



Making Peace is a Marathon

(Transcript of TED Talk)

I come from Lebanon, and I believe that running can change the world. I know what I have just said is simply not obvious.

You know, Lebanon as a country has been once destroyed by a long and bloody civil war. Honestly, I don't know why they call it civil war when there is nothing civil about it. With Syria to the north, Israel and Palestine to the south, and our government even up till this moment is still fragmented and unstable. For years, the country has been divided between politics and religion. However, for one day a year, we truly stand united, and that's when the marathon takes place.

I used to be a marathon runner. Long distance running was not only good for my well-being but it helped me meditate and dream big. So the longer distances I ran, the bigger my dreams became, until one fateful morning, and while training, I was hit by a bus. I nearly died, was in a coma, stayed at the hospital for two years, and underwent 36 surgeries to be able to walk again.

As soon as I came out of my coma, I realized that I was no longer the same runner I used to be, so I decided, if I couldn't run myself, I wanted to make sure that others could. So out of my hospital bed, I asked my husband to start taking notes, and a few months later, the marathon was born.

Organizing a marathon as a reaction to an accident may sound strange, but at that time, even during my most vulnerable condition, I needed to dream big. I needed something to take me out of my pain, an objective to look forward to. I didn't want to pity myself, nor to be pitied, and I thought by organizing such a marathon, I'll be able to pay back to my community, build bridges with the outside world, and invite runners to come to Lebanon and run under the umbrella of peace. Organizing a marathon in Lebanon is definitely not like organizing one in New York. How do you introduce the concept of running to a nation that is constantly at the brink of war? How do you ask those who were once fighting and killing each other to come together and run next to each other? More than that, how do you convince people to run a distance of 26.2 miles at a time they were not even familiar with the word "marathon"? So we had to start from scratch.

For almost two years, we went all over the country and even visited remote villages. I personally met with people from all walks of life -- mayors, NGOs, schoolchildren, politicians, militiamen, people from mosques, churches, the president of the country, even housewives. I learned one thing: When you walk the talk, people believe you. Many were touched by my personal story, and they shared their stories in return. It was honesty and transparency that brought us together. We spoke one common language to each other, and that was from one human to another. Once that trust was built, everybody wanted to be part of the marathon to show the world the true colors of Lebanon and the Lebanese and their desire to live in peace and harmony.

In October 2003, over 6,000 runners from 49 different nationalities came to the start line, all determined, and when the gunfire went off, this time it was a signal to run in harmony for a change.

The marathon grew. So did our political problems. But for every disaster we had, the marathon found ways to bring people together. In 2005, our prime minister was assassinated, and the country came to a complete standstill, so we organized a five-kilometer United We Run campaign. Over 60,000 people came to the start line, all wearing white t-shirts with no political slogans. That was a turning point for the marathon, where people started looking at it as a platform for peace and unity.

Between 2006 up to 2009, our country, Lebanon, went through unstable years, invasions, and more

assassinations that brought us close to a civil war. The country was divided again, so much that our parliament resigned, we had no president for a year, and no prime minister. But we did have a marathon.

(Applause)

So through the marathon, we learned that political problems can be overcome. When the opposition party decided to shut down part of the city center, we negotiated alternative routes. Government protesters became sideline cheerleaders. They even hosted juice stations.

You know, the marathon has really become one of a kind. It gained credibility from both the Lebanese and the international community. Last November 2012, over 33,000 runners from 85 different nationalities came to the start line, but this time, they challenged very stormy and rainy weather. The streets were flooded, but people didn't want to miss out on the opportunity of being part of such a national day.

BMA has expanded. We include everyone: the young, the elderly, the disabled, the mentally challenged, the blind, the elite, the amateur runners, even moms with their babies. Themes have included runs for the environment, breast cancer, for the love of Lebanon, for peace, or just simply to run.

The first annual all-women-and-girls race for empowerment, which is one of its kind in the region, has just taken place only a few weeks ago, with 4,512 women, including the first lady, and this is only the beginning.

Thank you.

(Applause)

BMA has supported charities and volunteers who have helped reshape Lebanon, raising funds for their causes and encouraging others to give. The culture of giving and doing good has become contagious. Stereotypes have been broken. Change-makers and future leaders have been created. I believe these are the building blocks for future peace.

BMA has become such a respected event in the region that government officials in the region like Iraq, Egypt and Syria, have asked the organization to help them structure a similar sporting event. We are now one of the largest running events in the Middle East, but most importantly, it is a platform for hope and cooperation in an ever-fragile and unstable part of the world. From Boston to Beirut, we stand as one.

(Applause)

After 10 years in Lebanon, from national marathons or from national events to smaller regional races, we've seen that people want to run for a better future. After all, peacemaking is not a sprint. It is more of a marathon.

Thank you.

(Applause)