

Once an Amish Runner: Tensions of Living Deliberately

Douglas HOCHSTETLER, Ph.D.¹

Abstract

This article examines the theme of living deliberately, a concept prominent in both American philosophy and literature and one pertinent to the broader field of Kinesiology. The method for this project includes comparing the practices and commitments of Old Order Amish runners, as described by Bart Yasso (2012), with the writings of John L. Parker (1978) and Henry David Thoreau (1964). Several tensions become apparent when examining these works, tensions which provide a deeper understanding of what it means to strive towards a deliberately lived existence. This article focuses on three such tensions: work and play; the individual and community; and depth and breadth of experience.

Keywords: *Running, Running Motivation, Commitment, Attitude*

An employee of *Runner's World* magazine since 1987, Bart Yasso holds the distinguished title of CRO – Chief Running Officer. His running résumé includes races on all seven continents and inventing the well-known (at least in the running community) Yasso 800s.¹ In the April 2012 edition of *Runner's World*, Yasso profiled an ethnic group in the manner of Christopher McDougall's *Born to Run* and the Tarahumara runners from Mexico. Yasso focused on a community famous for their insularity and religious devotion – the Old Order Amish. In particular, he chronicled his experience running with a group of Amish and Mennonite² in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania.

A long-time admirer of Amish culture, Yasso (2012) recently became aware of Amish running prowess, noting an Old Order Amish team's participation

¹ *Professor of Kinesiology, Discipline Coordinator, Health & Human Development, Penn State University, Lehigh Valley*

in the Ragnar Relay series, a 200-mile team race across the eastern portion of Pennsylvania. The group, named Vella Shpringa (meaning roughly, “Let’s run”), competed in the “ultra” section of the event, 6 runners completing more than 30 miles each. This team finished 1st in the ultra-division and 4th overall (as compared with other 12-person teams). In his article, Yasso openly wonders if “Amish traditions of hard work and endurance, their history of farming, of stoicism and few automobiles conspired to create a potential stockpile of superior long-distance runners . . . Sort of *Born to Run* meets *Witness*” (p. 114).

Intrigued by Yasso’s article, and as an experienced runner with ties to both the Mennonite and Amish communities, I participated in a moonlight run with the Vella Shpringa group on a steamy night in July of 2014. Our group of approximately 75 runners – a mix of Amish, Mennonite and “English”³ – ran 8.8 miles along the gently rolling roads and farmland of Lancaster County. The Amish men dressed alike in long, black pants with suspenders; some wore traditional short-sleeve buttoned shirts while others sported tech shirts from local races. The lone Amish female runner wore a full-length dress along with a vest (for night-time visibility). All of the Amish runners ran in modern running shoes and more than a few sported GPS watches. During the course of our evening together, I engaged these runners in conversation. I came away deeply impressed with these individuals, their commitment both to running and their local community, and their gift of hospitality and concern for others. My run with the Amish adds an experiential component to this project and enables me to expand on Yasso’s observations of the Old Order Amish runners throughout the paper.

Yasso’s article touches on themes found in an essay by David Dowling (2007). In ‘*Hard as a Diamond*,’ Dowling examines the concept of living deliberately, focusing on *Once a Runner*; a novel by John L. Parker (1978), and Henry David Thoreau’s (1964) works, including *Walden* and *Walking*. Dowling describes the primary characters in each – Parker’s protagonist, Quentin Cassidy, a college miler focused on his quest to crack the four-minute mile mark; and Thoreau – the writer, scholar, and walker. While acknowledging that this notion of living deliberately is “impossibly huge in Thoreau” (p. 115), Dowling finds clarity by examining Thoreau’s work

alongside Parker's. Dowling writes that "Deliberate living is not just a philosophy, but a habit of living that is only as transcendent and liberating as it is 'hard as a diamond' for Cassidy and sturdy and 'Spartanlike' for Thoreau" (p. 115).

In the subsequent sections I examine this theme of living deliberately, comparing the Amish runners, as described by Yasso (2012) along with my own observations, with the writings of Parker (1978) and Thoreau (1964). My approach is to explore and draw conclusions regarding several tensions related to living deliberately from the American philosophical tradition which Anderson & Lally (2004) term "radical empiricism." This method puts a premium on human involvement, where "concepts are tools for making our experiences articulate . . . [and the details of human experience] count as 'evidence'" (p. 17). Examining physical activity through three different narrative accounts helps in our understanding of how best to deeply engage in our human endeavors. In the language of anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1972), we may examine these stories about running in an interpretive manner or cultural text of sorts. In this way we learn what these narratives mean with regards to living deliberately.

Adding the Old Order Amish runners as an additional point of comparison to Dowling's essay provides another layer of understanding, richness and complexity. Most notably, the Amish runners demonstrate the difficulty when a practice community (MacIntyre, 1984) and religious community hold potentially conflicting values. Several tensions become apparent when examining these works, tensions which provide a deeper understanding of what it means to strive towards a deliberately lived existence. I focus on three such tensions – work and play; individual and community; and depth and breadth of experience. These are tensions to which Dowling (2007) alludes but I attempt to explore in greater detail. I want to note two important points here. First, for the sake of brevity I paint the Amish lifestyle and culture with a very broad brush. There are many subtle differences between Amish groups (e. g., type of clothing, access to technology) but it is beyond the scope of this paper to fully describe these differences. Second, those familiar with Thoreau and also Parker's protagonist Cassidy undoubtedly recognize their extreme individualism. This may, at first glance, seem at definite odds with the conformity exemplified by the Amish tradition

and communal way of life. Despite the dramatic differences, I hope to demonstrate how the Amish culture and religion includes an aspect of deliberate living similar to Thoreau's life at Walden and Parker's character of Cassidy. While the Amish do not engage in classical exercise such as strength training or yoga, their running pursuits are consistent with their value of outdoor, manual labor. The physical demands of Amish farm life, for example, bear a minimalist and vigorous quality similar to endurance running, activities which coalesce in meaningful ways.

