

Chapter 1

A Narrow, Winding Footpath to an Alternate Reality

Nothing in the world is worth having or worth doing unless it means effort, pain, difficulty. I have never in my life envied a human being who led an easy life. I have envied a great many people who led difficult lives and led them well.

—Theodore Roosevelt

For those not familiar with it, the Long Path is a hiking trail that runs 350 miles from the base of the George Washington Bridge in Fort Lee, New Jersey, to the John Boyd Thacher State Park some ten miles west of Albany, New York.

Inspired by Walt Whitman's poem, *Song of the Open Road*, the Long Path's creators first conceived of it as an unmarked trail that would connect New York City to the Adirondacks. Over many years, leaders and volunteers of the New York–New Jersey Trail Conference plotted its course, published information about the route, and blazed and built the trail. The Long Path was created by people who were passionate about nature, and it is maintained today by a network of volunteers for whom it is a labor of love.

Despite all the hard work of the Trail Conference and its volunteers, the Long Path is relatively unknown, especially compared to other long-distance trails. Only 119 persons had completed the full length of

the Long Path when I set out to through-run it on a sunny morning in August 2013. 2012 had been a big year, with six documented completions. In 2010, there was only one.

Compare this to the granddaddy of long-distance hiking trails, the 2,180-mile Appalachian Trail, which according to the Appalachian Mountain Conservancy, a total of 14,086 persons have completed. In 2013 alone, 597 completions were reported. In other words, in a single year five times as many people completed the Appalachian Trail as had completed the Long Path in its entire lifetime—despite its being more than six times as long.

I had lived in New York for years without ever hearing of the Long Path, until one summer day when I was running on the gentle carriage trails of Minnewaska State Park with my frequent companion, Odie, the family's Labradoodle. We were passing through primeval forest shaded by hemlock, the path soft with their needles. Cresting a rise, we came upon an intersection with a narrow, winding footpath.

This path did not look promising. Rocky and overgrown, it snaked among rhododendron bushes, hopped over a muddy bank, and disappeared into shadows. A crooked sign nailed to a tree identified it as "The Long Path." But the name meant nothing to me.

As I studied this path, the wind picked up and whistled through the tree tops, and a cloud passed in front of the sun, darkening the scene. The idea of veering off onto a strange and unknown path did not seem responsible. Yet there was something intriguing about it. Odie sniffed the breeze, then looked back, waiting for direction. After careful deliberation, I decided to stick with the carriage trail, the easy and familiar choice. A moment later, the sun reemerged.

I encountered the Long Path again a few years later, this time running in Harriman State Park with my friend Todd Jennings. We came to an intersection and found a large boulder with "Times Square" stenciled in paint. I laughed out loud. As a New York City resident who knew the "real" Times Square, I thought this rock was surely some kind of joke. But no, Todd explained, this is the Long Path. It's sort of like a paral-

l universe, he continued, similar to our own, but where ours is big, crowded, noisy, and fast, the Long Path is small, empty, quiet, and slow. It's also a little mischievous, he added with a wink.

I snorted in derision. "One universe is enough for me," I said, elbowing him in the ribs, "let's get out of here."



But as time passed, parallel universes began to seem more appealing. Working as a financial analyst at a major investment bank was exciting—but stressful. Sort of like riding on a crazy roller coaster whose rickety wooden structure you sense is going to collapse—you're just not sure when. "Small, empty, quiet, and slow" began to sound tempting.

At work, my boss suffered a heart attack. He retired on disability, and some of his responsibilities were shifted to me. Then a colleague disappeared. She was rumored to be on extended medical leave, but no one ever heard from her again, not even her closest teammates. Her workload was handed to me. I was pleased to advance in my career, yet I sensed a troubling pattern.

Then 9/11 hit. My company lost nineteen people in the World Trade Center collapse. It might have been much worse, but for the efforts of a former U.S. Army officer and decorated Vietnam veteran, Rick Rescorla, who took charge of the evacuation. Determined to do his duty to the last, he himself did not make it out.

