

Seventy and One Hundred

In my next lifetime, I want to be an ultramarathon runner. I want to skim the peaks and ridges, celebrating the universe a hundred miles at a time. I want to keep going, day and night, confident in my capacity to endure. I want to cultivate the skill of maintaining momentum and balance under duress, of finding my way in the dark.

In this life, I am an ultramarathon groupie. Beginning with my son, who introduced me to the sport, I am inspired by the young men and women who stand on the podium waving their national flags after 15, 24, 30 and more hours in continual motion. I have devoured books like *Born to Run*, *Eat and Run*, and *The Extra Mile*. I have enjoyed interviews with competitors on www.irunfar.com and followed their progress with live updates from the course. I have been thinking a lot about youth and next lifetimes.

Then, last week, the picture expanded. The irunfar interview featured not first place but last. And what an amazing last-place finish it was! The video showed a tall, buff woman smiling into the camera. The headline read “70-year-old Finishes Western States with Seconds to Spare.” Gunhild Swanson of Spokane, Washington became the first woman over 70 to conquer that punishing 100-mile mountain course and finish within the 30-hour time limit.

Unlike most deadly-quiet and abandoned finish lines that receive the back of the pack, hundreds of spectators remained in place, eyes riveted to the clock as she rounded the final turn of the high school track. The crowd erupted with joy when she surged across the line in 29:59:54.

I loved reading about her suspense last winter, waiting to hear whether race officials would allow her to compete in a limited field. I was entranced by her lifetime of pushing to and beyond the 26.2-mile marathon distance. I was moved to hear that her son and teenaged grandson were her pacers. I agonized over the fact that, with several others, she missed a turn and added 3 miles to the total distance. And I misted up to hear that Rob Krar, the overall winner who came in 15 hours earlier, joined her for the final 1.2 miles, coaching her step by step to finish strong and make the cut.

Gunhild Swanson is a year older than I. As I look forward to the final year of my 6th decade, I am playing with ideas for making it special. No, I told my sweetie, I am not applying for Western States. But I am not calling it quits either. I want to use this exciting milestone as an opportunity to gear up and charge the hills (whether actual or metaphorical). A special trip, some more half marathons, and a tattoo...70 random acts of kindness...what else?