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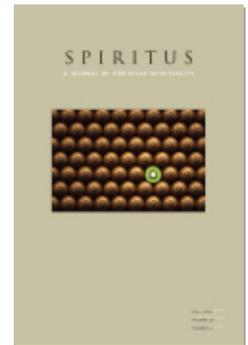
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## The Ascetic Life of the Ultrarunner

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# The Ascetic Life of the Ultrarunner

MIRIAM DÍAZ-GILBERT

## INTRODUCTION

The early Christian ascetic body. The modern-day ultrarunner body. What kinship do they share? This personal narrative explores the similarities between the two and how the ascetics' treatment of the body resonates with my spiritual ritual as an ultrarunner.

The early Christian ascetic experienced a demanding and difficult life of self-discipline, self-denial, prayer, fasting, repentance, and celibacy. The goal of the ascetic life was spiritual development, spiritual edification, and uniting body and soul with God.<sup>1</sup> Paul introduced the practice of asceticism to Christianity by using athletic terms that emphasized the “self-sacrifice, discipline, and self-control” required in living as a purposeful and unwavering Christian.<sup>2</sup> Christian ascetics such as Antony of Egypt, Evagrius Ponticus, Francis of Assisi, Catherine of Siena, and Teresa of Avila, among others, are often described as athletes. As an ultrarunner, I draw strength and inspiration from their example and recognize our bodily connection. Today's ultrarunners are literal ascetic athletes who engage in extreme, meaningful bodily experiences and practices very similar to the ascetics. Ultrarunning has a distinct spiritual dimension that lends itself to solitude and reflection, and is a kind of embodied spiritual practice that I call “ultrarunning spirituality.”

Ultrarunning is defined as running any distance beyond the standard 26.2-mile marathon. The most common are 50 and 100 miles, and 50 and 100 kilometers (31 and 62 miles). Six-hour, 12-hour, 24-hour, 48-hour, and multi-day races of five or more days are also ultramarathons,<sup>3</sup> referred to as “ultras” or endurance runs. For the uninitiated, the thought of running a standard 26.2-mile marathon, let alone an ultramarathon, is unimaginable. This sentiment is understandable. As a young girl watching the Olympics, I was in complete awe of marathoners who ran 26.2 miles. They appeared to have super powers and to be superhuman. Now, as an adult, I have evolved from a marathoner to an ultra-endurance runner, and have experienced the exhilarating suffering and joy of this chosen path.

Achieving the feat of running such grueling distances requires discipline, training, and a love of exercise. These key words: discipline, training, and exercise define asceticism (taken from the Greek word *askesis*). The Greek, Latin, and Semitic roots of these words have historically been used to interpret the language of Christian discourse including “asceticism,” which is used to refer to athletic training and physical discipline, and to describe spiritual endeavor.<sup>4</sup>

### **ASCETIC PRACTICES OF ANTONY, FRANCIS, CATHERINE, AND TERESA**

The connection between my ultrarunning body and the early Christian ascetic body is considered by first exploring a brief overview of the early ascetic life. When I think of Antony, Evagrius, and the Desert Fathers and Mothers, I think of ultrarunners as a different kind of athlete. In his review of the ultrarunning documentary *Desert Runners*, scholar William Viney writes, “I watched the film with an ultrarunner on each side...spent the whole film with a lump in my throat, thinking, mostly of St. Antony and early Christian monasticism. I wondered if anyone else thought the same. Probably not.”<sup>5</sup> Viney is not alone. I too imagine our desert ancestors when I read about and watch ultrarunning documentaries, which take place in deserts throughout the world. Journalist Ken Chitwood observes that, “running is a new form of religious asceticism complete with its own ascetics, disciplines, literature, fellowship, shrines, meditative practices, proselyting, prophets and priests.”<sup>6</sup> I also think of the medieval ascetics that followed such as Francis, Catherine, and Teresa, and feel a strong kinship with them when engaged in similar bodily practices required to train and run ultras.

