ON RUNNING MARATHONS AND THE GREAT WORK
By Herman Greene

I am 72 and I just ran the Boston Marathon. This was my 21st marathon . . . far from a record but still something. I’ve run enough to know what training and running a marathon is about.

Though marathons were beginning to be popular, there weren’t many marathoners when I began running 35 years ago. I ran my first marathon in 1984 when I was 39 and lived in Denver. I felt old.

I didn’t train for marathons then like I did later. For that first race I ran a fair amount and did some 10-milers . . . . Prior to beginning distance running myself, I remember a couple of runners were staying with us and they went for a run. When they returned I asked them how far they had run. They said “11 miles.” I couldn’t believe it.

I wasn’t really sure if I could run a marathon. About two weeks before the marathon I did a 16-mile run without too much difficulty. I said to myself “If I can run 16 miles then I can do 26.2 miles.”

When it was time for the race, we gathered on the grounds of the state capitol building. Denver skies are often bright and almost cloudless and they were this day. The temperature was cool. As we lined up to start, Beethoven’s 1812 Overture began playing. When we began running, the music came to the part where the cannons begin to fire: Not only recorded cannons fired, but real cannons on the state capitol grounds began to fire! What a thrilling moment. I could barely contain myself. I could hardly feel my feet touch the ground. I felt like I was flying and inside I was ebullient with the sheer grandeur of the moment.

Marathons are like that. Ordinary people who have worked to be there become larger than life for a moment in time.

Ahead of me, of course, were the miles and miles of running. As the race progressed I was in uncharted territory. We had no sports drinks or energy gels in those days, just water and miles of running. Somewhere, I don’t remember which mile, the difficult part of the marathon began. That’s the worst part and the best part. Without the grind and pain, there is no marathon. When there is no marathon there is no triumph because certainly I didn’t win the race. I did something that was difficult. The marathon is a personal triumph in the midst of others who are running their own marathons. And there are the crowds who are cheering you on: “You can do it! Five more miles!” You are running the marathon for them and they are running their marathons through you. Ordinary people doing great things are inspiring.
At the end, hands on knees, head down, almost not sure where you are . . . you’ve done it. You’ve done it.

Thomas Berry gave us a Great Work, that of moving on from a terminal Cenozoic era to an emerging Ecozoic era. He also described this work also as that of moving from our modern industrial civilization with its devastating impact to that of benign presence. He said the Great Work was the epic task of our time, one exceeding in its difficulty what had ever been conceived under that term.

When one runs a marathon, there are times in the race where you ask yourself, “When will this ever end.” Another way of putting that is that in the latter parts of a marathon you have the experience of endlessness, the endlessness of struggle. I was once a part of a community that made up words to popular songs. That community had a great sense of mission. The words to one of our songs were “Running on an endless marathon, suddenly deciding I am the one, running on an endless marathon, mystery-mystery has won the day.”

After Thomas Berry wrote his book *The Great Work*, I was around a lot of people who spoke of the Great Work. The Great Work became a grand and often repeated refrain. I watched a video of a talk Berry gave and copied down these words:

> We are about the Great Work.
> We all have our particular work—some of us are teachers, some of us are healers, some of us in various professions, some of us are farming.
> We have a variety of occupations.
>
> But beside the particular work we do and the particular lives we lead, we have a Great Work that everyone is involved in and no one is exempt from.
> That is the work of moving on from a terminal Cenozoic to an emerging Ecozoic Era in the story of the planet Earth... which is the Great Work.

> “We are about the Great Work!” When I hear those words I have a feeling akin to the feeling I had at the beginning of the Denver Marathon when the 1812 Overture played and the cannons began to fire. There is a grandeur about the Great Work.

It is exciting at the beginning. One embarks on an adventure. Later there may be ennui. Or one may forget the journey one set out on and become lost in the crowd. Or one may stay the course with this sense of endlessness.

In this last marathon I ran, I was injured in the 7th mile. I had to shorten my stride and it took me a long time to finish. The temperature was in the 30s at the beginning and in the mid-40s at Commented [AL2]: I see why you used numerals in the article, but this time the usage stands out as odd.
the end. Rain was constant and sometimes came down in sheets. Wind was in our face at 10-20 mph with gusts to 32 mph. This marathon, as all others is 26.2 miles long. The Boston Marathon has been run since 1897. It’s the granddaddy and the most prestigious of all. It’s a metro-wide festival. The run is from Hopkinton, MA to Copley Square in Boston. 2800 racers sought medical help. 59 were taken to the hospital mostly from hypothermia. Almost 27,000 began the race and 25,800 finished.

We have begun a Great Work that will not be finished in our lifetimes. So much depends on us.

Put one foot in front of the other . . . . We are about the Great Work.