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Running for God as a Dialogue between Self and Soul

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ABSTRACT

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This study is about the physical and spiritual aspects of running. In addition to the human physical activity of running, there is a special reference to God-consciousness. Although the paper reflects an African, Christian, psychological bias, from an interfaith perspective, it concerns a simple, natural, human activity, within a broader energetic field of consciousness, which is usually and simply referred to as Love. The deliberate choice of the broad generic terms, God, or Godhead, is intended to include such terms as Allah, Brahman, Tao, Spirit, Divine, etc. While the terms “self” and “soul” may be used in different ways by various wisdom, spiritual and religious traditions, here they essentially refer to the interior, social and spiritual dimensions of human relationships. The study adopts a phenomenological, psychological, and biographical methodology with special reference to the spirituality of running as experienced by participants and reported by the heroic figures of Allyson Felix, Eliud Kipchoge, and Teilhard de Chardin, respectively. Its humble intention is to inspire all concerning the benefits of physical activity in general and running in particular, for physical, mental, social, and spiritual health promotion.

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Session 3. SPIRITUALITY about: HEALTH

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I. INTRODUCTION

The inspirational movie *Chariots of Fire* famously contrasts the runners Harold Abrahams and Erik Liddle, who compete for gold medals in the 1924 Olympics. Liddle runs for his faith, Abrahams to transcend prejudice. Liddle refuses to run in the 100 meters as the race takes place on a Sunday. To avert an international incident he is persuaded to run the 400, which he wins after Abrahams has won the 100 meters. The low budget film expounds self-sacrifice and moral courage. The film, which was nominated for seven academy awards and won four, provided motivation for the present study

Another source of motivation was Kenya's marathon legend and world record holder, Eliud Kipchoge, as portrayed in the movie, *The Last Milestone*. The Ineos 1:59 Challenge Event, which was specifically created for Kipchoge, was held in Vienna, Austria, on 12 October 2019. The movie, features Kipchoge running a marathon in 1:59:40.2 hours. He was accompanied by forty-one pace making runners who rotated in groups of seven runners, running in an X formation to optimize wind draft, with Kipchoge at the center of the X, cheered on by spectators along the out-and-back stretches of Hauptallee. The movie is produced by Ridley Scott. It documents Kipchoge's humble upbringing, his mother's single parenthood, his journey from his training grounds in Kenya to the high-tech facilities in Europe, and his record run in Vienna. The milestone event was only made possible by the entire cast of runners, technicians and professionals, all of whom rightfully shared the achievement, as did the entire planet.

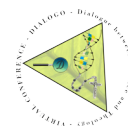
The focus of this presentation is on physical activity and health with special reference to running as a human, spiritual phenomenon. It is psychological to

the extent that it reflects the authors' life time interests and careers in psychology. In addition to any immanent and transcendent, connotations and implications, this psychological orientation means that such terms as "self", "soul" and "spirit" are lived, embodied phenomena, respectively experienced in the heart and breath of all runners, individual and collective. Marathon runners well know that indelible moment of "hitting the wall" at about 30 km of the standard marathon as a "dark night of the soul." On the other hand, anyone who has participated in the 90 kilometer South African Comrades Marathon will attest to its unique nature that has been defined as a "triumph of the human spirit." Today many international marathons are run by race organizers in aid of charity by runners who run for various charity organizations.

II. METHOD

The method chosen for this paper may be described as phenomenological, psychological and biographical. It includes three local participants' running stories. For scientific objectivity reasons, these participants are given the pseudonym A, B, and C. In addition there are brief vignettes from three heroic characters, all of Christian faith. Allyson Felix, Eliud Kipchoge and Teilhard de Chardin. It should immediately be disclaimed that not all persons can run, certainly very few are gifted with Olympian ability, but all can and should use some physical activity for health promotion purposes.

With her inimical, beautifully balanced style, Allyson Felix became the most decorated female Olympian ever in her fifth and final Tokyo Olympics, seven golds and three silver, and one bronze, for a total of 11 medals. All mothers have to endure childbirth as a suffering, but usually joyful event, which, in Felix's case, included



emergency C-section at 32 weeks and her daughter Camryn needing a month in intensive care.

