The Long Walk

April 22, 2003

It all began on Wednesday, April 16 when my next-door neighbor, Larry, invited me to a Seder. The food at this Passover celebration was outstanding and the wine went well with the bitter herbs. The readings documented the trials and tribulations of the Jews over many years, but the atmosphere was happy, with extended family and friends assembling for this important family get together. On the following Sunday evening the film epic “The Ten Commandments” dramatized Moses as he led the Hebrews out of Egypt through the Sinai Desert. The following day was Patriots Day in Boston, Massachusetts and the occasion of the 107th running of the Boston Marathon. Getting up at 6.00 across the common to the buses, comparing notes with strangers in this family of runners. And then there was the athlete’s village in Hopkinton with Johnny Kelly, the 61-time Boston Marathon hero singing “Young at Heart”. Long portajohn lines and into the corrals according to your qualifying time. The gun goes off and you stand still for an eternity then shuffle to the starting line. You run the marathon and then the long walk starts.

Your legs are like jelly; every step is a momentous challenge, you are heaving up the undigested sports food and drink and the comedian on the loudspeaker tells you and the sea of elated humanity to keep moving – it will do you good and clear the way for those following on behind. This joker just doesn’t understand the challenges of the long walk. Then there are the gentle volunteers who place the wrap around your shoulders to protect you from the cold onshore breeze and the chip removers who kneel in front of you and remove the timing chip from your shoelaces after you have painfully lifted your foot to an enormous height. You are rewarded for this donation with a finisher’s medal, which weighs you down like the cross from another time in history. And the long walk continues, still dragging and heaving, one of a sea of silver shrouds. Thousands of poor souls who are supposed to be jubilant following their great achievement, but instead are suffering pain worse than childbirth. The wind blows your metallic blanket and you fight your way to the water bottles; but you can’t drink; but you must drink. On to the food that is good for you, but you can’t eat, because you will throw up. Never again, never again, never again. Just as you said in some of those other long walks, but this one was worse, it was now and it was you and it was long. It was cold and you had a million miles to go to the buses that carried your bag of clothes that promised you warmth. Each bus was numbered and yours was at the end of the line, another eternity through the crush of jubilant and despondent souls, their mood depending on the success bestowed on them by their parents, their training and the accuracy of their predictions.

The lines to the labeled bus windows were interminable. In their wisdom, the Boston Athletic Association numbered runners by their qualifying time so that they could be assembled in corrals at the start like a bunch of rodeo bulls, pawing the ground with anticipation. But they all finished together, walked the long walk together, lifted their feet together, bowed their heads together for the prestigious medal and arrived at their clothes bus together. This bus was staffed by two saints and a driver who belonged to a union and so sat in his seat watching the depressing lines because he was not supposed to touch the clothes. Sneaky survivors cut in line shouting out and waving their numbers sending the gentle ladies off into the depths of the bus for hours searching in the piles of blue bags with yellow chords. One polite oriental gentleman waited forever, being too timid or fatigued to shout his name. I left the line to retch by the front wheel, nothing there, a few sympathetic murmurs. Have a sip of water, no use, wait until the gastric revolt had subsided. Back in line slowly up to the front. Number 15622 please; thankyou, thankyou, thanyou.

It was not possible to turn back against the crowd to the site of the medical examination for which I had volunteered on the day before the race. So on on in true hash house harrier style, but without much enthusiasm to the end of the human tunnel to be spewed out into the family greeting area, shivering still heaving. Back along the side walk, a trial sip of water; no way could I face that banana or sports bar. Left at Berkeley where the bright eyed medical student was waving his placard for the guinea pigs. Down there to the right past the massage place. Another thousand steps, all requiring a supreme effort. At last out of the wind and into the building, for my T shirt and a pair of socks. But then there were the stairs up into the auditorium. Stairs!!! Luckily there was a handrail to heave on and the heaving had subsided. At the top another enthusiast passed out the manila envelopes with my misspelled name and a blue form to fill in. How on earth could I fill in a form in the dim auditorium light without my glasses? Have a drink of water or you will die said the resident. Can’t I said. Ok said the resident, how are you feeling? Terrible. Good good, well done. Go down the slope and up the stairs to give a gallon of blood so that we may see what running does to a body. A gallon of blood? Don’t their eyes tell them anything? Would you like help filling in the form? Yes please. How do you feel? Terrible. Did you sweat during the race? Did you drink the green stuff? Did you eat a thousand packets of gel? How do you feel? Terrible, I still want to die. Good good, you’ll be better in the morning, just drink lots of liquid. Can’t I’ll barf. OK just wait until you are ready. Give me your arm so I can take the blood. Don’t look you’ll probably faint. Thank you very much, go and join that line and get weighed. Take off your shoes. Can’t. OK we’ll take off a pound. Wow you lost six pounds. Just drink some water and be careful of the hyponatremia that we are studying, it can kill you faster than dehydration. I still want to die. Not here, we are only residents and are not good at dealing with dying people yet. Go into that other line and get your blood pressure taken. Wow that’s a lot better than before the race. Now into that line over there for an EKG. Sit on a chair and pass the time of day with the standing queue, shuffle along. Hi there, I did your pre-race EKG, yesterday, you do have a heart? Don’t worry about the electrodes the hair will grow again and the pain is momentary. You still have a heart, you’re done now. Drink the water when you are ready, thanks for participating in this important study; you’ll live, I hope. How are you feeling now? Awful. Good, good. Cha ching. Next please.

On out into the wind and cold, but now with a coat, no chance of sweat pants, can’t bend that far. Only another few blocks to the hotel. The masses have thinned out, just a few locals and family members telling you about a good job or something. Shuffle, shuffle, shuffle, the nausea is going away, try another sip of water, but no chocolate chip cookies yet. Into the hotel, people are there with their new blue t-shirts sporting their medals. Mine is suddenly lighter, will I really live? Up the elevator into a bath, out of the bath, drink some water, no hyponatremia. Down to the restaurant and bar. A great big juicy hamburger and a couple of beers. I’ve done this walk before, there is an end to it, how about next year? I qualified for next year so I can’t stop now. Pain, nausea, shuffling, no more problems. Start training tomorrow for the next one. Dumb, forgetful fool.