Living Deliberately

Before unpacking the tensions it is crucial to go into greater detail regarding this theme of deliberate living. The deliberate life involves choosing one's *own* life, thoughtfully considering the available options presented within one's particular context. Before moving to his cabin beside Walden Pond for two years, for example, Thoreau pondered where best to settle for a season of time. He considered numerous possibilities, carefully weighing the potential of each plot of land. Thoreau observed that too often people relegated personal agency to others, living out someone *else's* life as opposed to one they actually chose. With his Harvard education, Thoreau felt the pressure of societal expectations to choose some worthy occupation such as law, medicine, or the clergy.

Expounding on this theme, Dowling (2007) contends that deliberate living, as described by both Parker (1978) and Thoreau (1964), is indeed exceptionally difficult and "hard as a diamond." Cassidy observed that his running "grounded him in the basics. There was both life and death in it" (Parker, p. 110). Despite the challenges, he knew that these efforts pointed towards growth and progress. Parker writes that Cassidy:

was merely trying to slip into a lifestyle that he could live with, strenuous but not unendurable by any means, out of which, if the corpuscles and the capillaries and the electrolytes were properly aligned in their own mysterious configurations, he might do even better something that he had already done quite well (p. 180).

Beyond merely hard work, however, deliberate living requires an element of intentionality.

Thoreau (1964) embarks upon his experiment at Walden Pond, removing himself from the civilized world of Concord, Massachusetts. He moves to a cabin in order to “transact some private business with the fewest obstacles,” (p. 275) or put another way, “to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life” (p. 343). In a similar manner, Cassidy (in Parker, 1978) takes up residence in a remote abode (at the prompting of his coach), intent on transacting his own private business which involves shaving precious seconds from his mile time. Both individuals represent attempts to intentionally cultivate, through considerable reflection and with conscious intent, an economy of life conducive to transcendence – an existence where deliberate living becomes paramount. Put simply, both individuals make a personal decision regarding conduct of life, a decision dramatically at odds with conventional society.

Furthermore, Dowling (2007) emphasizes the importance of movement as central to the deliberate life Thoreau (1964) and Parker (1978) attempt to create. “Physical, immediate experience functions as an avenue toward divine transcendental energies in Thoreau, and ‘purification’ in Parker” (p. 115), observes Dowling. Cassidy reflected that “Training was a rite of purification; from it came speed, strength” (Parker, p. 122). He realized a focused plan with a combination of intensive speed work and long runs would help create, for him, a meaningful existence. For Thoreau, physical labor brings about a higher sensibility and eventually informs his writing (Dowling, p. 121). He observes, “I think that I cannot preserve my health and spirits unless I spend four hours a day at least – and it is commonly more than that – sauntering through the woods” (p. 594). Or, in Dowling’s words, Thoreau “takes up the pen only after he has just finished physically bonding with nature through vigorous wood chopping or bean hoeing” (p. 122).

To live deliberately also requires a sense of broader contemporary society. Dowling (2007) notes that both Cassidy and Thoreau “diagnose a spiritual malaise and prescribe deliberate living to access an authentic life in an increasingly inauthentic culture” (p. 116). Cassidy and Thoreau were not content to settle into a blasé existence, conformed to the whims of culture. Rather, they took steps to explore their potential, through purposeful efforts and hard work. Thoreau demonstrated a willingness to leave society for

a two year period, to relinquish other responsibilities and economize his life. Through his sustained effort, Thoreau hoped that this ascetic lifestyle would, like Cassidy, ultimately produce results.

Rather than a wholesale rejection of, and aversion to other people and humanity in general, Moller (1980) identifies the polarities evidenced in Thoreau's life and writing: "The need for solitude and wildness, and the need for community" (p. 98). When Thoreau leaves Walden he does so to participate more fully in community once again. While on the one hand Thoreau wrote critically about cities and the broader society, his writing also includes aspirations of community albeit in his individualistic vein. In this way Thoreau resembles the Amish in their ambitious efforts to cultivate a form of what they view as true community.

These notions of hard work, intentionality, and movement – all central to the theme of deliberate living – point us toward the Amish runners with cultural values of community, hard work, and spiritual devotion. Projects like barn raising (an Amish tradition where men work en masse to rebuild barns demolished by fire or natural disasters) are part of the Amish social fabric while viewed as peculiar by outsiders. Helping others comes naturally and is part of their individual and collective identity. These communal Amish values correspond with the Amish runners and more broadly, Dowling's (2007) essay on living deliberately. Additionally, the writings of Yasso (2012), Parker (1978), and Thoreau (1964) exhibit several areas of tension related to living deliberately, themes which help explicate this difficult notion.

Work and Play

First, the Amish runners provide a means to examine the tension between work and play as part of this theme of deliberate living. We commonly attach these terms to our daily human endeavors. We head to "work" in the morning and "play" on the weekend or after the "work" is finished. In his seminal book, *The Grasshopper*, Bernard Suits (2005) defines work as "activity which is instrumentally valuable" (p. 146) and play as "activity which is intrinsically valuable" (p. 146). When we approach tasks for the purpose of producing results and experience the activity itself as toil, we are at work. Conversely, when engaged in activities which we find

significant, activities which we experience as good in themselves apart from any potential outcomes, we are at play. Suits continues that work is “a kind of necessary evil which we accept because it makes it possible for us to do things we think of as being good in themselves” (p. 32). Runners drag themselves to the track, for example, not because they necessarily love the pain of interval work,⁴ but because this preparation enables them to run faster on race day. This is part of the tension in that some activities, like running, may be experienced as both work and play.

