

At Fifty-nine

Paul A. Tenney

I WAS READING THE OTHER EVENING from an old and friendly book by the late George Sheehan entitled *Running and Being: The Total Experience*, published in 1978 by Simon and Schuster of New York. This was from the pen of a former New Jersey cardiologist who decided to join the ranks of the fit somewhere after his fortieth birthday, but I think he was well into his mid-forties before starting out.

As I pulled the book from a high shelf, I found that it was covered with a fine layer of desert dust. Apparently, it had been some time since it had last been read. I had always enjoyed Sheehan's thoughts, his quotes. This was especially true during highly intense business years of heading banks on the west coast. I found then that Sheehan was a beacon of calmness, a point of reference for me, that the world was not entirely mad—particularly during a demanding final business stretch. And though not a runner, but rather an old, somewhat dedicated bicyclist, I nonetheless found myself moved by Sheehan to get away from the office, now and again, to ride in the late afternoons under a canopy of sheltering trees in the East San Francisco Bay area where we then lived.

Sheehan became, through a series of weekly newspaper columns, a major running "guru" to whom many looked, not only for answers to their questions and ailments, but for the way he quietly slipped into the athletic mainstream as an oft-quoted spiritual advisor to the rest of us. Only James Fixx during that period came close to Sheehan's insightful commentaries on one's physical-spiritual well-being while sweating.

Unfortunately, Fixx died at fifty-two while jogging near his home, the result of a faulty diet and heart disease. But Sheehan passed away after a long and highly reported battle with cancer, a disease that eventually took him down as he neared seventy-five, when he was no longer able to run or write.

An example of Sheehan's thoughts may be found in a 1984 column published in a national running magazine, written ten years before his death and before prostate cancer was detected. At that time Sheehan observed:

I have found that tranquility begins about 20 to 30 minutes into the run. It takes that much time to detach myself from a preoccupation with my body, and from dwelling on the cares and concerns that filled my mind before I suited up to run.

By a half-hour, my body is on its own—competent, relaxed, virtuoso—and I am off into my head. From then on, I am likely to have sudden and varied insights that illuminate whatever I am thinking. At no other time does my mind move so swiftly and in such varied ways. ... Our finest hours are during those easy, comfortable miles on the road. When we take to the road, we place ourselves in a setting that fosters our art—which is no less than the self we make and the life we live.¹

That evening I leafed through Sheehan's book while my wife corrected first grade school papers. Her mother, eighty-five, sat beside her, a bright afghan about her legs, her thin shoulders bent over her latest book, now tipped to catch the most light. My mother-in-law is a marvel. She has continued to pore over thick religious biographies of LDS church leaders borrowed from our library.

I would stop now and again to reread thoughtful passages which Sheehan had written years before. I was immediately taken with one essay in which he described his age at the time, fifty-nine to be exact.

Turning to my wife to make sure there was a pause in her papers, I read to her:

I am now fifty-nine years old, which is an awkward age to define. At fifty-nine, I am no longer middle-aged. I have, after all, no 118-year-old elders among my acquaintances. Yet I could hardly be called elderly.

An awkward age, then, to define, but a delightful one to live. I am aging from the neck up. Which means I am elderly enough to have attained a look of wisdom; middle-aged enough to have a body that allows me to do what I want; and a face that lets me get away with it.

You know that look. My hair is short and graying, the face is just skin and bones, the general impression of an ascetic who began the fight with the Devil in the garden, decided it wasn't worth it and walked away. ... But fifty-nine leaves quite a bit of time to go. Years that could be as exciting as any that have gone before. ... From where I sit the fifties look great, and I suspect the sixties will be even better (186, 188).

I looked up, chuckled, and reread part of this last passage to my wife who had by now a lap full of school materials, the floor around her covered. "Listen to this; this is great," I continued. She kindly heeded my request, but then I don't think she was overly impressed with what Sheehan had to say about our common age.

