

My Good-bye Marathon

A man must find his occasions in himself,
it is true.—Thoreau, *Walden*, chapter 4

BY TOM HART

The halfway point of any marathon is a good time to assess how things are going, though these on-the-fly assessments can be treacherously tricky. Boston marathoners in particular know the seductive surges of power they can feel cruising invincibly through midpoint Wellesley and how those same siren surges are sometimes regretted a few miles later, in the Newton hills. My self-check-in at the halfway point of my last (most recent *and* final) marathon told me I was doing reasonably well. Yes, I could feel the accumulating miles a bit, but I was comfortable, breathing easily, legs feeling OK. Better than OK, in fact—I was seated happily in a Lexington, Massachusetts, bistro with a delicious slice of pepperoni pizza in my stomach and the last remains of a cold pint of Sam Adams in front of me at the table. It was noon, and my 26.2-mile walk had begun a little before 7:00 that morning. I would be moving along again soon and probably would be done before 5:00, marathon accomplished.

OK, OK, people—bear with me here, please—yes, I am talking about *walking* a marathon, walking the marathon distance, that is, 26.2 miles. It's silly, I know, *hours and hours*. Don't worry; it won't take that long for you to read about it.

And I don't want to hear any grumblings about my lunch break—here I was simply following the example of serious long-walk predecessors, who were not averse to taking breaks along the way. Ancient Mariner Samuel Taylor Coleridge, celebrated British poet, critic, and party talker of two centuries ago, on a walking tour of Scotland in 1803, totted up some 263 miles in eight days—an average of about 33 per day! True, at 30, he was less than half my age, but he already suffered from numerous physical complaints (mainly some painfully debilitating forms of gout) and was hitting the opium pretty hard, so we can't exactly count him as some extraordinary physical specimen or as being in the bloom of youth. Sam took his time, as for instance on September 4, 1803, when he left his inn (after a hearty breakfast) just after 8:00 A.M. and arrived some 13 hours later (9:00 P.M.) at his destination, had tea, and went to bed. At my (roughly 20-minute-per-mile)

meandering pace, he could have covered nearly 40 miles that day, though he does mention a midday break during which he “sits on a grave stone to write about the experience.” I also presume he ate somewhere along the way, resting there. The point is, he could walk all day, with breaks. I had decided to allow myself equal privileges during my effort and had indeed practiced the same marathon day lunch on my preparatory 20-miler 10 days or so earlier.

Yes, I was walking a marathon, and why not? If the mile is the universal coin of the running realm, the marathon is surely the most widely known road-race distance. There are more than 400,000 marathon finishers a year in America today. Tell someone you’re a runner and you’ll likely be asked, *Oh, do you do marathons?* Ask a randomly selected passerby to name a road race or an Olympic distance race and you’ll likely hear the word “marathon.”

It wasn’t always thus, and a quick look at how the marathon came to be so prominent offers a fine example of unintended consequences. (*I will make it quick, and I’ll ask you, meanwhile, as I digress, to imagine me walking and walking, postlunch, returning toward my hometown, Concord, now along a shady, paved bike trail.*)

Crowd control by qualifications

In 1969, after seeing the field for April’s Boston Marathon top 1,000 runners for the second straight year, the Boston Athletic Association announced that in 1970, anyone who wanted to run in its annual 26-miler had to have run a previous marathon in a time of four hours or less. Will Cloney, Jock Semple, and the other reigning Guys (I capitalize Guys to emphasize the maleness of marathoning at that time—the first official women’s division wouldn’t arrive at Boston until 1972) of the B.A.A. doubtless thought they had put a lid on that little overcrowding problem. The runaway growth they had seen would now be brought under control. *Mission accomplished.*

Sorry, guys. As a means of limiting the race’s field, the policy was a miserable failure. Despite ever-toughening standards (they cut a half hour off the qualifying time, down to 3:30, in 1971, went to 3:00 in 1975, and then 2:50 after 1979 for men under 40, for example), fields grew rapidly.

The 1996 100th-anniversary Boston Marathon—the last marathon I *ran*, after emerging from a marathon “retirement” of over a decade to qualify in a 3:30-ish time the previous fall as a 50-year-old—had a mind-boggling 38,708 official entrants and some 36,788 starters. There were a reported 35,868 weary finishers, of whom I numbered myself among the very weariest, stumbling across the finish line in around four hours (my chip time, I believe, was closer to 3:45, but even that was over an hour slower than my best for the distance and, despite that, a lot more painful).