“So when you see me on the track I hope you understand my fight. As an athlete who was told I was too old, as a woman who was told to know my place, as a mother who wasn’t sure I would live to raise my daughter. I hope you see that for me, it’s about so much more than what the clock says.” <https://sportspectrum.com/sport/olympics/2021/08/07/allyson-felix-female-olympian-gods-grace/>

According to Eliud “Religion plays a very important role in my life. It keeps me from doing things that could keep me from my goals. On Sundays I go to church with my family and I pray regularly, even in the mornings before a race,” Typical also of African Ubuntu and a generational orientation, he remarked further: “As a Christian, I believe that whatever investments I accumulate must trickle down to at least my grandchildren,” ([s://religionunplugged.com/news/2019/10/11/the-prayers-for-kenyas-eliud-kipchoge-to-run-a-marathon-in-under-two-hours](https://religionunplugged.com/news/2019/10/11/the-prayers-for-kenyas-eliud-kipchoge-to-run-a-marathon-in-under-two-hours)).

HeartMath is a coherent, healthcare system, which promotes interconnectedness [1]. From a HeartMath visionary perspective, the Ineos 1:59 Challenge Event is a perfect example of coherence. Eliud’s running expresses personal, psychophysiological coherence. In their turn taking and precise X formation, with Eliud at the centre of the X, his running companions epitomize social coherence. The entire cast of planners, technicians, spectators and subsequent movie exemplify global coherence. From a spiritual perspective, it is precisely such coherent collaboration, which draws planet earth along a highway, along which all creation is continually evolving. According to the Christian, cosmic vision of Teilhard de Chardin, all evolving complexity

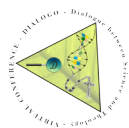
consciousness is ultimately directed towards an Omega point. This has been described as a metaphysics of the future [2]. From a broader interdenominational perspective, this energetic field of consciousness is usually and simply referred to as Love.

Teilhard is the famous Jesuit priest and paleontologist who came under extreme sanction by Catholic Church authorities for his outspoken endorsement of evolution and inclusive religious vision that was ahead of his time. Teilhard has posthumously received appropriate international recognition for integration of religion and science. Truly a man for all seasons. Teilhard was awarded the French Legion of Honor for bravery. His citation reads: An outstanding stretcher-bearer, who during four years of active service was in every battle and engagement the regiment took part in, applying to remain in the ranks in order that he might be with the men whose dangers and hardships he constantly shared. Teilhard served for over three years in the trenches of the front lines. He was the only Christian in his regiment, but by the end of the war he was referred to affectionately by the North African Muslim soldiers he lived with in the trenches as “Sidi Marabout,” an acknowledgement of his spiritual power as a man closely bound to God, protected from all injuries by divine grace.”[3].

III. DISCUSSION

Participant A

A’s story is on still and moving forms of meditation, often on running and while running, activities that form a substantial portion of his 72 year old life. At this stage of his life he still runs most days, simply for joy on the beach 500 m from the apartment he has shared with his wife for the past 14 years. Courtesy of old sports injuries,



most runs are preceded by about twenty minutes core strengthening exercises, and, to cool down in summer months in particular, succeeded by about twenty minutes swimming. Time spent running ranges from ten minutes to over an hour, particularly during the winter months. Running is usually a joyful activity, as occurs naturally in children and less often in adults. The author has always enjoyed running, both for joy and competitively. In his first year of formal schooling he won every athletics race. Memories surface of five athletics certificates proudly displayed by his parents in their family dining room along with the music certificates won by his sister.