Like ultrarunners, ascetics are a rare kind. Antony and Evagrius fled the world for a desert life. Antony lived the ascetic life in a cave; Evagrius lived in a monastery searching for God and desiring to be with God. They renounced family, friends, and the material world. Centuries later, Francis, confused and uncertain about the direction of his life, also fled his world and family after hearing God’s voice beckon, “Francis repair my church.”<sup>7</sup> He devoted his life to imitating Jesus Christ through fasting, prayer, and embracing the discarded and the lepers. He practiced extreme asceticism and self-denial to imitate Christ. At age six, Catherine saw a vision of Christ, and her subsequent imitation of Christ and ascetic practice resembled that of Francis. The highly-educated Teresa joined the monastic life and subjected her body to, perhaps, less extreme asceticism in emulating Christ’s suffering. In my experience, the body and what we do to it is the common denominator that joins the ascetics and ultrarunners.

Characteristics shared include the grueling physical pain and suffering the ascetic and ultrarunner voluntarily endure. Ascetics bravely and patiently sustained self-imposed pain and suffering. What we know about Antony’s life

comes mostly from his biographer Athanasius. In *The Life of St. Antony*, Athanasius writes that Antony began his ascetic life by imitating a hermit in the desert, not returning to his home, working with his hands, sharing his bread with the poor, and praying unceasingly. He fasted, slept on the ground in a cave, and obeyed the Word of God. He never bathed and rarely washed his feet.<sup>8</sup> For Antony, living as an ascetic was a matter of improving and transforming his body, and making it more spiritual and less material. In one of his sayings, Antony, who suffered and endured discipline to see God and lived until age 105, advised his monks to "...suffer hunger, [and] thirst..."<sup>9</sup>

Evagrius also did without food. His biographer Palladius writes, "At the end of nearly eight years of keeping a stringent regimen of ascetic practice... he managed to damage his bowels...As for fruit or anything else that gives the body pleasure, he did not eat them."<sup>10</sup> Evagrius dedicated himself to a regimen that consisted of eating once a day, and when he did eat, his food intake was very limited. He refrained from eating vegetables, fruit, and meat. This diet led to an intestinal tract disorder common among ascetics. He limited his sleep to a third of the night and the rest of his waking hours he devoted to prayer, Scripture, and contemplation. Evagrius stayed awake during the day and slept no more than four hours during the night. He resisted sleep by walking in the monastery courtyard during the night, praying, and meditating.<sup>11</sup>

Francis also treated his body in an unthinkable manner. His first hagiographer, Thomas of Celano, observed that Francis, "rarely or hardly ever ate cooked foods, but if he did he sprinkled them with ashes or dampened the flavor of spices with cold water...[and] he would not allow himself to drink even water when he was burning with thirst."<sup>12</sup> He traveled barefoot and willingly endured pain and suffering. According to his second biographer Bonaventure, Francis disciplined himself to live on the brink of starvation, mortified his body and sought coldness, hardness, and displeasure.<sup>13</sup> Francis treated his body "like an ass" and forced himself to "hard labor, protests had to be chastised with a whip, and had to be made content with a frugal diet."<sup>14</sup>

Catherine began fasting as a young girl. Her biographer Raymond Capua writes, "During the whole time I had the privilege of being witness to her life, she took no food and no drink that was capable of sustaining her, and this she supported, however, joyously, even when undergoing sufferings and extraordinary fatigue."<sup>15</sup> Catherine's other extreme ascetical practices included wearing only wool. Blood dripped from her body after flagellating herself with an iron chain for an hour and a half three times a day. She slept as little as half an hour every two days on a wooden board.<sup>16</sup> Catherine refused herself food, water and sleep, and endured flagellation and self-starvation. Her austerities and ascetical practices were exceedingly punishing.

