Every January it was the same story. Like so many others I looked to the New Year as the time to start my new life. I started thinking about it in July, of course, but I reasoned that it was better to wait until the New Year to start.

Every year I told myself that this was the year that I was going to change my life. Every year I was filled with hope.

Since I had so many bad habits to choose from—smoking, drinking, overeating, lack of exercise—I usually just picked the one I was most concerned about at the time. Some years I told myself I would stop smoking. Other years I resolved to lose weight. Once or twice I planned to get into shape.

Quitting smoking was easy. No problem. Although I had been a smoker most of my adult life, I still wasn’t willing to accept that it was anything more than a bad habit. Addicted? Not me! After all, I had quit twenty or thirty times.

Losing weight was easy, too. I just stopped eating. Or at the very least I stopped eating all the foods I liked to eat and replaced them with foods I couldn’t stand putting into my mouth.

I liked losing weight and I got very good at it. Unfortunately, I got even better at putting it back on. When you are carrying sixty, seventy, or eighty pounds more than your ideal weight, you’ve got plenty to work with. The beauty is, with that many extra pounds, almost any diet works... for a little while.

Losing weight satisfied the martyr in me. During the first few weeks of January, I would allow myself to feel a strange combination of self-pity and self-righteousness. I stood in judgment over those who didn’t have the self-control that I had. Like any good martyr, I wore the wounds of self-denial as badges of courage.
I wasn’t sure exactly what getting in shape meant, but I was pretty sure it had something to do with having a flat stomach, since everyone I saw who looked fit seemed to have a flat stomach. So all of my getting-in-shape programs began with doing sit-ups.

Once, in my early thirties, I actually tried to become a runner. I had an old friend who had become a marathoner and appeared to be a fairly normal person. He lost weight, looked great, and seemed more content than I had ever known him to be. I figured if he could run marathons, so could I. At the time, I had no idea that there was any other distance for a road race. If you were a runner, I thought, you ran marathons.

For a few painful months I tried to be a marathoner. I didn’t read any books or magazines about running before I started. How complicated could running be? I reasoned. How much could there be to know? You just put one foot in front of the other, right?

Of course, none of my “get fit” plans lasted more than a few weeks. They never lasted until the spring thaw. In the course of my lifetime I became very accomplished at one thing though: I became very good at quitting.

A LIFE OF SEDENTARY CONFINEMENT

Finally I decided to stop resolving. I was getting older. As a friend of mine said, one day you wake up and realize that you have your father’s (or mother’s) body. But rather than working on changing, I worked on accepting the changes.

I looked for activities that required no movement. I sat at my desk and worked hard to buy things… things to sit on! I decided that leisure meant inactivity. I took great pride in my ability to avoid physical effort.

It’s important to remember that for most of my life I was an expert at non-running. On my first day as a runner, I owned nine motorcycles, two cars, a camper, a garden tractor, a riding lawn mower, and a gas-powered weed-whacker.

I was never in danger of having to exert myself. I worked hard so I would not have to work hard. Breaking a sweat was something other people did—when they were working for me.

You may have fallen into the same trap I did. You may believe that physical activity is the province of the young and fit, that the deterioration of your body is the inescapable reality of living.
Who can blame us? Except for the rare fifteen second’s achievement of some extraordinary senior citizen, often we never see anyone our age engaged in any form of physical activity. Instead, we see retirees enjoying their golden years in peaceful settings with their every need anticipated and satisfied.

In time, the athletes on television and in print become closer to our children’s ages than to ours. We accept it as inevitable. We see athletes who are “old” at thirty and believe that our careers are over before they ever begin.

For me, with each passing year I got farther from being either young or fit. Suddenly it was five, then ten, then twenty years from that time when I thought I was in my prime. Without warning, I was old and overweight and out of shape. And I couldn’t imagine life being any different.

My ever-widening waist and sagging arms were testimony to my accomplishments. I was a fat cat. I carried proudly the accumulated excesses of food and drink.

The obvious aging of my body was matched by the invisible aging of my soul. You can’t see it and you can’t feel it, but over time the soul becomes just as unwilling to work as the body does. As soft as I was getting on the outside, I was getting equally hard on the inside.

Although I didn’t know it then, I was sad almost all of the time. I’m not talking about clinical depression or an emotional or psychological condition that would have responded to therapy. I was simply, completely, and essentially... sad. I had accepted that I could no longer expect to be happy, only content. I was tired, inside and out.