My office was in midtown, well outside of the disaster zone. But a neighbor in my apartment building barely made it out of the World Trade Center before it came crashing down. He was one of the survivors running through the streets covered in ash.

The 9/11 attack reminded me that life is short. As much as I appreciated my job, and as proud as I was of the company where I worked, it was time to think of the bigger picture. Part of this meant getting back in shape, not only to preserve my physical health, but to keep an even mental keel in the face of volatile markets and dog-eat-dog competition.

After 9/11, I got back in the habit of going for a daily run. After a hiatus of nearly ten years, I ran my third marathon, slowly and painfully, finishing somewhere in the middle of the pack.

Up to this point, my running career had been completely undistinguished. I had taken up running in high school in an effort to improve my fitness, tired of being the last to be picked for almost every game. But as I started to run, I found that after about ten minutes, my shins would swell and go numb. The doctor explained that this was probably a condition called “chronic compartment syndrome.” He stuck needles in my shin muscles to measure the pressure while I ran on a treadmill. Flummoxed by the tubes extending from my legs, I became dizzy and had to sit down. The test was interrupted, and the results were inconclusive. But that didn’t stop the doctor from offering to conduct surgery that *might* alleviate the symptoms. I pictured the scalpel glinting under fluorescent lights and demurred.

Despite the condition, I persisted in running, struggling through a four-year stint in the Army and somehow surviving my first marathon. A few more years passed before I finally underwent the surgery. To my astonishment, the procedure was effective, and the problem was corrected. Now for the first time in my life, I could run freely and without pain! Determined to run another marathon and set a new personal record, I added high-intensity speed work to my training program and promptly strained the iliotibial band (ITB), a tendon on the side of the knee. ITB syndrome is a common running injury, but at the time, no one could tell me what to do about it. I threw up my hands in disgust, focused my energies on work, and put on a few pounds. Then our first child was born. The ITB healed, but running was not a priority.

Time went by, my career progressed, and I didn’t do much running at all until the shock of 9/11 got me back into a daily running regime and training for the third marathon. One year later, as my fortieth birthday was starting to near, a childhood memory surfaced in my mind. I was only fifteen at the time; a friend grabbed me by the shoulder and pointed out a man who was said to have run forty miles to celebrate his fortieth

birthday. We were awestruck by this feat of endurance—we had never heard of anything like it.

Now it was nearly twenty-five years later, and I found myself toying with the idea of a forty-mile birthday run. It would be an audacious goal. Perhaps it would help me take my running to the next level. I thought long and hard about the forty miles, but didn't do much about it. Soon enough my fortieth birthday came and passed, and then another birthday, and another. Even with unencumbered shins and the ITB long since healed, running such a distance was too daunting a prospect. It seemed too painful and boring.

One day during the summer of 2005, I was running along an upstate New York country lane when I fell in step with a gentleman who looked to be in his fifties. We jogged together, trading stories. Trying to impress the fellow, I said I was training for a marathon (even though I wasn't) and that I might run forty miles for my fortieth birthday (although strictly speaking, I was now forty-two). He mentioned casually that he was training for a hundred-mile race. My jaw fell. I had never heard of such a thing.

Further, I didn't think fifty-year-olds were capable of strenuous activity, let alone the unimaginable effort it would take to run one hundred miles. Working in a New York investment bank, you didn't see many fifty-year olds. Few survived in the business that long. Those who did seemed to favor golf. One fifty-year-old manager had gone to Hawaii on a hiking trip—and returned with a broken ankle—proof, I thought, that once you turned fifty, it was all downhill, and at a very steep slope. Bankers in their mid-forties complained that they were slowing down, more quickly fatigued, plagued with injuries. Get used to a larger waist size, they warned, and back off on the running—it's too hard on the knees. (Not following running as a sport at the time, I didn't know that there were elite masters who could outrace people half their age.)