He has played many forms of sport throughout his life, but began running more regularly as from 1990 at the age of forty years, following a family smoking cessation contract, which included both parents and his wife. He was fortunate to hold both patents in his arms as they died from smoking related illness, his mother from emphysema and father from lung cancer. His mother died in 1995. Modern medical science enabled the remaining ten percent of her lungs to be sufficiently qualitatively regenerated to give her an extra five years of life. Emphysema death is not easy and he remembers running and crying to help ease the pain of her passing. His father's death was relatively less painful, in fact peaceful, as it was expected. When told of his impending death, his father simply indicated his acceptance with the remark that he had "had a good innings"

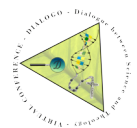
A reports: "The movie Chariots of Fire has a very special place in my heart soul, and daily arouses the meditation image of my Dad and I watching the move and sharing tears of joy. In my office at home, where I write, is a cup for the 100 yards won by my Dad at Teachers Training College. When I asked him to describe the

race, his typical self-facing comment was: "I got a good start, Boet". He was actually more suited for middle distance runner as are my son and I. Another memorial image resonates of feeling my Dad's presence, while recording my son, now aged 40, win the 800 and 1500 meters in his final school sports meeting. What joy!"

"Like my mom, wife and daughter, all gifted at sports, another great inspiration has been USA born Allyson Felix, who came back after a difficult childbirth to become the most decorated female Olympic athlete of all time."

"After running more regularly as from 1990, I ran my first marathon in September 1993, in enthusiastic determination to complete South African two major road races, the 56km Two Oceans on 2-4-94 and the 90m Comrades Marathon on 31-5-94 respectively. The Two Oceans was a major learning event for the over enthusiastic novice who contracted severe shin splints in both legs three weeks before the event and then still continued training instead of resting up completely. The race takes place in beautiful surroundings on both sides of Table Mountain, along the warm Indian Ocean past Muizenburg before crossing over to the cold Atlantic Ocean via Kommetjie, Chapmans Peak, Hout Bay and back home over the mountain. The last 21 kilometers was an exercise that may variably be perceived as walking over hot coals, masochism, macho, ego, and proof of ability to conquer pain, especially when running to glorify God!

In retrospect Comrades was much easy, really much like putting one foot in front of the other, while surrounded by cheering crowds for almost the entire race. It really felt like a great church service. Pent up enthusiasm only allowed a half hour sleep at about 4am just before the race. Pandemonium reigned. My planned running partner was nowhere to be found. I



remember standing at the start near a little Indian man, who, in true Comrades Spirit, divulged that he had run the race five times and never finished. Two Oceans had at least taught some caution and the wisdom of running negative splits. This means planning one's time of arrival, and running slowly enough in the first half, so one can complete the second half faster than the first. This strategy paid off. I remember running with various friends along the route, who were suffering through starting too fast, one had taken 11 pain killers and another had fallen into a ditch and humorously found himself looking up at a ruminating cow! Sandy and the children met me half way with a change of running shoes, which made everything much easier. I love you Sandy, Nina and David.

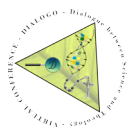
We were all together at another major event, a standard marathon in Virginia Beach, Chesapeake Bay, USA in 1995 on 18-3-95. This was a spectacle of another type, made possible by a Fulbright Scholarship and University of Zululand Counsel Grant that allowed us to spend time together at the University of Georgia, Torrance Centre for Creative Thinking. Marathon preparation was walking 6 miles to the University in the morning and running back, on one occasion very speedily in a huge thunder and lightning storm! Other running training was in the form of fast five km sprint events, at two of which I came third. I came first in the third, after finding out that the card handed in before mine belonged to a wheel chair runner. Compared to Comrades, the marathon was a highly professional event run in extremely cold conditions. In contrast to my athletic vest and shorts, other athletes were wearing woolen long johns. In contrast to a South African Comrades, collective human family ending the run together, the USA marathon finished in a huge shed. The booming loudspeaker appellation, "Here

comes Steve Edwards, from South Africa" somehow shriveled my frozen body even more!"