The habits that Cassidy and Thoreau cultivate – running and walking – help them create a deliberate life. While both individuals cover many miles in the process, their goals and overall approach are noticeably different. In this way, they represent the potential stance one might take towards human endeavors. Viewing an activity as either work or play depends, in part, on this stance and also the activity itself. Some approach running with a sense of anticipation, while others find toil. Some tolerate running for instrumental reasons – as a means to lose weight or prepare for a sport season – while others appreciate the strenuousness of the discipline. Furthermore, the nature of play itself is, as Kretchmar (2005) describes, both “fragile and temporary” (p. 147) because of its subjective composition. Even during the same run, for example, the runner may experience the fluid nature of this stance towards the activity. There are moments when she revels in the sounds and sights which nature provides, and other times when she experiences the run as sheer drudgery and finishing is the only thing on her mind.

Amish culture, and the Amish runners in particular, exemplify this tension between work and play. Yasso (2012) joins the runners on a spirited, full-moon jaunt through an area locals call the Valley of No Wires.⁵ Along the way conversation ranges from “personal bests, upcoming races, business ups and downs, [to] good-natured insults” (p. 98). The effort described is clear, yet the attitude is certainly jovial. The Amish runners balance their determined efforts with a sense of play, ending their run with more banter over whoopee pies⁶ and coffee. Additionally, given their racing success it is clear these individuals also put in the time and effort required for running improvement. On my run, several Amish noted their track workouts and the importance for speed development to meet their own running goals. In

fact, one of our group members had recently won a local 10k race, a fact highlighted by one of his Amish running friends.

The broader Amish community certainly values laborious effort, evidenced through the rituals of planting and harvesting toil and daily manual labor. As viewed by outsiders, the Amish are known as a hard-working lot. However, the Amish community does not view pursuits like running as important as work that has utility; effort in baling hay or harvesting corn is deemed more valuable than striving to produce faster times. Yet the Old Order leaders continue to allow their adherents to run, so long as running does not produce the kind of prideful displays disdained by the broader Amish community. To this end, Amish runners maintain a modest decorum regarding their running prowess. Consistent with their approach to farm work, and craftsmanship in general, the Amish community values excellence albeit with humility. They approach their tasks (including running) with the belief that doing things well is a way to honor God and one's gifts, as opposed to the pursuit of excellence for personal acclaim. For example, one of the Vella Shpringa members, a Mennonite runner named Jim Smucker,⁷ recently ran with an Amish runner in a 100 mile race in Virginia. Smucker told the runner, "You are most likely the first Old Order Amish person ever to run and finish a 100-mile race." The Amish runner quipped, "Yes, most likely, but we don't need to tell anyone or talk about it."

Like the Amish, Thoreau (1964), too, believed that strenuous labor could produce results but he was more skeptical of societal norms in this regard. His concern was that work could be completed with hopes of "progress" without any real change on the part of the individual. "A man may be very industrious," wrote Thoreau, "and yet not spend his time well. There is no more fatal blunderer than he who consumes the greater part of his life getting a living" (p. 636). Thoreau advocated for one's effort to be connected with a transcendent life – effort consistent with meliorism; in other words, striving towards improvement for both self and others. He wrote that "If a man walks in the woods for love of them half of each day, he is in danger of being regarded as a loafer; but if he spends his whole day as a speculator, shearing off those woods and making earth bald before her time, he is esteemed an industrious and enterprising citizen"

(p. 633). Thoreau's friends and neighbors were skeptical of his leisurely pursuits like walking – they did not view these efforts as being adequately industrious.

While Thoreau (1964) was quite active throughout his life – walking, boating, skating and hoeing beans – he approached these physical pursuits in a manner different from his writing. He discovered that physical activity enabled him to explore both his natural surroundings as well as his inner muse. Thoreau recognized that his walking held “nothing in it akin to taking exercise, as it is called, as the sick take medicine at stated hours – the swinging of dumbbells or chairs; but is itself the enterprise and adventure of the day” (p. 596). In this sense, while serving a utilitarian purpose of fueling his writing sensibilities, Thoreau clearly anticipated his walks and did not perceive them as toil.

For Cassidy (in Parker, 1978), running is quite clearly a form of discipline. When asked about his running, Cassidy responds, “See, when you're doing the actual thing itself, it's competitive and serious, I don't think anybody really has much fun at it. Rarely in practice and *never* in meets” (pp. 66-67). His main motivation for running is not the transcendental qualities that Thoreau (1964) proposes, nor does he perform these workouts for fun.⁸ He runs for instrumental reasons, in other words to achieve his running goals. He may saunter, or jog, on his recovery runs and while these workouts may appear enjoyable, they too serve a greater purpose – to enable harder work on subsequent days. Runners who joined Cassidy's Southeastern team thought they could “pick up on the Secret” (p. 35). The experienced runners like Cassidy knew that “The new runner would find [the training program] more tedious than he could bear. The awful truth would begin to dawn on him: there was no Secret!” (p. 36). The only path to success involved strenuous and continual effort.

In sum, these works offer several implications with regards to a quest for deliberate living. First, Dowling (2007) raises the possibility that we might escape “the work/play binary that dominates the industrialized capitalistic world” (p. 121). This line of thought is consistent with Kelso & Engstrom (2006), and more recently, Kretchmar (2014), who contend that many common tensions (e.g., work and play) are actually complementary

rather than polemical in nature. The Amish runners, and more broadly, the Amish culture, provide a possible model in this sense; they portray both commitment and strenuousness combined with a light-hearted approach and quality of humility. They take running seriously but do not take themselves, as runners, too seriously.