The suffering of the Desert Fathers resonated with Teresa. She writes: “Let us remember our holy Fathers of the past, the hermits, whose life we attempt to imitate. What sufferings they bore, what solitude, cold [thirst], and hunger, what burning sun and heat!”<sup>17</sup> Teresa engaged in severe penitential practices. She wore *cilicios* (belts with metal barbs worn under her clothes) and applied nettles to infected sores.<sup>18</sup> However, unlike the Desert Fathers and Francis, Teresa appeared more sensible regarding fasting and sleep. In her autobiography *The Life*, Teresa writes, “It wouldn’t be good for weak and sickly people to take up much fasting and harsh penance and go off to desert places where they could neither sleep, nor have anything to eat...”<sup>19</sup> Teresa suffered other bodily pain most of her life. She endured many illnesses and disabilities including catalepsy, paralysis, fevers, stomach problems, fainting spells, heart pain, nerve pain, seizures, and a broken arm.<sup>20</sup> Teresa writes, “You can’t exaggerate or describe the way in which God wounds the soul and the extreme pain this wound produces...yet this pain is so delightful that there is no other pleasure in life that gives greater happiness.”<sup>21</sup> Of her pain and suffering, Teresa writes, “...I suffered all those years...with great gladness...I was very conformed to the will of God...”<sup>22</sup> Gail Corrington observes that Teresa “regarded her sufferings as a source of happiness.”<sup>23</sup> Catherine also embraced suffering and pain. She tells her confessor Raymond, “For my happiness I have chosen pain...besides I enjoy it.”<sup>24</sup>

Just as the sufferings of the desert ascetics resonate with Teresa, the sufferings of the Christian ascetics resonate with me. Hunger, thirst, measured food and water, sleep deprivation, stomach problems, and blood dripping from the body are also common among ultrarunners. While suffering perceived as a source of happiness may sound like an oxymoron, to the ascetic and ultrarunner, suffering is natural. As in Christian asceticism, suffering is ordinary and unremarkable in ultrarunning. Ascetics willingly endured thirst, hunger, and sleep deprivation. These hardships are also experienced by ultrarunners, in addition to bearing the solitude, cold, and burning sun.

### **THE SUFFERING ULTRARUNNING BODY**

The ultrarunning body undergoes severe physical pain and bodily injury. In training and running exhausting distances, parts of my body chafe. I push through blisters, at times blood-filled ones, and frequently lose toenails. The toenails become infected from running in rain, flooded creeks and trails, and tiptoeing down rocky mountain terrain and switchbacks. I trip, fall, and tumble on tree roots, protruding rocks, and large boulders. I bang my knees, arms, hands, elbows, and shoulders, and have landed hard on my head. My body bleeds and sweats. Sometimes running gear such as compression leg sleeves cause irritating blisters on my legs and ankles especially on a scorching

hot day. The heat also triggers raised red bumps on my arms, legs, and chest. My body is dotted with these painless bumps. I dry-heave. I vomit. My reward is soaking my beaten feet and toes in an ice bath in the still cold night after my fifty-fifth mile. The freezing ice bath reinvigorates me, resurrects my dead feet and fatigued legs, and gives my body and mind new life so I can keep moving. When I savor these few minutes to soak my feet in the ice bath prepared by my also sleep-deprived husband, I think of Francis. To defeat any sexual temptation, he “would immerse himself in a ditch filled in winter with ice, remaining in it until every seduction of the flesh went away.”<sup>25</sup> Runners are also known to immerse their entire body in an ice bath to help reduce inflammation after a race.

The ultrarunning body endures sleep deprivation; the mind endures diminished cognitive functioning. Sleep deprived, I am unable to think and my speech becomes slurred. In this state, I cannot calculate numbers or remember how many miles I have covered. I also sleep walk in the dark, and to stay awake, I pray. I have seen and heard illusions in my delirium. Typically, at about mile 65 of a 100-mile or 24-hour ultra, my eyelids begin to close over my weary eyes as my whipped body and tired feet shuffle to the beam of the headlamp strapped around my head. Sometimes a full moon lights my path. From the time the 30-hour limit clock starts until my broken, tired, and sore body gently hits the bed at the refuge of a local motel or home, I will have endured 40 hours without sleep. Remarkably, research suggests that sleep deprivation in ultrarunning is beneficial. A study of a group of ultrarunners who ran the excruciating mountain Tor des Geants, 336 kilometers (200 miles), withstanding seven days and 150 hours at an altitude of 2,400 meters (7,874 feet) in the Italian Alps, found that runners who are sleep deprived during longer distances and hours experience less muscle fatigue and, therefore, can go on longer.<sup>26</sup> Again, I think of the Desert Fathers. Evagrius advised his monks, “Bear gladly with sleep deprivation and sleeping on the floor and all the other austerities by looking forward to the future glory to be revealed to you....” Evagrius cited Scripture: “The sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to you (Romans 8:18).”<sup>27</sup> This is a verse I meditate on when sleep deprived in the darkness of night knowing that my suffering will joyously come to an end at the finish line.

