

Roots and Ruts

In the late 1950's, a teenage woman married, had children before she turned 21, divorced, and as a single mom with kids, turned antiwar activist, dragging her young children to antiwar protests, learned how to cook, learned how to raise rebellious children, experimented with her life, tried recreational drugs, college, jobs, and the expressiveness of the Hippy culture, all on her way to teaching herself she was more than just a woman raising kids. By her mid-30's, she'd hit her life's stride. She had insight, skills, and talent to share.

Then breast cancer appeared. She had that cancer appear again and again, seven times, over the next four decades. She learned one doesn't fight cancer. Cancer is removed and life is lived. Cancer comes back. The cancer is removed and life is lived. Cancer comes back. The cancer is removed and life is lived further still. One learns to expand into different endeavors, different relationships, cope with family, other lives loved, and the constant eminent threat of cancer's return.

Born in 1941, she never forgot she was the youngest of nine children, the last child of two parents who were Okies, who in the 1920's dustbowl era sought refuge in Sacramento, who had little to give their children, but who found a way. She loved her parents who each passed away before her children got to know them. She loved each of her siblings, who her children never met. Though she shared her upbringing with each of them, she didn't miss that hard upbringing.

In the Depression Era years, her mother was the empress of the small house by day while her dad worked long, hard, and for small pay. He sometimes found work shoveling animal manure or cleaning buildings just short of being toxic waste hazards. He'd come home filthy, smelly, exhausted. He'd bathe in the back, outside, just so he could then bathe inside without fouling the air from his day's work. There was bread in cupboard, butter in the small, loud refrigerator next to the day's milk, and fruit on the table.

Daily while her dad was working, the other mothers in the small community filled with wooden shacks would come to visit her mother, who would offer tea and coffee while tolerating the ceaseless verbal slings and arrows from the other mothers regarding her dad's work. They disparaged his limited choice of jobs and his lack of job skills. They went on endlessly about how their husbands wouldn't stoop so low

as to take day work that was so beneath them. A prim, understated, diminutive woman, her mother heeded none of the loose-lipped gossip.

But one day her mother snapped. “My man works for us. His work isn’t what makes him proud,” she flexed, commanding the other mothers’ attention. “He works to provide for us, shows how much he loves us, putting food in our house, provides the tea and coffee you come to drink. He’s not too proud to refuse work, which is more than can be said for your husbands.” Having closed that topic permanently, the other women still came to her house, still drank the tea and coffee, speaking only kindly of her husband.

That youngest child was my mother. Her parents were my grandparents, though I have no recollection of ever meeting, though mom said I did. In my mind, I envision my grandmother as a young woman who kept a clean house while corralling her brood, calling out to the other mothers. I see my grandfather walking home on a dusty road, going immediately to the back of the house, removing his boots and clothes, showering outside, before doing the same inside the house. That’s the extent of my vision.

I come from good stock. Like my parents, I am smart. I like myself. The rest is gravy. My career has been learning how to swiftly dig into the root of a question, play around in the weeds, then produce the answer that I can effectively communicate with third parties. There is an answer to every question, though just so often the answer is not knowing the answer. It all works.

That said, I am not a moran. The moment I discern I am beating my head against the same wall, over and over, I adjust. The adjustment may be momentarily painful but shouldn’t that be part of the change? My mother, speaking in my head, would remind me that adjustment comes hard, but it comes. One needs to be prepared and ready to accept it. Then she’d wink with her eyes twinkling and her mouth in a smile and say, “but don’t stop fighting like hell.” Some adjustments come hard.

The runner in me began in college. I was fast enough to feel the pressure in my chest from fast running. I loved it. No one accompanying me on my runs, I discovered neighborhoods that I would otherwise have never driven to see. I noticed pets, landscaping, consistent traffic patterns, people walking. People staring. It was not yet training back then. I was too busy running.