1. In *Runner's World*, Apr. 1984, 127B.

I have thought often of what Sheehan had to say regarding his long runs on his noon hour, and then finding impressions and inspirations that seemed to roll through his mind while out pounding the asphalt. His "feelings of oneness with the universe" really do sound good, including such thoughts as, "We feel in our bones that we seek something beyond words, beyond the efforts of our own intellect."² He would then turn to Wordsworth, Yeats, Housman, Mozart, or even quote Robert Frost or Thomas Aquinas for a moment of guidance.

I find his search of his spiritual longings on the road most interesting: "What we have is a very special place for our mental and spiritual life. It comes with easy running, at a pace that frees the mind to create and the spirit to soar."³

An article which appeared in the religion section of a Salt Lake City newspaper in the fall of 1994 caught my interest in my ongoing concern for fitness and the spiritual helps that might be attached. The newspaper described a local stake patriarch and how he sought his own personal inspiration and guidance for his blessings by climbing in the nearby mountains before each blessing.

For Lagerberg, the mountains represent a prime place to ready himself for the spiritual promptings he believes patriarchs are so dependent upon. "I go up to the mountains for most every blessing I give. ... After four or five hours of work and sweat, you have overcome yourself. When you finally have reached the top, you see God's beautiful creation, his handiwork. There are no disturbances whatsoever. You can feel his presence in the beauty of nature and you come as close to the Lord as you possibly can in this earthly life. The veil between here and the spirit work is very thin."

It is usually in conjunction with this experience that Lagerberg senses the promptings—his "personal revelation from the Lord"—that form the blessings.⁴

From this, a recipient of such a blessing would later state, "He is one of the few people I've ever known who is at peace with all the elements of his life. He is a man of spirituality and wisdom."⁵

Over the years I too have been a devoted follower of a regular exercise plan even in my current calling as stake patriarch. For me, it has helped augment feelings of well-being and to relieve general stress from everyday life. As one eighty-two year old stated, "My life is so changed that I am miserable if I am not able to get my five to ten miles in every

2. In *Runner's World*, Aug. 1988, 14.

3. In *ibid.*, Apr. 1984, 127B.

4. Peter Scarlet, "Mountain Tops Bring Peace, Inspiration to LDS Patriarch," *Salt Lake Tribune*, 19 Nov. 1994, C-1, C-2.

5. *Ibid.*, C-2.

day. My health has never been better. I have a new zest for living."⁶ I too have often felt that way.

However, for me, the spiritual illumination has not readily been found on the open road. Maybe it is the on-going need while riding a very light and very quick racing bike for continual vigilance in traffic. Possibly it is the need to ride, as it were, "heads-up" as one swerves past ever lurking pot-holes in the road or tries to outrace the semi-wild, unkempt dog up that last hill—or could it be that it is just the desire to arrive home safely and in one piece that prevents one's mind from lingering too long on many intangibles.

But beyond relieving tension, chasing away the cobwebs, or satisfying my on-going need for personal fitness, exercise simply doesn't move far beyond the elements that Sheehan and Lagerberg seek. Oh, it is true that I complete some of my letters and essays while out pedaling on a deserted road, and, yes, I have had answers come to me that I have wanted. But I'm just not sure I can push it much beyond that.

For me, at least, it is the regular visits to an aged widow whose husband has left her in tattered financial straits, or weekly visits to a fellow quorum member now in the last debilitating stages of cancer. It is in the quiet dignity of the home he built that we discuss a previous priesthood lesson or the material covered in a Sunday school lesson he missed. Often we hold hands as we kneel and petition the Lord for guidance and assurance for him and his family. Those hours are sweet indeed.

I did share the article on Patriarch Lagerberg with another patriarch whom I have come to know and admire, who also works in the temple. While he thanked me for sharing the article with him, I think we agreed that the very reason we both work and worship in the temple is for the inspiration which the Lord has promised. We dearly seek for the magnification of our callings and for that sweet spirit to assist us in our blessings. While exercise and sweat have their place in fitness and good health, I believe there is something beyond that. There is the thoughtful element of grace, that wonderful "enabling power" which will be given. I treasure Jacob's succinct statement: "It is by his grace, and his great condescensions ... that we have power to do these things" (4:7).