I have also tolerated thirst until the next aid station or until I see my crew, my family, waiting to offer me bodily nourishment in the form of Pepsi, coconut water, plain water, a salty potato, a piece of bagel, a banana. During stretches of solitary miles, I ration what few nuts or M&Ms I have in my running pouch. At times, even though my body needs calories for fuel, the thought of food is nauseating and revolting. In this sense, I fast during ultras and take in only the calories my body can endure.



Feet Immersed in Ice Water; Toes Wrapped in Duct Tape © 2018 Miriam Diaz-Gilbert



Ultrarunning Toes © 2018 Miriam Diaz-Gilbert

I have run urban, trail, and mountain ultras in the freezing cold, punishing scorching heat, and suffocating humidity. I sprint through cold torrential rain, pelting hail, heavy winds, lightening, and thunder. When I think of what I subject my body to in the physical act of running these punishing distances, I recall Simeon Stylite. Simeon practiced “the mortification of standing continually upright so long as his limbs would sustain him...” His physical body consisted of “ulcerated feet, a tumorous thigh infected with worms, a dislocated spine, and so on.”<sup>28</sup> Simeon’s suffering gives me renewed strength to stay the course. I think of Catherine and Teresa too who found joy and happiness in the suffering their body endured. These ascetics, and Christ, are there to accompany me in my anguish and inspire me to embrace the joyful discomfort.

### **ASCETICS AND ULTRARUNNERS: DEFYING THEIR LIMITS**

Some might view the manner in which Christian ascetics treated their bodies then and the way ultrarunners treat their bodies in the present day as disturbing. According to the 2015 Ultra Marathon Statistics website, as of October 2015, there are more than 500,000 ultrarunners representing 170 nations worldwide.<sup>29</sup> I am one of them. I am an ordinary ultramarathoner. I am not a world-class elite ultrarunner. Like Christian ascetics, who might make us “shudder at...the strange and reckless lifestyles to which these pioneers of religious life committed themselves,”<sup>30</sup> modern-day ultrarunners are often seen as foolish. Perplexed by ultrarunners, some describe them as narcissistic, masochistic, and obsessive.<sup>31</sup> Francis’ asceticism, observes Donald Spoto, might leave some asking if Francis might have suffered from mental illness and have been psychologically unstable.<sup>32</sup> Such extreme and literal imitation of Christ today is considered “impossible and frankly undesirable.”<sup>33</sup> Contemporary readers might view ascetical practices as a sign of mental illness; however, to those who knew them, nothing could be further from the truth. Capua compares Catherine’s asceticism with the asceticism of Antony and other desert fathers.<sup>34</sup> By today’s standards, Catherine’s behavior may be viewed as “pathological,” and fasting comparable to anorexia and bulimia, or “holy anorexia.”<sup>35</sup> Robert Kiely sees it differently. He relates Catherine’s treatment of her body to modern athletes who are willing to discipline their bodies even to the point of death:

If Catherine’s treatment (mistreatment) of her body seems difficult to understand in the 21st century, it might be worth thinking of the contemporary athletes and dancers, among others, who “sculpt” their bodies by means of diet, weights, and steroids in order to achieve what they regard as an end worthy of discipline and sacrifice and even the risk of death.<sup>36</sup>

