Run For Your Life
The allegory of the marathon and reflections on the journey

BY: MICHAEL PATRICK DAVIDSON
Managing Director, JPMorgan Chase
TRIUM Global Executive MBA, Class of 2012
Fordham University, Class of 1994

It was November 2, 1997 at approximately 2 p.m. that I found myself running down Fifth Avenue in Harlem, just south of 125th Street; I was in pain and exhausted. Covered in sweat, the salty water from my brow was trickling down my face and I could taste the brine, as my bandana had done its job but was now saturated. As my legs pounded the pavement, aching from the day’s journey, the rains arrived, and they were torrential. Suddenly the road was flooded and with each step, water splashed everywhere as my clothes adhered to my body and my shoes felt and sounded like two sponges inhaling and exhaling water. As I plowed forward, repeatedly wiping the mixture of rain water and salt from my eyes, Central Park came into view and soon I entered at East 86th Street and was so very close to my destination. Both the rain and I continued to run while streams formed across the undulating roads in the Park. Onward I ran as I approached Central Park South, gazing through a cornucopia of umbrellas with the statuesque Plaza and parade of other hotels in the background. Now heading West, it all seemed blurry as the rain had stopped but I remained drenched. Approaching Columbus Circle, a right-turn back into the Park and now heading North along the bucolic and slightly inclined passage. I was now running as fast as I could to finish strong, ignoring the pain, trying not to slip on the slick pavement and then came an overwhelming wave of emotion as I crossed the colorfully painted roadway. It was Mile 26.2, I was 25 years old and had just completed my first marathon.

The New York Times headline the following day read as follows, “Neither Rain, Nor Fog, Nor Puddles, Nor Potholes Can Stop the Runners”. It was only ten months earlier that I was sitting in my apartment in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn on a winter’s day and decided that I needed a goal to kick-start the year ahead. Although I never enjoyed running nor was in any kind of condition, I thought that trying to get into the NYC Marathon, as well as the training and race itself, would be an intrepid endeavor, a great way to get in shape and likewise inspiring if I could pull it off. In the months ahead I was fortunate to gain a spot in the race via the lottery, which in those days involved standing in line in Central Park holding my application form and personal check for the fee, as the advent of online applications and payments was not yet conceived and as such, everything was manual. As for the journey on which I was about to embark, I had no idea how much of a role that running would play in my life, not just in 1997 but in every year since, which continues to this very day. In life, we are fortunate to find vocations, passions, talents and love that somehow collectively help to define us, if we trust our hearts, minds and intuition to pursue the things and people we should. For me, running marathons is one of those things that I stumbled upon and is akin to a classroom, that combined with the enormous preparation that is required, along with people I have met, travels I have charted and fundraising that my family

continued on page 2
The modern marathon commemorates the run of the soldier Pheidippides from a battlefield at the site of the town of Marathon to Athens, Greece in 490 BC, bringing news of the Greek victory over the Persians. Legend has it that Pheidippides delivered the momentous message "Νίκη" (victory) and his last words “Joy to You, We’ve Won”, only to then collapse and die, thereby setting quite an ominous precedent for marathon finishes.

When the modern Olympic games were inaugurated in 1896 with Greece playing host, the legend of Pheidippides was revived by a 24.85 mile (39.99 km) run from Marathon Bridge to Olympic Stadium in Athens. As an aside, in 2000 I completed this same course, which was my second marathon and a fundraiser for Epilepsy. Entering the stadium for the finish required a loop around the entire track and was indeed thrilling, although there were far less spectators than that which likely filled the venue in 1896.

Traditionally the final event in the Olympics, the first organized marathon on April 10, 1896 was especially important to the Greeks as this host nation had yet to win a medal. The United States was one of nine nations participating, thanks to sponsorship from the Boston Athletic Association. 25 runners assembled on Marathon Bridge, the starter proclaimed a few words, fired the gun and the race was on. “The excitement of the crowd waiting at the finish line in the newly constructed replica of the ancient Athens Stadium was beyond description”, wrote the Greek Historian Quercetani. Spiridon Louis, a Greek postal worker from the village of Marusi and veteran of several long military marches, crossed the finish line a full seven minutes ahead of the pack in 2:58. When it was all over, 9 runners finished, 8 of whom were Greek and the "modern day" marathon was born.