Participant B

Fellow academic, runner and lifetime friend, B introduced A to company sponsored community sports days. These enhance social cohesion and team spirit, which are core variables in health and physical activity promotion. Relay races are popular for various reasons, including public relations value for the particular company concerned, encouraging healthy competition for athletes, family and community, who enjoy each other's company in healthy outdoor fashion. The Richards Bay Coal Terminal (RBCT) Relay Race was a great favorite held annually, featuring teams of six runners, with each runner running approximately seven kilometers. Over four hundred teams of athletes from all over South Africa take part. Teams are categorized in terms of gender, age and whether affiliated to a company or not. For example, there may be a mixed team, comprising three men and three women, of veteran runners, aged forty to forty-nine years, running in the Open category as they do not all come from the same work company. The running community enjoyed RBCT relay races from various perspectives: fun, competitive, cooperative, comradeship, individual, family and community. In itself the exercise experience is a multifaceted holistic phenomenon. Along with the social aspects of the event, over the past years, fellow runners have also described the race in terms of its beneficial influence on their mood or 'runners high'.

He reported on his personal experiences as follows: "To me, personally, running and all sports in which I participated, have always been a joyful experience. It is the continuation of being alive that started in childhood play - it is the symbol



of life, of being alive, being able to move. When running and even the attainment of strength during weight exercises when I was young, gave me the inner sensation of being able to fly - an experience of lightness; It ensures me that I am not ill or impaired. Running, any sport requires some discipline to perform well. It brings people together and in the interpersonal context, the enjoyment of friendship enriches togetherness and social support. But at the same time running also allows for those moments of enjoyment of being alone with oneself and as the blood flows through your body so you can play with ideas that flow through your mind, self-talk, laugh spontaneously even at yourself. You can be a child again knowing that there will be a coming back, but for now, you can divorce yourself from the seriousness out there. Running opens the space ahead of you - the space welcomes you in and gently pushes you forward on the route that has become your route, the route you have chosen as if that part of nature at that moment belongs to you, communicates with you. It is then that you realize that there is a difference between merely being alive and enjoying a better quality of life."

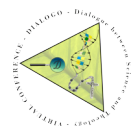
Participant C

C's running story is as follows. "As an academic and son of participant A and longtime family friend of participant B, for participant C running had initially been a way of spending time with his father such as at the age of five, running along the beach with his dad for as long as his little legs could take him and at this age having the perfect power to weight ratio. It then became healthy competition with peers, when at the age of seven, on a Saturday, he ran 19kms in a school fun run with each 1km lap being ticked off on a piece of paper attached to his sleeve. As there were a number of pupils who completed the same number of laps, a single lap race took place

during the following week. Comically, participant C was coming third in the race, until the pupil coming first stepped in a cow pat and the person coming second fell over the person coming first, with participant C then leaping over both participants to win the race with his father watching on. The next memory was at age 13 winning the town 4km interschool event. Participants C's best time before the race had been 18min 30sec but experiencing perfect flow on the day a time of 16min 30sec was achieved, with both participant A and B looking on and cheering him up the final hill with Participant C winning the race by overtaking the leader in the final few 100metres. The next memory was winning the 800metres and 1200meters in the final year of school, as alluded to by participant A above, with this being videoed by his father and wonderful encouragement heard on the recordings as energy was kept in reserved so that a sprint could be undertaken at the end of both races. A few half marathons have since been completed with the goal to run a marathon in due course. With two young children, running, when time allows, is more about enjoying and relaxation these days, although a twinkle can be seen in the eye when thinking about running competitively again in a few years as a masters' athlete! But whatever happens, it has all been because of God's blessing and to glorify Him."

IV. RESEARCH ON COMMUNITY EFFECTS OF THE EXERCISE EXPERIENCE.

In an early study on community effects of physical exercise [4] a great variety of positive aspects were reported, essentially describing a holistic, enjoyable, experience of wellbeing characterized by healthy, bodily feelings with enhanced movement, energy, mood, consciousness, social and spiritual behaviour. Afterwards, there were satisfying feelings of achievement,



refreshment, revitalization, self-responsibility, accountability, social harmony, mild to extreme euphoria and perceived health benefits, such as increase in endorphins and metabolism and reduction of tension, stress, illness, depression, cholesterol level, blood pressure and risk of heart disease. There was also the enjoyment of challenges, channeling of energy, relaxation, calmness, happiness, stability, improved self-esteem, self-actualization, problem-solving, sleep, diet, weight control, mental alertness, mental and physical flexibility and balanced individual, familial and social life. Social aspects were especially emphasized in terms of promotion of social support, interaction, connection, cohesion and harmony through the shared community experience and context. The Rugby World Cup in South Africa in 1995 was a nation building example cited.

