

In the footsteps of Richard Webster

A church musician's perspective on the Boston Marathon bombings

By Jason Overall

On April 15th, tragedy marred the famed Boston Marathon when two bombs went off at the finish line. Three people were killed and 260 persons injured. Over the next week the nation was transfixed by news of the investigation and manhunt that culminated in the unprecedented lock-down of a major metropolitan area. Many still struggle to make sense of these terrible events. Richard Webster, director of music and organist of Trinity Church, Copley Square, Boston, ran the Boston Marathon, completing the race moments before the blasts. His story provides a compelling context for how church musicians can respond to disaster with hope.

Jason Overall: What is your background as a runner?

Richard Webster: I started running around 1980 when I quit smoking. At first I couldn't run around the block without collapsing in a heap, but I found running to be a cleansing distraction from nicotine craving. Eventually, regular running became a habit. I completed my first marathon in 1995 at age 43. I had read a book on marathon training and followed its instructions. As race day approached, I was not overly confident that I could run 26 miles, but I did it. Crossing the finish line was like walking through the gates of heaven. I was hooked. The race I ran this year in Boston was my 25th marathon. With adequate training, anyone can run a marathon. Runners come in all shapes and sizes.

How often do you run marathons?

Usually two a year—Chicago in October and Boston in April. I run Chicago in order to qualify for Boston, an elite race open to those who have run a previous marathon under a certain time, based

on your age. I turned 60 just prior to the 2012 Chicago race, which meant that my qualifying time for Boston went up by 10 minutes. As my husband says, "you don't have to get faster, just older."

Have you found a spiritual dimension to running?

Absolutely. I empathize with those who call the great outdoors their "church." Being in the glory of nature, even on a bad day, doing what God designed your body to do, is hard to top. If your body is the "temple of the Holy Spirit," then exercise of any kind is basic housekeeping. There is a deep spiritual component to running. As Eric Liddel said in his *Chariots of Fire* sermon, "When I run, I feel God's pleasure." For me, running is meditation. As a composer, some of my best ideas result from a long run when the mind is receptive, empty. I never run with music, earbuds, or paraphernalia. I love the silence. My footfalls and the wind in my ears are music enough.

What is a typical weekly schedule for your running?

I would love to run daily, but a church musician's schedule is so wonky that some days it just doesn't happen. If I put it in my calendar, like a rehearsal, then I'm more likely to do it. I try to run four to six times a week. A day or two off each week is good. Your body needs to rest, repair and restore itself. In the months leading up to a marathon, one long run a week (8 to 20 miles) is key.

Are there parallels between running and musicianship? Has your musicianship benefitted from running?

Exercise, especially the aerobic kind, increases blood flow. More blood through the brain improves

concentration, something vital to musicians. Running has increased my stamina in general. This week I've been directing the Grand Rapids Choir of Men and Boys in recording sessions for a new CD. I stand for hours, waving my arms, doing all I can to help this fine choir achieve its best. I don't tire. Being a distance runner steels you. It gives you endurance.

What were your expectations before this year's Boston Marathon?

The best day of the entire year in Boston is Patriots' Day, the third Monday in April, commemorating Boston's role as the cradle of the Revolution. It's the day of the Boston Marathon, the world's oldest and most prestigious marathon, something our city is rightly proud of. As a state holiday, businesses and schools are closed. Everyone has the day off. From the starting line in Hopkinton to the finish line in Copley Square, throngs turn out to cheer the runners and enjoy the race. It's a 26-mile long party. On Patriots' Day Boston truly becomes that "city on a hill" for all the world to see. The energy, enthusiasm and electricity flowing back and forth between the runners and the fans is hard to describe. It's like really good church. I find it to be incredibly spiritual.

