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WRT 102 - 04

Self-Help Versus Self-Improvement

Throughout my life, I have been enamored with the idea of becoming a better person. Unfortunately, I've had few ideas on how I would do so, or exactly what "becoming a better person" meant. When I was in high school, being young and fairly naive, I assumed that some day I would get up and begin the magical process of making myself a better human being. To a teenager who didn't think very highly of himself, the idea was very seductive. Now, having spent three years of high school track attempting that process, I can safely say that learning to accept and work around my personal flaws was far more worthwhile than trying to get rid of them.

By the time I had entered Forest Hills High School, I'd already been living with some flaws for years. One of the first I'd hoped to improve was my physical stature and appearance. I was uncoordinated, skinny, weak, and slow in comparison to most other boys. The next was my remarkable ability to make stupid, costly mistakes, despite being smart enough to avoid them. The third, which probably bothered me the most, was my social awkwardness. At the age of fifteen I was much better at dealing with homework and projects than I was at dealing with people. Joining the track team was an attempt to tackle the first problem, and I think that I subconsciously believed that the other two would fix themselves after I got stronger.

As far as making myself stronger was concerned, the first year of track went well. By the end of my sophomore year, I had gone from not being able to finish a one-mile warm-up to being able to run five miles nonstop. I was still socially awkward and I could still be incredibly stupid, but the combination of sheer exhaustion and regular adrenaline highs made those problems easier

to ignore. Having fixed one problem and successfully been able to disregard the other two, I felt proud of what I had accomplished. I truly believed that I had made myself a "better" person. It was an incredible feeling, and I wanted to continue running track forever.

As it turns out, the term "adrenaline high" was a more apt description of track than I'd realized. The pride I'd felt in both being able to run and running often eventually wore off, and I realized just how much running hurt. Practices for track were two hours long each, and the team practiced five days a week, to say nothing of the weekend races. While I could physically manage that workload, I also had to keep up my grades. Since I was in an Honors program and taking a number of AP courses, this was not particularly easy. I kept throwing as much effort as I could into both, becoming more exhausted, more stressed, and more sleep-deprived as time passed. By March of my junior year, I had started to break down both physically and mentally. After injuries to my shins, ankle and toe put me out of commission for most of the month, I had time to evaluate how I had been treating the endeavor and what I had gained from it.

The resulting conclusions were not pleasant to contemplate. After some thought over the course of a few weeks, I realized that I'd failed to change myself into a "better" person in all three of the ways I thought mattered. I was still physically outclassed by almost every other experienced runner on the team, and I was still socially awkward and stupid. I had made progress on all three fronts, to the point that I was told at least once that I'd become a different person. As I soon realized, however, I hadn't really cared about becoming a better person in the proper sense. Going into my sophomore year, I had wanted to become "better" as in "better than everyone else" - an idealized, perfect person who had none of the flaws with which every human being is born. As if that wasn't enough, I also wanted to be acknowledged as stronger and faster

than everyone else. Doing better simply wasn't enough. I wanted to both be "better" than anyone else and for everybody else to acknowledge that, even though I realized on some level that it wasn't exactly an admirable goal. The well-adjusted among us would quickly point out that that was impossible; I was still adjusting.

The realization stung. By the start of my senior year, I still hadn't fully recovered from my literal or metaphorical wounds. Running with the team was not as fun as it had been for me as a sophomore - each practice was painful, and I kept asking myself why I was still there. I spent a lot of time thinking about the reason, and it was something that I would never have expected two years prior: I had been named captain of the team in my senior year. I had almost stopped caring about how well I did as a runner, but that didn't mean that I had stopped caring about my teammates. The extra work I did to help them (bringing extra food, explaining workouts, giving directions to races) got far more results than the attempts I'd made to become a teenaged Charles Atlas, and I reasoned that if I couldn't win races for the team, I could at least help make a race-winning team.

Funnily enough, I did a better job as team captain of addressing my problems than as a competitor running for the team. Part of the job was simply being available for my teammates, which also meant practicing the social skills I didn't know I had. While I wasn't any less awkward in conversation, talking to them taught me how to get to the point without sacrificing vital information (which my frequent Facebook posts could attest to). Another large part of being captain was making plans and ensuring that things ran smoothly. While that didn't make me better at avoiding mistakes (or at preventing my teammates from making them), it was invaluable in teaching me how to plan ahead. Leaving for a race without a teammate, for

example, was far less catastrophic if I'd already posted directions on Facebook. As for being slower and weaker than everyone else, it quickly became irrelevant when I became captain. Being faster or slower didn't affect how well I could help my team, and by that point in time, helping the team meant more than anything else. Not thinking about my perceived physical inadequacies constantly did wonders for me, and helped me eventually stop caring so much about them.

After spending a few months as the captain, I had finally addressed all of the flaws that had bothered me so much, with one exception - I hadn't satisfied my ego. Just as I had changed focus to suit the needs of the team, my ego had shifted its focus away from my running. I still wanted to be acknowledged as better than everyone else, and if my athleticism wasn't relevant anymore, then I wanted praise for something else. It was arguably the worst and most persistent of my personality traits, and as much as I hated my ego, I couldn't simply will it away. As such, I had to learn to live with it, and to let my pride swell every once in awhile. My teammates were an incredible help, whether they knew they were helping or not. From the little praises (such as "Thank you, Ben," "Ben, you're awesome," or even "Love you, Ben") to the grand gestures (in one case, a standing ovation and an award), their appreciation went a long way in finally quieting my ego.

Learning how to live with my flaws took up a huge amount of time, and before I knew it, the end of my senior year had come around. With it came a mix of contentment and peace - while I wasn't extremely proud of myself, I didn't feel inadequate or pathetic. I knew that I was still in some ways weak, absent-minded, and awkward, but I also knew that I had done my job and that I had done it well. I knew that I could be useful to others in spite of what I lacked, and

as long as that was true, I didn't mind being a bit imperfect. The team had finished the season at fourth in Queens, and I had been a part of that. In the end, none of my flaws had mattered, as long as I knew what they were and how to work around them.