In their daily struggle to survive, people from less economically developed countries, as may be found in Asia and Africa for example, may well regard consciously practised exercise as defined above as an affluent luxury. However, while political, economic, religious, artistic, cultural and many other factors will influence its occurrence, it could be argued that sporting physical activity or exercise in some holistic sense, as occurred in the Olympic Games of Ancient Greece, have found find their equivalent in all communities throughout history. Such activities were also often originally martial, as in Tai Chi, associated with subsistence activities such as hunting and/or ritual ceremonies accompanied by music and dance as for example in the Ngoma dance of the South African Nguni peoples.

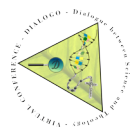
Participants strongly endorse the views that humanity has survived, evolved and thrived because of genetic predispositions towards creative, human, social, moral

consciousness and beneficial pedagogic and andragogic relationships. Is of the firm opinion that many unnecessary conflicts and wars that have been caused by fanatical religious fundamentalism, fueled by political and economic factors, mostly reflective of particular endemic destructive features of humanity, such as greed and power motivations. Planet earth is presently alarmed by the invasion of Ukraine by Russia. There is the hope that this will not lead to a third world war. And yet traumatic and motivational events also bring out the best of humanity.

V. THE SOUL OF TEILHARD DE CHARDIN, WW1 STRETCHER BEARER.

One imagines Teilhard de Chardin running to save lives as a stretcher bearer in WW1. Arguably such trauma amplified the following beautiful description of his pivotal, altered-state experience that occurred in an abandoned chapel, at night, during the battle of Verdun:

“Suppose, I thought, that Christ should deign to appear here, in the flesh, before my very eyes—what would he look like? Most important of all, in what way would he fit himself into Matter and so be sensibly apprehended? Meanwhile, my eyes had unconsciously come to rest on a picture that represented Christ with his Heart offered to men. This picture was hanging in front of me, on the wall of a church into which I had gone to pray . . . I was still looking at the picture when the vision began. (Indeed, I cannot be certain exactly when it began, because it had already reached a certain pitch of intensity when I became aware of it.) All I know is that as I let my eyes roam over the outlines of the picture, I suddenly realized that they were melting. They were melting, but in a very special way that I find it difficult to describe. If I relaxed my visual concentration, the whole of Christ’s outline, the folds of his robe, the bloom of his skin,



merged (though without disappearing) into all the rest . . . the edge which divided Christ from the surrounding World was changing into a layer of vibration in which all distinct delimitation was lost . . . I noticed that the vibrant atmosphere which formed a halo around Christ was not confined to a narrow strip encircling him, but radiated into Infinity. From time to time what seemed to be trails of phosphorescence streamed across it, in which could be seen a continuous pulsing surge which reached out to the furthest spheres of matter—forming a sort of crimson ganglion, or nervous network, running across every substance. The whole Universe was vibrating . . . It was thus that the light and the colours of all the beauties we know shone, with an inexpressible iridescence . . . these countless modifications followed one another in succession, were transformed, melted into one another in a harmony that was utterly satisfying to me . . . I was completely at a loss. I found it impossible to decipher.

All I know is that, since that occasion, I believe I have seen a hint of it once, and that was in the eyes of a dying soldier”

Teilhard believes that religious people can be divided into two categories which cut across existing religious boundaries, distinguished by whether or not they possess a sense of the numinous. A Christian with a heightened mystical awareness might, for instance, identify with this aspect of Sufism and Tantric Hinduism more than with other Christian traditions. Jung was just such a person who described Christ as a symbol of the Self. From a phenomenological psychological point of view, this concerns an energetic field of sentience, feelings, awareness and consciousness. Whether we are concerned with personal, social or spiritual relationships involving the divine self and soul, all may be viewed as co-created relationships.

