

# RUNNING ACROSS THE U.S.: USING DP CONCEPTS TO UNDERSTAND EXTRAORDINARY BEHAVIOR

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“Human lives are intrinsically and fundamentally dramatic in form.”  
-Peter G. Ossorio

“If I could teach one thing in this world, it would be to help people to understand what it is like  
to be ‘the other’.”

-Maria Krenz, Holocaust survivor

There are two dramas that will be interwoven in this paper. The most important story is about a young man who decided to run across the US while the second is about this author’s reactions to hearing about this extraordinary decision.

## EMPATHY AND MY STORY

My story begins with finding out from my youngest son that his close friend, Ryan had decided to run 3000 miles coast to coast across the US. When I first heard this I didn’t understand why Ryan would do this. I thought it was pretty crazy and that he must be running away from things. In short, Ryan had become “the other” and at that point in time I had little empathy for him and no understanding of the significance of his extraordinary decision. In addition to Ryan’s story, this paper is also the story of this writer’s journey from failing at empathy to the achievement of empathy.

Ryan had graduated several years before with honors in molecular biology from one of the University of California's most prestigious campuses. He had been planning to go on to graduate school and was working at a high-end market chain saving money for graduate school when his Mom died unexpectedly leaving Ryan and his younger half-brother grieving her loss. Ryan had been a good athlete, captain of his high school football team and skilled surfer but a mountain bike accident had temporarily sidelined much of physical activities. Understandably, without being able to do much of his usual exercising and having to deal with the shock and grief around his mother's death he had become depressed. It was a number of months later when I heard from my son that 25 yr old Ryan had decided to run across the country.

So, what do you say when someone you know decides to engage in what seems to be a foolish venture out of some movie even if the movie is as good as Forest Gump? And, what would you say when a very intelligent but normally quiet, laidback, 6' 3", longhaired blond Adonis, California surfer dude talks about running 3000 miles clear across the country at the rate of about 150 miles per week and you, a somewhat shorter, talkative, slightly pudgy, balding and retired psychologist from New York who occasionally runs 2 miles a week has a weak moment of cultural blindness? And, if you, like me, were an academic sort of person and had some preconceived notions about what is best for young, very bright people with honors in biological sciences, then, what would you say? In my story, the logical thing for Ryan to do given my preconceived ideas and what I knew then of the circumstances was for him to get some professional counseling, work through his grief and then do what any rational young man with his background should do; that is, go on to a Ph.D. or health professional program somewhere. In fact, sometime before this I had helped Ryan get a part-time volunteer internship experience in a physical therapy center which he had

given up to train for running across the country.. So, I, not trying very hard to be empathic at that point thought “Oy vey, Ryan, this is mischuginah! What a crazy thing to do and what a waste of potential!” Luckily, I had the presence of mind not to communicate this directly to Ryan although I wondered how my body language was being read when I did say, “Oh yeah, Ryan, that’s great!”

## EMPATHY

Now, you don’t need to have had exactly the same experiences as another person in order to empathize with them although having had some similar experiences may be helpful. However, the idea of long distance running was probably as foreign to me as working out your issues by means of professional psychotherapy was to Ryan. So, given some of our cultural differences how could I have achieved empathy for him? And, just what is empathy? Having empathy for another person means that not only do we appreciate how he or she feels but we also understand the relevant circumstances and the significance of what it means for that person to be feeling and behaving that way at that point in time. Empathy also involves having compassion for another but unlike sympathy we don’t speak of someone having too much or even inappropriate empathy. Similar to the concept of physical coordination, it seems that you can never have too much empathy. And, just as physical coordination is a crucial ingredient of successful physical performances such as in athletics or dance, empathy is an crucial ingredient in interpersonal human relationships especially for maintaining good intimate relationships. Moreover, empathy is not two hearts beating in synchronous rhythms nor is it just the firing of “mirror neurons” although some sorts of regular neurobiological processes may occur as an empathic encounter takes place. You can have compassion for what another person is experiencing without having to feel as they do. And, you do not even

have to agree with what they are doing in order to experience empathy with them, although you certainly become more understanding of their behavior as you come to appreciate the significance of why they are doing what they are doing.

So how did I fail at empathizing with Ryan? Like physical coordination we often take empathy for granted and are most apt to think about what goes into its performance only after things go wrong (such as, when a usually well coordinated ball player fumbles or the good friends or close family members quarrel over a misunderstanding). At some point, I began looking at what I was missing -where and how I might have fumbled.

