

The Spiritual Life of the Long-Distance Runner

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The New Yorker:

Shortly after sunrise, on June 14, 2015, a Finnish man named Ashprihanal Aalto stood on Eighty-fourth Avenue, in Queens. At 6A.M., he began running around the block. He passed a playground, some houses, and a technical high school. After half a mile, he returned to his starting point. Then he kept going—until, forty days later, he'd run five thousand six hundred and forty-nine laps, for a total of thirty-one hundred miles. Aalto was one of twelve runners attempting the world's longest certified footrace, the Sri Chinmoy Self-Transcendence 3,100 Mile Race. Eight of the runners finished the race within the fifty-two-day time limit. Aalto finished fastest and broke the world record by almost a full day.

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Psychologists don't just distinguish between two kinds of motivation. They also identify two kinds of well-being: happiness, which is a positive, momentary emotional tone, and meaningfulness, the sense that one's life has broad value and purpose. In 2013, the psychologists Roy Baumeister, Kathleen Vohs, Jennifer Aaker, and Emily Garbinsky interviewed nearly four hundred adults about the distinction between happiness and meaningfulness. They found that the two don't always overlap. In fact, people report that negative events and personal struggles, while they make life less happy, make it more meaningful. A key difference is that, while happiness is present-focussed, meaningfulness looks forward; it drives people to persevere through unpleasantness in the hope of grander rewards in the distant future. So it may be that, in a broad sense, Bielik and other ultramarathoners are driven by something more secular than spirituality—they could be hungry for meaning, in general.

Read the whole story: [The New Yorker](#)