I returned from this surprising encounter, still in a state of astonishment that a fifty-something could run for one hundred miles. Turning to the Internet, I googled the word “ultramarathon” and discovered that such races did indeed exist. Soon I was staring at pictures of ultrarunners

traversing a sandy trail somewhere in the Marin Headlands of northern California, fascinated by their audacity and enthralled by the beauty of the coastal mountains. Something clicked. I realized that a race like this might provide the excitement, the commitment, and the goal necessary to overcome the pain and monotony of serious training.

In short order, I signed up for my first fifty-kilometer race (31.07 miles) despite great anxiety about not only the distance but the 4,500 feet of cumulative elevation gain disclosed on the event website. Why, the elevation gain was almost equivalent to a mile straight up! So concerned was I about the climbing that I sought out the steepest, tallest hill around and ran endless repeats. When race day finally arrived, it took me six hours to finish (I was tied for last place)—but the feeling of satisfaction (and relief) at having finished was intense.

I ran a couple more fifty-kilometer races, taking on steeper mountains, braving bad weather, struggling with muscle cramps and heat rash—then signed up for my first fifty-mile event, with more than a little trepidation at the prospect of nearly doubling the distance. After a good start at the fifty-miler, something disagreed with my stomach (or possibly my stomach disagreed with the idea of running fifty miles), and I became nauseous and soon could no longer eat or drink. I stumbled into the aid station at mile thirty, determined to drop out. In fact, I was just opening my mouth to ask for a ride back to the start when the volunteer looked up from the lounge chair in which he had been dozing and said, “Congratulations, you’re halfway done.” In the face of such encouragement, I was too embarrassed to quit. I lurched out of the aid station and staggered through the next twenty miles in a haze. When I finally reached the finish line, in second-to-last place, I was so dehydrated I couldn’t talk. It took eight glasses of iced tea and a large pizza with everything on it to revive me. Then I woke up in the middle of the night, famished.

Not a particularly graceful performance. But along the way, I had achieved and then blown through my earlier goal of running forty miles on (or around) my fortieth birthday.

Over the next few years, I tackled longer distances and more difficult races. In 2008, at age forty-five, I ran my first hundred-mile race. It went surprisingly well. I immediately signed up for another hundred-miler, but this time dropped out halfway through, having failed to pace myself appropriately for a tougher course. I spent two more years training and racing, and with additional experience, my performance improved. Gradually I moved up from the back of the pack to somewhere in the middle and occasionally in the front. If I wasn't fast, at least I was getting steadier. In 2010 I completed the Badwater Ultramarathon, a 135-mile race through Death Valley, where the temperature often reaches 125 degrees. The next year I ran in the Leadville Trail 100 Run in the mountains of Colorado at elevations of up to 13,000 feet.

Why did I get hooked on these races? For one, on finally reaching the finish line, there's a thrill of accomplishment. It's like a runner's high, but the high lasts for days and weeks after the race is over. The races build self-confidence because they teach you how to manage adversity. You learn that it's okay to be tired, that you don't have to panic or get negative. You develop patience. When you're feeling good, you learn to resist getting carried away by enthusiasm. When you hit a rough patch, you troubleshoot the problem, figure out what's slowing you down, develop a plan to fix the problem or at least prevent it from getting worse—and keep moving forward. These skills help manage challenges in races and the “real” world.

“Steadfast resolution” is the most important part of character, according to one of my heroes, Theodore Roosevelt. Roosevelt was an advocate for the “strenuous life,” and he credited the time he spent out West as a rancher and cowboy for giving him the strength, health, and endurance that would power an incredible array of accomplishments over the course of his life.

In his memoirs, legendary ultra-runner Scott Jurek makes a similar point: “I ran because overcoming the difficulties of an ultramarathon reminded me that I could overcome the difficulties of life, that overcoming difficulties was life.”

It's not just elite athletes who feel this way. At a fifty-mile race called Rock the Ridge, which takes place on the Mohonk Preserve in upstate New York, I met a young lady who had just started running a few months earlier. When she crossed the finish line after eighteen hours, her eyes were as big as saucers, and the expression on her face shouted, "Look at what I just did!"