Planning for North America’s first marathon began between the runners returning on the ocean journey to the US, the first of which was the Boston Marathon conducted on April 19, 1897. This date was of course chosen to commemorate the famous ride of Paul Revere, warning of the advance of British forces to the American Colonists, “One if by land, two if by sea”. It was at the 1908 Olympic games in London that the marathon distance was changed to 26.2 miles (42.1 km), to cover the ground from Windsor Castle to White Clay Stadium, an additional 1.35 miles so that the race would finish in front of the Royal Family’s viewing box. Hence the phrase “God save the Queen”, proclaimed as runners passed the 24.85 mile marker. After sixteen years of apparently heated debate, the 26.2 mile distance was established at the 1924 Olympics in Paris as the official marathon distance, which stands to this very day.

The first NYC Marathon wasn’t organized until 1970 thanks to the leadership of Fred Lebow and Vince Chiappetta, was held entirely in Central Park and comprised a mere 127 runners including one woman. Only 55 runners finished and the winners were given wristwatches and recycled baseball and bowling trophies. Now the largest marathon in the world with ~55,000 participants, 40% of which are women, from all United States, 141 countries and including a wheelchair division, the marathon has become the single largest economic event of the year for NYC. Since 2006, ~$300 million has been raised for a spectrum of charities by NYC Marathon runners and the annual total has risen to ~$50 million.

Currently there are an estimated ~800 marathons annually all over the world and one can only imagine the total fundraising globally through the years that has fueled charities and causes large and small, consequent to organized running across a variety of distances, abilities and demographics, whether a Marathon, Half, 10K or even a Thanksgiving Day Turkey.

and friends have generously supported, has indeed molded who I am in 2020. The impetus for this essay is gratitude, for the lessons I’ve learned, values I have exercised and espouse, and despite the beating that running inflicts, and I am stronger in many ways as a result.

On June 24 and for only the second time in its 50 year history, the NYC Marathon was cancelled, as have been so many races and major sporting events across every region of the world as the grip of COVID-19 is proving more protracted than was expected, or hoped. It seems fitting to reflect on the ancient origins of the marathon for context and as we take a pause from these symbolic gatherings, with our sights set toward 2021 when these tests of endurance may once again resume and with appropriate fanfare.

History

The modern marathon commemorates the run of the soldier Pheidippides from a battlefield at the site of the town of Marathon to Athens, Greece
Trot. While running is core to human anthropology for survival, it has evolved to represent a striving to be healthy, fit, strong, connected to others and in so doing, raises funds and spirits for those among us whose challenges often transcend the abilities of modern medicine and technology. And more spiritually, running to honor those whose life on earth has passed and that our living of life to the fullest and staying in motion is in itself a fragile privilege and profound remembrance for those that ran and walked with us in life.

**Preparation**

Little did I know that in 2020 I would be reflecting on this day, now having completed 28 marathons across all 7 continents, especially considering that in 1997 I didn’t yet have my first passport nor any inclination to travel, but that changed in 1998 as part of what I now realize was an early personal renaissance in my life as in retrospect, I was truly shedding the skin of my childhood and adolescence into the person I was meant to be.