Thoreau (1964) provides guidance in escaping the work/play binary as well. He advocates for intentionality in human projects and with commitments in general. While Thoreau often spoke highly of farmers, for example, he cautions the reader against commitments which end up “owning” them and thus dictating one’s life. If, on the other hand, we can become more deliberate in our choices with regards to what we normally refer to as work, we may be in a better position to experience those commitments in the spirit of adventure, meaning, and perhaps even what we think of as play. Both Cassidy and Thoreau go to extreme lengths to pursue the limits of possibility, an extreme which may not be feasible for the majority of people. In this sense our contemporary value of the balanced life may reside, perhaps surprisingly, closer to the Amish way of life.

Parker (1978), through Cassidy, also provides considerations albeit in a slightly cautionary manner. In large part, Cassidy approaches his *workouts* as activities to endure. While his training regimen, at times, includes more reflective and transcendent moments,⁹ Parker describes many of Cassidy’s runs as brutal and death-like, without the intrinsic qualities seemingly apparent in the Amish running experience or in Thoreau’s writing. We may reflect on the extent to which we want our lives to include activities pursued solely, or even mostly, for their extrinsic properties. In addition to this severe quality, Cassidy’s training becomes all-consuming as he isolates himself. His solitary quest may serve as a reminder that our projects, while personally fulfilling, may at times cause rifts in our relationships or other responsibilities. Shunning family or work obligations to train and race, for example, may come at a steep price – one which leads to another tension in the quest for living deliberately.

Individual and Community

In addition to work and play, all three writings illustrate a related tension in the quest for living deliberately – a tension between the individual and

community. Yasso (2012) observes this struggle for the Amish runners, as they attempt to balance an activity like running, and their personal performance goals, with their identity as a member of an ethnic and religious community. For example, one of the runners, who Yasso interviews, asks to remain anonymous “partly out of concern that church elders might think their running is self-centered or otherwise violative of the group’s teaching” (p. 96). Amish runners fear their pursuits could potentially go the route of softball – a sport banned by church elders in Lancaster County as a result of the “display of pride, or modernity” (p. 100). While the Amish live apart from society (at least in terms of their lifestyle) they remain vitally connected to their own insular community, abiding by prescribed rules which place a premium on community and conformity as opposed to individualism. Wisdom comes from the religious community of faith and, ultimately, the Bible as opposed to the self-exploration advocated by Thoreau. The Amish interact with contemporary society although they hope to be *in* the world rather than *of* the world (a rough scriptural paraphrase of John 17:14).

While the Amish runners with whom I interacted demonstrated an aspect of conformity through their plain clothes, it also became apparent that they were keenly aware of “the world.” For example, one of the group organizers introduced me to several Amish runners. As we began to chat, their first topics of discussion focused on LeBron James’ move back to Cleveland and the upcoming World Cup championship soccer match between Germany and Argentina.

In a sense the Amish lifestyle constraints illustrate a form of Thoreau’s voluntary poverty – a restricted life intentionally and deliberately chosen. In both cases, this mode of being clears the way for more transcendent life. Amish youth thoughtfully and prayerfully consider whether or not to join the church, and accept the requisite conditions. It is on many levels an individual decision although the cultural ties to conformity are very strong. The Young Center for Anabaptist and Pietist Studies reports that over eighty-five percent of Amish youth eventually join the church, accepting the Amish way of life.¹⁰ While both Thoreau and Cassidy choose a solitary existence, at least for a period of time, living in seclusion conflicts with the very nature of the Amish community. For the Amish runners, a Walden

experiment, or one in the vein of Cassidy's solitary retreat, would be viewed as exceedingly selfish and certainly misunderstood.

The Old Order Amish hold numerous collective values which permeate their tight-knit culture. As a community, the Amish hold hard work as a cultural value, one that is transmitted to younger generations, often through labor-intensive farm chores. This explains, in part, why Yasso (2012) finds the Amish community admirable and worthy of consideration. The Amish remain skeptical of technology because of how they perceive technological devices will impact families and communities. Home land line phones, for example, may negatively impact family dinner table conversation. Some Amish values – such as grace or forgiveness – reflect religious beliefs. For example, in 2006 a lone gunman shot and killed 5 Amish school girls in southern Lancaster County. This tragedy subsequently led to national attention on the Amish community response of forgiveness and reconciliation with the gunman's family. These examples of communal values – hard work, skepticism towards technology, and emphasis on forgiveness and reconciliation – represent the Amish community's deliberate attempt to cultivate a way of life which upholds their religious tenets.

The Amish runners also illustrate a related tension between a practice community such as running and its intersection with the broader Amish community. The Amish runners wrestle with what it means to run fast, and what it takes to get there, against the values of their faith community. After Yasso (2012) spoke to a gathered group of Amish and Mennonites, one Amish runner (a veteran of seven marathons and a 2:49 marathon personal record) queried Yasso about training plans and techniques. Some of these runners, at least, clearly enjoy competing and are striving to improve their performance. But as members of their church community, they are deeply aware of church doctrine as it impacts their pursuits. One runner, a member of the winning relay team, noted this very tension: "When you start to elevate the individual above the community, that's a bad thing . . . I wouldn't want to win a race to put the attention on anything I've ever done, but if I could do it to inspire other people, that's something I would do" (p. 101). Yet these runners set themselves apart from other Amish by virtue of the running practice community, in the same way Mormon basketball

players live in a manner differently than their religious counterparts. By gradually taking part in their respective sport practice communities, both the Amish runners and Mormon athletes gradually assimilate into the sport-related culture which may, at times, conflict with the values of their religious and ethnic community.