#### UNDERSTANDING BEHAVIOR

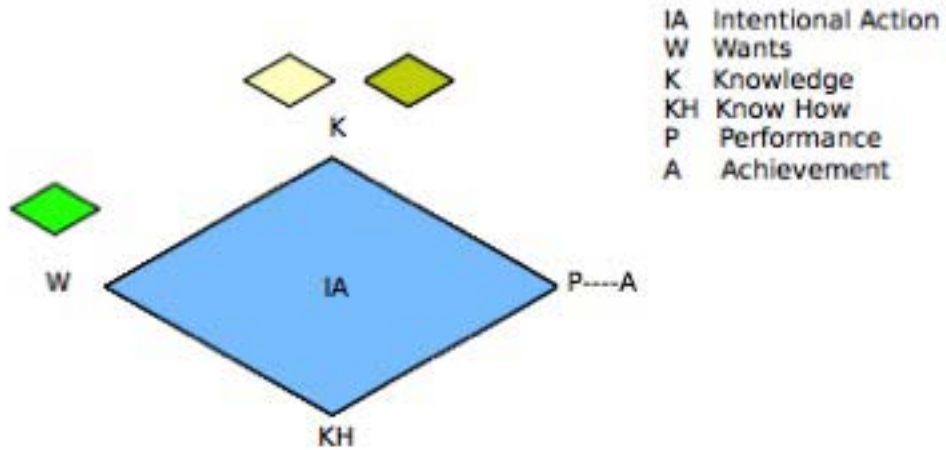
A few weeks before Ryan was to jump in Monterey Bay in April and leave for his cross-country run from a nearby beach, he came over to visit. One of his friends, a number of months before this, had put up a web site describing Ryan's intentions. "I think that's when I fully realized I had to be completely committed to doing this", Ryan later told me. He was now using this web site to blog about his preparations and raise money for his run and for a charity to honor his Mom. I still thought it was a crazy thing to do but at least now he had convinced a friend to go along in a car as backup rather than going solo as he had intended earlier on. So, we bought some tee shirts he was selling to raise money for himself and the ocean conservation charity in honor of his Mom. And, a few weeks after he had started on his run I heard him being interviewed on a local radio station and I started reading some of his blogs.

Sometime before this, a paper a colleague had sent me with the title "Intentional Action and Empathy" talked about using Ossorio's Paradigm of Intentional Action (PIA) as a vehicle to gain an appreciation of the significance

of another's behavior (Schwartz, 2010). And, Dr. Peter Ossorio, the founder of Descriptive Psychology, has said that one of the times you use PIA is when you don't understand someone or you want to figure out where you went wrong (Ossorio,2006). I had used this model for understanding human behavior before but now consciously applied it to Ryan and myself.

An intentional action or deliberate action description of a person's behavior has several basic elements to assess: W – what a person is wanting or desiring to do (the motivational parameter); K- what a person knows or is aware of (the cognitive parameter); KH- what a person knows how to do or, in another words an assessment of the person's abilities and skills at the time of the behavior (the competence parameter); and, P- the actual performance or course of action resulting in a particular achievement (A); and finally, one can look at how that all may fit into the social practices (SP) of a culture.

## DELIBERATE ACTION



The actor selects an option that matches, more or less, what the actor intends to do. The green diamond over the W represents what is intended and the yellow and green IA diamonds over K represent the actor's known options. Note that all corners are filled in in whatever way the actor can.

The above diagram is an adaptation of Ossorio's PIA from Wynn Schwartz, 2010. Also, note that the diagram presented above is a truncated

version of Ossorio's full schema for behavior description. A more complete diagram of an intentional action behavior description would include 8 parameters : Identity-I, Want-W, Know-K, Know how-KH, Performance-P, Achievement-A , Personal Characteristics-PC, and Significance –S.

So, where did I go wrong? Before applying the PIA model to Ryan's behavior lets first apply it to mine. First, in order to empathize with someone you have to want to understand them (W). In the beginning, I had my agenda for Ryan (get some counseling and then go on to graduate school) and wasn't even trying to have empathy for his decisions. Second, I didn't know much about long distance running especially the meditative aspects (K) and therefore assumed Ryan was 'running away from' rather than 'working through' his grief (K). Finally, I had invested in a different journey for him of going on to a professional career or graduate school that he wasn't ready for (K) and I had failed to use my own professional abilities and skills (KH) to understand the significance (S) of what he was he was intending.

