“Rich in Sunny Hours”

In uncertain economic times, running offers a store of wealth

by Jack Crager

The message was swift as a news flash and sharp as a skewer. “The new budget just came in,” my boss told me grimly, “and we’re going to have to lay you off.” With that, as 2008 faded, more than a decade of security at a magazine editing job came to an abrupt end.

It wasn’t a total shock; the parent corporation had been squeezing down even before the economic crisis kicked in, and everyone in the building seemed nervous. I knew I was far from alone, with layoffs rampant in the publishing world, the city of New York, the nation. I realized that my story had a silver lining: My wife’s job is stable (knock wood) and provides health insurance for our family. My young daughter’s reaction was, “Now I get to spend more time with Daddy!” (She’s right.)

I got a decent severance and a break from the workaday grind. I felt scared but strangely liberated—free to reinvent myself professionally and personally—and I quickly chose to hang out a shingle as a freelance journalist. Still, in my mid-40s, I faced old questions anew: Who am I? Where am I going? Where do I want to end up?

No doubt about one thing: I am a runner.

And that's no small comfort. Distance running has always kept me sane and steady, like a trusted friend, and so long as my body accepts the bumps and jolts, it always will. Back in high school, running became a source of identity, a private refuge from teenage society, a means for a gangly kid to be accepted as a jock (albeit an odd one). In college, running was an antidote to academic stress and a way to make friends. As the years went on, with competitive sparks renewed, NYRR racing times became badges of honor—"I'm still within a minute of my high-school mile!" "I qualified for the Boston Marathon!"—although I knew that these boasts paled in comparison to the painful journeys they represented; that the real reward is a reckoning with one's own athletic threshold, however grand or humble. "Sport is," Dr. George Sheehan pointed out, "where a person can suffer and die and rise again on six miles of trails through a New York City park."

Jack Crager, a resident of the Upper West Side, has been a member of NYRR since 1999.

This truth is both tough and wonderful, even—especially—in these uncertain times, when job security is fleeting and all financial bets are off. Other New York–area runners concur. "The economic situation seems so drastic that no one knows what will happen next, even now," says Elias Hernandez, 29, a private-banking officer who was laid off in the fall of 2008 and turned to running for solace, sometimes with friends in the Brooklyn Road Runners Club. "After an avalanche of bad news, I thought, 'Everything's so out of control that I might as well look for the things that I can control in my life—that I can find joy and comfort in.' And running was that. I felt I could go out to the park and put in a few miles and forget about everything and get back home recharged. It made everything seem much more tolerable."

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—Kelly Chin

After searching for several months, Hernandez found a new job at Royal Bank of Canada. "When you go through an experience that adds a lot of uncertainty, you find that, wow, running can have a very positive impact," he says.

Even those who haven't lost jobs have experienced extra stress. "Last year there was a lot of turmoil at work," says Kelly Chin, 28, who worked for Lehman Brothers until it went under in 2008 and was acquired by Barclay's, where she's now an assistant vice president. "A lot of my friends lost their jobs, and it was very upsetting—but running helped me blow off steam and clear my head. I would come back from runs much more relaxed."

A 2:47 marathoner, Chin spent the winter training for Boston, often running with her New York Running Divas teammates. "We have such a diverse group of women on the team that it helps to put everything in perspective—everyone has a different take on world events," she says. "There are parallels between work and marathoning: You have to put in a lot of effort, you're not going to see results right away, and you just have to maintain confidence that on race day it will all be okay. The economy is really bad right now, but you have to carry on and believe that years from now it will be fine."

Indeed, running can be an emotional equalizer. As I've segued into a freelance career—with both excitement and uncertainty—I've felt seesawing

moods: elation when I get a cool assignment; dejection when queries go unanswered. Joy at my newfound daily freedom; anger at my former employer. Delight about extra time with my daughter; worry about paying the bills. During the highs, running provides an adrenalin buffer, an outlet for excess energy; in the lows, well, there's no cure for the blues like a shot of endorphins.

"Something about running lifts me and makes me feel good about myself," says Anne Doyle, 50, who was recently laid off from her job as a director of planned giving for the Environmental Defense Fund. "It makes me feel that I can achieve something, even if I'm not working. It can define the day for you and give you this renewed, refreshed way of looking at things. I often feel like I'm in a fog right now—but running helps clear that fog away."

For me, running also helps manage the nervous energy that bubbles up at weird hours. One night not long after my layoff, I awoke at 2:00 a.m. with a jolt: "Holy %&*! I don't have a job!" I got up and started to write, then remembered the aphorism—was it Dr. Sheehan's?—to trust no thought arrived at while sitting down. So I donned my New Balance 992s and jogged briefly before I realized 2:00 a.m. was quite a strange time to run, so I switched to walking. I attached earbuds to my iPhone and cranked up the Peter Gabriel tune "Don't Give Up," a meditation on unemployment, perseverance, and the constancy of friends and family. The title is a marathoner's mantra—and the song evoked gratitude for the support I've gotten from buddies and kin.

I strolled through my neighborhood and made the mistake of drifting into Central Park, not seeing the small sign reading "Park Closes at 1:00 a.m." I was stopped by a police car—"Sir, let me see your ID"—and I replied, "Oh yeah, there's a curfew. I'll leave the park." But the two officers told me to stand in their headlights while one wrote a ticket. I glanced into the car, thinking their shift must be very quiet except for violators like me, and I wanted to blurt out: "My life has been turned upside down! I can't tell days from nights, and now you want to fine me for the one thing I still enjoy?! At least you have a job!" (I kept my mouth shut, and a judge later dismissed the fine.)

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—Elias Hernandez

In the months since, as the weather has warmed, I've settled into the self-employed lifestyle. One benefit is being able to wear running clothes pretty much 24/7. I've upped my pre-marathon mileage and the number of my visits to the gym for weights and yoga.

As Thoreau wrote in *Walden*, "I was rich, if not in money, in sunny hours and summer days, and I spent them lavishly." I've taken to other Thoreauvian maxims: "Simplify, simplify," and "Let not to get a living be thy trade, but thy sport." But the work projects have been sporadic—and there have been some restless nights.

One recent morning while traveling in Austin, Texas, I awoke at 4:30 a.m., nervous again, and grabbed my shoes. I hit the road and circled the quiet neighborhood, arriving at a convenience store in search of coffee at 5:30 a.m. The store sign said it would open at 6 o'clock, with $1.99 breakfast tacos, no less! So I ran another half-hour loop as the neighborhood slept—the houses still dark, cars still parked, the new amber sun breaking out against the starry twilight—and I suddenly felt a rush of optimism: what Thoreau described as "when the whole body is one sense, and imbibes delight through every pore."

I returned to the store and bought an egg taco and coffee, and by the time I had walked back to the house I was caffeinated, satiated, and much more sanguine about the future. If nothing else, a runner knows how to put one foot in front of the other. ■