

RUNNING FOR MY LIFE

BY AMY CHALLENGER

“HEY MOM, you need to write about your running,” said my 10-year-old son. “Tell people why you run so much.” We were walking home from church, kicking ice balls down the sidewalk. I shivered a little harder. My son had been reading my mind again. At sunrise that morning, I’d been writing about running, an activity I rarely put into words.

...

For the last 30 years, I’ve been running – everywhere. I’ve run up and down Syracuse University campus, through hot Michigan fields and towns, down the lakeshore of Chicago, up steep hilly trails of Marin County, along long New England roads. I’ve jogged across the magnificent Golden Gate Bridge and beside the banks of a misty gray Lake Zürich in Switzerland.

And as I’ve grown, I’ve run through hard stuff. I’ve squired and huffed through snow, rain and sleet. I’ve pressed my fists and mind through disapproval, heartbreak, depression, job loss, sexist bosses, through a squishy post-partum body, insomnia, parental stress, an ill child, through crime and betrayal.

“What are you running from?” one trainer once asked me as she rubbed a knot in my hip. “Your body isn’t made for this,” she added. “You shouldn’t have so much pain.”

But my running isn’t about avoiding discomfort. I run to press through hard stuff – to

find bones and muscles, alive against pavement, upright in a big, complicated world. I run to pump and sweat out false messages and expectations that hang on me, blind me and confine me from living the life I’ve been blessed to receive.

Sure, I run to stay fit. But also I run from hopelessness – I run from the myths that moms should be sweet and tidy and happy and smooth and young and beautiful; that bad schools can never change; that hunger and poverty and homelessness will never end; that a mother can’t help her child without giving him medication. I run from racism and stereotypes about women, kids, classes, religions, races and political parties. I run from all the stupid things I’ve said and done and from every thought of mine that has growled, “You can’t do that. You can’t change that.” I run from lack of faith, from broken friendships, from selfishness; from jealousy and pride and self-hate, from guilt and greed.

When I run, I always find a destination. But the trick is, the destination evolves as I move forward. It unveils as I stretch my limbs, warming up with the sky, as I abandon all that holds me back – my destination comes as I live.

I run toward the sound of my breath pulling in oxygen like the trees do.

I run toward the birds calling, the breeze blowing, the voices of people in my life whom I couldn’t hear before.

I run toward the light breaking through thousands of lacy branches and snowflakes across hillsides that I was too busy to notice.

I run to the places where I’m needed but I’ve ignored; the children who are overlooked, the mom who could use a phone call, the stranger I didn’t smile at, the family needing me to ask, “How can I help?”

I run toward the person whom I must forgive, toward the story I’ve got to write, toward the voice I’ve shoved down inside of me wanting to shout, “That is WRONG,” without worrying about popularity.

“You need to breathe. Calm down. Relax,” someone might say. But for me, running is relaxing. It’s where I find God.

“I hate running,” another friend says.

“I can’t run. My knees,” another says.

“Then don’t run,” I reply.

But seek that thing your body and mind must do to sift out the broken, jagged pieces of our world cutting and dragging you down. Sing or swim, pray or walk, write or paint or do downward dogs. Take a million photos. Dance the hula. Do something until you ache, until you taste your own salty sweat, until you touch your soft soul – free again.

As for me, when I’m sick or injured or when I’m really, really old – I’ll keep running, even if only in my mind. I’ll huff and puff and fight toward the bright, gorgeous hope waiting for me every day – if I run relentlessly toward it.

Amy Aves Challenger is an American expat and writer/artist living in Switzerland. Amy writes mostly about topics relating to the marginalized, families and nature. She contributes to The Huffington Post and has been published in The Washington Post, Mamelode.com and Braun, Child Magazine. Additionally, her poems and short story were published in an anthology by Kind of A Hurricane Press. Her poetry can be read on Twitter @amyaveshallenger and Instagram or connect with her on facebook.com/amyaveshallenger.

