

## **Power in Perseverance**

*by Marnie Fossitt*

It was a bright autumn morning. I closed my eyes against the sun's luminosity attempting to shut my ears from the cheering chorus. Now lined up, I glanced down at my shoes, tied, re-tied, laces double knotted. Feeling paralyzed, I breathed, "You are not weak. You are strong. You are ready." Powerful words, considering my new state of self-doubt.

The starting horn blared. We were off. Thousands of runners began the 42.195 km race from Toronto's City Hall.

During the previous night's pasta-loading dinner, I was returning from the washroom when I overheard my name. One of the group members was announcing his predictions. Jim would do a personal best. Elaine's time would be around four hours...and me...his forecast was that I would not finish. Humiliated, I quietly moused from the room, spaghetti untouched.

On a stormy Christmas Eve in 1963, I was in a serious car accident. I suffered a broken femur, shattered patella, and multiple lacerations. I spent months in hospital, coming home to convalesce in a bed loaned by the Red Cross.

As I approached my teen years, my mother watched over me like a hawk. I wasn't allowed to participate in sports. I felt jealous watching my sisters bounce on pogo sticks and walk on stilts. My "kneecapless" leg did not permit deep bends so cycling was minimal. I tried out for the basketball team. It was only when I made the cut that I begged my parents to let me participate. Mom was scared but relented. She needn't have fretted. I was not a natural, spending most of the games riding the pines.

As an adult, I began playing ladies' softball. I felt impotent when I couldn't run fast or catch the ball. Realizing that I was a detriment to the team, I resigned myself to walks and gentle aerobics.

Following the birth of my son, I was determined to shed the post-baby weight. The daughter of our child-care provider was a runner. She invited me along for a jog. The first time I went out with her; I ran a whole mile without stopping. It was not a smart move! My lungs were afire. My legs were dead. My chest screamed at me for three days. The good news was that, unlike biking, the shuffling gait did not bother my knee. I was hooked!

Two months later, I signed up for a 5 km fun run. I knew what "runner's high" was when I crossed the finish line, albeit as a back-of-the-packer, but for the first time, I felt strong and confident. I had found my activity and was grateful that no team would be counting on me.

I went on to run 10 km races and half-marathons, dragging the children along, bribing them with promises of post-race picnics and ice-cream.

I began itching to do the creme de la creme, the marathon, a grueling 26.2-mile trek. I figured that the fall Miller High Life Toronto Marathon would be a good one. Often “newbies” will train all winter for a Spring marathon but not being acclimatized to the heat, will “hit the wall.” I would train all summer. For my weekly long run, I dragged myself out of bed at 5 a.m. on Sunday mornings to do a “twenty-miler” and then headed home to prepare breakfast and get the family ready to blast off to church.

My mother still fretted but was pleased to see the strength in my resolve. I assured her that at the first sign of trouble, I would hang up my runners...

I had been excited, not concerned about my time, just wanting to complete the race. I felt prepared and proud of my commitment to the training. Yet, it took one comment from a seasoned athlete, to nose-dive me from believing in myself to a state of no confidence. The power in my veins had seeped away. All night long I was tied up in nooses of regret. Why ever did I think I could do this, an unathletic mother with a bum knee?

Early that morning, I sat on the edge of the bed. In spite of everything, I knew myself. The regret of quitting without trying would be worse than not finishing. So, I squared my shoulders and headed off.

I am always amazed at the runners who comment on the scenery during a race. I didn't see anything except the water stations and the mileage markers. The crowds were uplifting, yelling out our bib numbers as we passed by. Shortly after the 40 km marker, an onlooker cried out, “Hey, 917. You're almost there! Just around the corner.”

“Wow,” I gasped. “I’m closer than I thought.”

My splits written in ink on the palm of my hand, became a blue smudge. We didn't have fancy Smart Watches back then. Later, I realized that “you’re almost there,” does not necessarily mean, “just around the corner.”

I was struggling. I passed the 41 km marker, slogging along. I had very little gas left in the tank, moving on guts alone. I entered the stadium. People shouted and clapped. The announcer called out my name and time; 3 hours and 46 minutes. I stumbled across the finish line. A medal was hung around my neck. I began sobbing and staggering. My husband found me. Alarmed, he asked if I was all right. Those around laughed when I wailed, “I can’t find my gym bag!” I was pretty well out of it.

I went on to complete many more races including five more marathons. I never again saw the man who made the prediction. I'm reminded of the words of Philo. "Be kind, for everyone you meet is carrying a great burden." There is power in empathy. Perhaps his yoke was heavy that night. I can't recollect hearing his prediction of his own finish time.

He was a good teacher. He taught me to never doubt another's power and resolve, especially my own.