In many respects, how ultrarunners treat their bodies is analogous to that of ascetics. Ultrarunners experience a variety of injuries, from minor to severe

and potentially life-threatening.<sup>37</sup> Ultrarunners are contemporary athletes who discipline the body. While ultrarunners do not train or run to the point of death, some have died while on the course. In the 2010 Gobi Desert Ultra in China, an ultrarunner collapsed and died from heatstroke.<sup>38</sup> The same year another runner suffered permanent brain damage after becoming dehydrated and experiencing hyponatremia in an ultra event in the Sahara Desert in Egypt.<sup>39</sup> In 2013, a runner fell to his death after falling and hitting his head in the dark during the Tor des Geants 336 kilometers (200-mile) mountain ultra in the Italian Alps.<sup>40</sup> While training in desert heat in August 2012, a runner died of heat stroke while on a six-mile solo run in Death Valley, California in 123-degree heat as he prepared for the Badwater 135.<sup>41</sup> This behavior and drive may seem self-destructive. Conversely, Corrington contends that Catherine's asceticism and fasting were not "self-destructive" but "self-liberating" and a "triumph of the will over bodily limitations."<sup>42</sup> I can attest to this and believe ultrarunning helps me triumph over my bodily weakness.

In July 2014, I ran the Montour 24-hour Trail Ultra. Five months earlier in February, I fell and fractured my left humerus while shoveling snow. I was in pain for four weeks. I had been training for the NJ 100-mile Trail Ultra in March. Within days of the fall and with my arm in a sling, I slowly walked my training miles, albeit reduced. Nevertheless, I followed through with participating in the NJ 100-miler. Parts of the trail were wet and covered with snow and ice. With my arm in a sling and the aid of a hiking pole, I gingerly walked one 10-mile loop. It was Lent so I prayed the Rosary along the way. By the end of April, I had completed my physical therapy which enabled my fracture to heal. I began training to run the 2014 Montour 24-hour Ultra. I managed to complete 68 miles placing fourth in the women's division but fell short of my best, 83.3 miles reached at the previous 24-hour ultra where I placed third. I returned to Montour in 2015 with very painful plantar fasciitis in my right heel. At this ultra, I took two bloody tumbles, tripping over a small rock protruding from the ground and landing hard on the right side of my head and body. Blood oozed from my head, shoulder, and knee. I fell again after stumbling on massive tree roots and scuffed my left knee. Incredibly, I managed to run the first 40 miles and walked the final 22 withstanding great pain. Altogether, I completed a 100 kilometers (62 miles) and placed tenth overall among the women living up to the race T-shirt slogan: "Defy your limits."

During a recent 24-hour ultra event, I encountered a fellow runner who was pushing a running stroller. I inquired about it to which the runner shared how he had experienced a brain injury while cutting down a tree limb that fell on his head and consequently spent weeks in intensive care. The stroller helps him remain steady on his feet. Another runner in the 12-hour event was pushing a stroller at a snail's pace as he shuffled his feet and struggled to maintain

his balance on the wet course. I learned he had cancer and amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS). The diminished physical capacity of both runners did not stop them from participating. In fact, in a way it compelled them forward. They embody what ultrarunners are willing to subject their body to, even when medically and physically limited. Ultrarunners, like ascetics, defy their limits.

Christian ascetics and ultrarunners subject their bodies to extremes in different forms and to varying degrees. As athletes, ultrarunners similarly subject themselves to a certain measure of self-denial. Kallistos Ware writes, “Asceticism...leads us to self-mastery and enables us to fulfill the purpose that we have set for ourselves, whatever that may be. A certain measure of ascetic self-denial is thus a necessary element in all that we undertake, whether in athletics or in politics, in scholarly research or in prayer.”<sup>43</sup> I suspect Ware could easily see the association between the ultrarunner body and the ascetic body. Both leave many who do not subscribe to either lifestyle to wonder why they do what they do. Regardless, many are also inspired by their lives. Orthodox Christianity and Desert Fathers scholar John Chryssavgis writes, “It’s hard to imagine imitating the behaviour and ideals of the early Desert Mothers and Fathers, though one can discover in these occasionally eccentric ascetics a genuine source of inspiration.”<sup>44</sup> Social anthropologist Peter N. Jones describes ultrarunners as “a semi-obscure and incomprehensible group of athletes who run upwards of 100 miles merely for a belt buckle (the customary trophy) [and] along a semi-marked course through rain, snow, sleet, hail, wind and sunshine over hills, rivers, valleys and mountains and various other sundry terrain in an attempt to complete the ‘course’ within the allotted time...”<sup>45</sup> Despite the incomprehensibility of ultrarunning, what the body endures continues to inspire and fascinate others. For instance, researchers have discovered that the fatigue and strength of ultrarunners “can be seen as a test bed for ideas on how some people can manage to perform physical feats at which others can only marvel.”<sup>46</sup>

