

Spare Change

Life's changing is the only constant for each of us. Childhood to adulthood and every hood we pass in between. Playtime to work to retirement and all the transitions we experience reaching from one to the next. We adapt. We are challenged by each changing pattern within our life's. I am not a big fan of Heraclitus's philosophizing about change, but there it is.

I know about change for myself. Moving so many times between kindergarten and freshman year in high school that I lost count. Learning from those same kindergarten classes, elementary schools, junior high schools, two high schools, one university, and one graduate school. Changes for me led to seven employer changes following grad school, the last one being for myself with no employees for the last decade. Changes brought me my one and only wife.

Another apt word for change is evolve. I've evolved from a hopeful, cheery, inquisitive youngster to . . . a hopeful, bitter, inquisitive should-be-retired man, willing to mostly listen to others spew forth their opinions because I'm not sharing. I know my right from your wrong. That about sums up my evolution. In so many facets of my being, I am still a boy.

I laugh as often and strongly as possible. Seeing an animal playing when no one is looking – not that the animal cares – enjoying the moment with my fellow creature. I pout when the dessert or the coffee is gone. Being entertained by others and being the entertainer to others remains the best parts of my existence. Loathing decorum, I do so out of necessity, because its expected. Great effort has led to modifying my actions, patterns, leading me to new skills, and newer patterns of living my life.

What hasn't changed are my core values, taught to me by my parents, separately. Their outlook on their separate lives are the guiding force to how I have lived and am living my life. That said, my beliefs are my own, as are my own outlook on living my life, with the habits developed to live a best life, or so I hope and expect. I clearly have a zest for diverse interests and searching out the best means for me to enjoy those interests. I plan to continue that zest and curiosity into and through retirement. I am no different than those around me and who have come before me.

Living has also though me, that change is forced upon me.

It is a four-mile race run in a well-established park, the race course looping around itself. The park has ballfields for softball, baseball, soccer, and football. It has an historic house turned into a museum. There are picnic shelters and playgrounds, There is a large compound otherwise called a doggie park. Grass fields, defined for sports and otherwise abound. A river flows along the entirety of the western side of the park, at the park's lowest point, the path along the river being completely shaded, even in wintertime.

I've only been to the park to run this 4-miler, but I've been there so many times that I've seen the outdoor activities and walked through the historic house along with a quick tour of the park's welcome center. When this race was must-do in the late summer, there were hundreds of race participants. Today, there were less than 100 runners.

The opening mile is a loop on the park road, a slight decline with a strong incline in the second half. The opening loop gives way to the first time on the river's path, with just so slight variations in elevation accompanied by little twists on the path mirroring the river's path. The course turns off the path for a quarter mile incline to the park's highest point before a plunge down onto the path further out from the prior turn. The final mile continues on the path in reverse direction, coming out at the path's beginning before the quarter mile surge to the finish. It's a fast course. Or at least it used to be for me.

I'm not the same guy who ran in the top 10 the first time I raced the course. That race time 20 years ago would have won the race I just ran. Same course. Great June race weather. Different dude. Not my fault. I simply became older.

Because lining up just behind the fast runners behind the start line doesn't work for me anymore, I found a location to stand behind the leaders. In fact, the spot I chose was not really anywhere close to those runners. Glancing around me, I placed myself amongst the runners who appeared to have a clue, in front of those wearing the morning's emergency orange-colored race shirt.

My precipitous decline into being average didn't take long once it started. My acceptance that I could no longer start with the fast runners and hold on took longer. The others streaming passed me in the first half-mile of the race was disheartening in and of itself. Steadily falling further behind with each passing mile was even worse.

This race was a good moment to practice overcoming what I had experienced. I moved back from the start.

The starting horn went off, we all surged in various levels of pace over the start line and into the first quarter mile before turning left, beginning the long oval-shaped opening mile. And while younger kids and adults still passed me in that first mile, my experience let me know they would not be in front of me when we entered the river path. I was correct.

The strangest sensation in my running now is that when I increase my pace, I feel like I am running fast. It just feels like a five-minute per mile pace. I feel smooth, legs moving in rhythm with my arm swing, jaw slackened, each step forward a gentle kiss of the ground from my feet. But that's not reality. Photos and video reflect an awkward running gait, moving just fast enough to be in front of the runner behind me. I show no fluidity in style or gait. There is no rhythm. There is just me trying to stay upright, staring at the ground under me, looking for balance. I still run on the balls of my feet.

I forced myself to hold back on my race pace in the first mile. Slowing down in the second half of a race is unpleasant in memory. I didn't want to have that experience, yet again. So, I held back, letting those runners who had dreams of glory go past. I may be slower, but I do know my abilities. I had four miles to get the job done. That job used to be to hang in the lead pack. Now, I was that lone wolf running off my own experience.

In the second mile, under the canopy of the trees lining the river trail on both of its sides, all of those who should have known better receded behind me. I didn't accelerate as I had planned. I maintained my race pace. They just . . . slowed. I moved up. Except for a woman who had slowed and came back to ride on my left shoulder the rest of the race. I didn't look back. She made no sound. I could feel her presence all the way to the finish. But I digress.

Turning off the river trail and taking the path up the long incline to the end of the second mile, I passed a few more pretenders who had underestimated their own pace and the strength needed to get up the incline. They fell off my pace, never to be seen again, while I focused on the next runner just in front of me. Next one up. Then we crested the incline to get back down to the river trail.

There was a time, for many decades, when a downhill was dessert. Without hesitation, I would fly down an incline, a downhill, no matter how slight or steep. There was a time. I looked down to the bottom of this incline and realized I was running too fast for my legs to stay under me. I braked, trying to remain upright. By the strength of my inner voice screaming for me to slow, brake, bend my legs, trust my ankles, drop my hips, and relax, I got myself down without falling. On my post-race cool down, running up that downhill, I saw for myself that it was not a steep hill, up or down. Another example of change.

Through the third mile, I passed a couple of exhausted runners, and picked up another runner as we turned onto the main part of the river trail, again under the canopy, and together we picked up a third. And the woman was still running just behind the three of us. This was the mile to force the pace, though I knew this effort would accomplish maintaining the pace we had earned. We twisted along the river trail, finding a straggler or two that had reached their own breaking point. We thought we had disposed of a middle-aged runner in blue, but he clung onto the woman's pace, so there were four of us bunched together into the final mile.

Over the final mile, I finally found my race rhythm, and though I didn't leave the other three, I was able to keep abreast, push to keep up, and stay with them around the river trail's final twists and turns until we burst off the trail and into the final third of a mile around the gentle curve to the finish line. Slackening my jaw, dropping my shoulders, touching my index fingers to my thumbs, pushing my elbows just a titch further behind me, I shifted my running form into fast, which is now old man thinks he is racing position. I no longer have a sprint. We finished.

I finished at the fastest per mile pace I'd done in over two years, since the running went to hell in a basket all at once. It was a small step. The woman who ran off my shoulder thanked me for being her unwitting pacer. The two guys that ran with me that last mile were pleased with their efforts. I had sought a small victory and that's what I earned. A small victory from a small change.

Here's hoping this small change leads to slightly bigger steps.