I usually run marathons in costume. It's more fun and it jazes up the fans. Kids particularly love it. I've run as the Easter Bunny, Paul Revere, Abraham Lincoln (in 2009 for his 200th birthday), Robin, J. S. Bach (to raise funds for the Bach Week Festival in Chicago), Robin Hood, Cat in the Hat, and a bumble bee. This year, to raise funds for the Trinity Boston Foundation, we held a costume contest. "See Richard run . . . as an Angry Bird, the Pope, or Prince William." Votes were cast by making contributions to the Foundation. Prince William won handily. The costume was handsome—a red military jacket and sash, à la Prince William on his wedding day. I had a framed photo of Kate Middleton dangling from my neck and wore a big crown so fans could see me coming. All in all, it was a heady mix of fun, adrenaline, and enthusiasm, and for a worthy cause.

Did you have any goals?

No. Unlike Chicago, which is a flat course, Boston is notoriously hilly. Heartbreak Hill is only one of many "ups and downs" in this race. A "personal best" in Boston is as elusive as the Holy Grail. I'm always happy just to finish. Last year's race, when it was 88 degrees, I ran in 4:30. This year I lopped off nearly a half hour, finishing in 4:03.

Runners, especially marathoners, rely on their fans to help get them through the race. I knew I'd see one of my choir



Richard Webster

members at Mile 11 in Natick. She was there with a banana, a swig of water and a hug. Mile 13 is the "Wellesley gauntlet," with thousands of Wellesley College women hanging over the police barricade screaming and begging for kisses from runners. So inspiring. So fun. At Mile 19 a group of Trinity choir folks awaited me, near the beginning of Heartbreak Hill. One of my tenors jumped into the race. For the next two miles, he ran with me, sticking by my side until we had crested Heartbreak Hill. Thanks to Mark, I forgot about the agony of those two relentlessly uphill miles. A gaggle of friends had gathered at Coolidge Corner, Mile 23.5, cameras and iPhones poised. Their wild cheering jazed me up so much that I ran the rest of the race. Usually the agony of the last 3-4 miles is so acute that I can't run continuously. It's more a mix of running, walking, and hobbling. Lots of runners resort to this toward the end. For me, this time was different. My Mile 26 was the second fastest mile of the entire race. Inexplicably, I just kept running and crossed the finish line several minutes before I should have. Was it the Holy Spirit? Coincidence? The fans? The costume? I don't know.

Did you have friends waiting for you at the finish line?

I did, but I didn't know it. Just after finishing, I spotted one of my choristers and her father in the crowd in front of Old South Church. I went over to the barricade for a quick hug and chat. Soon after leaving them, the first explosion went off a half block away. I will never forget how loud it was. It doesn't surprise me that some who were close to the blast suffered hearing damage. At this point you think, "Is this a stunt? Fireworks? Something electrical?" Utter bewilderment. When the second blast struck, further down Boylston Street, you knew something was terribly wrong. Suddenly, chaos was everywhere. Sirens. Medical personnel careening toward the scene with stretchers. Emergency vehicles appearing out of nowhere. Choirs of sirens. Race volunteers moving the finishers away from the scene. A cluster of us were standing around trying to figure out what was going on when another runner who had just crossed the finish line, his forehead bloody, staggered up to us. Choking on his words, he said, "I can't believe I saw limbs lying in the street." We began to cry. How could this be happening? As this group of strangers wept, race volunteers surrounded us, asking, "How can we help? Can we call a relative for you?" That was futile, of course. Cell phone service was completely down. In the face of evil, the impulse is to overwhelm it with kindness and compassion.

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Richard Webster as Robin



Richard as J.S. Bach



Royal Richard

People were desperate to find a way to help, to bring relief to the suffering. In the weeks following, this response did not abate. Boston has felt like the Kingdom of God. Goodness, gentleness, and generosity are everywhere. Traffic is less aggressive; crowding onto a rush hour subway more deferential. Our city responded by saying, "The last word will not be evil, but kindness and mercy."