Despite their entrance-requirement strategy's failure to curb growth, Boston's curmudgeonly organizers should be congratulated for the far-reaching effects of their ruling, which coincided with the arrival of world-class marathoning in the USA and was a huge factor in American distance-running improvement. Boston fields are now a bit smaller (the 2010 edition had a mere 26,736 official entrants, for example), but that is much more a function of the availability of so many other excellent marathon opportunities around the country than it is a sign of reduced marathon popularity.

Runners are like everybody else in at least one respect: what is made inaccessible to them is also made more attractive. Getting into Boston, once qualifying standards were set out, certified a runner's competence, so more runners were pushing harder in more races to make the grade. Now there was a recognized level of achievement to which a runner could point and say, "I made it." "Boston qualifier" races sprang up all over, and what had been a handful of marathons nationwide quickly became a full schedule in every region. Boston is not even the biggest marathon any longer—several cities boast races that vie for that honor. New York's megaevent, once a cult-status multiloop Central Park trot, had some 37,899 entrants in 2008, for example, while Chicago 2009 claimed 33,475 finishers.

A minor handicap to running

Now, in 2010, I was going to "make it" to the consecrated distance again, but walking this time. Yes: I was indeed compelled by the desirability of the unavailable. Being short a lung (my right one was removed in 2009 when a cancerous tumor showed up there) doesn't create day-to-day living problems for me much at all. I walk, ride a bike easily, play golf, can do some modest cross-country skiing in the winter, and so on. Lately I've even learned how to scull, rowing my single in leisurely fashion along the Charles. Recently retired, I can always find time for a walk and get out for about an hour every day. Decades of running helped me, even in my mid-60s, make a solid recovery from the cancer surgery and resume regular activities relatively quickly. But my most regular activity, my daily run, was denied to me. I resented that and wanted to push back against that denial somehow. If running 26 miles and change back in the 1970s had made me feel like a "real" runner, had been a centerpiece of my running and planning and training for years, couldn't I at least now achieve that distance, if not at the same pace, again? I was being reminded, all too forcibly, of the inevitable diminishment and loss we all must face sooner or later—but I wanted to focus on what I *could* do rather than what I couldn't. Long story short, I was walking those 26.2 miles because I couldn't run them.

Of course, beyond that angry motivation lay plenty of other reasons to think an all-day walk would be a good experience. I was 95 percent sure I could,

physically, do it (keep going and sit down when you get tired, right?). I had been walking about an hour daily, and my marathon ramble would afford me ample opportunity to think about how that basic life routine was coming along as a running replacement. It would be a day of discovery and celebration, set aside as a gift to myself, like my 37-mile-run day on my 37th birthday decades ago. It would be special, and it would be, yes, it would be fun!

In the end, the walk was undertaken with the goal, consciously spoken or not, of investing the experience with enough specialness that it would force me to pay attention. By its scale, it would include virtually every sort of event, internal and external, that can happen in a walk. Emerson examined what he called Representative Men. This would be—ta-da!—the Representative Walk. If I wanted to understand my walking, the need for it, the satisfactions derived from it, the problems or threats generated by it, a marathon-sized walk fit the bill just fine.

So rejoin me now on the bike path, please—

I'm the shortish, ordinary-looking guy in the cargo shorts and baseball cap, the one glancing nervously upward at that persistent cloud canopy: hmm, was it actually going to get rainy? Had I been a fool to reject my wife's offer, for my return walk, of an umbrella she had thoughtfully brought to our lunch meet-up? I was a couple of hours from home—how would those hours, and miles, go by if I was, well, wet? That might not feel so good. And how good *did* I really feel right then, anyway? I had definitely stiffened up somewhat as I sat for lunch and felt tight and rusty as I worked to warm up again. Worked. Was that it? Was this going to turn into *work*? In the perspective that defines work as the absence



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of choice, since I had little choice now but to keep walking, did that consign this effort to being actual *labor*? And not only labor, but four or five more hours of it? I wanted to walk my 26 miles, not labor through them.

