

Running as Spiritual Practice by On Being

TRANSCRIPT FOR BILLY MILLS, CHRISTINA TORRES, ASHLEY HICKS, ET AL. — RUNNING AS SPIRITUAL PRACTICE syndicated from OnBeing.org

KRISTA TIPPETT, HOST: For the Summer Olympics, we're breaking format to explore a topic our listeners have called out as a passionate force in all kinds of lives, and a connector across all kinds of boundaries in American culture: running. Not just as exercise, or as merely physical pursuit — running as a source of bonding between parents and children and friends. Running as an interplay between competition and contemplation. Running and body image and survival and healing.

MS. CHRISTINA TORRES: People from high school now tell me, "I never thought you would have become a runner of any kind." I always used to tell people, "I'm not a runner, my body could never do that." And once I did it, it was this feeling of, "What else have I been lying to myself about?" Like, "What else have I been hiding from 'cause I was scared?"

MR. BILLY MILLS: The number one objective of my Olympic pursuit was to heal a broken soul. And I look back — it just blows me away. A 77-year-old man, and I know what it is to be broken, but I also know what it is to be on a healing journey.

MR. SIMRAN JEET SINGH: When people see me on the street with my turban and beard, they have a number of preconceptions about the type of person I am. At worst, they associate me with terrorism. In most cases, people at least see me as someone who is foreign or strange. So running is, for me, a simple way to shatter these stereotypes. It challenges people to see me from a different perspective than they would otherwise.

MS. ASHLEY HICKS: When I was training for my second marathon — I was running Chicago, and I went to go get some new shoes. And the guy at the running store — I was telling him, "Yeah, I'm not super excited about this. I just want to get through. I'm kind of nervous about my time and everything." And he was like, "Yeah, the best thing for you to remember is that the blessing is outside of your comfort zone."

MS. TIPPETT: I'm Krista Tippett, and this is On Being.

[music: "Seven League Boots" by Zoe Keating]

MS. TIPPETT: Thomas Merton wrote, "It is true that we are called to create a better world. But we are first of all called to a more immediate and exalted task: that of creating our own lives." Our producer Lily Percy took up the idea of running as a spiritual practice as a theme for the first season of our new podcast *Creating Our Own Lives*. The 10 voices in this hour were originally drawn out by her. We'll end with Olympic gold medalist Billy

Mills. We begin with Christina Torres.

MS. TORRES: My name is Christina Torres, and I'm originally from southern California, but I now live in Honolulu, Hawaii.

MS. TIPPETT: Christina is many things — a teacher, a writer, a Mexipina. She calls running her “moving meditation.”

MS. TORRES: Pretty much towards the end of college and the beginning of my teaching career, I had actually never run more than a mile. I hated running. I was always really bad at it. It always made my chest hurt. I actually left soccer, which made my Mexican father really sad, because I told him it was too much running, and I didn't like it. I was the kid that would beg my parents to give me a doctor's note so I wouldn't have to run the mile.

Running was always sort of associated with things I wasn't good at, with shame. I was one of maybe a handful of Mexican kids in my school, and I was chubbier than a lot of other kids. And so I was picked on 'cause I was really bad at anything athletic. So, for me, running did not have great associations, actually, until I was a little bit older.

I was actually looking at a bookstore, and there was this book called How To Do Everything. It's one of those kind of novelty books. And in that, they had a little thing about learning to walk-run, which is essentially — you'll break running up into intervals. So you'll run 30 seconds, walk one minute, run 30 seconds, walk one minute, and you'll do that for a week or two. And then you'll change the intervals, so you'll run for a minute, walk for a minute, run for a minute. And then you increase until you're running.

And I remember that, finally, after maybe two months, I was able to run 30 minutes, not very fast, but 30 minutes completely without stopping and that was right towards the end of my senior year, and I had never done that in my entire life. “I was like, oh, my body can do things.” And I never really looked at my body that way. Like, my body can be trained to do new things. And I was hooked, and I've sort of been running ever since.

[music: “On the Long Road Home” by The End of the Ocean]

MS. TORRES: Sometimes, as runners, we're not all feeling great about ourselves. And I woke up one morning — you know, you just have those mornings, and you look in the mirror, you're like, “I hate this.” It's so irrational. You know that nothing has changed in the past seven hours since you went to bed. Nothing is different. But you wake up, and it's almost like my body isn't mine, which makes me sad because all of my body is mine. Like, if anything, it's the only thing that is truly mine.

