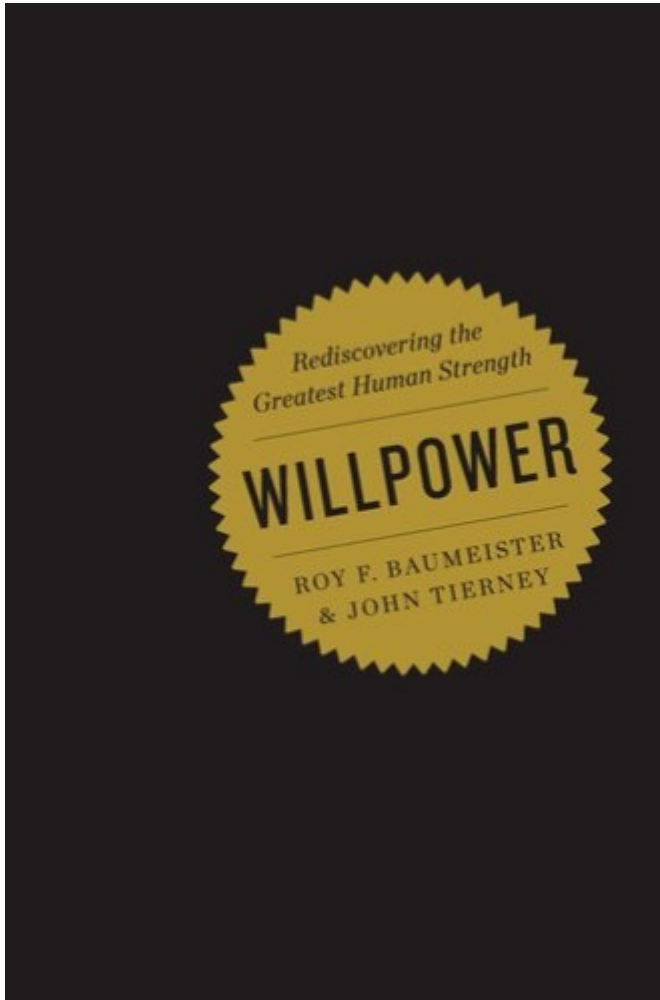


Why willpower?

By [Amy Frykholm](#)

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In Review



Willpower

by Roy F. Baumeister and John Tierney
Penguin

Every year, people gather in my hometown for an almost unthinkable challenge. During the Leadville Trail 100, athletes run 100 miles. They begin the race at 10,000 feet, climb to 12,600 feet, descend down the other side of a mountain pass to 9,200 feet, then turn around and do the climb and descent all over again. You can only train for a race like this up to a certain point. Racers say that they train to run 50 miles. After that, they rely on the capacity of the mind to convince the body to keep running, even though everything in them urges them to stop.

The race is metaphorically fascinating. Racing is about facing oneself as much as it is about facing a difficult challenge. The last runner to cross the finish line is ritually cheered with greater enthusiasm and more admiration than the first. This testimony to endurance has brought me to tears on an annual basis since the summer of 2000, when I first put my lawn chair alongside the last uphill that runners face.

Maybe it is this spectacle--and my complicated feelings about it--that has me entranced by a new book by psychologist Roy Baumeister and science writer John Tierney. Baumeister set out, through an extensive set of laboratory experiments, to determine what makes for willpower. Tierney has tried to turn this research into a readable, anecdote-driven, almost self-help oriented book on the subject.

Baumeister and his colleagues find, for example, that willpower functions like a muscle. It can be built; it can atrophy. They find that humans have essentially one resource pool for willpower: extending it in one area will certainly weaken it in another. (This is why it's a bad idea to try to quit smoking and go on a diet at the same time.)

A recent [article](#) by two psychology professors argues that Baumeister's description of willpower misses the critical factor of belief: willpower is limited, but only if you believe it is. Endurance increased among study participants, they note, when they believed that they could renew their willpower indefinitely.

This notion would resonate with Trail 100 runners. The belief that running the race is possible--that finishing is doable--has to be valuable when you are at mile 60 at 2 a.m., with two marathons left to go.

But Baumeister [shot back](#) that "mental tricks" (like belief) only work in short-term situations. Belief about your abilities will never trump "judicious" use of willpower. In fact, false confidence will hurt rather than help us--we will find ourselves breaking down and backfiring more readily. Baumeister describes willpower as something like a mechanism that can be well-maintained and utilized for optimal performance or broken through misuse.

Willpower is an important factor in spiritual pursuits of all kinds: it can keep us persisting in prayer and see us through trials; it plays a crucial role in a disciplined life that might be old-fashioned but is a well-documented part of religious traditions. But from a theological point of view, what is the value of a person's will functioning well or poorly? Simply celebrating the human capacity to endure great trials--or to lose 100 pounds or to sit, as in one example that Baumeister and Tierney site, encased in a block of ice while the ice melts--is empty unless it's tempered by community, by a commitment to something bigger than oneself.

That bigger "something" goes unaddressed by both sides of the willpower debate. They are not interested in the question of why we might exert our wills, only in how. This seems like an important missing piece.