Now I see people who are sad and I want to tell them that it doesn’t have to be that way. I see people who are carrying the physical and emotional weight of years of excess and I want to explain that the happiness they are so desperate for is only a few steps away.

They say you can’t run away from your troubles. I say that you can.

**MY MOMENT OF TRUTH**

People ask if there was a particular moment of enlightenment that caused me to change. They are surprised to learn that there was no moment of epiphany, no blinding light. There was only the relentless march toward middle age.
There was one incident, though, that maybe would pass for an epiphany. I had been invited to a fancy dinner party and needed to rent a tuxedo. The salesperson measured my out seam. Forty inches. Then she measured my waist. Also forty inches!

I had become a cube! I had the measurements of a decent-sized throw rug.

And so, at age forty-three, when I found myself standing in my garage in a pair of new running shoes, I knew that it was my moment of truth. Surrounded by the mechanical witnesses to my folly, I stared out at my driveway and into my future. Ahead of me lay forty yards of driveway. Behind me lay forty years of bad decisions and broken promises.

I’m not sure how long I stood there. I was paralyzed by fear and more frightened of starting than I was of not starting. I knew that this was it. I knew that this would be the last time I would have the courage to start.

With a primal scream I started down the driveway, at a full sprint. Arms flailing and legs pumping, I ran like a person possessed. I guess I was. I ran at full speed toward tomorrow. For about thirty seconds!

That’s as long as it took for my legs to hurt, my lungs to hurt, and my ego to hurt. I stopped dead in my tracks. Thirty seconds! That was as long as I could run. I was overcome with my own arrogance, and I started to laugh. After years of working hard and playing hard and living hard, I couldn’t move my body for longer than thirty seconds.

It never occurred to me that I would stick with it. Why should this time be any different from the others? But I found myself putting on my running shoes, heading out the door, and waiting for the urge to quit to overcome me. As the days passed, and then weeks and months, I became perplexed. Surely I would quit. I always had in the past.

This time, though, something was different. Even now I’m not sure what made the difference. Running—well, okay, waddling—was becoming a part of my life. And I was enjoying it.

It may just have been the absurdity of it that kept me interested—the complete incongruity of “John the Runner” living in the body of “John the Couch Potato.”
BECOMING A RUNNER

Whatever the reason, I continued to run. That is not to say that I considered myself a runner. No, I thought of myself only as a person who ran. After all, runners looked different from me. They were lean and fluid. I was thick and clumsy.

That I continued astounded me. Over the first days and weeks I shifted from walking for a while to mixing some running with the walking to mixing some walking with the running. I kept repeating that cycle until I kept myself moving for about thirty minutes at a time.

Still convinced that I would quit, I began to set goals for myself. When I could easily run a quarter of a mile, I tried for a half-mile. Much to my surprise, my body continued to adapt. Soon I was running a mile, then two, and finally three miles at a time, three days a week.

It wasn’t pretty, but it was a start. I learned a lot in those first weeks. I learned that for me, like so many others, running is the answer. Out on the road it is just you, the pavement, and your will. Running is elementary. It is elegant in its simplicity.

As the effects of being a runner became more obvious, as I lost thirty, fifty, and eventually one hundred pounds, I wanted more. I wanted to race.

So I ran a 5K (3.1 miles), then a 10K (6.2 miles). As I accomplished these goals, I was forced to set new ones. I finished a halfmarathon (13.1 miles), and eventually, much to my amazement, I finished a full marathon—26.2 miles! Still no sign of quitting. What had happened to me?

Make no mistake, I was still very slow. I was often last or nearly last. I was always the slowest in my age group. But I was there at the beginning and at the end of every race. As I crossed finish line after finish line, as the race numbers began to clutter my refrigerator door, and as my running shoes began to multiply like rabbits, I was forced to face the truth. I had become a runner. Now what? I had no plan for succeeding and almost no experience with self-congratulations and celebrations.

TELLING MY STORY

I began to tell my story on the Internet. The anonymity of sitting alone at my laptop protected me from my fear of being ridiculed. I started posting to a running discussion group. Slowly, I worked up the nerve to describe not only what I was doing but what I was feeling.
My first venture into writing was actually nothing more than an e-mail message. I told about a race, about finishing nearly last, and about what it felt like to be middle-aged, slow, but happy. It was the first time I had ever invited anyone to share the joy of my running.

