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The Marathon Metaphor

Jess Hench

There's just something about marathons. Once you've completed one, you'll understand why they are addictive. I still get choked up at the starting line every time I hear the word "Go!" That's when the magic begins.

For the first few miles, there is great energy with so many runners close together, all excited to be starting a race, and the fans are cheering on the sidewalks. Later it calms down and we all spread out a bit, and it becomes a mental sport. My calves rock-hard, my ankles burning, my body craving more fuel... so many parts of me want to stop, to rest, to just sit down and eat pancakes and forget the whole thing. But I tell myself that even if I stop halfway, I'll still end in pain- at least if I finish, I'll have pride to go with it. So I push through, my mind reigning over my body, until the finish line is in sight. Crossing that finish line: it's so hard to describe the feeling, and you can only truly understand it if you experience it yourself. Pride, achievement, relief, success, happiness...it all swells up and I just beam with delight. That medal around my neck at the end means so much - and makes it absolutely worth every step.

See, the marathon is the perfect metaphor for all of life's challenges. There are times when it gets hard, when we want to quit, when we want to just sit down on the sidelines and forget we ever started. But we have to keep going - keep pushing ourselves - because the reward of finishing is worth it. It's not the medal, it's not trying to come in first - it's the sheer pride of accomplishment. Because I have finished a marathon, I know I can finish anything. I know I can overcome any challenge. I know I can seek

out challenges solely for the sake of the challenge, for the sake of pushing through it, for the sake of finishing. It's amazing to look back and say, "I did that." And because I can do that, I know I can do anything.

As I make my way through this PhD program, I will carry the Marathon Metaphor with me. I will start out excited and quite likely run too quickly out of the gates, and later I will settle into a steady pace. There will come a time when I may wonder, "Why am I doing this?" and times I will likely want to quit. I will probably hit a wall at some point - feeling like I don't have the endurance to continue the journey. But I will push through that wall, because I know what it's like to finish a marathon. I know that walking across the stage and receiving a diploma will be more incredible than any finish line and race medal I've earned. Knowing what the finish line feels like will keep me motivated and inspired, and I know with all my heart that I have what it takes inside me. This may just be my best marathon yet.

Jess Hench is a second-year PhD student in the Educational Policy, Planning, and Leadership program with a concentration in higher education administration.