Although running invariably entails individual elements, the Amish runners find ways to dovetail a seemingly solo and introspective pursuit such as running with a social element. In fact, the Vella Shpringa group self-identifies with the slogan: “The joy of running in community.” My own experience certainly confirms the social nature of Amish running. My chatty group included not only Amish farmers but also an individual who worked in the siding business and another in stone masonry. Conversation en route ranged from work issues to family changes to upcoming races. Group training runs include runners at various speeds and ability levels where everyone is included, regardless of fitness level. For example, the night I ran with the Amish, runners divided themselves into three groups depending on running pace. The slower groups started first with the intent that everyone finish at roughly the same time. Those Amish who race typically do so with other Amish or Mennonite friends and compete in pursuit of personal excellence rather than vanity. Consistent with their humble roots, they are not likely to brag about running prowess or accomplishments and typically keep their individual medals but stow them somewhere out of sight, so as not to appear proud.

While the Amish runners demonstrate the complexity of pursuing individual goals as members of a religious community, Cassidy (in Parker, 1978), like Thoreau, embarks on a largely individual project apart from his teammates. On one hand he is deeply immersed in the running practice community, and seeks wisdom from his coach and other knowledgeable runners, although he chooses a solitary mode of training to work towards improvement. While Cassidy forges his initial identity as a runner as part of a team, he withdraws from community with the express purpose of improving himself in order to return to community (and perform well on the public stage of racing). While some elite runners, like American distance star Ryan Hall, live and train primarily as individuals, others (such as the Hanson Brooks project or Nike Oregon project members) opt

for a communal approach which resembles Kenyan training. Similar to Cassidy, Thoreau (1964) recognized that his family's bustling house in Concord was not conducive to the reflection he needed as a scholar. While Thoreau lived at Walden, he maintained contact with his literary friends, others with a transcendental bent. He withdraws from society for this two year period, but does so informed by and a product of his contemporary culture. Thoreau's isolation enables him to write not only for self but also in observation and critique of 19th century society. Moller (1980) identifies the paradox evident in that Thoreau "for two years, sought solitude in the woods, . . . eloquently preached self-reliance and independence, yet . . . felt, all his life, a deep need for human intimacy and true community" (p. 181).

Dowling (2007) writes that Thoreau wants to "focus our attention toward the harder question of our ability to find meaning, rather than money, in the things we do" (p. 114). The Amish runners certainly find a degree of individual meaning through running. They display the characteristics of the broader running community – with trendy running shoes – yet they adhere to church doctrine, dressed in standard Amish attire. The identity of these runners, while impacted by their interest and performance in running, does not appear to dominate their identity as compared with Cassidy and Thoreau. Running, for these Amish, is largely a leisure-time pursuit and they find identity elsewhere, through their place of employment and broader Amish community. Conversely, Cassidy identifies himself as a "real runner" while Thoreau finds his identity as a literary figure and scholar. Yet, as the Amish runners become more dedicated to their running pursuits, they face a choice of whether or not to become known as runners – with all of the commitment this holds, potentially at odds with their religious community.¹¹

In terms of implications, this tension between the individual and community continues to permeate our modern lives with repercussions on our search for deliberate living. Western culture emphasizes an individual nature which, at times, gradually results in either isolation or alienation. As Putnam (2001) writes in *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, "we have been pulled apart from one another and from our communities over the last third of the [20th] century" (p. 27).

Yet we also tend towards identification with community in the sense of adopting prevailing societal values. We may be reluctant to join a bowling league but opt instead for connecting with others through social media.

To a certain extent the balance point between the individual and community is a matter of personal regard. The Amish runners clearly tend towards the communal side of the spectrum while those like Cassidy and Thoreau align closer to the individual space. Some runners find energy in the presence of others; they seek out running clubs, running partners, and perhaps post training and racing results online. Others draw strength from solitude, if only for brief periods of time. This type of runner looks forward to the pursuit as a means of personal reflection. Neither type of individual – one who tends toward the communal or towards the individual – is necessarily better. It is only when one moves closer to the extremes that concerns may arise.

Like Thoreau and Cassidy, we may need seasons of reflection and time spent apart from society to gain clarity of thought. Conversely, we may need seasons and times of corporate identity and goals more in keeping with the Amish way of life. Regardless, we should remain vigilant regarding our personal tendencies and societal context. Thoreau was concerned that 19th century United States was weighted too heavily towards community, prompting his retreat to Walden. If contemporary Western culture is indeed weighted too heavily towards the individual, we might learn from the communal approach of the Amish.

Depth and Breadth of Human Experience

In addition to the previous tensions, all three works illustrate the extent to which choices between depth and breadth of human experience impact the ability to live deliberately. Here I have in mind the choice between focusing our efforts in a particular area versus exploring many different paths without the corresponding depth. One way to think about this distinction is to use and unpack the familiar labels of “runner” and “jogger.” While these terms serve as general categories, the distinctions signify not only differences in speed or pace, but also commitment to the discipline and identity with the practice community (e.g., Smith, 1998, Hopsicker & Hochstetler, 2014). Cassidy (in Parker, 1978) noted the difference between himself and the

joggers or “philosopher runners” who could talk abstractly about running but “were generally nowhere to be seen on dark, rainy mornings” (p. 122). Runners, as a whole, not only move at a faster rate but also take their efforts more seriously; they are more likely to employ a variety of training runs (e.g., hills, intervals and tempo runs) and test themselves by racing. Conversely, joggers may compete on a casual basis (seeking to finish rather than race), perhaps focused on social benefits or losing weight. Furthermore, the distinction between joggers and runners (as emblematic of the difference between depth and breadth) brings to mind the relationship between amateurism and professionalism. From its Victorian era past, the notion of amateurism conjures up images of balance and fair play, the pursuit of excellence and the intrinsic rewards of sport. Conversely, professionalism necessitates a loss of balance, a single-minded pursuit of excellence in one, highly specialized, area. Within this sphere of professionalism, fair play may succumb to gamesmanship, a “win-at-all-cost” mentality, a premium placed on decisions based on economic profit, and overall loss of ethical standards. While the runner and jogger generalizations are certainly fluid, the distinctions provide a glimpse into our ability to choose varying paths and levels of commitment, choices embodied with the Amish runners.