I vividly recall that my very first training runs in March 1997 were only a mile or two along the path that juxtaposes the Narrows of NYC Harbor from Bay Ridge to the Verrazzano Bridge. Those short runs in the cold spring air were extremely difficult and unpleasant, owing also to my level of physical fitness, or lack thereof. Yet the marathon itself was an anchor in my mind, even though I wasn’t sure I would ever push my body to this extent physically, my training began in April, which would give me a solid six months to prepare and ramp-up gradually. It was during the summer months of 1997 that my love affair with Central Park began as the six mile counter-clockwise perimeter loop became a mainstay of my regimen and by June I was up to ~12 mile runs and aiming for ~18 miles by September. It was sometime in late June that I sustained my first and only injury that I’ve ever had related to running, iliotibial band syndrome, affectionately known as “ITB”, which is essentially an overuse of the connective tissues along the outer thigh and knee. This condition was so painful that it stopped my training altogether and while I was in physical therapy for a month, I gained an even deeper respect for long distance running, and the importance of self-care and stretching. Much like life itself, flexibility of mind and body is increasingly vital to physical, mental and emotional health through the years, which I appreciate far more profoundly at age 48 than I could at 25. Akin to a tree that bends and sways in the wind or a structure that is engineered to allow for movement, flexibility in so many ways is vital for long-term survival and durability amid the literal and figurative storms of life. More intimately, our familial and romantic relationships depend on compromise, latitude and empathy to allow for each person to grow and evolve through the years. Lack of flexibility on the other hand renders broken branches, uprooting, cracks in the foundation shattered windows, emotional suffocation, break-ups and even divorce. Ever since those days sitting sidelong in physical therapy, stretching has been a core aspect of my marathon training, and I have been injury-free to this day. A testament to stretching and flexibility considering that a 26.2 mile marathon requires approximately 500 miles of training over the four months prior, I have logged ~14,000+ miles of training, 742.3 miles * of actual marathon distance since I began running in 1997 and excluding many non-training runs through the years. The irony is that while I seldom truly look forward to a run, especially the longer distances preceding the race, I have never regretted a run of any kind and always feel somehow better physically mentally and emotionally, whether following a 3 mile jog or a 20 mile circuit. It is worth stating that marathons do not become easier, the training cannot be abbreviated, I still feel extraordinary pain during and after a race and yet, the difference is that my physical recovery is faster in the days afterward due to stretching and core muscle memory and my overall mental endurance has become ever stronger through the years.

Having now traveled to forty-six countries, including six years living in Tokyo and London while navigating a 26 year career, flexibility, patience and humility are each manifestations of that which I practice in my life and have matured in a symbiotic way

* Including the Two Oceans Ultra in Cape Town - 34.9 miles, 2004

continued on page 4
with the mental and emotional stretching that marathons have likewise demanded. What is true in life and in running is that no matter how many years you've lived or races you've run, the practicing of these virtues never ends. For just as a muscle can atrophy from underuse or neglect, so can one's character if not continually honed by experience and nourished by our relationships.

**Purpose**

During those days in physical therapy I also watched others with various injuries and disabilities working hard to overcome their injury or condition, and it occurred to me that running a marathon was a privilege. It was this basic reflection that led me to create my first marathon fundraising campaign and after researching various organizations across NYC, I found Incarnation Children's Center (ICC). Since the first cases of AIDS were reported in 1981, HIV infection had grown to pandemic proportions affecting millions of people. In the mid-1980’s, large numbers of children with HIV/AIDS were abandoned, orphaned, or removed from their parents because of drug use, neglect or abuse. The foster care system was unable to find foster parents willing to care for all of these children. As a result, these “boader babies,” who had nowhere else to live, languished for months, even years in New York City’s hospital wards. In response to the needs of these children, ICC was created. In 1988, a four-story, red brick, former convent in upper Manhattan was converted into a homelike residence for twenty-four HIV positive children. ICC was dubbed "the Ellis Island" for homeless children with AIDS.

During the program’s first three years, two-thirds of New York City’s AIDS boarder babies were discharged from hospital wards to the home-like environment of ICC. By 1991, there was a surplus of foster parents for all but the sickest children. New York City’s “AIDS boarder baby crisis” had ended and ICC had played a pivotal role in this success story. ICC then turned its attention to the plight of those children with AIDS who were too sick to live at home, but not sick enough to require hospitalization. Having learned that very ill children often improved dramatically with proper nurturing and high-quality medical and nursing care, ICC pioneered the concept of comprehensive care for them by attending to psychosocial and mental health needs in addition to superb medical and nursing care. Many children, presumed terminally ill, improved clinically and returned to a home setting. For other children, ICC remained a sanctuary full of love.

When I first visited ICC in August 1997 I met Sister Bridget Kiniry, of the Dominican Sisters, who was the administrator and essentially, the mother-figure for the children and the home itself. In those days and considering the sickness these children were facing, I was warmly welcomed to meet and play with some of the children, hear their stories, tour the small facility and also peer into the intensive-care room, where tiny babies received special nursing, medicine and constant supervision. It was love at first sight and on the spot I knew that these were the beautiful people for whom I would raise much needed funds. I still have a copy of the type-written letter I sent to Sister Bridget on August 20, 1997 making my commitment and to this very day in 2020, she remains a dear friend.

