

Witness to Reconciliation
Reconciliation and the Boston Marathon

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Reconciliation – I was torn when asked what example to share as I have been part of and worked on reconciliation in racial reconciliation in the United States, ethnicity in Kenya, and political faith in Northern Ireland. But to make my talk both personal and more generalizable, I decided to stick with my own journey in intrapersonal conflict and reconciliation I was asked to talk about – participating in the 2013 Boston Marathon. This experience I see as part of a grander narrative on identity in Christ, needed justice for all in our country and hope found in the perfect life metaphor of training for and running a marathon.

April 15, 2013 was a painful culmination to the start of my worst year as a long distance runner since I started in 2009. After a training season plagued by fatigue, burnout and persistent minor (but impeding) injuries, I ran the Boston marathon with an injured right knee and a devastated spirit shrouded in struggles with identity and disappointment. I had taken nearly three weeks off from running right before the marathon to try and let my knee heal, so had missed the sport I loved and was still in pain. And running a marathon with an injury I knew meant compounding pain and injury – and it did. My hope in that run was the finish line. I mean, I wanted to enjoy the experience as I had two years earlier in my first Boston marathon, but my pain, fear and impeded training predicted finishing itself would be the highlight of the race. And I had elatedly crossed the finish line in 2011 to amazing volunteers and a sense of accomplishment and growth that was physical, emotional and spiritual. Crossing that finish line last year was to be a redemption of my rough 4 months of running. It was to be a reconciliation of the hurt and disappointment with the possibility of renewal. And we had two more turns – run under the Massachusetts avenue underpass, turn right onto Hereford and left onto Boylston, and ride the elation of cheers and achievement across the finish line. It was half a mile away. And we were stopped.



Virginia with other stopped runners before the Massachusetts Avenue underpass – half a mile from the finish line

LEADING OFF

Confusion

■ Many of the 23,000 runners who started the marathon were not permitted to finish it; police stopped the field at an intersection not far from the finish line shortly after the blasts. Greg Meyer, the 1983 Boston champion, was running with his son Danny and did finish. "I told Danny, who was struggling the last three miles, 'Thank God you kept running.'" Meyer told the *Boston Herald*. "[We] would have been there right [at the finish line] about then."

Photograph by Yoon S. Byun / The Boston Globe / Getty Images

People died, people were injured, people’s souls were crushed. I started crying that day and it took over a month before I could stop. I cried for myself, for those injured or who lost loved ones, whose own wounds were real and persistent, and those whose wounded identities and souls led them to perpetrate such painful actions. For me, I was grappling with failure – real or perceived – physical pain, fear – all in a big mess of a weight that only quit threatening to drown me at St. Columbo’s Bay, Iona, Scotland. I left 2 ½ weeks after Boston to help lead a group of students on a Hope College May term course, “Conflict, Peace and Reconciliation in a Celtic Context – a reflective journey through Scotland, Ireland and Northern Ireland.” I was a 35 year old, married without children, marathon female – and prayed to find a new friend during our residence week on the Isle of Iona at a 600 year old abbey with fewer than 100 people. Then thought such a hope was ridiculous. But God knows what we need and I believe can place unexpected hopes in our hearts that He plans to fulfill. Wendy – a 35 year old, also childless, marathon runner from Northern Ireland was the only person in my generation on the island that week. And she was leading conversations on poverty, development and global interactions for us. Topics on which I teach and research. Wendy also had her marathon finish line stolen – in her case, by nature – she had trained in celebration of five years cancer free and her 35th birthday (one month after mine!) for the New York marathon in the fall of 2012. A marathon cancelled days before it was to be held due to the devastation of “superstorm” Sandy. We shared in words and in understandings beyond words the disappointment, the ensuing physical injuries (she had tapered and then ran a

marathon a few weeks later not quite ready for it and ended up with a knee injury), and the lessons that training for a marathon had brought us. We cried together and laughed together. And that was the real start to my own intrapersonal healing, peace and reconciliation. As part of the pilgrimage across the island we were on, we were to throw a stone representing a significant burden in our life into the Bay – releasing it symbolically to God. That conversation allowed me to throw a bulk of the weight into the lapping sea of St. Columbo’s Bay.



As I threw the heaviest, smoothest stone representing that pain into the Bay, God replaced it – again with hope – the uncertainty and pain were not entirely gone, but the hope of renewal was heavier. I had a renewed perspective. I had prayed in the same opening session in which I prayed for a new real friend about wanting to run again. My physical pain was still acute and I was deeply afraid I would

never heal – perhaps irrational – but I had faced so much physical and emotional pain...

After I had thrown my rock in the Bay, an amazing woman from the Netherlands – she was part of a Dutch group also doing a week residential at Iona – came up and began chatting a bit with me. You see, earlier in the week, after a healing service when I shared my injuries and my heart's desire to run free again...she had cried with me. Well, on the pilgrimage, she brought me a stone, black and rough on one side and shiny on the other (pain and beauty, loss and hope together) and said, "God is with you. You will run again." She told me she will be praying for me and our group. She was an amazing lady - even though I speak NO Dutch and her English was wonderful but a second language. It was a bond of the heart.



In a place dedicated to the pursuit and understanding of peace and reconciliation, God brought the largest steps towards my own reconciliation, forgiveness (of myself and others), and hope. It was on Iona that I learned that the Boston Athletic Association decided to let non-finishers from 2013 run again in 2014 – regardless of gaining a new qualifying time – something I did not think I could do given my injuries. Wendy was the first person I told – I ran across the island with the email on my phone, and thrust it in her hands when I found her – it was our last day there and we were getting ready to board the ferry back to the mainland. She read it, and silently tears sprang to her eyes and we embraced. God gave me someone to share that profound step with who would understand and even share the feelings I was experiencing.

So April 21, 2014, I will run the Boston Marathon again – a tangible, symbolic restoration will occur – and as I hit that last half mile and cross the finish line, I believe a circle of reconciliation will find a type of completion.

Reconciliation is a journey, a process, but also has times of completion and fulfillment.