Following his run with the Vella Shpringa group, Yasso (2012) ponders the notion of Amish running potential. “The Mennonites were good runners,” writes Yasso, “but the Amish – with their even harder lives, and even stricter rules, were clearly a cut above,” leading Yasso to wonder, “Man . . . with a little more training, just how good could these guys be?” (p. 99). Indeed, top 10 finishers in their local race, the 2013 Bird-in-Hand Half Marathon and 5k, include numerous Amish runners. Yasso’s question astutely identifies the potential link between a life spent “hard as a diamond” and potential running greatness, one predicated on depth. The running group I joined clearly included individuals with impressive racing profiles, their conversations naturally leading to stories of training workouts and upcoming events. One Vella Shpringa runner mentioned completing a 100 mile trail run in addition to his goal for an upcoming half-marathon – hoping to break 1:15 (5:44 per mile) for this distance. He mentioned this goal in response to another runner’s query, not in a way to bring honor to himself, but in a matter-of-fact approach which underscored his commitment to running and intent towards the training

this kind of goal entails. Should the Amish runners commit themselves to running and in this way experience a heightened degree of self? This singular focus might necessitate training solo, racing on Sunday mornings, attending running-related conferences, and spending money on technical gear and equipment – decisions and commitments which may be at odds with Amish cultural and religious values. Conversely, should the runners remain balanced in their approach and thus maintain a more muted and perhaps broad existence, continuing to run but in the context of Amish traditions and family commitments? This might mean running fewer miles, racing less often, racing only on Saturdays (so as not to conflict with Sunday morning worship), and spending less money on running-related paraphernalia.

There is something to be said for inclusive claims regarding the benefits of movement. Anderson (2001) contends, “Movement is a place where anyone might meet possibility, establish creativity, and in the process both learn about self and establish her or his ‘self’” (p. 145). One does not need to become an elite athlete, or even a dedicated runner, to reap some benefits of movement. The individual who embarks on a casual workout program dedicated to weight loss becomes open to new experiences in ways similar to the serious athlete – yet only to a degree. The individual who cross-trains or participates in a number of sports on a recreational basis experiences much, albeit in a different manner than one who chooses a singular purpose.

To explore the depth of human experience, in our case of running, requires work “hard as a diamond.” Runners like Cassidy realize that approaching one’s personal best requires “a certain amount of time spent precisely at the Red Line” (Parker, p. 109). In physiological terms, this means periodic training at threshold and interval pace, deliberately imposed stresses on the cardiovascular system which, under the right conditions and coupled with elements such as knowledgeable nutrition, flexibility, and race strategies, lead to faster running times. Athletes like Cassidy may criticize the Amish runners for not giving their entire being; in turn, the Amish runners may criticize Cassidy for giving too much. There is an acknowledgment in Thoreau’s (1964) writings that the strenuous or “hard as a diamond” lifestyle is largely a solitary effort. Perhaps this path is even restricted and

is not open to all. Dedicated runners like Cassidy may relish the fact that their efforts are exclusive. In fact, the recent explosion of ultra-marathon and trail running events suggests that some runners deem 5ks or even marathons as too tame and not wild enough. Recently, sporting goods manufacturer Pearl Izumi capitalized on this phenomena through an ad campaign which included one ad in particular: “Runners are wild. Joggers are runners who have been domesticated.”¹² In this vein the deliberate life requires an element of individual determination, a willingness to confront those moments of figurative death in order to grow.

The pursuit of depth certainly requires a focused and committed effort. Thoreau (1964) recognized the commitment required to become fully immersed in walking, writing:

If you are ready to leave father and mother, and brother and sister, and wife and child and friends, and never see them again – if you have paid your debts, and made your will, and settled all your affairs, and are a free man – then you are ready for a walk (p. 593).

Cassidy (in Parker, (1978) faced a similar situation regarding his calling as a runner. He realized he could choose between the “hearty challenges of lawn care . . . [or he could] strike fear in the heart of mediocre talent everywhere!” (p. 63). Reaching or even striving towards one’s potential only occurs with dedicated and complete commitment. Yet, the projects undertaken by Cassidy and Thoreau are not universally applicable; their experiments with life in extremis may not work for others. Thoreau understood this in that he did not intend for everyone to live in the woods; however, he advocated that each person find *their own* place to live. The Amish runners, for example, recognize their goals of development differ from Cassidy’s singular purpose of seeking excellence and Thoreau’s intention of discovering the meanness or sublimity of life.

Dowling (2007) rightly notes that the runner’s effort “through its very hardness brings vitality . . . [and] knowledge” (p. 118). Similarly, Thoreau (1964) found that during his time of solitude he “grew . . . like the corn in the night” (p. 363). He realized “the callous palms of the laborer [were] conversant with finer tissues of self-respect and heroism” (p. 597). These

arduous efforts bring one in contact with deeper issues and values in an experiential manner. Parker (1978) writes that “From the crucible of such inner turmoil come the various metals, soft or brittle, flawed or pure, precious or common, that determine the good runners, the great runners, and perhaps the former runners” (p. 120). Focused training and hard work creates an opportunity for refinement and the resultant knowledge. This is exactly the kind of life Thoreau sought, determined as he was to “drive life into the corner” (p. 344).