So for me, though, once I started running it was really hard to be angry at my body in the same way. I would get out on the road and, all of a sudden, step by step, it was like running myself back to myself in a lot of ways. So it's nice to know that there's always going to be this place I can go where it's just me and the road. And there's something really beautiful about that.

I did the LA Marathon and, I mean, I'll be honest with you, it went horribly. I hit the wall essentially 'cause I also went out way too fast. And so I knew I wasn't going to make this time, and I ended up getting picked up by a pacer.

And I was just crying, and I kept sort of saying, “I don't know if I can do this, I don't know if I can do this.” And he was like, “Find a mantra in your head and just keep saying it over

and over again.” And it’s funny, ‘cause it’s changed now. But for me, it’s been, “I’m strong, I am powerful, I can do this. I am strong, I am powerful, I can do this.” And I just kept saying that over and over again.

And I finished. And I didn’t finish as fast as I wanted, and my feet were bleeding. I think I nearly threw up. But I crossed the finish line just being, “If you had told me six months ago that I was going to be able to finish 26.2 miles, I would have laughed in your face.”

I always used to tell people, “I’m not a runner, my body could never do that.” And once I did it, it was this feeling of, “What else have I been lying to myself about?” Like, “What else have I been hiding from ‘cause I was scared?”

[music: “Portarlington” by Years of Rice and Salt]

MR. JOHN CARY: My first memory of running is probably a lot more recent than in actuality. I’m sure that I chased my brother around and my other siblings around as a kid. But I actually remember running between my dormitory at the University of Minnesota and the rec center during my first year of college, and in particular, one day when it was minus 58 degrees Fahrenheit. And I remember running in these Converse All-Star shoes as my throat was burning, and yet, being so incredibly happy to be kind of braving the weather and quite proud of myself at the moment.

MS. TIPPETT: John Cary is a trained architect who thinks about human-centered design. He’s also a strategist for the TED prize.

MR. CARY: My ideal running is running with other people, running with a partner in particular. And I’m really lucky to have the most amazing running partner. I’ve had several over the years, but one in particular at this moment in my life is another young father. So we end up talking a lot about fatherhood, and work things, of course, and all that.

And I typically do run with other men, and I’ve found that some of the best conversations I’ve ever had in my life with other men have been while running. And I think part of it is you’re running often side-by-side or one person in back of the other, rather than having to deal with looking somebody in the eyes as you’re being vulnerable with them, or sharing a story, or whatever it might be. But I truly have had some of the best conversations. And my current running partner, Peter, is a big part of that these days.

I’m kind of a mid-distance runner. I do about one marathon a year. And I love that distance. But I especially find in those later miles, including the miles right before I finish, to just truly get into a stride, get into a flow. And there are places on my favorite runs where I’m just flooded with a certain smell of eucalyptus trees — here in the Bay area — or other smells. There’s also little micro-climates that I run through at different times, and I can just feel that all over. And that has far less to do with the kind of physical motion that I’m in and just more to do with passing through time and space.

[music: “Suburb 27” by Marconi Union]

MR. CARY: My daughter has run with me for, I’d say, a third of the miles that I’ve logged since she was born. And, I mean, I try to run somewhere between 1,200 and 1,500 miles a year. That’s about 30 miles a week. And about a third of that is with her. And so I’m literally pushing her.

It started with this large running stroller that we then put this contraption onto so you could place her large car seat in there. And it was kind of like pushing a shopping cart, which is one thing on an urban sidewalk, but another thing in some of the hills that we do in the Bay area. I would be pushing her to the top of this beautiful cemetery overlooking the Bay, and people would drive by in cars and clap or cheer us on or something like that. And, of course, she's snoozing away, and I'm drenched in sweat. But I love those moments. I love running with her.

I especially love talking with her as I'm running. And I do any number of things from practicing animal sounds with her to telling her all the people in the world that love her. And over the course of a run, I'm able to name, like, 50 or 60 people in her life. And whether or not she's processing it is another question. But I just love those times we have together.

[music: "Trópico De Cancer" by Café Tacuba]

MS. TIPPETT: I'm Krista Tippet, and this is On Being. Today, running as a spiritual practice, as told through the voices and stories of runners. Some people turn to prayer or meditation or yoga as a way to slow down and make sense of their lives. Ashley Hicks found that in running. She lives in Atlanta, Georgia, and she's the co-founder of Black Girls RUN!

