

GOD, MY MARATHON PARTNER

By Earline Thomas

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So, I had a stroke. I thought, "Is this the way I'll end my life?" I'm sitting here curled up in a wheel chair, saliva dripping from the corner of my mouth, and I am unable to communicate intelligently. Wow!! This can't be it.

Then I remembered something one of the doctors said to me. He said, "***There is nothing physically wrong with you. You must retrain your brain to function all over again. What you used to know and take for granted, you have to relearn.***" In other words, I had to be born again. This statement became my recovery lifeline.

Hmmm, I thought, I can do that. Where do I start?

I decided to walk again. Part of the rebirth was to retrain my brain in the use of the muscles in my feet and legs. I wanted quality to my life and the desire was to first walk. My dream has always been to travel. God has given us a beautiful world to see, visit and enjoy and I had no desire to see it from a wheelchair.

The doctor said that therapy **must begin** right away. I was to go to therapy once a week, but that was not enough. I had to practice every day. So I took those things from therapy, such putty balls for my hands and elastic tubes of different strength for my right leg and arm, and I practiced every day in a make-shift gym in my home. The doctors gave me a cane that I never used, and I was also given an arm brace that I threw in the garbage. Using them would mean I accepted my plight, and I didn't.

I took inventory of myself and noticed that all of my right side had curled up. My toes, my arm, my hand, and my mouth, even the right side of my tongue was in need of retraining. It was boring, exercising daily, but it had to be done. And I did it because I didn't like the alternative.

I believe that when a student is ready the teacher will appear.

I received a letter in the mail from the American Stroke Association about a marathon. I thought, "God, are you talking to me?" I attended the recruiting meeting and met an old friend there named Wanda. She did not know I had been ill. After the meeting, she said that she would walk if I would. We agreed to walk. She would walk a full marathon, 26.2 miles, and I would walk a half marathon, 13.1 miles. You should have seen my daughter Belinda's face when I told her I was walking a 13.1 miles marathon. "***What!!!***" she said.

The training was scheduled to last for six months. We met on Chicago's beautiful lake front every Saturday. I remember our first training walk. We were scheduled to walk three miles. The group was excited. They paired up and took off, some running and others walking. I was left behind. Wanda had something to do that day, so I assured her that I was fine and that it was alright if she left me. I was one of the last persons on the walk. I felt alone. I felt hurt and felt sorry for myself. With no one to talk to, I started to cry.

A small voice began to speak to me. "Why are you crying? Why are you here? You said you were doing this for you. You said you were doing this for your health. So, why the tears? Your goal is to finish. Not to finish first, not even to finish last, but to finish."

After I calmed down, I notice someone behind me. It was a young lady with a weight problem and a bum leg. Her intent was to walk a mile and a half, not three miles as instructed. She said she would walk that far with me. I was glad to have the company, but my goal was to complete the three miles. We walked and we talked and we completed the three miles together. That was my first victory.

During the week, I followed the schedule and walked almost every day. The more I walked, the easier it got. I used the lake front mile marker signs as guides. For instance, I would say to myself, I will walk to the first mile marker without curling my toes. I would practice just that until one day I was walking and noticed that I was no longer curling my toes. What a good feeling. Another victory.

It was time for my next project, to concentrate on my hand and fingers. As I walked, I would be conscious of my hand and do the hand and finger exercises learned in therapy. When you walk six or seven miles, you find all things become easier. My walking became better and better and my hand and finger movements became better and better.

Now it was time for my arm. It wouldn't move. I would take my left hand and make the right one move. At night, I would lie in bed with hand weights. With both hands, I would work the right arm and make it stretch and get used to raising it above my head as I lie in my bed. This took a lot of practicing. As with all things, it became easier. Even today my arm will not open fully, but it is not curled up.

I could now walk with my arm at my side and moving my hand and fingers when I wanted to and not curling my toes. **Great, Great, Great.** My concentration now was on allowing my arms to hang and move rhythmically with my body. This seemed impossible at first because the arm seemed to function on its own. Then one morning, on the lake, with the sun rising on the horizon, it happened. I was walking and my arm casually swayed with my body. I screamed with joy. I did it.

The only thing left to do was ***practice, practice, practice.***

I walked and completed two half marathons, one in Arizona and one in Hawaii. I have since traveled to Bermuda, as an American Stroke Association marathon mentor. I have also traveled to Atlanta on business, a spiritual journey to Virginia Beach, and a pleasure trip to Jamaica. Wow! The Jamaican trip was beautiful and peaceful. I have plans for Peru, Thailand, Alaska, India and Africa, not necessarily in that order.

All the while, I reflected on a book I read that was published in 1922 by Emile Coue, ***“Self Mastery through Conscious Autosuggestion.”*** He states that, “Every illness, whatever it may be, can yield to autosuggestion.” He is known for the autosuggestion ***“Every day in every respect, I am getting better and better.”*** I would repeat this statement 20 times three times a day, in the morning, while walking and before bed time. It works. Try it.

My speech improved by reading aloud. The speech therapist also gave me tongue twisters to read aloud. That was a trip!!! I had to go back to basics with my handwriting. Writing my A B C’s over and over again.

Today, three years later, I still walk at least a mile a day. Rain, shine, sleet, snow, cold weather or hot, I walk for me, for my health and for my spiritual growth. I work at it everyday, recovery never stops.

Emile Coue also said, ***“Always think that what you have to do is easy.”*** And so it is.