockey. Remember, I have six brothers. I think five of us were together that night. It was the week between Christmas in 1994 and New Year’s Day and someone asked about New Year’s resolutions. We were seated at a round table and each of us took a

turn going clockwise around the table telling what we had in mind for a resolution. When they got to me, I just blurted out quite spontaneously, half-jokingly, and somewhat to my own surprise, “I think I’ll run a marathon next year!”

My youngest brother, Allen, was next. Right after I said I thought I would run a marathon, he said, “That’s funny. I was thinking of running a marathon, too!” He was serious, and so the seed for my marathon-running career was planted!

In the next chapter, I will talk about how Allen and I went about our training for our first marathon. Before doing so, I wish to offer some reflections about how our review of our physical well-being should be a model for assessing our spiritual condition and seeing where we need to improve.

The Connection between Spiritual and Physical Wellness

If you picked up this book thinking it would help you with the physical aspects of running—such as training programs, nutrition, and what kind of shoes to wear—I will try to address such issues in the chapters that follow. If you focus only on the physical aspects, however, you will be missing a crucial element of your training program: the spiritual aspects are essential as well. Most great athletes and coaches know about this critical connection between physical success and one’s emotional, psychological, mental, and spiritual state. An athlete could have all the talent in the world and superior physical ability in comparison to opponents, but if he or she is beset with emotional problems or is simply not motivated, that athlete will not succeed.

Indeed, athletes must pay close attention to the mental aspects of sports competition as well as their physical training if they hope to succeed. Another of my favorite Yogi-isms (you can tell I am a fan of Yogi Berra) is “You can observe a lot by

watching.” Part of your watching means paying attention to what your body and your mind are telling you.

A Sound Mind in a Sound Body

Every year *Runner’s World* magazine puts out their shoe guide, which reviews various types of shoes from different brands. Some shoes are specially designed for running on a track, others for trail running, long-distance running, motion control, stability, and so on. Over the years, I have worn several different brands, including Nike, New Balance, Brooks, Saucony and Etonic running shoes, but the brand that I have been wearing the most for the past several years is ASICS. Their shoes seem to fit my foot just right and provide the arch support that my feet need. I mention ASICS not to push their product, since you should find whatever brand works best for you. But I want to talk about ASICS here in the context of the connection between the mental and physical aspects of running because of their name. The acronym ASICS stands for the Latin phrase *Anima Sana in Corpore Sano*, which translates as “a healthy soul in a healthy body,” based on the saying of the Roman poet Juvenal, *mens sana in corpore sano*, which means “a sound mind in a sound body.” The founder of ASICS shoes, Kihachiro Onitsuka, who started his company in 1949 in postwar Japan, adopted a company philosophy that promoted being active as an essential part of a person’s overall well-being.

I have lived most of my life by that philosophy as well. I definitely feel better when I run. I have found that I think more clearly after running, which I do to start out almost every day. I am not naturally a morning person, so running in the morning helps to wake me up and get my day going. I have “written” speeches, homilies, magazine articles and chapters for books in my head while running, which I try to actually get down in writing when I get home from my run.

I have gone out running with a seemingly insoluble problem on my mind, only to have a solution come into clear focus while running. I am sure that the blood and oxygen flowing through my brain helps.

Running has also helped to keep my body sound. As I write this, I am sixty-seven years old, five feet, nine inches tall, and weigh 157 pounds, only seven pounds more than when I graduated high school fifty years ago. My blood pressure is good and my cholesterol levels are where they should be. I have already achieved my goal of living past fifty-five, so I view any additional years as icing on the cake!