[music: "Trópico De Cancer" by Café Tacuba]

MS. HICKS: I was able to really kind of break through the mental part of running in around 2006 when I started running after college. I was just trying to get back in shape. I hadn't been playing soccer, and I started running, and I really found that it was a way to really kind of decompress after work. So you go out there, and you're out there for a couple of miles, and you can kind of process and think through things and relieve stress. So that was really what helped me kind of break through this idea of miles of nothingness that running initially felt like for me.

When I run, the one thing that I like to do is I don't run with music, headphones, anything. I call myself a true minimalist runner. Literally, it's just me and my running clothes. I like to go out, and I start out slow, and then I will pick up my pace after that. But for me, it's just the idea of allowing myself to kind of settle into the run — settle in and to feel the road beneath your feet, settle in and really acknowledge your surroundings. When I run, it's this idea of really being present and acknowledging where I am, and what I'm doing, and the purpose.

[music: "On the Long Road Home" by The End of the Ocean]

MS. HICKS: So when I started running in 2006, running was not the most diverse community. I'd go to these like local races like a local 5k or local running groups, and I would be pretty much the only person of color. And so I just noticed that maybe there's an opportunity there. Maybe there's an opportunity to kind of talk to people about the benefits of running, health — physically and mentally. And then also just see if there are other runners of color that I can connect with. And so we started Black Girls RUN! in 2009.

Initially, we just connected with other runners, people who are already doing marathons and half-marathons and dedicated runners. And then we started to see more and more people joining the group who had never run a day in their life. And so that was an incredible experience to kind of introduce people to this old sport that's new in our

community. And now we get emails from race directors all the time saying how diverse races are becoming. And just the running community in general is changing, and people seem to love the change.

I definitely think that running has helped me become certainly more spiritual, certainly more present. It was interesting. When I was training for my second marathon — I was running Chicago, and I went to go get some new shoes. And the guy at the running store — I was telling him, “Yeah, I’m not super excited about this. I just want to get through. I’m kind of nervous about my time and everything.” And he was like, “Yeah, the best thing for you to remember is that the blessing is outside of your comfort zone.”

And so that was something for me to really kind of think about. And it was something that I would actually meditate on, literally just saying over and over and over in my head as I continued my training. And it’s something that I do now. Whenever I’m challenging myself to something new, I keep saying that the blessing really is outside of your comfort zone. If you stay and do what you’re comfortable with, you’ll never experience something new and incredible.

[music: “History Day” by Mogwai]

MR. ROGER JOSLIN: My name is Roger Joslin. I’m 64 years old, and I’m from Austin, Texas. I think my most vivid early memories of running were when I played football in junior high and high school. And running was used to get us in shape and as punishment. Most any infraction, we were called on to run wind sprints until we puked our guts out. And in preparation for football season, I would train on the country roads near our house, running sprints and then running distances so that I would show up in some sort of reasonable physical condition when two-a-days started. And so I didn’t take to running right away. I’d always viewed running as something very unpleasant ‘til about my mid-20s. Then I began to appreciate running for itself.

MS. TIPPETT: Roger Joslin is an Episcopal priest in Bentonville, Arkansas. He’s also the author of *Running the Spiritual Path*.

MR. JOSLIN: I was going through a very troubled period of my life where I had faced a bankruptcy and divorce and was separated from my family. I wouldn’t see my kids as much as I’d been accustomed to. And I was working out of town in San Antonio, Texas, and I started to run there after I got off work. And I ran, and I ran, and I ran, simply because I found that it was a distraction from the pain I was feeling. I could punish my body a bit, and hurt in different places. I think I approached it the same way maybe somebody who was better at drinking whiskey than I was might have. I ran to feel different than I was feeling, just to escape from the pain.

And I’d noticed that — I’d been meditating for a number of years, not terribly successfully. And I began to notice that my running life and my meditating life were beginning to merge. One day, I came across an article about Thomas Merton in which Thomas Merton was quoted as saying that “Prayer is the desire to pray.” And I didn’t really know about prayer as equating it with meditation.

And so my notion of what prayer is about began to expand. Because I imagine that God is most fully present with us at this moment. And to the extent of which you can find yourself in the present moment then you’re finding yourself in prayer. So it worked quite naturally with running with me to begin to find ways of running that brought me into the present.