A very promising start

To shake off those gloomy speculations, I tried to refresh myself by recalling how splendid I had felt five hours earlier as I emerged from the woods that border our backyard and turned right to walk out along the main causeway of Concord's Great Meadows National Wildlife Refuge on a gloriously crisp blue July morning. My shadow was thrown a good 30 feet ahead of me on the grassy path, and the early-morning sun warmed the back of my neck most pleasantly as I proceeded.

There was virtually no one about. I had left home at 10 before seven. I had given a distant wave in the direction of a fellow readying the Great Meadows minitruck for the day as I passed the refuge's work shed and had exchanged a few happy superficialities with an old gent on a side trail just off the main loop as he sat taking huge-lensed pictures of a bunch of wood ducklings peacefully paddling with their mom. That was the extent of my human contact for the early in-town loop of my journey. Even when I was out on a road accessible to cars (for only perhaps 15 minutes of my first eight and a half miles), there was little or no traffic.

I had decided to begin the day with a local loop, cutting through Great Meadows to Monument Street and then crossing the Old North Bridge, drawing inspiration from Emerson's lines about embattled farmers and the "shot heard 'round the world." I would wander some walking trails and generally be in shaded woods. The morning was brisk enough (under 60 when I started) that I wore jeans and an undershirt for those early miles. A couple of hours later, crossing an open field before returning for an at-home pit stop, I was glad to shed one shirt, though—it was closer to 70 now, nearing nine o'clock.

Coming back through Great Meadows, I could hear the *boinkings* of bullfrogs and the raucous *trillings* of redwings and around them the rest of the day's ambient *whistlings* and *burlings*. Thankfully, there was not much in the way of *whining* mosquito buzzing. I would get through the morning, I imagined, spend much of the midday on a paved bike path where mosquitoes weren't common, and be back home, happy on my screened porch, well before the serious evening armies of evil bloodsuckers emerged.

It had been a little bit threatening to feel, just over an hour into the walk, a kind of twinge going on with my left foot strike. It was nothing, really, except



Courtesy of Christopher Corkery



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that as I thought about seven or eight more hours of pounding the pavement, I realized that I couldn't take any physical signal lightly. Running a marathon, for an adequately trained runner not concerned about a fast racing time, shouldn't be depletingly arduous. When I was running several a year, only a couple—my fall Boston qualifier and then Boston in the spring—were all-out efforts, and I can remember pacing someone one year to a 3:15 race in what was basically just a long workout for me. Of course, then I was half my present age and regularly putting in 55-mile weeks. Training to run marathons was something I at least knew about, therefore, even if I no longer was running them. But was I in fact adequately trained for my marathon this time? How in the world *do* you prepare for a nine- or 10-hour *walk*?

A question of proper training

I had never been a serious hiker or walker—who had time, after all, when running daily? Many runners are essentially indolent and aside from their miles have little time or energy for exercise of other sorts. My own reading, strumming, gaming, and watching habits, certainly, are not aerobic. Probably the longest I had ever walked was five or six hours clambering up and down well-trod New England mountain landmarks like Monadnock or Moosilauke. I would be out there on my marathon for three or four hours longer than on any of those climbs—sort of like tacking one ordinary marathon run time onto a six-hour walk. How, again, do you train for that?

I had warmed up to it, extending the length of my longest walk each week or so from the more or less regular three miles to seven, 13-plus, and finally a little over 20. This was in the six- or seven-week stretch following our return from a cross-country driving extravaganza trip on which my wife and I had congratulated ourselves on simply getting in a walk of close to an hour almost every day—our longest on the trip was probably only about four miles, but at least we were very regular. If I huffed and puffed quite a bit on canyon walks at 7,000 feet, so what? That wouldn't be the case strolling at sea level at home. One part of me knew, or thought it knew, that I could probably just do the marathon-length walk, taking breaks as needed, without any preparation whatsoever. Another part cautioned that anything taking so much more time than any previous walk had to be treated carefully and with due respect.

And I did learn a few things as I pushed out the length of my long walks. The first extension happened without any planning at all as I simply extended my usual walk from an hour to two one day. I had gone out feeling good and just decided en route that this would be a good day to go a little farther. I learned on that particular walk that, out for several hours, I would have concerns about going to the bathroom. I learned that having a cell phone wouldn't have been a bad

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idea, that building in a couple of breaks for snacking as walks got longer would likewise be sensible, and, facing my wife's irritation when I returned, that letting other people know what your plans are is a must.