When I announced the campaign to my colleagues at Morgan Stanley, Hines Interests, Tishman Speyer and the myriad of people with whom I worked in the real estate industry, the response was overwhelming. At the time, I was the Property Manager at 750 Seventh Avenue and in two short months, contributions arrived from senior leaders, building tenants, engineers, security guards, vendors and even the porters and matrons at the building who organized their own collection and gave me an envelope filled with each person’s name and contribution diligently listed, and I still have the envelope.

It was Mid-November after the marathon and I made arrangements to visit Sister Bridget to give her the money I had collected. I had not been to ICC since August and all she knew was that I was a nice young man raising money for the center and as such, her expectations were understandably tempered. When I arrived, Sister and I
sat for a few minutes and I excitedly handed her a large manila envelope filled with a motley assortment of checks, cash and coins that amounted to $26,653. Needless to say, she was amazed and all she could express with a big hug and kiss was “Thank God”, as contributions like that didn’t just walk in every day and certainly not from a 25 year old.

That feeling of giving, of making a difference, of purpose was so palpable, that combining fundraising and marathon running has remained a constant through the years. Aside from other fundraisers connected to various marathon adventures, since 1997 I have run the NYC Marathon eleven times, each for a different charity, in my training and fundraising for Ovarian Cancer that began in February will continue nonetheless in preparation for the 2021 NYC Marathon, which will also be the 50th Anniversary of the race itself.

Each person has a purpose in running a marathon, whether for a cause that has impacted their lives, honoring a loved one that has passed or survived a disease, a physical disability or perhaps something private, to tackle a challenge that is equally difficult and meaningful. I once stood at the NYC finish line wrapped in a foil blanket for two hours after my race completion, watching the other runners arrive. It was dark, cold and windy that late afternoon and the runners coming in had been out there for at least 6 hours, battling the elements along with pain and exhaustion. In their faces you could see such a range of emotion and in one notable instance a large man well over 6 feet tall with a build similar to a football player was with his partner, a much smaller female - He was openly weeping and she was as stoic and poised as a field general as they crossed the finish line holding hands, then sharing a long-awaited hug and what was surely a very salty kiss.

Time

I don’t often talk at length about marathon running and this is the first time I’ve ever written or expressed much of what is in this essay, but when someone does enquire, among the first questions they ask is, “What was your best time?” Interestingly, running for time has never been a goal and my pace has remained more or less consistent with minor fluctuations based on how I’m feeling that day, in the moment or amid the conditions in which I find myself. Of course, each race is timed and as such to answer the question, my fastest completion of a marathon is in a place that few would imagine that a marathon is even organized. It was a hot sunny day in 2003 on Rapa Nui (Easter Island) far into the Pacific Ocean, that I completed the marathon in 3:48. I credit this time to the course, conditions and how I felt that day, surprisingly strong after the many hours of travel to arrive at this, the most remote inhabited island in the world. Amid many trails, the island has a ~13 mile winding paved road which connects two of its shores and makes the course fairly intuitive amid the volcanic landscape. The island was drastically deforested through the centuries to support the once thriving population and construction in the hundreds of the mysterious Moai, which to this day serve as sentinels of protection, peace and symbols of the Island’s culture and ancestral spirit. I recall that in the last few miles of the race and having been in the direct sun for several hours, I gazed across at the Moai who were among the only spectators for this event, praying that my heart wouldn’t give up as I could feel it pounding in my chest. Minutes later I crossed the finish line and stood gazing out to the ocean, listening to the waves crashing on those rocky shores, just breathing, stretching and grateful, with only the sight of water and soaring seabirds in every direction.

A second primary question that often follows is “What was your hardest and/or longest race?”, for which there are two answers that bring us to two very different corners of the world.

In 2005 across the Drake Passage on King George Island in Antarctica I completed what was more akin to a 26.2 mile eco-challenge in 5:25. The course itself included two loops around the island, up and down a glacier, past a science research station, through

Adélie Penguin Feeding
Photo Credit: Davidson - Antarctica, 2005

continued on page 6
snow, ice, water and mud, and with penguins frolicking in the distance. Among the most challenging aspects of the race was that because I was running for so long, my clothes were soaked and it became extremely cold as the temperatures dropped into the 20's(F) toward late afternoon, which made the zodiac shuttle back to the ship far more urgent when I finished. As you might imagine, the weather in this part of the world is tempestuous and ever-changing, to the extent that some travelers on past trips of this kind, were not allowed to venture to the island or were evacuated before the race could finish due to the wind and seas thus, I was fortunate in 2005.