In the late 70's and into the 80's, there were either 10K races or Boston with other much smaller marathons. Races of odd distances, unique to a lake, a neighborhood, a route that circled around a town, were also available, and fun. Where I live now races are either a 5k or a half marathon, with too many full marathons, but I won't stray from the topic.

Over the decades, I've lost touch with racing fast for less than an hour's worth of my time. Racing an Olympic track distance the correct way hurts. Flat out hurts. Take a 10k race, or, as we know it, a 6.2-mile race. Six miles with a kick. Six miles unbroken in distance. One after the fifth, after the fourth, after the third, after the second, after the first. All in row, over hither and yon, hill and dale, along lakes and thoroughfares, through woods and along paths, raced in solitude or before throngs of friends, homeowners, police and paramedics, all the while chasing or being chased.

Quick digression: during a back half of a 10k when I was in lead pack racing for the win, ahead of us, sitting in a lawn chair in front of his house, a man was reading the Sunday newspaper. Looking up towards us, pushing his paper down, he saw us approaching more quickly than he anticipated. Making eye contact, I asked him, "Did the Giants win last night? I didn't stay up that late." Recovering his composure, he glanced down at the paper and looking back up and nodding said, "Yep, 7-3. Good luck!" Giving him a thumbs up, I smiled, refocused, staying in the pack until the kick, when I finished in the middle for fourth. I was always fourth.

I've missed the easy floating through the first two miles at race pace, a pace faster than most of my daily runs, but not so fast as a sprint. The feeling in my feet from my toes through my ankles, barely flicking off the pavement into my next stride leading into the next until I had settled into my race rhythm. I have forgotten the inevitable strength move that comes in the middle miles, finding out what my legs and trunk have to offer on that day. Listening to the others around me breathing in making their own way, I knew whether I could hang with them or they would fall back.

I actually miss the headaches I would give myself, manifesting themselves some hours after the race. those head pains arising from my intense focus just to stay with runners faster than me for as long as I could hold form while running a stride faster than those behind me so that they could not catch me. I read somewhere, I think,

that when racing I shouldn't look back because that showed weakness. I followed that axiom at first, then I adjusted to looking back, making eye contact, giving a slight nod and resuming my steady state pace. A good race made the headache worth the effort. Never thought to take an aspirin.

I'm going back to racing short distances. I've run seven Boston Marathons and too many other marathons to count that I needed to qualify for Boston. Recent experience shows me I can no longer hold qualifying pace for 26.2 miles. It's sad, really, but not as sad as pounding myself repeatedly into submission attempting repeatedly to attain the unattainable. The loneliness of the long-distance runner isn't from running solo. The loneliness comes in the middle of the marathon to the finish line when there is no one running around you as you slowly, steadily, realize the goal, the dream, the hope, and the strength are all gone. It's a long way home when the last good race stride goes away.

It was a fun ride. I have no excuses for failing as long as I did for one more jaunt from Hopkinton to Boyleston Street. I'd do it all again, except for that loneliness thing. I am never surprised how I can ignore the hundreds of thousands of spectators along with the other runners around me when I am working just to get to the finish upright to meet up with the woman I love.

Running is an experiment for one. I love the never ending experimenting with my running, searching for the joy it gives me. But running slower than the pace I know from my own experience when I expect more is no fun when the pace lasts for so long. Time for another experiment based on older, committed principles, without the marathon dreams.

There are still the weekend runs with the running kids, going far just to get to breakfast. I still have the courses known only to me, with the odd distances, which I instantaneously compare and contrast to prior course runs. I have those shorter sections of each run where I can feed my need for speed. There is the track or the quarter mile posts on a bike path from which I can play my running arithmetic games. I'll race because I enjoy those events. The good news is those events won't be as long. I'll continue to take up the rear, which is a new view for me. Race shirts come and go and there will be less medals. The result still leads to the post-race food and an adult beverage. And, I'll continue having that happy feeling inside.