#### RYAN'S STORY

When Ryan's Mom died unexpectedly, Ryan had become depressed. He had stopped surfing and running and working out. At some point, realizing he was out of shape he decided to start running again- something he had done before. His Mom had been a runner and running made him feel closer to her. He told me, "It was the only thing that made me feel good so I kept on doing it more and more". He had a part-time job but had broken up with his girl friend so had

lots of time to run. On one of his runs he began to wonder how far he could run. He had run some short local races for fun before. He had seen the movie "Forest Gump" again and even began to wonder if he could run across the country as the movie character had done. One of Ryan's personal characteristics is his interest in science. His Dad describes him as a persistent learner, an experimenter, risk taker and problem solver. "He is very good at fixing things and taking a scientific approach to solving problems", says his Dad from whom Ryan learned a lot of carpentry skills. Ryan soon started applying his knowledge about solving problems scientifically to researching how it might be possible to run coast to coast across the United States. He read about other peoples' experiences (over 200 people have documented this he tells me) and he obtained information about routes, timing and even the equipment needed to go solo. And soon, he started on a training regimen at first running about 7 miles a time 2 or 3 days a week.

"We discover behavioral possibilities primarily by behaving" Ossorio (2006).

By July of 2010 Ryan had been running on a more regular basis. To challenge himself he entered the Santa Cruz wharf-to-wharf 10k race and came in fourth in his age group of 19-24. Soon he was running about 50 miles a week some of that in the redwood forest of his home town's Nisene Marks State Park where he encouraged friends to run with him a few times. By September he had found out he had been rejected from a top rated graduate school he had half-heartedly applied to and some friends had cheered him up by putting up a web site about his intentions that he was now using to describe his preparations and promote his run. Also, he had done more research on lightweight camping equipment, bought a lightweight tent and pack and made an attempt at a 3-day 80 mile run up the coast to San Francisco. He had run about 11 miles up coastal Route 1 with



his pack when his knees began to hurt and he decided to call it quits and look into another way of carrying his needed supplies. He considered several other ideas including pushing a long handled jogging stroller as two previous across the US runners had documented since he was still thinking about running across the country solo. In November he entered another race in Bear Valley, Ca., an obstacle course race that although it was only 7 miles was mostly run in the mud during a rainstorm (See Mudder Photo). While running again in the rain and dark one day in December, Ryan badly twisted his ankle and his training then focused on just weight lifting for a few weeks. His ankle healed quickly, however, and he was back running in January. By February, he was running around 10 miles in the morning, taking a break and then running 10 miles in the afternoon several times a week. He also had developed a more effective stretching routine. And, he had read a book on Chi running and was applying the concepts and his knowledge of physics to effect what he calls “almost weightless “ running.

By the end of the year, Ryan had become a lot more aware of what it would take to run 3000 miles clear across the country (K). He had greatly increased the skills (KH) that he needed in order to achieve this goal and had thoroughly researched several other runners who had engaged in similar activities (SP). All that remained was to reaffirm his desire (W) by making a commitment for a starting date. In January of 2011, Ryan started to plan for an April departure and shortly afterwards his friend Nick talked about joining Ryan by driving in a car as backup. Ryan told him to think about it carefully for a few weeks and soon both of them were committed to an early April departure. On April 2, after taking a brief ocean dip in Monterey Bay and reluctantly saying his goodbyes to a small group of friends and family who had gathered to see him off, he started

on his run. That day was one of the most difficult for him as he had gotten a late start and had to run through the Santa Cruz mountains to San Jose (about 37 miles) arriving at his younger half- brother's home late in the evening. This was the most he had ever run in one day.