A commitment to depth, exemplified here by running, also provides what Anderson (2006) terms a “borderland existence” or “wildness” between the tameness of our over-civilized existence and the savagery evident in primitive culture. Like the Amish, Thoreau (1964) worried about the ease with which we fall into paths of societal conformity. Thoreau recognized the need to live in a counter-cultural manner since there were too many “champions of civilization” (p. 592). Running potentially takes one away from the normal work-world existence, the mundane and commonplace, leading towards places and opportunities for growth and testing one’s mettle. This process enables runners to interpret their own running-related, seemingly mundane training routine as informative and meaningful (Hockey, 2013).

At some point, as Thoreau (1964) wrote when leaving Walden, the runner may find other “lives to live,” times when other responsibilities take precedence. But until that time, individuals like Cassidy and Thoreau may be willing to do whatever it takes to accomplish their goals. Cassidy realized that during heavy training periods he became tired all the time, useless to everyone else. Parker (1978) rationalizes, “But then his life was most certainly focused on the Task. And hadn’t he decided at one time that he would do whatever was necessary to become . . . what it was he could become?” (p. 120). For the Amish runners, the willingness to do “whatever [is] necessary” conflicts with both family and religious values in a way that could ultimately compromise running potential. The Old Order Amish runners do not fear the hard work required for running success nor do they fear commitment in itself. Rather they are cautious of the nature of the commitment and how a singular focus on running might negatively impact their family or ties to the Amish community.

When faced with options between depth and breadth with respect to our human projects, we might consider several issues. First, at some point in our lives we may need to commit to either breadth or depth – it is difficult to have it both ways. As William James (1992) contended, individuals “seeking their truest, strongest, deepest self must . . . pick out the one on which to stake their salvation” (pp. 182 – 183). Thoreau, too, recommends commitment to some life calling, but only after full consideration of available and meaningful options. Additionally, it is possible to grow in both areas of depth and breadth; doing so necessitates time, patience, hard work and commitment. Each of us may have areas where we could more fully develop in terms of both breadth and depth – becoming a more proficient runner, for example, or taking up painting, classical guitar or woodworking.

Moving Towards Deliberate Living

From what can we learn regarding deliberate living in the context of these three influential pieces of writing and the tensions they bring to light? Dowling (2007) contends, “The full embrace of the physical life, and not a mere flirtation with it, forms the core of ‘the true runner’ just as Thoreau sets in motion the life of the transcendentalist through the physical process of living at Walden Pond” (p. 116). This full embrace of life requires what Anderson (2006) terms “working certainty” (p. 65), a notion Bugbee (1999) outlines in *An Inward Morning*; he contends that “certainty lies at the root of action that makes sense . . . a basis for action rather than arrival at a terminus of endeavor” (pp. 36 – 37). Thus, one makes the decision to run tentatively, perhaps, without knowing the end result but nonetheless with commitment.

How did Thoreau know that the Walden *experiment* would prove fruitful? The very notion of experiment involves a large degree of uncertainty and possibility of failure. How did Cassidy know going to the cabin would help improve his race times? How can the Amish runners be certain that their efforts will be worthwhile, not only individually but as part of the community too? The common thread with respect to these decisions involves a willingness to embrace the tenuousness of life. To make progress one must forge ahead – not haphazardly but with intentionality and through reflection. Indeed, working towards a sense of autonomy and

personal reflection may facilitate a deep commitment to, and appreciation for, endurance running (Næss, Säfvenbom & Standal, 2014). These individuals – Thoreau, Cassidy, the Amish runners – have seen others make progress within a practice community and felt the intimations that these commitments provide (Anderson & Lally, 2004). For example, over time the runner gradually becomes more integrated, and increasingly committed to, the discipline of running.

Despite their importance, commitment and this notion of working certainty do not, on their own, necessarily guarantee an exemplary conduct of life however. Put another way, this kind of deliberation may result in ill-informed or perhaps even harmful outcomes. The sporting world provides plenty of examples of athletes whose deliberate commitment towards winning resulted in unhealthy, and at times, unethical behavior. As sportswriter Rick Reilly (2014) contends, “The price of greatness is more than you want to pay. The world’s most legendary athletes are usually the ones most wildly out of balance.” Sport viewed as a particular practice community requires its adherents to display virtuous behavior combined with athletic excellence. In other words, it *does* matter how one plays the game. Furthermore, one might use this process of deliberateness to pursue one activity exclusively (e.g., Cassidy and Thoreau) and similarly possible to deliberate in a way which is more holistic in its approach (e.g., the Amish).

To the extent that we value individual achievement and the striving that this requires, some seasons of life may require us to focus on individual projects with self-regard bordering on selfishness. Even the Amish runners, with whom I joined, represented one particular season of life, all seemingly in the late 20s to mid-30s age group. Those individuals in the Amish community so-called master’s age or beyond may simply have too many other responsibilities to pursue running in a focused manner. Like Thoreau, we may need occasions to retreat to the woods figuratively speaking, times to pursue important research efforts, pedagogical refinement, community service responsibilities, or family commitments. However, Cassidy serves as a reminder that while pursuing our own goals we may do so at the expense of others. The Amish runners provide an opportunity to ponder at what points our individual endeavors may need to take a back seat,

or even become squelched, because of our own community. The hyper-competitive master's runner, for example, may realize that taking care of an ailing parent may supersede training for a particular race.

