

## Walking

I knew the way home. Single mom, raising two kids in a house she rented. We lived in the home at the end of a long, vacant street, bereft of even an empty warehouse, but with dirt-filled lot after dirt-filled lot. No one drove down this street. Ever. Our home was up against the freeway, only a fence separating our side yard from the speed lanes and the constant hum and rumble of speeding traffic. We were renters.

The home had three bedrooms; one she used and the other two used by me and my sister. I recall dirty windows, an oversized septic tank, and the long straight walk from our house up the street, away from the freeway, to what I dubbed in my mind to be civilization, which was a gas station, a separately-located convenience store, a laundromat attached to that store, and a big grocery store in another lot just a few more steps further. The necessities.

There was a school bus stop for us at the end of the long walk and across the street from the gas station. If we were on time, the school bus would wait for us at the gas station. The school bus did not come down our long, empty, almost lifeless street. Only when we didn't get out the door in time to complete the long walk would the bus come to us. Because the bus driver was mad from her having to come down the street to get us to school on time, we were mostly on time. We were kids and kids and kids don't understand adults yelling at them.

I was in fourth grade, my sister in second, when we moved into that house. My youth was spent moving into and out of a lot of houses, up and down the state. Mom had the moving bug. I attended so many different schools in so many different towns located from one end of the state to the other that I lost count. Mom had ADHD before it was diagnosed by society. A single mom raising two kids without a father was a tough go in the 60's.

After school, I played baseball, because that only required a fielder's glove to play. I didn't own cleats until I began junior high school. The team that selected a player would give them a baseball uniform for the season, the uniform to be returned clean after the last game was played. The ballcap showing our team logo we got to keep. The ballfield was five miles away from our house. I know this because years later I discovered a map of the town that included my street and I measured the distance between the two. I was ten.

Practices were my escape from the house. Focusing on catching the hit ball, hitting the practice pitch, and running the bases, I was into the moment. I ran after foul balls, long, fly balls, grounders, singles, and balls left on the practice field. I ran nonstop. My teammates wore cleats and had practice outfits, kept clean by their mothers. I wore cut off jeans a t-shirt that became darker with each wash after each wear. We were all kids, the same age, and equal at practice.

Getting to the practices was easy because when the end-of-the-school-day bell rang I would walk from the school across the play yard to the ballfield, one of several in the park adjoining the school. The getting home after a practice was always tricky. In the first week my team worked out together, I learned to practice each day after we were done, that no, I didn't need a ride, because mom was on her way from work to pick me up. She did work, and she did intend to pick me up, but only that first week. I memorized the way home.

When you're in fourth grade, five miles is a long way to anywhere, much less to home. So is waiting for a ride that isn't coming. The waiting is more excruciating than the walking. Both are frustrating, but the walking actually accomplishes the task at hand, which was getting home. The first time I walked home after practice the route was a guess on my part, spotting familiar landmarks, using the crosswalks, and generally heading in the direction of home. I was a bird returning home from winter, or so I thought.

Later into the season, I would ponder a lot of thoughts, but that first week, I endeavored to just get home the quickest way possible. That required walking through the school neighborhood before passing through the more upscale section leading to walking along the incredibly busy thoroughfare, finally reaching intersection with the gas station on the other side of the thoroughfare. Using the crosswalk at the intersection, I would hustle to the gas station side, with every step past the gas station leading to the final long walk on our vacant, dirt lot filled street, the house at the end waiting. Running parts of that walk soon followed.

By the last week of the season, I was running the entire way home, somehow having acquired a backpack, which contained my glove, my books, and the secret formula, to what I wasn't quite certain. I was run/walking to and from my games. Come that last week, I was chosen to be on the fourth grade select team for a tournament. I had to learn a new running route from and to home. I was a sorta distance runner.

My senior year in high school, many, many moves later, having settled into a last house before college, my being a distance runner continued as a part of my baseball career. Our coach had to be away from the tryout practices for three days and asked me to lead the practices. Two other seniors were trying out and had become distracting to the rest of the squad who wanted to play the season. I released my anger through the laps around the entire ballfield that we ran after each practice, sans those two. The rest of the team did three. I ran double that. The two seniors were not selected to play that season. I kept running home.

In college, I voluntarily quit the University baseball team. I was the age when I knew better than the coach and I was not fond of his yelling at each of us just because he could. And, he wasn't a very good coach. Months later, looking in the mirror at myself, I saw my father. I had a head start on a paunch. My pants were more than a bit snug. No extracurricular activity. I began running, every day.

Following a few months running in general athletic shoes and gym shorts, and after seeing the occasional runner heading the other direction, I located a specialty running store, coming out with running shoes that fit and that I could afford. I purchased two pair of running shorts with liner briefs, running socks, and a couple of cheap running shirts that I'd seen on the other runners. While in the running store, I saw an advertisement for a 10km running race tacked to the wall. Trouble soon began.

Having over a decade of practice from my many walks home from the many baseball practices, I created running routes from the intramural building on campus. Those routes took my all over the city, through myriad neighborhoods, parks of all sizes, along water, up and down almost every hill in town. Even when I didn't know just how I'd arrived at an unintended destination, I knew that I'd find my way back to my start. Never considering myself lost determined I had found a new running route, lots of new routes.

Today, I have the internet and its many providers for running routes. Several times a week, I'll use the google to locate a potential new route or slightly alter an existing route, dependent upon my running intentions. I want fast and short, long and flat, challenging hills, I'll find any of those without too much trial and error. Once a new route is established, I'll take it for a spin, once. Should the new route pass muster, I'll

put it into the rotation. My pie-in-the-sky goal would be to run a different route every day of every month. I've settled for more than a few but less than a lot.

The same goes for races. All these decades of running and racing later, I am willing to race a new course once. When I find a keeper, I place it into the next year's race calendar I keep in my head. A keeper requires a fair course that is visually exciting to run. There is one race I've entered and completed for 16 consecutive years. There is another I have removed from my calendar because it has lost its way. I don't want to think when I race. I simply want to focus on the next turn, the next mile split, the next runner to catch.

A running friend runs the Dipsea every year, a race with a handicap start by age and gender. The older you become the earlier you start. His first Dipsea was when he was in his 30's. His start time back then was so far back, he thought he'd never catch another runner who had a head start. He learned to run his faster pace, passing those head-start runners aggressively and swiftly. He's now in his 70's. He starts so much earlier than long ago that he is no longer catching and passing runners; he is the target of those younger than him, who aggressively and swiftly pass him on the narrow trails. He shows up to run the Dipsea every year.

For a time, like him, I had a race that I yearned to run annually. It was a half marathon in a quiet town set on the banks of a major river, with quaint Victorian homes in the first miles blending into separate neighborhoods of varying socioeconomic status before the race course crossed a major highway, plunging into a deep woods leading into and out of a large regional park, the last three miles an almost straight shot to the riverside finish. The course was flat and fast, hilly and tough, with crushed gravel trails in the deep woods that made racing quick, completed with long, straight, and flat stretches. When the deep woods portion was removed, the course rerouted, I checked out.

Unlike all those growing years when I had to get home by foot, when I taught myself to run, self-teaching and learning pace, experiencing the increased lung capacity accompanying the mental tenacity in simply getting home, I don't need to run a particular race just because it fits on my calendar. Life is too short to settle for mediocrity. I race for fun. I race for the experience. I know a keeper when I race one. When I find my joy, I know my way home.