And so I imagined how a priest might put on his vestments before going to celebrate the Eucharist, doing it very mindfully. And so I would approach running the same way. If I put on my shorts and t-shirt, and then pulling my socks and make sure that there's no creases in them, smooth them out, and pull them up just right, and examine my shoes to make sure there's not any pebbles or dirt inside, and lace up the shoelaces very carefully and double-knot them. And simply just pay attention to what I'm doing. And so, to the extent of which I can prepare my mind and my body to receive, then I think I've prepared myself for both the run and for the prayer.

[music: "I Know You Are but What Am I?" by Mogwai]

MR. MIKE STAVLUND: I didn't like running a lot as a kid. It was sort of a thing that was forced on us in grade school and junior high and high school. But I started to love running when I had this job — I was managing apartment buildings, and I was always meeting with people to try to rent them apartments. So I was walking around in the D.C. heat all during the day and trying not to sweat and look unappealing. But at 5 o'clock, I started this practice where I would just go running, and then it didn't matter what I looked like or what it felt like. It didn't matter what the weather was, whether it was raining or hot or cold. It was, for me, a way to just jump into the world and let it come at me with whatever it had.

MS. TIPPETT: Mike Stavlund is a pastor, writer, and professor living in Falls Church, Virginia. He's the author of *A Force of Will: The Reshaping of Faith in a Year of Grief* about the death of his 4-month-old son. "Running," Mike says, "became a metaphor for my life."

MR. STAVLUND: One of the things I love about it is that it's not mental. There's not a lot of things that I find that happen in my mind. In that sense, I think I learned about meditation through running instead of learning about meditation through studying meditation. So much of my life is — my mind is just buzzing and busy and worried about a lot of stuff. I'm needing to accomplish things and worry about things, but when I'm running I can kind of get away from that.

And I just — I'm in my body with all of its limitations but with all of its capabilities at the same time. And I think that integration works as well with my kind of spiritual goals. I'm so limited in so many ways. I'm so not the person that I want to be, but I'm capable of slowly, gradually becoming something later that I'm not now.

[music: "Reprise" by Ani DiFranco]

MR. STAVLUND: My son had — before he died, he'd struggled for his whole life — four months of life — with some really serious cardiac limitations. And so running for me then was a way of kind of experiencing some of that. It's emotional to remember that. But, yeah. I remember just being out on these runs in our hilly neighborhood and feeling so hot, like I couldn't catch a breath and feeling like I was really out of shape because I hadn't really been running regularly before that. And just realizing, gosh, this is what his life was like. So it was cathartic in that sense and it was a way for me to just kind of taste some of what that was like.

I was tempted to just go full bore and try to run myself into the ground. Because I realized me running as hard as I can isn't even as hard as it was for him to just lay in his bed and to try to keep up with all these cardiac inefficiencies. So it definitely was a way for me to connect with him, and do so almost retroactively, because when he was alive it was too much for me to think about all that. I needed to just do what I had to do to care for him

and to try to help him make it to his next day.

[music: "Creature Fear" by Bon Iver]

MR. STAVLUND: I teach ethics and we talk about — in ethics we talk about instrumental goods versus inherent goods. There are things that we do because they get us to another thing. Some people run because it helps burn calories and helps them lose weight or whatever. But for me, running is an inherent good. It's good in and of itself. It's essentially beneficial.

So I'm excited because my kids are starting to be like, "I want to go running." And there's no reason — they don't have a reason to run. They're not training for something; they just want to go running. And it's just an enjoyable, inherent part of being human, I think. So they're starting to, and my wife and I are trying to find ways to interact with all their paces and all that stuff. They want to have it happen the way they want it to happen, but it's more fun for us.

[music: "Avenue of the Saints" by The Pines]

MS. TIPPETT: You can subscribe to the Creating Our Own Lives podcast on iTunes. All of the voices you're hearing this hour are there as full episodes to download now. And, as always, you can link to this show and the podcast at onbeing.org. Coming up in the second half, we'll hear Olympic gold medalist Billy Mills.

MR. MILLS: The number one objective of my Olympic pursuit was to heal a broken soul. And I look back — it just blows me away. A 77-year-old man, and I know what it is to be broken, but I also know what it is to be on a healing journey.

MS. TIPPETT: I'm Krista Tippett. On Being continues in a moment.

