

Reflections on the Boston Marathon from a Breast Cancer Oncologist (or, Why I Just Don't Quit)

AMY H. COMANDER^{a,b,c}

^aAuerbach Breast Center at Newton Wellesley Hospital, Newton, Massachusetts, USA; ^bMassachusetts General Hospital Cancer Center, Boston, MA; ^cHarvard Medical School, Boston, Massachusetts, USA

Disclosures of potential conflicts of interest may be found at the end of this article.

The day of the Boston Marathon was something else. In fact, the forecast was so ominous that the traditional Patriots' Day Red Sox game was postponed for the first time since 1984. Still, we all came to run, and run we did. With this year's brutal weather conditions, you might not expect New Englanders (no matter how hard-core) to come out to support the runners, but many did. They wore trash bags, applauded, and encouraged us on—demonstrating the meaning of "Boston Strong." As I ran past Mile 13, amidst the cheers, I heard someone yell, "Go, Dr. Comander, go!" Startled a little, I looked back and saw a familiar face—a patient I once took care of. It was so surprising that I honestly did a double take in disbelief. I then remembered another one of my patients, who had told me to look for her as I ran. Given the storm, I figured she'd think better of things and stay home instead. But I spotted her easily, bundled up in a full-length down jacket, with a huge umbrella, and her family by her side. "That's my oncologist!" she proclaimed to any and all who would listen. We took a selfie and then I continued along the course.

I finished the Boston Marathon—albeit a couple of hours slower than the winner, Desiree Linden, the first American woman to win in Boston since 1985. But by heeding her advice to "keep showing up!", I had "beaten" so many others, not to mention those half of the elite runners who dropped out completely.

Since finishing the race, I have been bombarded with all kinds of comments—from friends, family members, colleagues, and patients. "How did you even go out there? I would have just stayed in bed!" "How did you keep going?" "Did you consider dropping out?" I understood them—the weather conditions were severe; in fact, some runners experienced hypothermia or other health conditions related to the cold. But the idea of dropping out of a race that I had worked so hard to train for never even crossed my mind.

I won't lie; it was pretty miserable out there. It is no fun to run when your shoes and socks are soaking wet, your toes are numb, and the rain is coming down so hard at times that you cannot even see in front of you. I think of Angela Duckworth and her study of "grit," and how so many of us that day finished the race in such abhorrent conditions. I think back on my years in medical school, residency, and fellowship, and how my intense medical training further instilled in me the values of endurance, persistence, and "never giving up." Anyone who has been through

medical training can tell you that it requires intense commitment, focus, and dedication, just like training for a marathon.

More importantly, I think back on why I run in the first place. As a breast cancer oncologist, I see too many people whose journeys are unfortunately cut short. I think about my patients often during my runs—the ones who are facing grueling chemotherapy sessions, surgeries, and radiation treatments, as well as the ones who, despite all these treatments and my best efforts as their doctor, did not get to pursue all of their dreams. That is why for the past 5 years I have chosen to chase after the life-affirming experience of crossing the finish line in Copley Square. I have run the Boston Marathon for the past 5 years for charity, and this year I ran for "Team Eye and Ear," to support groundbreaking gene therapy research that can help restore vision to children with inherited retinal conditions that cause blindness, led by my physician-scientist husband, Jason Comander, M.D., Ph.D. One of my favorite marathon mantras? "Carpe Diem!" In the months leading up to the marathon, when I rolled out of bed at 5:00 a.m. for a training run on either my treadmill or in the snow, I would think of my dear patients, as well as Jason's. I am grateful on a daily basis for the ability to do this.

When my patients tell me that they are so impressed that their doctor runs marathons, I tell them that the training and preparation for a big race like the Boston Marathon pales in comparison to what they face as they go through cancer treatment. My patients are the ones who are truly going the distance, and they have no choice but to "keep showing up." It is because of them that I lace up and get out there, and I had the distinct privilege to learn an important life lesson, which was reinforced on April 16. "Life isn't about waiting for the storm to pass. . . It's about learning to dance in the rain."

The world's best marathoners ran Boston, but with 25 mph headwinds, torrential rain, and the coldest temperatures in 30 years, half of the elite runners quit. Not me. Not my patients. We don't quit. I can honestly say that it never even crossed my mind to drop out. Carpe Diem!

Oh, and Boston 2019—I am coming for you!

DISCLOSURES

The author indicated no financial relationships.

Correspondence: Amy Comander, M.D., Auerbach Breast Center at Newton Wellesley Hospital, 2014 Washington St., Newton, Massachusetts 02462, USA. Telephone: (617) 219-1230; e-mail: acomander@mgh.harvard.edu Received May 2, 2018; accepted for publication May 2, 2018. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1634/theoncologist.2018-0262>