

## Life's Journey

Paul writes in Corinthians, “we walk by faith, not by sight “ (2 ,Co.. 5:7) Our journey is never in a straight line though. Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote” Our truest steps are human steps. To walk unswerving more divine.” Old Testament familiar directive: “What doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love Mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God” ((Micah !V) Today I share my physical-spiritual journey’s three stages so far==1 running over 30 years daily, 2 outdoor walking and gym machine training following foot surgery and 3) the Covid era that closed the gym routine and ushered in the present practice of walking outdoors many miles every day. It is a three part journey for which I am extremely grateful.

Some forty years ago I was in a very stressful new position as a college dean with an inherited faculty embroiled in academic political infighting. One Friday night Mary K and I and our two young daughters got in our car after work to drive from upstate New York to our home town Montclair, NJ, to visit Mary K’s parents. I was at the wheel on The Garden State Parkway when I suddenly found it increasingly and frighteningly hard to breathe. I thought this was a heart attack. Within minutes I found myself flat on my back on a stretcher in an ambulance looking down through my feet at the beautiful faces of Mary K. and our two little girls standing in the highway darkness and peering in at me with worried expressions. As the ambulance doors closed, I wondered if I had seen them for the last time. I found myself praying as hard as I could that I would be okay and that, more importantly, if not, that the three of them could carry on fine without my being part of the team.

After emergency room doctors and tests, it was clear that it was not a heart attack. I had hyperventilated. I had not heard of that phenomenon in which anxiety fires adrenalin to make your heart race and your lungs go wild. A family doctor and friend of Mary K’s parents came to see me in the hospital. We talked, and there in the late night he read me the riot act: I was overweight, I smoked, I drank too much coffee, I drank martinis. I didn’t make time for regular exercise. I was doing everything wrong --a sort of palette of maladaptive responses to stress. That doctor’s lecture was my wake-up call. I had been truly scared. Having failed at previous efforts to

quit smoking, this time I was able to cold quit forever, full stop! Same for any kind of drinking except what the doctor himself did and said would be fine—some white wine in moderation. Get exercising? He didn't have to tell me twice. I honestly felt God's spirit had entered me with new force and would support me. I began to run every day. A half-mile, then a mile, then several, then 5, then some 10k competitive races and fundraisers. The running daily took off all the excess weight. I felt better and I thanked God for turning my life around. And I continue to do so.

By way of background, both Mary K. and I were not only born and happily public schooled in Montclair, New Jersey. We even had the same obstetrician. How preordained does that sound? I was raised all-in as a boy in St. James Episcopal Church. Choir. Crucifer. Etc. Mary K. was raised in the Congregational Church next door to her house where her grandfather had been the minister. Mary K's father, by the way lived in the house on the other side of the church and one day he walked over past the church and asked Mary K's mother to marry him. Also seemed divinely planned. When Mary K. and I were married we chose her denomination. After that incident on the highway, church became more important. I learned that when running I could not only plan out my day ahead of time. I could think. I could pray. I could explore gratitude. I could take stock of myself and Mary K. and the girls, what did they need? Anyway, my life's journey had been altered and while we went through lots of family challenges of all kinds, as most people do, I kept running. I really relate to Tom Hanks as Forest Gump saying, "I just keep on running Jenny." Every day, wherever we were. I just ran and ran and ran until my always pronated right foot's arch completely gave out. Back to that full stop in a minute.

During the running period of 35 years, my thirteen years working at Yale (my own college) followed by close to that number of years at Boston University created opportunities for me and Mary K. to staff and lead and, for me, sometimes to do a set of lectures on university alumni trips all over the world. Both in Connecticut and Massachusetts, Mary K's school district superintendents generously allowed her to step away briefly from her important work as a reading specialist because they believed, as we do, that travel is educational. My university positions also led to huge amounts of international travel after I created and ran a new international fundraising program for Yale. Thus, I ran all over the world. Through the streets

of Istanbul, along the beaches in Madagascar. I ran in the still dark morning of Beijing past the suspicious eyes of the uniformed guards of the Forbidden City. And sometimes I had to run in place, just jog up and down on the motel doorstep in Churchill, Ontario where we were staffing a polar bear trip. On the tent platforms in game parks in Africa 'and on the car rear platform of the trans-Siberian railroad. Notably, since I always ran around 5:30 or six in the morning, I ran around into the light and into darkness around every kind of mosque, temple, cathedral, shrine, abbey, monastery and church I could find. Cathedral big bells pealing, Imams calling from their minarets Sacred music choirs rehearsing. First sun light pouring over the dome of the Vatican. Or over a 100-foot-long reclining gold-leaved Buddha in Thailand. Different world religions and devotional practices seemed to sink into my pores with regularity and familiarity I always felt, unalterably that God was with me and I not infrequently repeated the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm.