[music: "Avenue of the Saints" by The Pines]

MS. TIPPETT: I'm Krista Tippett, and this is On Being. We're breaking format for the Summer Olympics, exploring running as a spiritual practice in all kinds of lives as told through the voices and stories of runners.

MS. SARAH KHASAWINAH: My name is Sarah Khasawinah. I was born in Chicago, raised in Missouri, and went to school along the East Coast. And now I live just outside of Washington, D.C.

MS. TIPPETT: Sarah works in the U.S. Senate to improve policies for older Americans.

MS. KHASAWINAH: In elementary school, we had running as an exercise in school. And I never finished in the first half of the class. In fact, I always finished in the last half of the class, and at that point, thought I probably wasn't very good at running. And I rediscovered running again later in high school because I was doing a program that required us to do action hours. And I thought, "Wouldn't it be wild if I signed up for the cross country team?"

I almost always came in last on my team, not usually last in the whole meet, but definitely in the back of the pack. And one time, during a really, really particularly hot day, I was way in the back of the pack, and the referee, I think, thought everybody was gone, and when he saw me, he was like, "Oh, well, have a nice day." [laughs] I was like, "I am." And

that I think may have been one of the turning points where I realized running is something that I enjoy. I enjoy the journey, and I'm having a nice day every time I'm running.

[music: "Espuma" by Café Tacuba]

MS. KHASAWINAH: My faith makes me disciplined. I pray five times a day. Year round, I'm basically waking up somewhere between 5:00 to 6:00 in the morning. So, I'm awake, and when I wake up, I do the ablution ritual to wash up and get ready for prayer, and then I pray. And then I'm up. My mind and my body are awake. So the next best thing to do is run. So I think that from the discipline aspect of my faith. Like, faith improves my running, and running improves my faith. It gives me an opportunity to meditate, and to reflect, and think about verses from The Qur'an, and to actively practice gratitude, which is a big component of Islam.

In The Qur'an, multiple times, God puts thankfulness up there after believing in God. And being thankful is constantly one of the most important things. And when I'm running, I feel like I'm actively expressing that gratitude, first of all, by being able to use my limbs and the faculties that God gave me to run. And also, I'm outside, and when my strides are comfortable, and I feel like nobody's looking, sometimes I'll sort of spread my arms out and just think, "Thank you, God. This is beautiful."

[music: "On the Long Road Home" by The End of the Ocean]

MS. KHASAWINAH: The point in which I think a run begins to feel truly spiritual is after that first hour when I think about verses from The Qur'an about how God takes barren fields and blesses them with rain and brings them back to life. And in The Qur'an, that analogy is often used to compare how humans are, the cycle of life, and how we will be brought back to life. So then I begin to think about my own mortality. And that's an often reoccurring thought for me on runs after I've emptied my brain of all of the regular things that I need to think about. And to clear my mind — and it just happens organically without even thinking about it. And there's a little period in between, usually, where I'm just thinking of nothing. And at that point I feel like I'm just receiving what's around me.

[music: "Summer Glass" by Talkdemonic]

MS. MALLARY TENORE: My name is Mallary Tenore. I grew up outside of Boston, Massachusetts, and I currently live in St. Petersburg, Florida.

My first memory of running was actually when I was 3 years old. In the small town of Holliston, Massachusetts where I grew up, they held these track meets for kids ages 3 to 13. And my mom took me there right after I turned 3, and she said, "Well, these are races where you get to run down a track, and then you get a ribbon at the end." And I really didn't exactly know what that meant. I had never been to a track meet before, and as a 3-year-old, I really didn't do much running except for running around the house and falling down. And so my mom said, "All you have to do is just run down the track until you see me, and then I'll give you a big hug at that finish line."

And so the guy who was running these track meets would say, "On your mark, get set, go." And I'd run down that track, the 50 yards, and I'd be weaving in and out of lanes, and my pigtails would be flying, and I'd be kind of hitting elbows with the other 3-year-olds who were running with me. But I just kept focused on my goal, which was running toward my mom.

At the end, I would always sort of run into her arms, and I would get a ribbon. And really, that is what fueled my initial love for running. A lot of times, people will say that runners run away from things, but I've always found that I've been running towards something. And I think that I've thought that for so many years because my love for running started with me running towards my mom.