Some days later, the same chorister and her father with whom I had spoken at the finish line on race day said to me, "You saved our lives. We had been standing where the first bomb went off, waiting to see you finish. When you crossed the finish line, we left to go find you. Had you not finished when you did, we would have still been standing at that spot."

How do you make sense of that? Maybe God gave me what it took to run faster than usual in order to spare their lives. But what about those who were not spared? These are hard spiritual questions with no facile answers.

What elements of your spirituality or musicality have nourished you during this time?

It has been a difficult time at Trinity. Our church is near the finish line. For ten days, the Copley Square area was closed as a crime scene. No one could get near the church. We were in exile. Where would we worship the following Sunday? The Church of the Advent graciously invited us to join them. Liturgically, our two churches are famously different. The two congregations worshipping together would have been something to behold. Temple Israel also reached out to us, offering their beautiful, modern building in the Longwood Medical area. "Come and hold your services here," they invited. Not only did these kind people open up their building, they demonstrated radical hospitality, laying on coffee hour, serving as ushers, directing us to the restrooms. The chief Rabbi publicly welcomed us. We celebrated the Eucharist before the Torah ark in the Jewish temple. Who would ever have thought? Their only request was that we not bring crosses into the building. Roughly 900 people worshipped in a space as un-Richardsonian Romanesque as one could imagine. With a choir of eighty, a grand piano and flute, we were good to go. There was a lightness, grace, and holiness to it all. The congregation belted the hymns as never before, much to the amazement of the Jews, who blogged

about "how those Christians really sing!" No one there will ever forget that service. The psalm appointed for Good Shepherd Sunday was Psalm 23. "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me." What more needs to be said?

The Trinity choirs have been a unifying thread through these trials. The day after the attacks, a choir dad e-mailed, "My daughter insists that the Choristers go ahead with rehearsal today. She is adamant that they be together. If they can't go to Trinity, then why not rehearse at Mr. Webster's house?" A 10-year old gets it. When you're the choir, you come together to do your job. You have a mission. Two days after the bombings, with the church still closed, our Wednesday Evensong morphed into an open-air service at the police barricade two blocks from the church. Colin Lynch led the choir, and clergy offered prayers for the healing of our city. Though our church building was closed, the community of faith carried on. Trinity finally reopened the following Wednesday. The first public service was Evensong with the Choristers. TV cameras rolled. It was another step in a painful, uncharted, redemptive journey that no one could have foreseen.

At a time like this clichés are helpful because they convey truth. Life is precious. Life is a gift. It can be taken away or altered in an instant. Thank God for it every day, and tell those you love that you love them. Tell them often.

You express yourself so eloquently through your compositions. Can you envision responding to these events through your music?

I don't know yet. Here's another irony. The day before the race was a Sunday, known in Boston as Marathon Sunday. It's a big day in the city churches, with scores of out-of-town runners on hand. At Trinity we bless the athletes during the services. I had composed a new anthem, *Have you not known? Have you not heard?* based on Isaiah 40, to be premiered that day. The text includes, "They shall run and not be weary. They shall walk and not faint." It had been commissioned by Stephen J. Hendrickson, a parishioner whose partner, David McCord, was about to run his first marathon. The energetic music weaves in the famous theme from *Chariots of Fire*. The Trinity Choir gave it a rousing first performance. Given the following day's events, the piece has acquired a particular poignancy.

Are there other aspects of this that you would like to share?

There is no doubt that evil exists. We saw it in twelve horrifying seconds in Boston. But evil is everywhere, every day. Though there was injury and death on Patriots' Day, there is violence in the streets of Boston, Chicago, Baghdad, and Damascus every day. We who claim the faith of Jesus are called to respond to the world's brokenness passionately, with courage, mercy, and healing.

This article also appears in the October issue of The Journal of the Association of Anglican Musicians.

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Opus 50 • Good Shepherd Episcopal • Lexington, KY • IV/58

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