Other people.

Let's admit it: there is something fundamentally selfish in any serious runner's approach to the activity. I certainly didn't ever object to running with other people and plenty of times found hooking up with some others for a training run or a particular workout to be helpful and fun. But when I was putting in the work to train for marathons, getting the miles in was the prime consideration, and that often meant squeezing in a run before work, or on my lunch break, or perhaps as part of my commute. And mostly this meant running solo. Even when serious marathoning was behind me and I was doing half my previous mileage, fitting those 30 or so weekly miles into working and parenting and my whole life meant grabbing them when I could and again doing solo fit-around runs most of the time.

What turns out to have been the case is that the aloneness of those runs was as important as getting them in at all. The (roughly) an hour a day on my own, pulled away from family and work, was a needed break, as important mentally and spiritually as it was physically. I'm a reasonably gregarious sort of fellow and enjoy socializing in many forms, but I also need time on my own, time to myself. And my running was basically all of that kind of time I ever got. It was in fact, expressed wordlessly, an insistence upon having such time.

Easy to walk with others

Walking, much more than running, is perceived as a pleasant social activity. One of the main benefits of having walking rather than running be my daily exercise is that it's much easier for my wife to join me—we rarely walked together in my running days. This was not only because my runs were tailored to specific training purposes but also simply because time was at such a premium. It's easier for most groups to accommodate to each other's walking pace than for random groups to run at the same tempo. It's easier also to say to guests at our house, *Let's go for a walk around Great Meadows* than it is to say, *Hey, let's go run five miles*.

On the other hand, I need time alone, too. And somehow if I was going to do a walk grand enough to be both spectacular and representative of all my wayward remaining pedestrianism, then that walk had to be a solo. On my second lengthening walk, a 13-miler, we arranged that I would drive over to Lexington early one morning, park, and then walk back to Concord. There I would pick up my wife at our house, from whence we would return, walking back to Lexington for lunch and an easy drive home. But for the 20-mile trial extension we merely met in Lexington for lunch, and that was the plan for the actual marathon walk, too (though I would be passing through the house in midmorning and midafternoon

and thus getting to check in with her then as well). I would be on my own for the day, essentially.

Of course, for much of the day I would be walking on a bike path that would have plenty of activity, but there I felt invisible most of the time, and certainly most folks walking, blading, running, or biking along weren't paying much attention to me or to each other. In the way that each marathoner in a race has his or her own unique experience of the event, I would be walking alone. I sat briefly on a bench as I got to the paved bike trail in Bedford early in my second morning stretch, wondering a bit about the next phase of my marathon and the people I would inevitably share space with. As I sat wondering, I suddenly noticed there was a new sky going on. It featured a vast, low layering of gray masses,



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puffy and shelf-like and dark except for a few scattered gaps into the bright blue beyond, which in places revealed blazing white sunlit cloud piles in a dimension beyond the dark canopy—wondrous, really, but potentially nervous-making, too. Those were the same clouds triggering tiny tremors of trepidation postlunch. *Well, until the rain came, I thought, might as well enjoy the shade and relative coolness from the clouds.*

As it happened, I basically lucked out—the day never got hotter than the low 70s and there was cloud cover from the middle of the day on until I was done. Had I planned the walk for a day or two later, I would have had to pull it off during a stretch of droughtish weather that saw record heat and area prohibitions on outdoor water use. The knowledge that serious heat was coming had pushed me to set a date, to make the warm-up walks happen, to get this thing done. Here is where the marathon walk was just like previous running marathons: it called forth from me an absorbed fascination with the weather. Any marathon (or ultramarathon) calls for such devoted attention, because these events don't happen all that often. Confirmed Boston marathoners know how tragic it is to plan a whole year around one day's run and then have that day turn nasty, even to the point sometimes of precluding a competitive event. At the Athens Olympics in 2004, no one expected record-breaking times in that heat, and yes, all the competitors had to fight the same conditions. And what a great race it was for medaling Americans

Deena Kastor (bronze in 2:27) and Meb Keflezighi (silver in 2:11), even though their times weren't at all their best. But when it's not so much about competing for medals and instead focuses on adding one more precious Boston to a limited life list, it's a shame to see weather conditions define your performance more than training readiness. Jack Fultz was surely happy with his poky 2:20 win in the Boston broiler of 1976, but many of that year's sub-3:30 qualifiers had to be depressed by times significantly slower than their dreamed-of Boston bests. And the 2012 race: ouch!