[music: "Cowgirl" by The Album Leaf]

MS. TENORE: I was 11 years old when my mother passed away, and she had had a three-year struggle with breast cancer. And when she passed away, I really was in complete shock. Even though I knew that she was sick, everyone in my family said that she was going to be OK. And as an 11-year-old who was quite optimistic, I really did think that she was going to make it. And so when she passed away, I really felt like I had lost all control.

And so I began to search for something that I could have control over, and for me, that was food. And I started to severely decrease my food intake. I started to obsessively exercise and got so sick that I ended up in the hospital multiple times and in residential treatment for a year and a half. And one of the ways that I sort of integrated myself back into high school, since I was away for about three years, was by joining the cross country team.

And I would say that in the years since graduating college, I've done so much better. I mean, I've come so much farther than I ever thought that I would from that little girl who was 66 pounds and very unhealthy. But I still have to kind of keep in mind the fact that running could have a potentially detrimental effect if I begin to be too obsessive about it or if I start to only focus on burning calories. And so when I told my nutritionist and my therapist that I was thinking of running a marathon, they were both very skeptical. And they said, "Well, I don't know. This could be really bad for you. It could make you slip back into old behaviors." But for me, I really wanted to do it almost as a way to say that I don't want my eating issues to restrict what I can do in this world and in my life.

And I found that as I trained for the marathon I was actually much more focused on staying strong and staying healthy than I was on losing weight. And it wasn't always easy. So it was a real sort of learning experience, but also a real reminder of all the work that I've done to sort of let go of a lot of those eating issues that I so deeply struggled with.

I used to think a lot that my mom really wanted me to be perfect. And I think a lot of people who have struggled with eating issues tend to be Type A, tend to be perfectionists. And in some ways, while I was running, it was sort of liberating and freeing because I was trying to let go of that perfectionism and that tendency that I have to say, "Oh, you have to get the best time, and you have to run the best," and was really holding onto this gift of running that my mother gave me.

[music: "The Path" by Zoe Keating]

MR. JEET SINGH: I grew up running, actually. I was a soccer player growing up and so — a lot of distance running. I didn't enjoy running without a ball. It was an obligation for the privilege of being able to play soccer. It changed for me when I moved to Boston. I had just finished college, I was starting my graduate school at Harvard, and I didn't have a community with whom I could play soccer or basketball or any other sports that I loved.

And so I just found myself on the Charles River, and I just started to enjoy having that

time to myself to think about anything that was on my mind, whether it was something related to my studies, introspection, having to do with my own spirituality, thinking about my family and friends. It was just a really nice way to reflect.

MS. TIPPETT: In the Sikh tradition of Simran Jeet Singh, there is a duty to “hone the spiritual body in the same way that we hone our spiritual selves.”

MR. JEET SINGH: Sikhism sees the world as truth, and that truth permeates the entirety of the world. So “the creator is in the creation, and the creation is in the creator” is a phrase we often pull from our scripture. [reciting scripture in Arabic] And God is absolutely embedded in everything. And so service becomes a very important aspect of spirituality, of religious living.

And so one of the ways in which I find running to be incredibly powerful as a community service — I know most people don’t think of running as service — but one of the things for me is — when people see me on the street with my turban and beard, they have a number of preconceptions about the type of person I am. And most of these assumptions are deeply negative. At worst, they associate me with terrorism, which has happened to me on a number of my runs. In most cases, people at least see me as someone who is foreign or strange.

So running is, for me, a simple way to shatter these stereotypes. It challenges people to see me from a different perspective than they would otherwise. And so, I think probably the most unexpected way in which running has formed me has been its shaping of my discipline. I think the very practice of engaging in something every single day is in and of itself sort of a ritual that shapes somebody much in the way that religious ritual would. And so, in that sense, I think running has really contributed to my ethical formation, in that it has helped to create a sense of accountability and of mental fortitude, so that when I am faced with situations that are difficult, I am more likely to say and do the right thing because of this daily practice of running.

[music: “History Day” by Mogwai]

MS. TIPPETT: I’m Krista Tippett, and this is On Being. Today, exploring running as a spiritual practice, as told through the voices and stories of runners.

MS. CHRISTY MARVIN: My first memory of running is out-running my older brother. One of his forms of entertainment when I was a child was to just tease, torment, torture in any way that he could. And it didn’t take me very long to figure out that I could out-run him. So probably about the time I was 5 years old, I started hitting the streets to get away from him.