Ultrarunners share some of the same experiences evident in Christian asceticism in the sense that they exercise, train and discipline the body and the mind, subject both mind and body beyond the limit, and find themselves in the midst of silence while running. Although runners, myself included, do not desire to live on the brink of starvation, we do practice some degree of body mortification, such as minimal food and hydration for long periods of time, and we embrace hardship and displeasure. Common words to describe ultrarunners include masochistic, sadistic, extremist, freak, selfish, over-indulger, super-human, and just plain nuts. While ultrarunners would disagree with those terms, I think a more befitting expression is ascetic because we engage in a life committed to *askesis*, that is, to training, discipline, and exercise, and as a result push both mind and body beyond the limit.

For the greater majority of ultrarunners who survive injuries, the beating and trauma the body and mind endure, and who finish the race, the body is able to bounce back. Research shows that successfully completing an ultrarunning event requires both physical and mental abilities and that ultrarunners have an extraordinary ability to be resilient and recuperate. Although ultrarunners endure sleep deprivation and their muscles, joints, tendons and digestive organs take their toll, ultrarunners possess an extraordinary ability to recover. They are able to go beyond their physical capacities.<sup>47</sup>

## **ULTRARUNNING SPIRITUALITY**

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Ultrarunners run for a variety of reasons. These reasons include love of nature and personal challenge. For some, a life-changing experience, trauma, or loss is the impetus for running ultras. Others trade in one addiction, such as smoking, drugs, and alcohol for another. Yet others run these grueling distances in pursuit of solitude, spirituality, and an escape from a chaotic world. I identify with the latter reasons. I choose not to smoke, ingest drugs (not even legal ones as I have nine drug allergies), or consume alcohol, not even socially. I receive a minute drop of wine during Holy Communion. Communion with God is a major reason I run ultramarathons. I feel closest to God when I run these long distances. Equally, communion with God and the search for God is a major reason early ancient ascetics renounced the chaos of their world and fled to the desert, monasteries, and convents.

This personal narrative contends that ultrarunners are running ascetics who practice what I call “ultrarunning spirituality” in a sport that lends itself to solitude, reflection, and spirituality. Unlike any other sport, the landscape and the solitary hours and days spent in the physical act of ultrarunning affords ultrarunners the opportunity to think about what they are doing and to experience a unique spirituality. In a study of ultrarunners at the Western States 100-mile Trail Ultra, runners expressed this attitude. One stated, “What a fantastic thing God has given me, the privilege of doing many, many miles. It’s just God, and the mountains, and me.” Another stated, “Instead of a mantra, I say the Rosary; it’s easy to do with a Catholic background.” The study also shows that ultrarunners reflect on spiritual and existential questions including God, nature, the meaning of life, and sing and pray during ultra events.<sup>48</sup> In another study, an ultrarunner said, “running allows us...to be as spiritual as we can because we are out there and we’re suffering and maybe that is what it is to be closer to God.”<sup>49</sup> What these runners share reverberates with me. I, too, pray and feel closest to God when running arduous ultras.

Ultrarunners engage in “running asceticism” to challenge themselves, to be free, to leave the world temporarily, to be one with nature, and to be near God. Ultrarunners and ascetics are solitaires that spend a significant amount

of time in physical and spiritual darkness, and in solitude. Both journey to harsh and inhospitable environments. The life of an ultrarunner and an ascetic requires endurance, perseverance, and patience to approach the finish line and to find God. They share a spiritual challenge.

