

up the cliff, my cadence painfully slows as my heart rate nervously quickens. All of a sudden my running shoes feel like roller skates as my legs fill with lactic acid and my footing slips. Instead of a jackrabbit, I now feel like a clumsy sloth stumbling over spilled marbles.

When I finally reach the summit of my Mt. Everest, I gasp for oxygen and thirst for water. Looking down at where I came from, I notice how difficult a climb it really is. While standing at the bottom of the cliff before my grueling trek, my vision was clouded by gallons of endorphins. I fail momentarily to realize that in the life of this granite mountain my presence occupies less than a tenth of a nanosecond, and if I want to have a working relationship with it I have to show it the respect an elder deserves.

The granite beats me hard that day. Ten hours later, I am still sore. Tomorrow, however, I'll be back. And although I'll never be able to conquer it, maybe by visiting it frequently, studying its lines and cracks, and understanding its past, it will cut me some slack someday.

## order in a chaotic environment

The majority of my runs start off in a parking lot. I drive on nicely paved roads to a neatly lined parking lot and then squeeze my car in between the two lines that mark "my" spot. As I first step onto the trail and look around I'm awestruck with the beauty that awaits me. Millions of trees stand at attention, their branches jutting out in freakish directions. It all looks so pretty, yet so confusing and convoluted from afar.

As I run through this sea of chaos, I stop to re-tie my shoe. Bending over, I notice the ground beneath me for the first time. Under my feet and all around me are hundreds of crushed leaves and twigs. Next to them are worms and ladybugs. And next

to them are trillions of bacteria and viruses. Inside them there is at least one cell. And inside this cell there a nucleus, and so on and so on. It's complicated, yet it all works. For more than 5 billion years it has worked, and we still cannot explain precisely how numerous elements existing freely in nature combine to form an animated organic being.

Trail running is more than a physical experience, it's a spiritual journey. I love trail running not just because of the occasional deer I see or because I get all muddy and sweaty, but because it allows me to see things imperceptible in a concrete jungle. I've learned the value of living, the importance of challenge and the beauty in all levels of life. Most importantly, however, I've learned that what is taught to me on the trail is not exclusive to the trail. Nature's lessons are universal truths. 🌿

*Cristopher Benner is a runner, triathlete and writer who lives in Richmond, VA. His favorite runs are those guaranteed to get him muddy.*



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