MS. TIPPETT: Christy Marvin is an award-winning, record-breaking mountain runner in Palmer, Alaska. She’s a devout Christian who weaves faith and prayer into extreme sport — climbing up cliffs, running through mud and snow. Christy excels in these terrains, and she’s raising three boys who do as well.

MS. MARVIN: When you’re a mom, and you’re at home, the quickest way to get your child’s attention is to sit down and look comfortable. So for me, to connect with God on a real one-on-one basis and undistracted, when I’m at home and I have three screaming children running around the house, it doesn’t really happen. So my running time is my alone time, and it is my time when I rejuvenate my mind and my body, and when I really do feel like I not only come back from my runs with what they call a runner’s high — I

come back with a spiritual high as well.

Because the whole time that I'm out there running, I'm praying, and I'm talking to God, and I'm asking him to help me in all different walks of my life, help to be a better wife and a better mother. And particularly when I'm competing, I do find what I call power verses that I look for before every race that I run. And I really think on those.

And I commit them to memory so that I can pull on them and I can call on them when I reach those points in the race when I feel weak, and I don't feel like I can do it on my own, and I feel like I need a greater strength and power. There's some in Psalms. Psalms 46, 1-3 says, "God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore, we will not fear though the Earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea. Though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging."

[music: "On the Long Road Home" by The End of the Ocean]

MS. MARVIN: The races — I absolutely do get wrapped up in the competition, and I do want to win when I step on the starting line. I don't just go at it from the perspective of another time of prayer and meditation. I mean, I'm out there to compete, but I absolutely know that I cannot do it on my own, and that I cannot even begin to push myself to the extent that God can help me to push myself. And two years ago in Mount Marathon when I came down to the bottom of the mountain, my legs felt like noodles. They felt like they were going to buckle. Everything in your body is hurting at that point. Sometimes when the pain gets to be too much, I literally call on God and I just say that, "You know, Jesus, you have to carry me all the way home because I feel too weak on my own, and I just need you to pull me through."

I knew that he hadn't brought me this far to see me fail now, and that I really just needed to act out all of that training and all of the preparation that together we had done through those many hours spent on the trails and up mountains and over rivers. I just needed to dig, and I needed to call on every ounce of strength that I had left.

[music: "El Aparato" by Cafe Tacuba]

MS. TIPPETT: We close this hour with Olympic gold medalist Billy Mills. He won a gold medal at the 1964 Olympics in Tokyo. There, he set a world record in the 10,000-meter race, and he's still the only American to win a gold medal in that event. Billy grew up on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota.

MR. MILLS: My first memory of running was — a Jesuit priest gave my father what I'll call a book, but it was actually a collection of articles. And one of the articles said, as my dad read them to me, "Olympians are chosen by the gods." And I wanted to become an Olympian. I wanted to be chosen by the gods. And it had absolutely nothing to do with the Olympic Games. My mother had just died, and I thought if I was chosen by the gods, even if they were the Olympic gods, perhaps I would be able to see my mother again.

At that point, I thought I would try boxing. I had six fights in the ring, zero wins and six losses and that hurt. [laughs] I tried basketball. I was slow. I got in for a game and lost it because I went to the wrong basket and scored two points. Football hurt. But I ran, and then I felt spirituality. I could feel my feet pounding against the earth. I could breathe in, and if the wind is blowing in the right direction, a quarter of a mile away there would be some wild flowers, and I could inhale the fragrance of the flowers. And it felt spiritual.

The first official track meet I was in, the little Indian boys lined up. We go into this white community, and all of the young white athletes had on track shoes, track uniforms. I had on basketball shoes, Levis, and a t-shirt. At the School of Mines in Rapid City, South Dakota, I got dead last in the 400 meters, but I enjoyed it. I enjoyed the movement, the activity.

So when my dad died, and I was 12, I didn't really pursue much running. Then I get to high school. I am 5'1", 102 pounds, the second smallest young boy at the school, Haskell Indian School in Lawrence, Kansas. And the coach was talking to us and he simply said, "One of you can do something magical in sport. One of you could become a great athlete." Just having the coach point at me saying, "One of you could do something magical," I felt it was my dad speaking to me. My sophomore year, the third race I ran, I won - was undefeated the rest of my high school career. So I came out of high school with the fourth fastest mile in the nation, making good grades — ended up with a full athletic scholarship at the University of Kansas.