Much to my surprise, several unseen friends e-mailed me back to say that I had told their stories, as well as my own. They told me that I had managed to put into words what they were feeling about themselves, about the metamorphosis in their lives, and about the role running played in their self-discovery.

Encouraged by their responses, I began sending an e-mail to the group every month. I called it “The Penguin Chronicles.” The character of the penguin came from my own observation of my running style. I knew I wasn’t a rabbit, but I didn’t feel like a turtle, either. I needed a new image to capture the awkward but tenacious steps I was taking. Penguins, as they have come to be called, are runners of all shapes, sizes, ages, and genders. Some are fast. Most are not. But what unifies us as runners is our commitment to using running as a way to find the best in ourselves and those around us.

As I continued to tell my story, I discovered that I was not alone. I discovered that nearly everyone in the middle of the back of the pack at races is astounded to be there.

In the summer of 1997, I took yet another step. I strapped my running shoes to the back of my motorcycle and headed out to find myself and my friends. For nearly two months I ran alone and with groups, as slowly as I wanted and as fast as I could. I met Penguins from North Carolina to California and from Oregon to Washington, D.C.

In the summer of 1998, I hit the road again. This time I was in a car and I would be away from home for twelve weeks and cover 14,000 miles. I ran in the heat of Houston and in the morning chill of Squaw Valley. I ate in places with names like Bubba’s and Whitey’s. Every run in every new place was like a homecoming. My life would never be the same.

For many runners, it is as though we have been plucked from our previous lives and transported to a parallel universe—a Never-Never-Land where we are all Peter Pan. We are living lives that only a short time ago would have been a fantasy.
I’ve given up on having a plan to succeed. With each step, with every mile, I am making a new plan. I may not be ready to accept success, but I am no longer prepared to quit. And I’ll gladly accept the effort of being a runner. I’ll challenge myself to run farther and to run faster. Because I know that the only person I will ever have to outrun is the person I used to be.

More than that, I have learned just how far I was from who I wanted to be. And from the day of that realization, every step has taken me closer to the person I am trying to become.

Starting is scary. It is for everyone. Joan Benoit-Samuelson, the U.S. women’s marathon record holder, talks about how, as a new runner, she would stop running to pick flowers as cars passed by her because she was so embarrassed by how she looked. I never allowed my eyes to meet those of other runners, because I was afraid of seeming like an impostor.

In time, though, those fears subside. In time, as you begin to realize that it is the quality of your effort that matters, failure becomes unthinkable. How can you fail to become yourself?

Every runner has had to take that first step. Each of us in our own way has had to find that courage. So can you.

This is not a book about how to be a better runner. If you’ve never run, it provides some helpful tips to get you started. If you’ve run for a while, it contains some bits of collected wisdom that may help you run farther or faster. If you are an experienced runner, it may help you rediscover the joy of your early running years.

This is, in large part, a book about why to run. Whether you are simply thinking about beginning to run, or have been running for a week or a lifetime, this book will help you think differently about the activity of running and about the sport of running. This book will show, through my own experience and the experience of hundreds of others, how you can find the joy in running that we do.

In the pages of this book you will see yourself in the stories of other runners. You will discover that what you are feeling is shared by men and women, young and old. And you will understand that what we have in common as runners is more important than what separates us as individuals.
The Courage to Start is about how to use running as a means to find yourself. The road and the trails and the treadmill can become the paths that lead from who you are today to who you want to become tomorrow.

This book is also, by default more than design, a journal of a journey. It is the story of one person’s trip back from middle age. It is the outline of an odyssey of hope and disappointment, of moving forward and falling back, of life-altering revelation and profound stupidity. It is the story of the search for my self and the remarkable joy of discovering that who I really am is much better than who I once pretended to be.

More important, it is the story of the people I have met on my journey. It is about runners who have shared their joys with me, who have laughed with me and cried with me. It is a story about the hundreds of intersections of my life and other people’s and of the truths those people told me and that I have tried faithfully to pass on.

As the songwriter Paul Simon put it, “There were incidents and accidents, and in each there have been moments of revelation.” This is true not just for me but for all those who have been kind enough and courageous enough to join me in my search. More than being my story, it is their story. It is our story.