Can you walk on your hands?

My legs loosened up pretty quickly after lunch, and though they were getting somewhat tired and had pretty much lost their morning spring, they weren't generating any real calls for my attention. Oddly, it was my *hands* about which I found myself more conscious. They were both swollen, puffed up and tight feeling. I had noticed on my very first longer walk that after my usual hour of walking, whether because of gravity or the gentle-but-constant swinging motion, my hands got swollen. I didn't think this was dangerous, but it caused a nagging awareness. With 15-plus miles accomplished, my fingers were so fat that I literally couldn't pull my hands into a fully fist position. Even my forearms grew and felt tight, pumped up as they might be after a weights session. I had noticed the effect even more in my 13-miler, and between that and my 20-miler I mentioned it at a visit to my doctor, who didn't see it as a danger. I should add that she had a positive but generally underwhelmed, "Oh, that's nice" sort of response to my noble walk extensions and indeed to my projected epic walk. In this way she was nicely representative of most people.

My hands are slender, with visible bones, tendons, and veins, but by midwalk they appeared as smooth balls when I tried to close them into fists, knuckles unnoticeable on round, meaty mitts. But unnoticeable was the proper word for all of me, really, walking along solo as the afternoon produced more and more bikers, joggers, bladers, and walkers. The condition of my hands, indeed of all of me, was of no interest to anyone but myself. Folks had other things to think about and fortunately, so did I.

For example, had an hour passed since lunch, and was it therefore time to flip on the tunes once again, after giving my iPod a rest? I always feel just a twinge of guilt when walking with earplugs beaming tunefully. They can have the effect of helping to envelop me in my own world, where I doubtless pay less attention than I should to what's going on around me. Mindful awareness and Thoreauvian grokking of my world are desirable, yes, but must we not equally allow for the beneficent influences of, say, Ella Fitzgerald's transcendent rendering of the Duke's "Sophisticated Lady" with its wondrously breathy Ben Webster

sax solo? Tunes *could* be considered as energizing fuel and thus as belonging to Thoreau's stratum of basic necessities of life. (The four he lists in the long first chapter of *Walden*, "Economy," are food, clothing, shelter, and fuel.) Certainly they provide energy, whether via Steely Dan's "Kid Charlemagne" spot-on guitar wailings or the Roches' gentler if equally ironic "Hammond" harmonies. Each person must, of course, step to the music that he hears, however measured: if you want 50 Cent in your head or the Berlin Philharmonic, blessings on you either way. The bad part of listening while you walk is that you can become lost to your surroundings and rapt in a musical mist, and of course that's the good part, too. To plug in for your walk or not to plug in is a legitimate debate. Many would agree with Gregory McNamee, who blogged on *Brittanica.com* about the vast benefits of walking at all levels and then said, "You're disqualified by the way if you walk with a mobile phone or iPod in tow." Uh-oh, here I was breaking both rules on the same ramble! Luckily, on my megawalk I was spending so many hours perambulating that I allowed myself the luxury of being on both sides of the argument, albeit at different times.

Be careful of your playlist

Today there are road races at which iPods are banned, the claim being that they represent, in a crowded running environment, a potentially hazardous distraction. My main marathon-running days came before technology made running with sound practicable, but by my 60s, when I was pushing myself in shorter races for age-group geezer glory, I was equipped to try racing wired up, so to speak, a few times. Problems can ensue when the question shifts from whether to listen to what's on the musical menu. I orchestrated just one race playlist, for a 5K effort, and I can now see why. What can I have been thinking? I mean, sure, Chuck Berry's "You Can't Catch Me" seems reasonable, but what were tunes like Jackson Browne's "Running on Empty" or—no matter how toe-tappingly irresistible—They Might Be Giants' "Withered Hope" doing there? In retrospect, it's clear that I had known inside I was unlikely to break 20:00 in *that* 5K! I never made another race playlist after that one.

