

I've been listening to a lot of music lately by a group called Florence and the Machine. It is a band that I find appealing because their lyrics present a creative blend of God, the World, and Wisdom. It is also a band that my middle school students really think is groovy. The following is an excerpt from their song, "No light, No light:"

No light, no light in your bright blue eyes
I never knew daylight could be so violent
A revelation in the light of day
You can choose what stays and what fades away
And I'd do anything to make you stay

For whatever reason, these lyrics kept rewinding through my head each time things got a little rough during Saturday's Holiday Lake 50K. Let's revisit the events of the day.

Running has not been easy for me the last three years. Since my clot in 2009, I have been on a steadily increasing regimen of Coumadin, a blood thinner. This medicine not only reduces the number of platelets and makes my blood less "sticky," but it also reduces the number of red blood cells, leaves me fatigued, and makes my legs oh so stiff. I spent most of last year being tested to see if I had any number of muscular, neurological, or auto-immune issues. Finally, in October 2011, my hematologist presented me with new data that told me everything I was experiencing was normal for long term Coumadin patients. Great! However, that revelation did open my eyes to a very blatant reality that it was entirely my choice of how to handle this issue.

So, I decided to just ignore it and run through the discomfort. I ran 100 miles in October as a fundraiser for my cross country teams in 16:00. I paced the Richmond Marathon 3:45 group. I ran the very hilly Turkey Trot 10K in 40:00. I finished third at the Willis River 50K in 4:43 (a personal best on that course by over 19 minutes). It wasn't that I was in better shape; I was just dealing with the inevitable discomfort in a more positive manner. I was both embracing and attacking the pain.

2012 is going to be a big year for me. First, I am doing the Beast series. Second, I am running a 60K race in New Zealand in December as part of an educational grant I received last year; I am also visiting all The Lord of The Rings' sites on the South island and doing a virtual unit with my middle school English classes at Swift Creek Middle School while on location.

Now, back to the day. I had entered the Beast series on Friday, Feb. 11 partly to get it done and partly to make sure I did not wimp out on Saturday morning for some reason. I also set numerous alarm clocks since I have a history of being either right on time or a touch late to some of Horton's ultras. Everything went as planned. I was up on time and out the door by 4am. My drive was uneventful, and I arrived at the 4-H camp by 5:25. I checked in, exchanged some greetings with friends, and retired to my car for some chill time.

The weather and conditions were perfect – no great debate over clothes, shoes, or hydration options. I suited up with all my Brooks gear since I am a member of their ID (Inspire Daily) corps and headed to the start line.

I saw many old familiar faces in the crowd. I was amazed at how many people were lined up to start this event. I reflected briefly at how "popular" ultrarunning has become over the past few years. I wondered if I should have brought my iPod. Then the race started.

I wanted to run both strong and gentle. Strong, meaning that I maintained focus. Gentle, meaning that I was light on my feet. The race started out perfectly up the paved road. I was tentative and safe on the first trail sections despite my super bright headlamp. I kept silently wishing that the sun would rise just a touch bit faster.

The first aid station came and went without incident. I ate some candy and drank some Mountain Dew. The second aid station was suddenly before me. I was running the kind of race, so far, that seems to just float by. I was feeling marvelous. I was in a calm place with no cares of place, time, or who went past or fell behind.

Normally, at Holiday Lake, I start to get annoyed with the trail between miles 12-16. I curse the slant of trail, mumble about the rocks, and dread the short, but brutal rises. But this year, things were different. I just kept running along, drinking water from my Nathan pack and eating my gels.

I approached the turnaround, but refused to look at my watch. I did not want to let myself off the hook and start playing the mental game of “I still have this much time . . .” or “I can still break such and such a time if I . . .” I just kept moving.

The stiffness was waiting for me by the lake. Perhaps it had hidden between the rocks or just a little further up the hill. The same thing happened last year, and I just gave in to a slower pace. This year needed to be different. I forced myself to keep moving at a pace that embraced the pain and stiffness. I suffered through my issues and then reached the first aid station on the return loop. The soda tasted so sublime. It is certainly weird how I can, at times, enjoy cold soda so much.

The stiffness was still with me. I knew I was getting slower, but I pushed on. The halfway point came and went. I started to pick up the pace a bit, but I would not let myself look at my watch. I reached the last aid station, drank some soda, and kept running. I vowed to myself that I would not back off or slow down just because it was uncomfortable. I just kept running.

Usually, this last section seems to take forever, but the miles just flew by. I was aching and stiff, but I was deliberately ignoring the distraction. I kept repeating the lines “You can choose what stays and what fades away.” You truly do have control over what guides your actions. The pain and stiffness is inevitable. I might as well as make the most of it. I pushed through the final mile. As I approached the finish line, I was shocked – 4:35ish. Not only was this a Holiday Lake personal best, but it was also a trail 50K personal record.

2012 was my ninth Holiday Lake 50K++ finish. I’ve run in the snow, the mud, and the cold. I always love this race. I am actually looking forward to the rest of the races in the Beast series instead of looking at them as something I either have to do and can do. I had a great time this year – so much so, that the number of runners who still don’t know the rules of the trail didn’t really bother me. I just chalked that fact up to the sheer number of participants.

As a final comment, I found great joy in the pain and adversity. I felt alive with the pride I felt at having such a strong and gentle race. Terrapin awaits me, and I am stoked at the challenge.

Christopher Calfee