The ear-piercing screech of the alarm blares at 4:15 in the morning. It's still over two hours until daylight, a most unnecessary hour for most human beings to be up. Yet I do it voluntarily most weekday mornings without giving it much consideration. In fact, I am usually already awake with anticipation of what I'm going to do next.

I won't say I've always been a morning runner, but I've been doing it for so long now that I don't clearly remember the days before the transition. It's just how I'm wired. My body and my mind seem to like it that way. While most people don't understand the runner, many runners don't understand the one who rises two hours before dawn, in much the same way that I don't understand the one who runs at high noon in the midday heat in the middle of a southern summer.

Runners. Yeah, we're different, but we're different from each other too.

I've been running for so long now that I have almost forgotten how not to run. I do it for the same reasons I breathe, eat, and sleep. It sustains me. It defines me. It supports me. It soothes me. It completes me. When I think about how much everything around me has changed since those first committed steps almost 30 years ago, the one thing that hasn't changed is the joy of the pure act of running. It never gets old.

Quiet morning runs are always done in the silhouetted darkness, but within the shadows, there is abundant life. This time of year, early spring, there are always the subtle background sounds of nature and hints of movement that one can soak in even more fully without the distraction of clear vision. The sounds of stereophonic chirping birds and croaking frogs slice through the darkness, and the glimpse of scurrying bunnies, raccoons, possums, skunks, red fox, squirrels and an occasional deer at the same time startle and thrill me. They are a reminder that the world does not all keep the same hours and that the night supports its own active life. After a morning run, the entire remainder of the day is delivered with more clarity, insight, and energy.

A lot has happened to me and around me since I've started running, I've relocated from New York to North Carolina, then to Atlanta, which is possibly the best running city in the world. Since I've started running, I've become a father and a grandfather. Since I've started running, I've seen a space shuttle disaster, I've seen a great wall torn down and I've seen tall buildings crumble. Since I've started running, I've seen the rollout of the Microsoft Word, handheld mobile phones, Apple computers, compact discs, Laptops, the launching of the first GPS satellites, and the launching of the Internet itself.

I've gone from running how I feel to wearing a heart rate monitor, and I've gone from bleeding nipples and blisters on my feet to Body Glide and blister-free socks. I've gone from water in a bottle to Gatorade in a fuel belt and Camelbak, to Gu shots and Sports Beans.   Everything around it has become outdated, but running never gets old.

If I ran for any other reason than the pure joy of it, I would have stopped long ago. Everything around running had gotten old, including me, but running never does. I've slowed down. I've lost flexibility. I have nagging discomforts that never used to be there.   In the years I've been running, paper running logs have been replaced by spreadsheets, then by on-line running journals, and now, I just let my Garmin downloads track everything. I've gone from cotton T-shirts to singlets, to high-tech moisture whisking running outfits.

 On April 16th, it will be the 39th anniversary of the day I started running as a way of life. Over the next year, I plan to write a lot about the last 40 years, and what I hope to be the next 40 years. It will be the first full year of running since I lost my father, my inspiration, and the one who showed me that running can last a lifetime.   He ran his last race when he was 72, and we walked a mile for his 92nd birthday. I should be so lucky. I will continue to get older. Almost everything does.

But not running. Running never gets old.