

## Perspective: On Being A "One"

It's easy to lose sight of the "power of one" to feel—as an individual—that our muscle is pea-sized in a world that seems to assert puissance of Popeye proportions. But each July for the last four years, I have witnessed firsthand how mighty this diminutive sinew can be. Just as a single strand of hemp braided together with others forms a rope strong enough to hoist an ocean liner, from its berth, or how a lone voice joined in chorus with other can challenge a thunderstorm in June, no longer a whisper in the throes of the gale, so too can a single person gain strength when united with others.

It all starts nestled amongst Vermont's Green Mountains, in a verdant field that looks dressed and bedecked for a wedding or a gala, high-brow affair, where men in tuxedos escort women tottering on high heels, draped in blowsy silks, and modeling oversized bonnets. Elegant, multi-peaked tents with sumptuous, satiny covers stand contrasted against the azure sky above and the deep glaucous forest beyond.

But no engraved invitation is necessary to attend this morning, no RSVP was required. We are all more than welcome to come—we are entreated to, in fact; encouraged to bring as many friends and family members as we can muster. The day, the event, the grounds are open to all: young and old and every age betwixt, men and women, couples and singles, rich and poor, from near and from afar. This is no exclusive fete, not by any stretch; it is a gathering of "ones"—folks from all walks of life who carry the common thread of wanting to do something worthwhile on this fine morning. Each "one" is here to participate in the largest series of 5k runs/fitness walks in the world, which was established by a woman, yes, *ONE* woman, who promised her sister that she would do all she could to eradicate the disease we're here to help fight.

Despite the elegance of the venue, the crowd of upwards of six thousand people sports shorts and t-shirts, sweatshirts and sweatpants; high heels were abandoned in favor of sturdy, supportive running or walking shoes; fancy millinery was supplanted by baseball hats and headbands. Some have donned the latest in technical athletic gear, while others have wrested faded, well-worn shirts from the back caverns of their bureaus.

A special class of women readily stands out amongst the panoply of color and all the shapes and sizes, its members easily recognizable by

their vibrant pink t-shirts and caps. It is these women—and the sisterhood to which they and others joined without choice—for whom we are here. These are the survivors: the women who have been diagnosed with and treated for the disease, who are here to celebrate and be celebrated, and who are lending their voices, their time, and their two feet to raise funds for disease awareness, testing, education, and research. With dignity and grace they wear the signature-pink shirts they are given.

On this warm summer morning, they are more than survivors: they are mentors, they are inspiration, they are the personification of courage and determination. By all the entrants and volunteers, they are treated like royalty, deservedly so.

*The strength of a man's virtue must not be measured by his efforts, but by his ordinary life.*

—Blaise Pascal

(1623-1662), French scientist and philosopher

As the appointed time for the first event (the women's 5k run) draws near, the early-morning milling about, easy camaraderie, and apparent randomness are subtly transmuted into purposefulness. The co-ed knots of attendees are untangled and hordes of women either amble or intently advance to the starting line. Before long, a ribbon of people participating in the first race of the day stretches for hundreds of yards down the rural road, racers packed together tighter than a cork in a bottle of wine.

There is still time to chat before the race begins, though, as we take off our figurative competitors' hats and become women, just plain women. Here the stories are told: a petite blonde has threaded around her waist the scarf of a friend who was just diagnosed; a couple from Virginia, of which she is a survivor, drafted their New England vacation plans to be in this Vermont village on this particular day; most of the employees from a local business run en masse for a recently-diagnosed co-worker. Nearly every one of the partakers in this and the other two races (men's 5k and co-ed 5k walk) is there with a sister, mother, wife, daughter, grandmother, aunt, or friend in his or her heart. And while we wait for the starter's gun to go off, it is poignantly clear that, despite the contest of speed we're here for, we are all in this together, and despite the outcome 3.1 miles down this maple-lined lane, each and every one of us is a winner. That been said and felt, as the state's governor closes his welcoming remarks and we're given the "on your mark"-concentrate on the countdown; "get ready"—our muscles tense and

twitch like a quarter horse's in a calf-roping chute; "get set"—we take a deep breath.... and.... "Go!"—we give it our all, our best shot, 100 percent; we leave nothing on the table, we go for broke.

As we run along the bucolic road, hundreds of people shout and cheer, perhaps for someone they know in this snaking throng, but more likely the commotion is for every unknown face, every unidentified "one." Some spectators sit on lawn chairs, others stroll the road's shoulders, but all raise their voices and their hands, making us feel like we're running in the most important race in the world—which we are. Volunteers shout their encouragement as they hand out cups of water, their enthusiasm and support unbiased, blanketing the speedy and the pokey amongst us. When we round the halfway bend and double back so that we are running toward those near the rear of the pack, these runners, too, are clapping and rooting, even though we are, technically, sprinting "against" them. No matter. "Go girl!" echoes in all of our ears, spurring us on, lifting our spirits.

Coming through the finish chute, a swarm of bystanders whistles, stomps, and applauds. A friendly face above a telltale volunteer shirt supplies a frosty bottle of water and an "atta go!" For those in the survivor shirts, there's a pink rose and a hug when they cross the line. The announcer's enthusiasm in reading off the name of the person to cross 823rd is as unflagging and fervent as it was when he announced the first's name. There is no way to judge by the embraces lavished upon the runners where in the herd they finished. For in this race, it really doesn't matter. Once again, we know we are all champions. Anonymous glory for all, for every ONE.

Later, sweaty and tired—but exhilarated by the solidarity, the sense of purpose, and the knowing that today's race has made a difference to someONE, somewhere—the eclectic crowd assembles under the big tent for the awards ceremony. We are moved by the powerful words of the speakers who have come to honor us with their stirring stories of valor and inspiration. They speak quietly and with humbleness, but we know each of them is a hero in their families and in their communities.

When the last speaker has turned off the microphone and the awards ceremony is over, the thousands of us drift away and the once-throbbing crowd disperses. But all are changed: we are tall, proud, bold, strong. There's not a one of the "ones" who, for a while at least, will feel overlooked, like a pebble on a vast beach. Each has been touched, and each has felt-on some level—the extraordinary power and spirit that results when individual minds and bodies come

together. And all it took to start it was ONE promise from ONE sister to another then ONE participant signing up, then another ONE, then another ONE, and another....