As we stood together conversing about the news article in a temple hallway, dressed in our white suits before our next assignment, there seemed to flow over us the unspoken thought that each of us, alone, needs to find those spiritual answers that will bless others—no matter the personal form they might take. So Patriarch Lagerberg could well be right—at least for him.

I am always amazed at what church members perceive and say about

6. In *The Runner*, May 1985.

the office of patriarch. The time needed for carrying out the calling has come to amaze me. If not had on an open road, or a mountain top, it must be had at some other time. One simple statement in the scriptures clarifies all other questions, at least for me: "Draw near unto me and I will draw near unto you; seek me diligently and ye shall find me. ... And if your eye be single to my glory, your whole bodies shall be filled with light" (D&C 88:63, 67).

My eighty-five-year-old mother-in-law lives with us now. I care for her, watch over her, buy the things she enjoys, see that her meals are on time, and in the late afternoon take her on short slow walks, weather permitting. It is a quiet part of our day together. Often winter weather is mild enough so that the rest of the nation is envious of our location and high pressure weather patterns. These are the times when coats and caution are left at home.

She takes my arm as we move slowly out of the driveway and down the road. We move at a pace that she enjoys and can observe the surroundings. A wave of her other arm in a wide loop signifies an approaching, all-inclusive statement she is about to make, generally about the weather or the desert setting. Or we may walk for quite a bit without speaking. It's a good time together, but years have passed for her. She has grown frail, her frame thin, her snowy white hair well cared for. Her hair often catches the low sunlight on our walks which causes a bright celestial halo effect about her head. It is almost as if she were trying on a new future head piece with which I am not familiar. She has moved under the lonely burden of widowhood for nearly three decades.

On cold days, when the wind is strong and moving in from the south and west, I dress her in the thickness of a good hiking jacket and pull down over her head and ears the soft warmth of an inviting Icelandic stocking cap. She is unable or unwilling to zip the jacket. I reach over to do that for her. On better days, to ward off wind or the slanting rays of a late sun, she wears the green university baseball cap my daughter gave me several years ago. She pauses for a moment at the mirror before stepping out and laughs at her new hat. Maybe her hair is not as she would like, but for now she is "roughing it."

"How do I look?" she asks herself stopping to check, always with a short chuckle. For the next little bit she never releases her grip on my arm. She opens the door, moves through it, and talks lightly of the weather, the day, or the wind, moving her other arm in stately loops. Her walk is unsteady, and often she shuffles, her tennis shoes tripping over absolutely nothing on the road. But for her, this is part of her day, as the sun lingers deep in the western sky, it is her time, her exercise and thought on the road. A time of well-being. Of thinking and commenting on an anticipated storm rolling in from the Pacific. It is her time to be out,

to acknowledge the winds from Cajon Pass or the snow atop the nearby San Gabriel Mountains. Her voice is soft, her comments float in the afternoon wind, unheard.

The quest for physical and spiritual well-being continues in the world that Sheehan described at age fifty-nine. But as one thoughtful observer noted:

The deepest insights in both science and religion are associated with symmetries or relationships that remain unchanged through transformation. Indeed, it is my belief that the great truths of God, man and the universe are associated with the fundamental symmetries of nature. It is likely that these symmetries are innate with us and a sensitivity to them can lead us to creative insight.

God gives to every man an environment in which he can achieve greatness or ignominy no matter what kind of circumstances he finds himself in. God also gave us knowledge. And to us in this dispensation he has given far more than has ever been possessed by any other people on the face of the earth. ... I suggest the reason for our failure is that we don't make full use of the knowledge and powers he has given us.⁷

After learning of his malignancy, Sheehan came to some realizations which he shared when he wrote in 1987, "My life has been filled with the best of me. What it has not been filled with is the best of others."⁸

7. John H. Gardner, "Learning by the Golden Rule," *BYU Today*, Dec. 1982, 17-21.

8. In *Runner's World*, Mar. 1995, 18.