Writing about hundred-mile races, a free-spirited runner and author who goes under the name of Vanessa Runs explains the motivation for ultras: "It's that sense of accomplishment, self-worth, and empowerment that spills over into every other aspect of your life. It makes you hold your head up higher, gives you courage to shed those toxic relationships, inspires you in your career, helps you raise your family better, and motivates you to live healthfully and happily. That's why I run ultras, and why I encourage others to do so. The physical act of covering random mileage is indeed senseless. But knowing for a fact that your body and mind are capable of far more than you thought—that is life changing." Another wonderful aspect of ultramarathons is the beautiful locations. I've run in the coastal mountains of California, Wyoming's Grand Teton and Bighorn ranges, Death Valley, Texas hill country, the forests of Vermont, the Florida Keys, the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia, and the wilds of Pennsylvania.

Don't get me wrong: I have nothing against cities, office buildings, hotels, shopping malls, sidewalks, asphalt, or office cubicles. As a financial analyst, this is my world. At the same time, I've never been able to shake the feeling that the great outdoors is calling to me. It's whispering my name. Even when I'm comfortably slouched in my ergonomic desk chair, nursing the morning cappuccino, staring into the computer screen, part of me hears the wind whispering through the trees.

Apparently, I'm not the only person who feels this way. Researchers find that exposure to natural settings provides therapeutic benefits with respect to mood and health, both physical and mental (they call this "green health"), and even more when combined with exercise (they call this "green exercise"). The hypothesis is that, humans having evolved in

the wild, our minds and bodies are best attuned to the natural environment and benefit from—no, *need*—an occasional break from electronics.

You can call me a “green exercise” enthusiast if you will—but I cringe at the thought of the local gym putting a potted palm next to the elliptical and selling this as a green experience. And I fear that they’ll turn “green exercise” into a diet supplement, try to bottle it, or package it as something you can do in as little as six minutes a day.

There’s something missing from this green movement. Green care thought-leader Richard Louv quotes Henry David Thoreau, the nineteenth-century transcendentalist and author of *Walden*, as saying, “We need the tonic of *wilderness*.” Like many outdoor enthusiasts, I’ve read Thoreau’s words closely. What Thoreau actually said was, “We need the tonic of *wildness*.” And then he elaborated, “We need to witness our own limits transgressed.”



With time, I learned more about the Long Path. A friend ran a section along the Hudson River and posted pictures on Facebook. This time I recognized the name.

One day I discovered that a trail runner named David O’Neill had through-hiked the Long Path in 2005. The trek lasted twenty-four days. Then he came back in 2006 and ran it. This time, the journey took 12 days, 5 hours, and 17 minutes. I pondered this achievement. I considered reaching out to O’Neill and asking him about his experience, but couldn’t find any contact information.

Some of my running friends had taken on multiday trail runs. If they could do it, why not I? But I hesitated. Those friends might well be stronger, fitter, younger, and more experienced than I. They might well have natural talent that I lacked.

I’m cautious, risk-averse, and a bit of an incrementalist, as befits a financial analyst. In training for my first marathon, I had followed Jeff Galloway’s method, which calls for gradually extending the distance of

the dreaded long run. As per his instructions, I ran twelve miles one Sunday, then came back two weeks later and ran fourteen, for a modest increase of 16.7 percent. Fast forward several weeks, and after running twenty-two miles one Sunday, two weeks later I completed twenty-four, lengthening my maximum distance by a manageable 9.1 percent. And every Sunday, those two incremental miles at the end of the long run had really hurt.

Galloway's plan was perfect for conservative people like me, for whom jumping into something unprepared seems like madness.

Now, as I contemplated the 350-mile distance of the Long Path, I thought back to the longest distance I had ever run, which was the 135-mile Badwater Ultramarathon. The step-up would be not 9.1 percent or 16.7 percent,—but rather, 259 percent. This was incomprehensible. How do you face up to a task that is so much bigger than anything you have ever done? It felt like fastening wings to your arms and leaping from a cliff.