In 2017 on the remote island of Madagascar I ran what I would consider the hardest race I have experienced and accordingly it took me 5:30 to finish. What made it extraordinarily difficult and also exhilarating, was the terrain which took me through fields of tall grasses, waist deep water, ankle deep mud, winding rocky trails through villages, children herding cattle and long open roads with very little shade. It was very hot, well into the 80s(F) and although I had water on my back and there were a few stations along the way, dehydration was a real risk, and this is the only race whereby the organizers rode ATVs to monitor runners who may be suffering from heat-stroke, especially in the latter miles. There were moments that with no water with me or in sight, nor any other runners that I could see in any direction, the psychological challenge became as present as the physical, along with the sheer isolation.

If you wonder how I manage to find these races organized in far-flung corners of the world, in 2002 I had the good fortune of discovering Marathon Tours & Travel based out of Boston. Thom Gilligan founded the company in 1979 and was on the leading edge of an idea to organize marathon-based adventures to both major cities as well as exotic locales all over the world, in many cases working closely with local peoples to create the event for years in advance. Despite the name, traveling with Marathon Tours goes far beyond running a marathon or a half, 10K or 5K, which are distances often included for spouses, children and fellow travelers who may not be able to complete a “full”, but want to participate. In fact, other than race day, these trips are very well-organized vacations to explore local habitats, wildlife, culture, cuisine and as such, provide access to amazing experiences that can even make the marathon seem like an accessory to the adventure itself. I also believe that a holiday is not only about location but as importantly, the variety of people that surround you on the journey offering new voices, ideas and companionship, often revealing kindred spirits. Traveling with Marathon Tours has fulfilled this hope on each of the eight trips I have taken through the years, acknowledging both the caliber of the kind, flexible and highly competent people that organize and guide these journeys on their team, as well as fellow runners, travelers and curious souls from disparate parts of the world who by sharing their life stories, teach you a little about your own.

My entire disposition toward running has never been a race against others, but rather a race with myself to do the very best I can regardless of time, which I accept with a whole heart at the completion of each marathon. In fact in some races, and especially in NYC, I relish stops along the way to drink water, catch my breath and enjoy watching the other runners passing by, each of whom is running their own personal race. In this way, the marathon is a microcosm of life itself with a myriad of people of all genders, races, ages and demographics, side-by-side from start to finish, all striving to achieve a shared goal. Victory and the spectrum of challenges that each person faces during a marathon or in life, whether physical, mental or emotional are as unique as a fingerprint and as such it is important to run your race, not get caught-up in the races of others nor the spiral of comparison which can encumber your spirit. Focus on your journey, revel and gain energy from the success of others and be the same source of inspiration in return.

Time is perhaps the most precious resource and yet no person truly knows how much they possess before it runs-out. We often make assumptions
that our lives will last until some measure of old age and defer hopes and dreams that we should pursue in the present. As John Lennon wrote, “Life is what happens when you’re busy making other plans.” And indeed life should not be rushed or urged to pass quickly so that we can move onto the next thing or used to overthink the past. Rather, we must use the time we have to maximize the experience itself and relish the moment, because what is the past but a series of present moments that passed and the future, present moments to come. It seems somehow apropos that this reckoning has arisen for me amid years of running races. Although seemingly defined by arriving at a destination as quickly as possible, the marathon has actually been a fountainhead for what has been a long life-lesson in patience, fortitude and being present, touching every part of my life.