#### Skype Interview: Using Modern Technology as an Aide to Empathic Connection

In June, Ryan was almost half way across the country in northern Colorado where he had stopped for awhile to see some family and meet up with his girlfriend with whom he had gotten back together again. After several phone calls and emails Ryan and I worked out a time when we could Skype each other online. This face-to-face communication lasted over an hour and produced some quite touching moments. Using some DP concepts such as PIA, Person Characteristics (e.g., traits, attitudes, emotions, values, etc.), and the significance (S) paradigm, I had prepared a series of questions for Ryan. And, as I began to fill in more of the details, our interview shifted from being about his run to being about him, his values and observations about the drama of his life. I observed myself slowing down, listening more closely, understanding more deeply and even tearing up a few times as Ryan talked about the changes he had been through since his Mom had passed on. I began to more fully understand the original significance (S) of this run for him and how it had changed and broadened as his grief had lessened. And, as I communicated my understanding of what he was saying back to him I noticed that we were drawing closer to each other even though we were about 1400 miles apart. He hadn't decided to run across the country in order to run away from issues but rather in hopes of working things out. And, clearly now he was no longer depressed.

Ryan had made some mistakes earlier on in his running but as time had past he found himself feeling stronger and the physical demands more manageable (KH). He had run through rain and snow storms, unbearable heat and dust storms, dealt with a collapsing tent and getting lost several times. He no longer had knee or foot pain problems – he had lost some weight, which made the running easier and was eating better and more conscientiously. He had done a lot of thinking (K) and found himself now meditating more as he was running. “As I cross the country, I think about the number of people living below where they could be,” he noted. “It’s become really important to know myself“, he says and, “ it’s taking so much less effort to meditate while I am running”. He no longer listens to music as he runs rather he gets into a rhythm while running where things just seem to flow as he attends carefully to the environment around him – a state of mind that some call ‘mindfulness meditation’ (cf, John Kabat-Zinn) or a form of moving or walking meditation that Zen Buddhists refer to as Kinhin.

Finally, I asked him if the reasons (S) for this journey had changed for him and he responded that the sense of adventure had become paramount. He and his friend, Nick, were having some incredible times, seeing some beautiful scenery and meeting some fascinating people many who had responded favorably (and a few unfavorably) to this young man from California and his artist friend with a Mohawk haircut and their quest to reach the Atlantic. Some had put them up for a night or two, some had donated a little money or food and some had arranged for news articles or even TV and radio interviews.

Another thing that had changed for Ryan was that he was now really enjoying writing about his different experiences as his many recent detailed, very interesting and humorous blog posts attest (cf., [RUNFORIT.US](http://RUNFORIT.US)). "One of the things I've really enjoyed on this trip is the ability to slip in and out of different people's lives, experiencing but not really living," he wrote in a June 25 entry. "It's a great sampling of life, like trying on different outfits to see what feels best. I think this is another profoundly important learning tool available on this trip, as it gives a young person such as myself a large body of lifestyles to draw from as I begin to consider my own future and my approach to such things." And, at the time of our June interview, Ryan had become a lot clearer about his eventual career goals. He was already making plans to enroll in graduate school to pursue a degree in physical therapy when he returned to California. Ryan's journey was proving to be more therapeutic and valuable to his future potential than anything I might have suggested.

So, had I achieved greater empathy for Ryan? I certainly had experienced several moments in our online interview of empathic connection. To use a slang expression, I felt like "I finally had gotten him" and I think he experienced that also. I now understood so much more of the full significance (S) of what his run across the country meant to him. I had come to understand and accept who he was and what he was doing. Another observer of our interview, who is perhaps less biased than I, was my wife, Kris who with Ryan's knowledge had listened in to most of my Skype interaction with him. She is a licensed marriage and family therapist and, as my intimate partner, has previously witnessed my performance in some decidedly unempathic interactions as well as some empathic ones. She commented that she had also observed some touching empathic moments in my interview with Ryan.

In late August, after he had run across Ohio and entered into the Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania area with about 370 miles left to go before Atlantic City, N.J., I had an opportunity to Skype interview Ryan again and asked him if there was any one thing the journey had taught him. Ryan answered quickly, “Yes, there is no obstacle which you cannot overcome”. So, in sum, Ryan had an idea about what he wanted to do (W), learned as much as he could about how to do it (K & KH), and engaged in the course of action required to achieve his goal (P-A). On September 11, 2011, Ryan arrived on a beach in Atlantic City, N.J. and jumped into the Atlantic ocean with sheer joy and a little exhaustion.

#### NOTES

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being so open and genuine in our phone calls and Skype interviews; and, finally, for his extraordinary journey.

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## APPENDIX

Will run even in bad weather.....



Colorado & no longer depressed.....





And , Atlantic City, finally.....



Nick & Ryan....