As we strive towards a life we trust is deliberate and significant, as we pursue excellence, the Amish runners remind us of the importance of humility. Buoyed by their religious community, they have achieved a certain degree of running success and, according to Yasso (2012) at least, demonstrate the promise of potential greatness. Yet, they remain modest about their own accomplishments and place them in the context of other ideals and commitments. When Yasso shares his impressions over lunch with one of the Vella Shpringa team members, he wonders if with the proper coaching and training these Amish runners could become a dominant force in the running world – like “Canadian curlers, or Finish Nordic skiers” (p. 114). Yasso's new-found Amish friend smiles at this idea, however, and observes “Well, we might be pretty fast compared to some of the Americans who eat fast food and don't exercise much . . . But I'm not sure it's such a good theory when you compare us to the Kenyans” (p. 114). This response illustrates not only the Amish runner's humility but also his knowledge of and respect for the practice community of running. Through extensive training and over time he has improved his fitness level and race times; but he is similarly aware of his respective place as compared with the elite runners around the world.

REFERENCES

Anderson, D. (2001). Recovering humanity: Movement, sport, and nature. *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, 28, 140-150.

Anderson, D. (2006). *Philosophy Americana: Making philosophy at home in American culture*. New York, NY: Fordham University Press.

Anderson, D., & Lally, R. (2004). Endurance sport. *Streams of William James* 6, 17-21.

Bugbee, H. (1999). *The inward morning*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press.

Dowling, D. (2007). 'Hard as a diamond': Running and living deliberately in Parker and Thoreau. *Aethlon* 24, 113-130.

Geertz, C. (Winter, 1972). Notes on a Balinese cockfight. *Daedalus*, 101, 1-37.

Hockey, J. (2013). Knowing the 'Going': The sensory evaluation of distance running. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 5(1), 127-141.

Hopsicker, P. & Hochstetler, D. (2014). Finding the 'Me' in endurance sports: An apology for runners & joggers and cyclists & riders. *Kinesiology Review*, 3(3), 161-171.

James, W. (1992). The self. In G.E. Myers (Ed.), *William James: Writings 1878-1899*. New York, NY: Literary Classics of the United States.

Kelso, J., & Engstrom, D. (2006). *The complementary nature*. Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Kretchmar, R. S. (2005). *Practical philosophy of sport*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.

Kretchmar, R. S. (2014). Complementary kinesiology: Why it is not wise to choose sides or work alone. *Quest*, 66, 249-262.

MacIntyre, A. (1984). *After virtue: A study in moral theory*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.

Moller, M. (1984). *Thoreau in the human community*. Amherst, MA: The University of Massachusetts Press.

Næss, H., Säfvenbom, R. & Standal, Ø. (2014). Running with Dewey: Is it possible to learn to enjoy running in High School Physical Education? *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 6(2), 301-315.

Parker, J. (1978). *Once a runner*. Tallahassee, FL: Cedar Winds Publishing Company.

Putnam, R. (2000). *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.

Reilly, R. (April 22, 2014). Some truths I've discovered. *ESPN.com*. Retrieved from <http://espn.go.com>.

Smith, S. L. (1998). Athletes, runners, and joggers: Participant-group dynamics in a sport of "individuals". *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 15, 174-192.

Suits, B. (2005). *The grasshopper: Games, life and utopia*. Peterborough, Ontario, Canada: Broadview Press.

Thoreau, H. (1964). *The portable Thoreau*. Carl Bode (Ed.). New York, NY: Penguin Books.

Yasso, B (2012, April). Running with the Amish. *Runner's World*, 92-101, 114.

Footnotes

(Endnotes)

- 1 The Yasso 800s refers to a speed workout popularized by Bart Yasso to help train for, and ultimately improve one's marathon race time. His theory is that running up to ten 800 meter intervals (interspersed with 400 meter recovery periods) will help train for and predict marathon finish time. For example, if one can complete the 800s in 3 minutes, then this individual is in shape to run a 3 hour marathon.
- 2 For a comprehensive guide to understanding various Anabaptist groups such as Amish and Mennonites, see *Concise Encyclopedia of Amish, Brethren, Hutterites, and Mennonites* by Donald B. Kraybill. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010.

- 3 Old Order Amish use this term to refer to individuals who are not Amish or Mennonite.
- 4 For more on pain associated with running, see “The Place of Pain in Running” by John Bale, in *Pain and Injury in Sport*, edited by Loland, Skirstad, and Waddington. London, UK: Routledge, 2006.
- 5 This refers to a particular location in Lancaster County heavily populated by Amish homes, all noticeably without electric wires from public utility poles.
- 6 Whoopee pies are traditional Amish baked goods consisting of two round pieces of chocolate (or sometimes pumpkin) cake filled with a creamy frosting or filling.
- 7 Smucker, who previously lived in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, is a Mennonite who helped initiate the Vella Shpringa group runs. Currently Vice President and Dean of Graduate Studies at Eastern Mennonite University, in Harrisonburg, VA, Smucker maintains communication with his Old Order Amish running friends in Pennsylvania.
- 8 On occasion Cassidy does recognize, and seems to appreciate, the transcendent qualities of running, perhaps best evidenced through his experience running alongside a group of horses.
- 9 There are several specific episodes where Cassidy’s running, because of its extreme nature, pushed him to the point where running became transcendent rather than work-like. In this sense, the relationship between participant and activity is more nuanced and dynamic, largely dependent on one’s attitude and also quality of observation as opposed to the nature of the activity (in this sense, running).
- 10 For additional information about the Young Center for Anabaptist and Pietist Studies and Old Order Amish see: <http://www2.etown.edu/amishstudies/Index.asp>

- 11 In June of 2012 two of the Vella Shpringa runners found their way to Colorado (by Amtrak) and posed with American ultramarathoner Scott Jurek for a photo that ultimately made its way to Jurek's Facebook page.
- 12 For an overview of the Pearl Izumi ad campaign see: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dK9p9_4FfkI