

Community Mennonite Church of Lancaster
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Running as a Spiritual practice – Lori Bergey

I started running in junior high because I played field hockey and needed to get in shape. I really didn't enjoy it very much through junior high and high school but just ran because it was part of the sport. Pounding the pavement in the heat of summer on hilly country roads with tall cornfields blocking the breeze and being chased by German Shepherd dogs was not my idea of fun. However, I continued to run because I loved playing field hockey. If you would have told me 30-35 years ago that I would be talking in church today about running as a spiritual practice I would have told you that you were crazy.

In college I realized that running in the evening helped me stay focused for late night study sessions so I continued to run. Post college, I also ran but it was not a regular part of my routine. It was when I had children that I started to think about running in a new way. I found that when Sophie and Noah were young, running allowed me a quiet time to think. I craved that time of just being alone and quiet. From a young age I found it hard to sit still and pray or meditate. With running I found that the rhythm of my body moving allowed my mind to settle and it became life giving for me as a mom. I made me feel so much more grounded and also started to see running as a way to pray and meditate.

When I started to work full time after my children were in school I found I needed my running time more than ever. In between my full days at work and busy evenings I tried to squeeze in runs to create my sacred time. Today I continue to choose running. As I have gotten older, my focus has been more about being in the moment rather than my pace. I have run in 5Ks and even did a half marathon a couple of years ago with Lynn and some members of our small group but mostly I prefer to run alone.

Throughout the years I have found different practices to be helpful for me when I'm running. Sometimes I use a running meditation that Deb Kraybill shared with me. While I'm running I take time to notice how each part of my body is feeling as I move. This practice of focusing on my feet as they take each step, listening to my breathing, and paying attention to my arm movements is so helpful in calming my mind. I also pay attention to the different microclimates I am running through. The small change in temperatures and the smell of the environment around me can easily be missed if I don't focus on it. The smell of hot pavement and fresh mulch in the summer remind me how some smells become much stronger with heat of summer. The smell of spring blossoms and decomposing leaves keep me in tune with the change of each season. As my run transitions from pavement, to sidewalk to grass I pay attention to it and notice how it affects my running. On sunny winter days I love to watch the dazzling reflection of the sun on the small

shiny stones embedded in the sidewalk. The rays of light dance off of the sidewalk bringing warmth to my soul. Recently I have been thinking about the signs of new life as I watch snowdrops, crocuses and daffodils pushing through the earth, the yards are turning a bit greener and have even enjoyed watching the progress on a new house being built along my current route. It is this form of paying attention that brings me great gratitude.

I don't always just run in silence. Sometimes I need something to motivate me. A couple of years ago a friend and I talked about listening to music when we run. She said she listens to music so she doesn't think too much when she's running. I found this interesting because I count on this time of my day to some thinking even when listening to music. I do listen to music occasionally but more recently I have started listening to podcasts. My current podcasts for running have been ***On Being*** by Krista Tippett, ***The Robcast*** by Rob Bell and ***For the Love*** by Jen Hatmaker. I find these folks and their guests to be inspirational and bring grounding to me.

Being a teacher, my schedule is more flexible over the summer so I have more time to run. I usually use this time to add more miles to my runs. This past summer I started to really struggle with adding more miles. When I did really push myself, I was exhausted for the rest of the day. This just didn't seem right. I started to panic. What would I do if I can't run? Is that what happens as we age? How will I stay grounded without running? It took awhile to figure it out but finally I was tested and found out I was anemic. Once I realized that this was the issue, I stopped feeling bad about not running as much and just walked. This was a real relief to me. I found I could do all of the same practices I had been doing while running. I am happy to say that my iron levels have returned to the normal range and I am running again. I am glad I had the experience though because if I do need to stop running at some point, I know that I will be able to continue my spiritual practices in other ways.

My prayer for each of you is that you find a practice that grounds you.