In this regard, we have a significant problem with obesity in our culture. My purpose in discussing obesity is not to wade into societal debates about the “perfect” body type or size. I am only concerned with the topic of obesity as it is related to health. The only perfect size is what is healthy for you. The Center for Disease Control (CDC) and Prevention’s health survey of more than 5,000 adults in 2017-2018 found that the obesity rate was 42 percent, up from the 40 percent figure that was reported in a similar study in 2015-2016. The severe obesity rate was 9 percent in the new survey, up from the 8 percent figure in the previous one. In other words, about four out of ten American adults are obese, and nearly one in ten is severely obese. By comparison, a half century ago, about one in one hundred American adults was severely obese. The obesity rate has risen about 40 percent in the last two decades.

To translate the obesity rate into pounds, a woman who is five feet four, the average height for females in the United States, is considered obese at a weight of 174 pounds and severely obese above 232 pounds. A man who is five feet nine, about the average height for males, is considered to be obese at 203 pounds and severely obese at 270 pounds.

According to Dr. William Dietz, an obesity expert at George Washington University, the findings of the CDC

survey suggest that more Americans will get diabetes, heart disease, and cancer. These facts should be alarming to those who find themselves in the weight range of being obese or severely obese and should serve to spur some self-review and resolution to take steps to correct the situation.

There are many different types of fad diets touted as an easy way to lose weight. Actually, there is only one sure fire way to lose weight: burn off more calories than you take in! Of course, that is easier said than done. But running is one sure fire way to burn off more calories and, when combined with eating in moderation, is guaranteed to result in weight loss.

In terms of spiritual motivation to lose weight, the book of Genesis tells us that we are made in the image and likeness of God. If we let ourselves become overweight and obese, we disfigure the image of God in our bodies. Have you ever noticed that images of Christ hanging from the cross never depict him as being fat or obese? The Bible does not relate any athletic accomplishments of Jesus, but he was physically fit. So we too should work on keeping physically fit. We should strive to be like Jesus in body as well as in soul.

A Healthy Soul in a Healthy Body

Speaking of our souls, the measure of a healthy soul is more difficult to assess since it cannot be calculated numerically like a person's weight. Before trying to describe how to assess the health or wellness of your soul, we must first discuss what we mean by the concept of a soul.

A traditional definition of the soul is “the ultimate internal principle by which we think, feel, and will, and by which our bodies are animated. The term ‘mind’ usually denotes this principle as the subject of our conscious states, while ‘soul’ denotes the source of our vegetative activities as well” (*Catholic Encyclopedia*). Thus, the maxim “a sound mind in a sound body” would be more limited to the conscious thinking

processes of one's mind, while "a healthy soul in a healthy body" would refer to the broader notion of the unconscious and unreflective aspects of a person's existence.

In the Bible, the Hebrew word *nepeš* is often translated as "soul." The basic meaning of this term can be best understood, it seems, in those scripture references where *nepeš* is translated as self or person, that is, the concrete existing self. For example, *nepeš* is explicitly described only in Genesis 2:7; by the reception of the breath of God into the nostrils man becomes a "living *nepeš*." The New Testament word for soul is the Greek *psychē*, from which we get the root of the word "psychology." The *psychē* is associated with life. It leaves the body at death (see Lk 12:20). The *psychē* as the seat of supernatural life and the object of salvation furnishes a basis for expressions such as "saving one's soul" and the "care of souls." The *psychē* or soul in the New Testament is the totality of the self which is saved for eternal life.

St. Gregory of Nyssa and St. Augustine followed the philosopher Aristotle, who understood the soul as being in union with the body. Their understanding of the human soul was as an individual spiritual substance, the "form" of the body. In other words, Christians believe that both body and soul together constitute the human unity, although the soul may be severed from the body and lead a separate existence, as happens after death. The separation is not final, however, as Christians also believe that the soul will be reunited with the body at the resurrection of all the dead at the second coming of Christ. In his *Commentary on the Soul*, St. Thomas Aquinas wrote, "A soul is that which all living things alike have in common. In this we are all alike."

In this regard, I have found in my pastoral experience that many Christians do not seem to understand the resurrection of the body as a key article of our faith. On one recent occasion when I preached a funeral homily about how we look