[music: "El Aparato" by Cafe Tacuba]

MR. MILLS: My practice as I got ready for the Olympic Games started when I was still in college. And I came so close to suicide. Our society was breaking me. I was caught between Plessy vs. Ferguson, white and black America, equal but separate, being overturned with Brown vs. Board of Education. So in many ways, if you were not a white athlete or a black athlete, you didn't fit into this change that was occurring in America, white leadership, black leadership in conflict for equality.

So if you were maybe Latino, Hispanic, Native American, Asian, male, female, you didn't really fit into that equation. So I felt like I didn't belong, yet I was facing some of the racism. When I made All-American — and this has happened at several occasions — many people were taking photographs, but there was always one photographer, three years in a row, who asked me to get out of the photo.

And I remember a little bit of me breaking. I go back to my hotel room, and I'm going to jump. And I didn't hear it through my ears; I heard it underneath my skin, movement. And the movement, in many ways, formed a word, the energy of the movement. I felt I could hear, "Don't." Four times. The fourth time powerful, gentle, loving, "Don't." And, to me, it was my dad's voice.

So I'm crying, and I wrote down a dream: gold medal, 10,000 meter run. The Creator has given me the ability. The rest is up to me. Believe, believe, believe, believe. And what I did — I took the Native American culture, tradition, spirituality. They became the core of my Olympic pursuit, simply because I felt the virtues and the values of culture, tradition, spirituality that are positive would give me confidence, would give me direction, would give me a clarity of mind to make a positive decision and stay the course. And that became the core of my Olympic training.

It was, in a sense, not to win a gold medal at the Games, although I wanted to try to win the gold medal. I wanted to try to get a world record. But the number one objective of my Olympic pursuit was to heal a broken soul. And I look back — it just blows me away. A 77-year-old man, and I know what it is to be broken, but I also know what it is to be on a healing journey. You feel you're never healed, but the journey is a lifetime.

I'll tell you what went through my mind when I was running my Olympic race. So now we're in Tokyo, Japan. The race is under way. Lap after lap, runners fall behind. I

remember crossing the three-mile within one second of my fastest three-mile ever but we had over three more miles to go. There was absolutely no way I could continue, but it was just one more try, one more try.

120 meters to go. I feel like I'm 12 yards behind. I've got to go now. Lifting my knees, lengthening my stride, pumping my arms, coming off the final curve, 95, maybe 85 meters. I can see the finish line. And as I go by the runner that moved into lane five so I can go by him, I look, and out of the corner of my eye on his jersey, I saw an eagle. It was back to my dad, so powerful. "You do these things, Son. Someday, you can have wings of an eagle." It was wings of an eagle. "I can win. I can win. I can win." Sixty meters to go, maybe 55 meters to go, the thoughts were so powerful. I may never be this close again. I've got to do it now.

I felt the tape break across my chest. An official came up to me, and he says, "Who are you? Who are you?" And I go, "Oh my God, did I miscount the laps?" He said, "Finished, the new Olympic champion." And I put one finger up, and I said, "Did I win? Number one?" He says, "New Olympic champion." I said, "I've got to find the runner to tell him the eagle on his singlet helped me win." I found him. I look, and there's no eagle. It was simply a perception. And I realized that perceptions create us or destroy us, but we have that opportunity to create our own journey.

[music: "Silence of Siberia" by Lowercase Noises]

MS. TIPPETT: This show came about while we were producing stories for the podcast, *Creating Our Own Lives* — COOL for short, hosted by Lily Percy.

MS. LILY PERCY: You know, I don't know much about this but it sounds like you're practicing mindfulness when you're running, because you're really paying attention to your body, which is a big part of mindfulness.

MR. JUSTIN WHITAKER: Yeah, and one of my big influences was an author named Danny Dreyer, a runner who created ChiRunning, after learning Tai chi exercises. And it's incredibly similar. It's a lot about mindfulness of the body and really feeling what's going on, learning appropriate posture and then relaxing into it. And, of course, I do mindfulness meditation regularly. And it's really — so many of the things are very similar, the way you set up, the way you kind of put some work into creating the right posture. Then you need to relax and just kind of see what comes up for you.

[music: "Arrabal" by Gotan Project]

MS. TIPPETT: You can subscribe to the *Creating Our Own Lives* podcast on iTunes. All 11 full episodes on running as a spiritual practice, with the voices you heard this hour, are there to download now. You can also, as always, listen again to this show and all of our podcasts at onbeing.org.

[music: "Arrabal" by Gotan Project]

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