

March 24, 2019

Winning **KINDNESS** at all costs

I was in the ninth grade, my last year of junior high school: I had recently won an award for a self-portrait I drew; I was on the track team; I was in love and had recently kissed a girl for the first time. Most importantly of all, I hadn't yet developed zits. My world was a great place to live.

All of this was housed comfortably in the back of my mind as I stood at the starting line of the 440-yard race at my first ever track meet.

A few weeks before I had been sure I would follow in my big brother's footsteps and be a pole vaulter, but I had the bad habit of flinging myself backwards. While it looked pretty impressive and drew applause from teammates and coach alike, flinging yourself backwards on the pole vault is not a track and field event. It should be. It looks very cool, especially if you get the flailing just right.

The only track event that I definitely did not want to take part in was the 440-yard dash, which equated to 64 seconds of wondering if I'm about to have a coronary. Which is exactly what the coach assigned me to. Not only that race, but the mile relay, in which you had to run a 440-yard race while coordinating with three teammates. It's hard to coordinate while gasping for breath.

So, I'm standing at the starting line. My first 440-yard race, ever. I was up against two guys from Oberon Junior High, our nemesis. We were the Drake Dragons. Together we sing (everybody now!), "We are the Dragons, the mighty, might Dragons. People ask us who we are, so we tell them: We are the Dragons the mighty, mighty Dragons." Our school song was written by Burt Bacharach.

Drake Junior High School was smooshed right up against the foothills of the Rockies and across the street from the Jolly Rancher candy factory. Oh, that wonderful scent. *Ahhhhhhh.*

"On your mark. Get set. Go!"

Man, I zipped away from that starting line like a gazelle. I ran like the wind. Like a combination of wind and a gazelle. A *gazind*. I ran like a *gazind*. After three cups of coffee. And wearing tennis shoes.

A quarter way around the track and I was already distancing my two opponents! "Ha! Eat my dust, suckers! !! Am! Awesome!" The world was my oyster! And I don't even like oysters! The irony of it!

Then my body said, "Ehem. Uh, Dave?" My legs, or what used to be my legs, suddenly became encased in a vat of molasses, which is, itself, in a large tub of Dippity Do. My lungs, which a few seconds before were cheering me on, now had become my bitter foe. It was like I was trying to breath through bricks. My lungs laughed at me! *Moo hoo, ha ha ha!*

The other two racers ran by, looking back at me like one might look at an accident on the highway. Did I see pity in their faces? I felt like a zombie—not from that awful Walking Dead show, but the classic George Romero zombies: "*Brainnnnnnns.*"

After finally dragging my zombie self across the finish line, my coach pulled me aside.

"You didn't pace yourself," he said, not unkindly.

Cut to a week later, our next meet. I'm at the starting line. I don't know why it was always one person against two, but there I was again, ready to take on two competitors. Suddenly we're off! Only I didn't start out at a full sprint. I managed each step, figuring the speed I was capable of keeping up for the entire quarter mile.

This time, it was my competitors' turn to fizzle out half-way around, while I was able to distance them without ever going full tilt. Man, that felt good!

At our next practice, we gathered on the bleachers and the coach called me out for having improved so much in one week. I remember being embarrassed, but it faded quickly because he switched gears and talked about something that had happened at the meet.

I only have a faded memory of the actual thing that happened. What I remember is that some teammates and I took a few minutes and helped a worker at our competing school to clear out some hurdles and things from the track. It was really nothing, a few minutes of minor effort. But it was enough that the worker told the competing coach, and he told our coach.

It would have never occurred to us that it meant something. But our coach called it out. By doing so, he made clear that the real winning isn't necessarily being the first to cross the finish line, it's the journey. It's by being of service to others, providing a simple act of kindness.

Winning, I learned, means being an example of Christ in a world that is filled with hurdles.