

Hitting the Wall

SOMEHOW, watching my younger sister Jessica cross the finish line of the Boston Marathon convinced me that it would be a good idea for *me* to run a marathon too. It was a moment of insanity, I know—running 26.2 miles (42.2 kilometers) *for fun?!*

Race day arrived, several months and many training sessions later. Jess and I were ready to go, and the streets of Chicago were lined with cheering crowds and Gatorade stands. I double-knotted my shoes, nearly bursting out of them—it felt like they were tied to coiled springs.

The starting gun sounded, and as soon as I found some space, I zipped through the pack of runners, with my sister trying to keep up. Pacing? Pssh! Who needs it?

All marathoners “hit the wall”—usually around mile 18 to 21 or so, with only a few miles to go. You hit the wall when you’ve used up all the energy stores in your muscles. You’re completely out of gas, just running on fumes.

I expected to hit the wall, but I was surprised by just how quickly the wall hit me. At mile 12 I was cruising along without a care in the world—actually on pace to qualify for Boston!—but by mile 13 I was barely hobbling. Cars don’t feel pain when they’re running on fumes but, trust me, people do. Every step is agony. Joints ache. Muscles cramp. Any dirty sidewalk looks like a good place to take a nap.

Good thing Jess was running the course with me. She’d run the race before; she’d hit the wall—hard!—and she’d finished anyway. She knew exactly what I was going through: I was helpless and ready to drop. I told her to go on ahead so she could qualify for Boston again. I didn’t

want to hold her back. I’d meet her at the finish line.

But Jess, with that younger-sister tenacity, stuck by me. She patted me on the back, encouraging me: “Let’s make it to the next stoplight. . . . There’s a Gatorade stand coming up. . . . We’ve just passed another mile marker. . . .” She was barely exerting herself by this point, since I was going so slowly. When I stopped to stretch, she’d wait. When I was able to hobble again, we’d continue together.

Finally, we crested that last hill and glimpsed the finish line. We crossed it *together* that afternoon, hand-in-hand, arms held high. Somehow, finishing seemed like more of a victory after hitting the wall.

Jessica never left my side. She had been on pace to finish an hour sooner, qualifying for Boston. But she gave up her race so I could finish mine, even though I could barely hobble.

I’ve never seen Jesus as clearly as I saw him that day in my sister Jessica.

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me. . . . ■



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PHOTO BY TOMAS FANO

Anything can become a spiritual practice once you are willing to approach it that way—once you let it bring you to your knees and show you what is real, including who you are, who other people are, and how near God can be.

— BARBARA BROWN TAYLOR