## CONCLUSION

The lives of extreme runners and ascetics such as Antony, Evagrius, Francis, Catherine, and Teresa, are difficult to explain and comprehend. Although most of us would not imitate the practices of ascetics, my experience suggests that today's ultrarunners are "ascetic athletes" who defy their limits and engage the body in practices that parallel early Christian asceticism. In particular, the suffering of the Christian ascetics resonates with me. Both willingly practice self-denial, abandon comforts, and subject their mind and body to pain, suffering, privation, mental and physical fatigue, and sleep deprivation. They voluntarily leave the world: ascetics for a lifetime, ultrarunners for the duration of an ultra event. One distinct difference, however, is that ultrarunners do not leave or renounce their families and friends. Family and friends are essential to helping make the ultrarunning life attainable. Without my husband, daughter, and son, who serve as my crew and pacers, this experience of "ultrarunning spirituality" would not be possible.

After completing a series of marathons, I began training for my first 50-mile ultra. Almost 13 years later, I trained for and ran my 21st ultra run and my fourth 100-mile ultra event. I have learned the importance of training and disciplining my body. I know the physical, mental, and spiritual strength required to persevere the suffering encountered during the long miles in the heat of the day, cold darkness, downpours, thunder, and lightening. I embrace it, and am aware of the encouragement, hope, and strength that comes from praying along the silence of the punishing trail, and from my family and God who accompany me in the suffering caused by blood blisters, loose toe nails, a beaten body, injury, delirium, and being lost on the course. Even though ultrarunning is a solitary sport, when I run an urban ultra or a trail ultra in the mountains and in the woods, through meadows, up hills, down switchbacks and through creeks, I am not alone. I feel God's presence. I converse with Christ and am strengthened by his suffering. And Antony, Evagrius, Francis, Catherine, and Teresa fortify me. They were not crazy, and neither am I, or my fellow ultrarunners.

While modern day ultrarunners are not ascetics in the traditional sense, they engage in a kind of "running asceticism" which parallels characteristics found in ascetical practices. We share a kindred spirit and experience. Ultrarunners, like Christian ascetics, are solitaires in a sport where there is little to no talking, that invites danger, embraces self-denial, teaches patience and



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humility, provides solitude, and bestows joy. This “ultrarunning spirituality” comes in the form of a disciplined and suffering body, and time communing with God and with the saintly ascetics.

I close with a prayer I discovered years ago. I carry it in my running pouch, along with Scripture passages and my rosary as spiritual gear for every race.

**THE ULTRA RUNNER’S PRAYER**

*Carolyn Eardman and Jay Hodde*

Lord,  
Watch over me today as I run.  
I have paid the price to run this race  
through the summer heat, the winter winds,  
up those hills.  
There are other days and other races,  
but this is the day and this is the time for this race.

Lord,  
Watch over my body.  
Keep it from injury.  
As I run, may the tiredness and the pain be the symbol  
of victory and not the reason for defeat.  
May I acknowledge my limitations,  
but not accept less than my potential.

Lord,  
Watch over my mind.  
May I be intelligent as I run.  
May I listen to the signals from within  
as I enjoy the scenes from without.  
Keep me from foolishness at the start  
so that I can finish with wisdom at the end.

Lord,  
Watch over my spirit.  
As time passes and my commitment  
dims and blurs, may the inner resources that  
You gave me come forward and give me the  
resolve to press onward.

Lord,  
 Watch over my competitors.  
 As they face the physical, mental, emotional and  
 spiritual challenges we all face, may they find the  
 peace and strength that I have found through You.  
 Remind them that we all are struggling equally  
 and that their personal victory is a result of Your guidance.

Lord,  
 Watch over the trails and mountains.  
 As they seek to challenge me, may they also offer  
 havens of comfort and shelter from storms.  
 Please allow me to seek out that shelter and give me  
 time to enjoy the boundless beauty they possess.  
 Let the mountains offer me a test and a challenge  
 but also a passage through which I may safely pass.  
 As I continue to press to the summit, may the trail  
 lead me where You want me to go.

Lord,  
 Let me win.  
 Not by coming in ahead of my friends,  
 but by beating myself.  
 Let it be an inner win. A battle won over me.  
 May I say at the end,  
 I have fought a good fight,  
 I have finished the race,  
 I have kept the faith.

## NOTES

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