

Marathon Running as a Form of Pilgrimage: The Manifestation of a Ritual Process.

Good morning, I'm Josh Niedwick, a folk studies graduate student at Western Kentucky University and this morning I would like to talk a little about looking at marathon running as a form of pilgrimage. So, my basic questions about marathon running are "does it bring runners to a sacred space?" and "Can it be physically manifested as a spiritual journey?"

A definition of pilgrimage and its specific attributes has been debated back and forth for some time. Does it require a specific destination? Must there be a spiritual or religious relic of some type involved? Can it be secular? At what point is it tourism and not pilgrimage? Answering those questions is not something I set out to do, instead my aim was to add to the conversation... and maybe muddy the waters even further. First, I wanted to look at the experience of marathon running as a form of pilgrimage through the lens of Turner's three stages of ritual

process (separation, liminality, and reaggregation), and then, assuming we find correlation, consider the question if marathon runners are aware of this circumstance and if they intended on having that experience in the first place. Finally, I will conclude (unsurprisingly) that the reality is far more complex than what my initial questions implied.

My fieldwork consisted of interviews with willing participants and participant observation. Which, for the purpose of full disclosure is what precipitated my interest in this topic. After running a marathon myself and having an unexpected spiritual encounter during that process I became fascinated and curious with whether or not it was something that was common for other runners. As a result, I began to have conversations with those who I had been training with as well as other runners in the community about their experiences as well.

For the purpose of this paper I wanted to narrow the focus of my research to a particular subtype of running that even among the running community is set apart in terms of difficulty, distance, risk of injury, and prestige. This is not to say that the other types of running activities and communities do not have the possibility of a notion of pilgrimage or spiritual experiences associated with them, just that I didn't focus on them in my research. Marathons are strictly twenty-six point two miles races that commemorate the legend of Pheidippides who, supposedly, was dispatched from the battle of Marathon to Athens to report on the Greek victory over the Persians, and after arriving and delivering the good news, promptly died from exhaustion. While the notion of running this distance as being fatal is dubious at best, marathons are a fairly significant jump in difficulty and risk of injury when compared to shorter distances and thus require a specific training regimen in order to best mitigate this risk.

This training regimen, or “cycle” is actually where we start our dive into the ritual process analysis. Before entering into the training cycle individuals may run once every few days or even every other day, whereas a typical marathon training cycle causes the participant to run every day with the mileage increasing weekly. This schedule begins about four months before the marathon and can also include cross training and dietary adjustments. This cycle typically causes the runner to “separate” themselves from their normal daily routines and even affects some personal and social relationships as more time is spent in preparation for the marathon. Even more interesting is that during the latter weeks of training in this cycle it is common for a runner to accumulate anywhere from thirty or over forty miles in training runs, far more than the 26.2 during the race. While these miles are significant and are generally respected by the running community, they

are still held separate and distinct from the actual experience of the race and clearly fall within the realm of the pre-liminal stage.

The liminal stage itself was perhaps the easiest to identify and apply to the experience a participant has during a marathon since the act of running a marathon is literally transitional, in more ways than one. Two weeks before race day the runner significantly decreases the mileage, they run to mitigate the chance of injury and to allow the body to “incorporate” the conditioning from the training cycle. This tapering identifies a shift from a mostly physical preparation into more of a “mental” one before the race and marks the beginning of the transition from separation into the liminal phase. The race, a journey from point A to point B, is where we find the forming of *communitas* amongst the participants on the race course. It’s not uncommon to hear conversations among runners during the race about preferred race fuel types and when to take water as

opposed to an isotonic. Sometimes conversations involve possible difficulties or injuries they are experiencing or even sharing insights about what challenges may be faced later on in the course. One participant even mentioned a feeling of “oneness” with her fellow runners as they cooperated and looked out for each other at a water station, making sure everyone was hydrated and looked after. All of these interactions are purely based on the experience of being in the race together, without any consideration of normal social standing, affiliation, or socio-economic class. This is a key point to mention since in distance running, while there is a clearly identified winner, every individual who crosses the finish line within the allotted time is recognized for their achievement with their own “finisher” medal. So, while this is technically a competition, for the vast majority of those running the race is more of a shared experience of a personal challenge that is different for each runner, but all recognize the difficulty and will often

support and encourage each other while on the course.

Completing the race brings us to reaggregation which proves to be a little more challenging in that there does not seem to be any form of completion that is absolute and final. While the race may end, all of the participants interviewed reported a desire to begin the process again even if they swore during the race, they would never do another marathon. This absence of completion does not imply however that there is not a change in the individual moving forward after having experienced the race. Nearly all participants recounted a change in perspective after their experience, either within a spiritual or secular context. But we're concerned about marathon as pilgrimage, so what about the sacred space? This is where things get interesting. In regards to a "spiritual" experience the most obvious piece of evidence is the commonly reported phenomenon often referred to as the "runner's high" which is most often described as a sense of euphoria

experienced by the runner. However, some of the participants went further to describe it as more than just a release of biochemistry, one participant said...

“there's just days where you feel like it's just very confirming, this is not that I'm made to win races, just that I'm made to do this. That's a, oneness to that feeling.”

The use of the phrases “oneness” and being “made” to do this provides our best clues of a spiritual connection to the sacred during the experience. In fact, several participants correlate the experience they have running with their own spiritual lives with one even equating running and his faith with being quote: **“long obedience in the same direction”**. And yet another mentioning that their long runs provide **“ample time to reflect and to pray”**. While other runners kept their descriptions strictly secular and biological with no hint of religion or

spirituality, and there was some in between.

So, we have an encounter that follows the ritual process and some participants do report a spiritual experience while others... do not. None of the runners actually set out to embark upon a pilgrimage, but based on their responses it would seem some do indeed feel that they had been on such a spiritual journey while training for and running a marathon. My initial question was if intentionality mattered, if they needed to have that awareness in the beginning in order for it to truly count as a pilgrimage. One of my participants however provided a very profound perspective, and that is namely that the concept of intentionality is not nearly as important as to what *insight* the runner has about their experience. Based on my field work I would say every runner navigated the three stages of the ritual process and either experienced a change or transformation by the trial of running a marathon (or marathons) but it was

their insights, the **“ability to look back and see meaning where there was none”**

that placed that meaning within a spiritual context and determined, at least from

their perspective, whether or not the marathon brought them to a sacred space

and manifested their race as a spiritual journey.

Thank you and I will be happy to take any questions you may have at this time.