I was intrigued. I was afraid. And now the Long Path began to whisper my name. Considering the idea was like staring at a map with a great blank spot in the middle. Uncharted territory. What would one discover on the secluded hilltops and in the secret hollows of the Hudson Valley? Imagine starting at the George Washington Bridge, the path's southern terminus, then heading north into mystery. This wouldn't be a race, it would be a journey. A pilgrimage. A crossing. An adventure.

It would be like following a yellow brick road—or sailing off into a stormy ocean after a white whale—or opening the door of a wardrobe and finding yourself in an unfamiliar forest with fauns and witches.

What made the Long Path so alluring as a challenge was that I could neither declare it feasible nor reject it as impossible. I'd wake up some mornings fired up with enthusiasm. On other days, the notion seemed a pipe-dream. Only a handful of ultrarunners tackled multiday runs of this distance. I could have reached out to them for advice, but I didn't. I couldn't think of what to ask.

This state of indecision persisted for several months. In my mind, the idea was balanced precariously, like a large glacial rock left perched

on the edge of a cliff when the ice withdraws. It might stay put for centuries, or it might tip over at any moment.

I toyed with the idea, and sometimes talked with friends about it, but hadn't made any kind of commitment—until one day I found myself at Frank's Custom Shoe-Fitting, a small shoe store in Middletown, New York. If you haven't heard of Frank Giannino, all you need to know is that in 1980, he set the record for running across the entire United States, a distance of 3,100 miles, which he completed in 46 days 8 hours and 36 minutes, averaging 66.9 miles per day.

Why did he do that? Frank explains: "I am frequently asked why people do these kinds of things. I answer with one word: 'Ownership.' All of us have a burning desire to 'own' something, even if it is as simple as an endurance achievement. Once you have reached your goal, you 'own' that accomplishment, and can savor it for a lifetime. No one can ever take away from you the intrinsic satisfaction that comes from the completion of a goal. And of course, we keep on setting them." As of 2013, no one had beaten Frank's record, although the world's toughest mountaineer, adventure racer, and ultrarunner, Marshall Ulrich, gave it a good try in 2008. At age fifty-seven, Marshall completed the distance in fifty-two days, six days behind Frank, but fast enough to set the master's record (for an individual fifty years or older). It was the toughest experience of his life, he declared, well beyond climbing Mt. Everest or running through the heat of Death Valley. Marshall's philosophy is similar to Frank's: I once heard him say, "Even as you get older, don't stop setting goals."

You can find any running shoe you want on the Internet, but I made it a point to buy from Frank, hoping that some pixie dust might rub off on me. I stopped by his store one morning to pick up a pair of shoes. Frank was padding around barefoot, munching on grapes.

"You've heard about the Long Path?" I asked.

"Of course. You ought to talk to David O'Neill, he's run the whole thing," he replied.

I wanted to probe Frank, ask what he thought of that accomplishment, how he would train for the distance, or where could I find the

mysterious O'Neill, when a middle-aged customer walked in, complaining that her feet hurt so much that she could barely walk the dog. Frank listened to her closely, helped her select a pair of shoes and inserts, taught her how to tie the laces more comfortably, and sent her off happy, with his personal guarantee that she could bring everything back if it didn't help. Then someone walked into the shop asking for military-style jump boots. I waited, glancing at my watch, not wanting to interrupt Frank, but growing impatient. Frank referred the paratrooper to another retailer. I was about to ask a question, when the door opened again. At this point, out of time and patience, I blurted out that I was going to run the Long Path and set a new record.

Frank smiled, raising an eyebrow ever so slightly. I bit my lip, but it was too late. I hadn't entered his store intending to make such a commitment. It had just come out. Evidently the glacial rock had tipped, and it was now rolling downhill, crashing through brush and trees.

You can't say something like that to Frank and think he'd miss it or forget. Nope, I'd as good as gone and scheduled an appointment with destiny. Not to say I couldn't postpone the appointment. My daughter talked me into running Badwater again, and that race was the focus of my training in 2012. Ashamed to face Frank, I bought my next pair of shoes over the Internet.

But when 2013 rolled around, I realized it was time to show up, step up, and deliver—or at least try. After all, about to turn fifty, I wasn't getting any younger.