Now part 2: the next stop on my journey. I had run so much I had a completely damaged and broken arch. This time, before a set of not ambulance doors but hospital OR doors would close on me, I was now lying on a bed in pre-op at Boston Medical Center when the anesthesiologist arrived and asked me to confirm that it was my right foot to be operated on and then penned a big black X on it. Did surgeons really make mistakes? Four hours of surgery followed. Maybe not a miracle operation, but it became an academic paper I learned. In the book of Daniel, we hear of "feet part of iron and part of clay," but my foot with the black X was now part human bone and part Titanium. I was grateful I had a right foot with titanium plates and screws and was fitted with orthotics. Crutches and floor exercises followed but after six months of PT I was able to join Boston Sports Club less than a mile away in Bedford. I prayed every day anew with thanks to have a better foot.

Every morning around 5:30 AM my new routine began --elliptical machines, Stairmasters, reclining bikes and treadmills, followed by mat floor exercise. Not much running. It worked well, I could get a good workout and be back in time to take our grandson Izzy to school or sometimes just wait with him for the bus =a special time for me and Izzy each day. During the school years here in Lexington Mary K and I became familiar playground and park people with new young friends. Pilgrim Church—our

home for 25 years as of last month—was central to everything. As many long-time Pilgrims know, Izzy began at Pilgrim Nursery School. My new exercise plan allowed me lots of new Pilgrim interactions. I would say hi to Susan at the gym and spend time with Jane and Taylor, and Elisabeth as they and Izzy and I gathered on the Lincoln Park monkey bars, swings, the balance beam, you name it. Although my foot was still in a boot shoe, I felt I would get there in time. It has always been reassuring and happy to have fellow Pilgrims weaving in and out of my journey from running to gym to the present.

This is the third and final stage so far! Covid arrived and not the ambulance doors and not the OR doors, but The Boston Sports Club doors closed for good. Open air walking seemed safest for both Covid defense and to maintain fitness. Okay, an addiction by now but a healthy one. I walked. And then I walked some more. Most early mornings before breakfast, every end of the day if possible. And at noon time if I could work it in. Reebee said of her biking recently, time for lengthy exercise is a luxury and not available to everyone. But it was my priority. Morning, noon, and night—I have an abundance of gratitude for the ability to keep moving.

More walking, more fellow Pilgrims. Ed on his bike trail pausing to ask me if I needed help, visualizing my funny gait. Son Mei on the bike trail exchanging thoughts about the value of solitary meditation when walking. Reebee dismounting from her bike for a short pastoral visit. Duncan whizzing by at what seemed like 50 miles an hour while shouting out a Hi Sharing space with Bob as he briskly walked circles around our church to keep his body mass index exactly where he wanted it. A practice he talked about one Sunday.. Steve coming to a stop at a school crosswalk calling out his car window “hey man, how are you? I see you everywhere.” A speedy passing runner turned out in a flash to be a smiling marathon trainer, Sadhana! We Pilgrims were us journeying through Covid in the safest most intentional strategies we could and I believe we all shared a joyful sense of God’s watching over us.

So that ends my three stages of physical and spiritual motion so far. . . As I conclude, I will mention that when I was an undergraduate, I loved reading Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*. What a great group of characters

all joined on a pilgrimage—a humorously but also humanely presented band of folks joined together on a pilgrimage to Canterbury. Well, our pilgrimage here has an equally inspiring and diverse set of characters on this life journey together. And for most of us there are familiar songs and hymns that bring walking happily to the fore. Our linguistic idiomatic speech, in fact, relies on phrases like “walking the walk and talking the talk,” “I feel like I’m about to walk off a cliff.” walking in a straight and narrow path, sometimes perversely telling someone to “take a hike” or “you’re angry, why don’t you walk it off?” Walking language is part of our speech and I suspect has been since we as a species first stood up on two feet. We turned into walking on two feet to be hunter-gatherers. We walk for as long as we are able to and then we still keep walking spiritually. When one set of doors closes --and I have called out three sets--, another set opens. I believe that God does not even see closed doors. In any case, I am grateful for my feet. But one caveat I feel I should confess—that foot of mine with titanium parts literally has a floating screw loose. That means that I have a screw loose. I learned that on an x-ray some ten years ago and I opted to leave it that way. You can make of that what you will. Amen