Allyson Felix’s Faith in God and Self.

Felix’s faith began when she was young, as she was raised in a strong Christian home, with godly parents she considers wonderful role models as she grew up. “I came to know Jesus Christ as my personal Savior at a very young age. Ever since then, I have continually been striving to grow in my relationship with God. I was nowhere close to the perfect child. I had my share of difficult times along with some disappointing choices that I made, but thankfully God never stops loving me.”

“One of the lessons I’ve learned on this journey is that there’s really only so much of this you can predict, much less control,” Felix told ESPN in December 2018. “By its very nature, pregnancy is about opening yourself and embracing whatever God and this child has in store for you. . . . Having a child felt like I’d be risking my career and disappointing everyone who expected me to always put running first. It’s hard to say why I finally felt ready to start a family. I just know that I was. “<https://sportsspectrum.com/sport/olympics/2021/08/07/allyson-felix-female-olympian-gods-grace>.”

Allyson Felix - The Greatest of All-Time <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sxD3bUBMX5U>

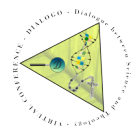
<https://olympics.com/en/video/allyson-felix-why-it-is-a-special-time-for-women>

VI. THE UBUNTU OF ELIUD KIPCHOGE MOTIVATING HUMANITY TOWARDS GREATER SELF-REALIZATION.

Eliud Kipchoge self-discipline and work ethic are legendary as portrayed in the short documentary from Runners World available at the following websites:

<https://www.runnersworld.com/news/a29430499/eliud-kipchoge-ineos-159-challenge-result/>

<https://religionunplugged.com/>



news/2019/10/11/the-prayers-for-kenyas-eliud-kipchoge-to-run-a-marathon-in-under-two-hours

<https://www.runnersworld.com/news/a29430499/eliud-kipchoge-ineos-159-challenge-result/>

What follows are some of his motivational quotes

“To me, running is life. I run to live longer and enjoy a healthier life.”

“Every day is a challenge, you’re always faced with a new one. And when I have achieved something, I look forward to the next goal. That’s the way to go.”

“To run alone is not sport. To run with others is sport.”

“When I have a lot of pain, I try to confuse my mind to forget about the pain and think about the distance.”

“What motivates me year in, year out, is the love for the sport and the legacy I want to leave for the present and next generation.”

“...a run in the morning is like eating a fruit a day - it chases the doctor away.”

“Personally, I don’t believe in limits.”

“These roads are best ran together.”

“I don’t have regrets. In any sport, the feeling of regret is a sign of indiscipline.”

“My mind was clear... From the first kilometer to the last kilometer, I knew I had it.”

“I want to run with a relaxed mind.”

“I am running to make history, to show that no human is limited.”

“I’m sending a message to every individual in this world that when you work hard, when you actually concentrate, when you set your priorities high, when you actually set your goals, and put them in your heart and in your mind and in your mind, you will accomplish, without any question.”

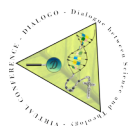
“Keeping calm allows you to think more clearly and being patient allows you to be prepared on how best to run a beautiful race.”

CONCLUSION

With its essentially phenomenological, psychological and biographical approach, this study is about physical, personal, social and spiritual health with special references to God, Love and the natural human activity of running. Phenomenologically, this concerns energetic fields of awareness, sentience, consciousness and co-created relationship science. Psychologically, it is about individuals and groups running to glorify the Divine. Spiritually, these are embodied souls in quest of spirit, created and Creator. Biographically the cast of heroic characters included the stories of three local runners, with Pseudonyms A, B and C, as well as those of Allyson Felix, Eliud Kipchoge and Teilhard de Chardin, with the intention to inspire all with regard to the benefits of physical activity in general, and running in particular, for physical, mental, social and spiritual health promotion

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