Besides, for this daylong marathon walk effort, wouldn't my iPod simply die along the way somewhere, out of juice? What might then be the effect on a tiring walker as his equipment deserted him? I decided I would put together a list good for around four and a half hours, a time I was sure my pod would survive, and that I didn't need to worry too much about fine-tuning it, just including good stuff I wasn't tired of. And that indeed turned into a pleasant marathon-prep task, a little bit of everything and a marvelously absorbing hour gazing at my laptop iTunes screen. I would have some designated quiet times and otherwise listen when I felt like it. I ended up tuned in for about half of my trek, and I will say that

I came away from the experiment with a more firmly understood commitment to walking podless with some regularity.

From the high school in Concord where I taught for many years, it's a short, easy walk to Walden Pond, and my American Lit classes usually spent a period



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making the trek with me to see Thoreau's original house site, which, among other things, features a large pile of stones to one side, a cairn built up by contributions over the years from many visiting pilgrims. Frequently kids in my class tossed on contributions of their own, and when we talked about the heap, I would

tell them about the incredible discovery, when the pile was cleaned up not long ago, that one lucky workman made: he found Thoreau's iPod! Long thought to have been lost, the moss-encrusted device, I would tell them (once Apple technicians were able to get it to function again), would offer considerable insight into Thoreau's musical predilections and, by extension, his whole thought process. I mean, it's pretty clear, isn't it, that the fellow who used to sit and play his flute across the pond of an evening wouldn't have spent hours every day walking around the woods without his ear buds working, right? Henry was a listening kind of guy. *Much is published, but little printed*, he tweets to us in the "Sounds" chapter of *Walden*. The kids then—as an optional extra-credit assignment—could make up a playlist of what Henry was probably listening to, explaining his choices by showing their relevance to Thoreauvian principles and passages and submitting to me a CD with their explanatory liner notes.

Everything's better when taken outdoors

Thoreau comments on the freshness of household objects seen outdoors: ". . . so much more interesting most familiar objects look out of doors than in the house. A bird sits on the next bough, life-everlasting grows under the table, and blackberry vines run round its legs; pine cones, chestnut burs, and strawberry leaves are strewn about. It looked as if this was the way these forms came to be transferred to our furniture . . ." Anyone who plays an instrument can experience this delight

by taking the music outdoors and listening to its new qualities. Thus, too, for me to listen to my mixes as I walk is pleasant.

So I started up my pod again an hour after lunch and arrived back home for a final snack-and-changing break just after 3:00. Mine was not a rugged, desperate trek, after all, but one on which I pampered myself shamelessly. For my closing phase, I swapped my somewhat limp shirt for a crisper one and, more important, went with fresh racing socks and a switch to my ultralight old Saucony road-racing flats. I enjoyed some quick chocolate chip cookies and cold delicious milk, and when I left this last pit stop, with almost 22 miles behind me, I felt confident. Just four and a half miles more, two loops around friendly, familiar Great Meadows: these were clearly doable.

And do them I did. As the afternoon lengthened, the familiar trails were dutifully trod—I use the adverb advisedly, since there was more duty than magic step by step. I savored the overcast day’s mildness, relishing the temperate air, but was almost grumpy that no rain had materialized to make my ramble more objectively epic. Knowing now for sure that I was going to complete my quest lent tiny shadows to my self-congratulation—had I aimed too low? Had I been too easy on myself? Almost 10 hours had elapsed since I had begun, and no brass band had materialized, no medals were on offer.

Shortly before 5:00, I had a shady sit for a final few minutes on one of the benches that are spotted around the reserve’s main causeway loop. Frost’s dictum is that a poem begins in delight and ends in wisdom. My walk began before it began, really, in the delights of anticipation and planning, and then took actual shape in the delights of the brilliant morning sun-slanting light on the blooming paths around Great Meadows as I walked through a basically empty Concord. The delights, in fact, were of every stripe, from idly watching the river flowing gently beneath me as I crossed the “rude bridge” near the Minute Man Statue in the clear morning to savoring this final shady sit-down.

Yes, delights aplenty, but where was the wisdom? My calves were tight, and my feet felt draggy and just a bit pinched—they were surely a bit swollen by then, too, though not as much as my hands. I was glad to sit, both to get off my feet and to take a moment to consider the day, something I had been pretty consistently *not* doing for several hours. I had lost the thread of the day’s specialness somewhere, or rather, I had forgotten to pay attention to it. I was just walking along, after all. Having had no cosmic revelation, what had I missed along my not-so-very-epic way?

