

THE FICKLE FINGER(S) OF CHANGE

WORDS BY DANIEL MASKIT



IT WAS IN HONG KONG THAT THE WORDS SUNK INTO MY BRAIN LIKE A BULLET IN THE HEAD.

My friend Jesse was brandishing a pair of what looked like giant salamander's feet. "You have to try these shoes. For the first time in my life I can run and my knees don't hurt."

Run. Knees. Hurt. That part I understood. I'd spent the first 45 years of my life not being a runner because we all knew that runners messed up their knees. But "don't hurt"? Where did that come from? Jesse elaborated: "You need to read *Born to Run*." So I did. And *The Book* made me want to believe. I wanted to be able to run without damaging myself. I wanted to be one of those crazy ultra marathoners. Who wouldn't, after reading *The Book*? But I still didn't believe that was possible.

Yet those words remained buried deep in my head. And they weren't going away. "Besides," I told myself. "You need to be getting some sort of aerobic exercise." I had given up ice hockey when I moved to London and hadn't found anything to replace it. I was playing football, but as a goalkeeper; a position I had chosen as a kid because it best suited my laziness and disinclination to run. And walking was nice, but not providing any sort of cardio work. Could running be my salvation? There was only one way to find out.

So I bought the lizard feet, more commonly known as Vibram FiveFingers (or VFFs), and I started walking in them. Weird. Painful. But I stuck with it. And after about six weeks I tried my first run. Like everyone else's first run, it was short. And I was sure I was going to die. But I didn't. And I stuck with it. And I started wearing the VFFs more and more. Because I was tracking all my runs on Nike+ it was obvious that both my endurance and speed were improving.

Less obvious at the time was the fact that my physiology was also changing.

COULD RUNNING BE MY SALVATION? THERE WAS ONLY ONE WAY TO FIND OUT.

I gradually became aware that I felt more upright – a distinct change from my lifelong bad posture. And the drop in weight became obvious when my belts required more holes. And then my trousers became too baggy to wear. But what really drove home how much running had done for me was encountering some odd artefacts.

While we were packing up, preparing to move flats. I opened a drawer and there they were: a pair of orthotics and a pair of silicon heel cups. I'd been running for almost two years, and couldn't honestly say how long those items had been in that drawer. I do know that before I started running, they were part of my daily footwear to help calm down my plantar fasciitis; I had come to accept occasional flare-ups, leading to weeks of pain. I remember being unable to run around and play with my nephew because the pain in my feet made it hard to walk – let alone chase after a child.

Now the orthotics and heel cups were collecting dust and I was collecting marathon medals. The dramatic nature of this change in fortune prompted me to reflect on another gift running has given me.

Years ago, I studied ballet, but I was frustrated by my lack of flexibility and by my inability to feel – let alone control – the muscles needed to perform various movements properly. I can hear my teacher, the extraordinarily patient Marie Adair, saying: "That was a very nice move, dear, but not at all what I was asking for." No matter how hard I worked, or which classes I took to improve, I was quite limited. Now I work with a running coach who is improving my flexibility in ways I would not have imagined possible. I am learning how to find and control muscles I once believed to be mythical. Sometimes, when I make a new muscular connection, something Marie said to me years ago makes perfect sense at last. At these times I smile to myself and hope that, somewhere above me, Marie is smiling too.

Running hasn't just made me thinner; it's made me more flexible and no longer grounded by a medical condition. Which is a most remarkable result of a friend telling me about a pair of shoes and a book.

DANIEL MASKIT IS A VISUAL EFFECTS WIZARD. FRIEND TO BEARS. FOODIE. TRAVELER. HISTORY BUFF. DANIEL RUNS LONDON WITH RUN DEM CREW AND [ULTRA] MARATHONS IN VIBRAM FIVE FINGERS.

WWW.MASKIT.NET/RUNDEMBEAR @RUNDEMBEAR