Mindfulness
“Do You Meditate?” For years my response to this question was that this was not something I practiced, or was able to for that matter, as I thought that meditation required sitting perfectly still as the mind was liberated to find its natural place of rest and thought in the present and explore the mystical reaches of one’s subconscious. Yet I realized at some point while running those many thousands of miles, that I had been meditating for years - thinking, sensing, feeling, allowing my mind to find its own stillness and energy, only while my body itself was in motion. Interestingly, although I have often listened to all varieties of music while running, I find that I do my best, most consistent and methodical runs in silence, only hearing and feeling the rhythm of my breathing and focusing on inhaling and exhaling, mindful and completely absorbed in the present and ironically, the more fluid the motion of my body, the more still my mind and thoughts become. The results of this practice for so many years is manifested in how I articulate myself in the workplace, personally with friends, family and people I love, on a broad range of topics. As I sometimes reflect, I’ve done an enormous amount of thinking and synthesizing of disparate thoughts, that have rendered fairly well-developed points of view and feelings about people, places and things, such that the words are often at the ready when they need to be spoken. Long distance running is also a silent solitary endeavor for me and I suppose it has made me quite comfortable remaining silent when listening to others, a skill that I very much enjoy exercising. I’ve found that you learn a lot by listening and that when you rise to speak, your words become much more impactful to those that are hopefully listening to you.

Culture
When people come together to do virtually anything in an organized way, culture is not far behind. Whether in relation to a country, community, faith, ideology, demographic, company, hobby, music or sport, that which binds people around a shared interest, activity or endeavor is a culture that incorporates a code of ethic, often nuanced rules of etiquette and an energy that is not easily defined yet palpably felt. Having shared time with many thousands of runners through the years, some who became friends and most who were crowded together at a starting line early in the morning and speaking a variety of languages or side-by-side for miles, the culture that permeates running on various levels is a primary reason why it remains such a core aspect of my life.

There is an inherent humility that dominates the psyche of a runner as each step is an opportunity for injury whether the pull of a muscle, roll of an ankle or temper tantrum from any number of tendons and ligaments that work in unison as our legs and feet rise and fall over and over again on a variety of surfaces and facing a spectrum of conditions. The runner can only go as far as the body and mind will take them and there are no short-cuts. This basic universal disposition and shared attribute manifests an extraordinary bond, often unspoken, between runners and can be as subtle as a wave and nod on a random training run, sharing insights and experiences with fellow runners on the eve of a race, stopping to help, console or run alongside an injured runner who was only
moments prior a stranger, yet then may become a friend. Even water and aid stations have basic etiquette among runners who, in the midst of a race, exercise patience, courtesy and grace for each other, as well as the beautiful selfless souls who volunteer to organize and operate these stations, quickly providing provisions while voicing encouragement and a smile. Whether from a garden hose stretched to the roadside or a bottle Poland Spring, aid stations in a marathon are timely reminders that self-care and sustenance throughout the race are vital to increase the odds that completion is possible. If a runner waits too long to hydrate or re-fuel, the body has its own forms of protest and in many cases can end the race altogether for that person. Like life, how we care for ourselves along the way and especially in the first half of life, has a direct correlation on the quality and duration of life in latter years.

Dehydration in a marathon is akin to burn-out in life and if we allow either to emerge, it is much harder to recover than if we had prevented them from the start. Among my golden rules, hydrate before you’re thirsty, take a vacation before crisis and always make sure your tank has the fuel you need for the journey.

I would be remiss not to mention the countless spectators that provide much needed emotional fuel for runners the world over and what a difference that can make in a race. I have run many miles alone in remote places whereby the only support may come from a fellow runner passing by, children herding animals or people watching curiously from the entrance to their homes in a tribal village. What I have learned running global marathons is that a single human being that offers a smile, a clap of the hands, a shout or laughter can propel my spirit for miles ahead, all of which transcends language. Conversely, many of the larger marathons have so many people along the route that the emotion can be overwhelming and brings you to tears, especially in New York City since this is my home. I am fortunate to have family and friends that are there each year along the route in their favorite viewing spots, now equipped with the marathon tracking app, and whose presence means as much to me today as it did in 1997.

In terms of the ultimate confluence of cultures, NYC’s sheer breadth and depth of diversity is certainly manifested by the cohort of ~55,000 runners each year as well as the distinct landscape, sights and sounds found in each borough and neighborhood, many of which strive to put on quite a performance. I have often reflected that marathon day is the greatest of the year in NYC because everyone is literally and figuratively juxtaposed, energetically cheering the runners regardless of race, color, creed, age, love, politics, ability - All for one and one for all, a moving albeit fleeting symbol of what coexistence could resemble in so many other spheres of our lives.