Is the finish anticlimactic?

Yet the mild disappointment I was feeling, I realized, was more generated by the impending end of the walk than by some dimly registered lack of specialness. To

leave my bench and finish the walk was to return to the mundane daily tasks of my real-world existence. If nothing else, I had at least succeeded in walking so far into miles of mindlessness that pulling out of that state was vaguely undesirable. And I *had* walked far, indeed. Whatever hadn't happened on the megawalk, and even without an event-commemorative T-shirt, the miles accumulated couldn't be denied. I was now a walking marathoner, and I trumpeted the fact to an empty living room on my arrival home.

I'm still mad about no longer being able to really run. The marathon memories my trek jogged loose for me may, in fact, have made me even angrier about what I've lost. But I do feel I've extended my walking range and have added choices to where I go with that. It's certainly a lot easier now for me to say something like, "Let's walk [the 13 miles] into Cambridge just for fun." Adding choices is the important principle here. Even the smallest of choices establishes a qualitative difference. So *the knowledge that I can decide to spend a day walking* is the needed boost at least as much as the day's walking itself. I'm saying to my body, to the world, as a regally postured toddler might angrily proclaim to a too-directive sibling: *you're not the boss of me!*

My last marathon was, simply, an active assertion of my ability to choose. I paid attention to the weather, to my iPod, to the possibility of an amazing oriole caught in a green leafiness, to my puffy hands, to speculation on pit stops, to my companions of the road, and to whatever caught my interest, but most of all, I *chose* to take the time to pay attention to these things. That my attention wandered, dwindled, and malfunctioned regularly did not detract from the effort's ultimate value, nor did my inability to immediately express a wise moral of the adventure.

Here I side with William Hazlitt, who relished long walks, especially solo ones, proclaiming that *I am for the synthetical method on a journey, in preference to the analytical. I am content to lay in a stock of ideas then, and to examine and anatomize them afterwards. I want to see my vague notions float like the down of the thistle before the breeze, and not to have them entangled in the briars and thorns of controversy.* And here I would expand controversy to include not only debating with a companion of the road, but also the need to find a meaning at all. So if I haven't quite rejected Frost's formula, at least I've offered it in a radically rebalanced version, heavier on the delights and fuzzier on the wisdom, which may in this particular case have simply devolved into the wise pleasure of soaking in a hot, deep, postwalk tub.

Years of thrusting Thoreau at high school students taught me that, while many groaned at wading through *Walden* as a whole, most responded enthusiastically to isolated sentences and pronouncements of our famous local literary curmudgeon. They happily held out nuggets of his glittering thought, for example, when I would ask them to find a sentence that most completely expresses the ideas of a chapter or to choose a 30-second snatch to read aloud on our pilgrimage to Thoreau's cabin

site, and these thoughts genuinely move them. And when, as students will, they challenge me to do the same, to isolate for them a favorite Thoreauvian thought, I most often steer them to chapter 2 (“Where I Lived, and What I Lived For”) where, nestled into one of his many calls to awaken, he makes a wonderfully comprehensive announcement. I’ll give two lead-in sentences before the biggie:



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We must learn to reawaken and keep ourselves awake, not by mechanical aids, but by an infinite expectation of the dawn, which does not forsake us in our soundest sleep. I know of no more encouraging fact than the unquestioned ability of man to elevate his life by a conscious endeavor. . . . To affect the quality of the day, that is the highest of arts. To affect the quality of the day! Tantalizingly vague, obviously of critical importance.

Was my walk a success? Was it done well? I know this, at the very least: my megawalk, my last marathon, surely (and for the better) affected the hell out of the quality of that July day.

Epilogue



Courtesy of Christopher Coakley

Although he was diagnosed in 2008 with lung cancer and gave up his right lung to surgery, Tom Hart became the happy consumer of one of the new genetically targeted drugs for his particular type of lung disease. The illness went into abeyance for four years, during which Hart wrote, traveled, and followed his cross-country team’s progress (Concord-Carlisle High School in Concord, Massachusetts) in minute detail, still writing reports and analyses of every meet and every runner as he had through all of his years as coach. In November 2012, problems with headaches revealed an aggressive return of the illness. Tom died on December 29, 2012. 