

Discovering Voice is a Marathon

Any number of people love sports, athletics, training, and physical exertion, but think that there really isn't any connection to writing, especially expressive writing. However, this couldn't be further from the truth, because the voice inside us can relate anything that we learn in the body, regardless of what state of mind we're in. It's difficult, but you're used to it, right?

Speaking about endurance sports, multi-marathoner Mark Goodsell said, "We don't really know what we are made of, because we seldom attempt to find out." He goes on to say, "The human body will only go so far, the governor will say it's time to stop, and as you push through that you are requiring the spiritual aspects, mental, emotional, or whatever you want to call them, to step in and kind of override the physical discomfort that you are feeling" (Goodsell).

One of my students, also a marathoner, said about this moment, "When you reach the point that your body wants to stop, you draw on something else, some other part of you. It is no longer the physical aspect of the being, it is something beyond the physical, something that many never find or discover. It is only at a point of physical exhaustion that this inner part of you is drawn upon to step up and speak out." While he has a point, I'm not sure it's the *only* way.

Goodsell's main idea is that "what we're made of" is "seldom" found. But if it could only be found through extreme physical exertion, wouldn't that seem a little unfair for the disabled, children, and the elderly? I believe that any situation, in which "the spiritual, mental, emotional aspects" are called upon, the truth about what we're made of is made clearer.

I suggest that the "whatever" that Goodsell refers to may be a combination of all those aspects. Writing teacher Peter Elbow said that inside each of us is a "spiritual-mental-characterological condition," in other words, a "true self" that consists of the "stuff we're made of." In a difficult time, when we speak the truth as it seems right in that moment, a real voice can emerge. This voice requires no review, no hesitation, and no practice runs. Your real voice tells it like it is.

I'm not suggesting that writing a heart-wrenching piece of work is just the same as winning a football game, or running an endurance race. However, if you are an athlete, I would ask you to look for moments of clarity in your life's race and open yourself to writing about them. As my student said, at your "point of... exhaustion when this inner part of you is drawn upon to step up and speak out," allow it to do so. Whether it is physical, emotional, spiritual, social, or any other trial, allow your voice to step in and speak to you of the truthfulness of your situation.

Coaches have long realized that discipline and sacrifice can help athletes to attain success not only on the field, but also in their personal lives, because the principles are exactly the same. As you draw on your real voice, think about Coach Vince Lombardi's counsel: "Perfection is not attainable, but if we chase perfection we can catch excellence. The price of that success is hard work, dedication to the job at hand, and the determination that whether we win or lose, we have applied the best of ourselves to the task at hand." May you find the best in yourself.