

Our Spiritual Marathon Of Hope

by Staff

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On March 3, 1977, the life of a young Canadian man changed course forever. The young man had been diagnosed with osteogenic sarcoma, a cancerous tumor that makes bone go soft. This resulted in him having to have his right leg amputated six inches above the right knee. This life-altering cancer did not cause him to go into depression or feel sorry for himself, but instead he proclaimed, "I'm not ready to leave this world."

The night before the surgery, he picked up a magazine and read an inspiring story of amputee Dick Traum, who had run the New York City Marathon a few years earlier. He thought that he, too, would like to run a marathon with his prosthetic leg.¹ In the fall of 1979, he hatched a plan to raise money for cancer research by running across Canada. His goal: \$1 for every Canadian. This journey would be run on the Trans-Canada Highway, the world's longest highway, spanning a distance of 4,860 miles.

The "Marathon of Hope" was born.

On April 12, 1980, he dipped his prosthetic right leg in the frigid waters of the Atlantic Ocean, off Canada's easternmost province, Newfoundland. For the next 143 days, this twenty-one-year-old man with a prosthetic leg ran 143 marathons. Think about that! He ran 143 marathons in 143 days. How many elite athletes the world over could do that?

On August 31, just outside Thunder Bay, Ontario, with 3,339 miles behind him, he was forced to stop. The cancer had returned, and he was no longer physically able to complete the Marathon of Hope.

What occurred in those 143 days changed a nation, leaving an indelible impression in the minds of millions of people around the world. This young man made a difference beyond anything he could have imagined. His name was Terry Fox.

The story of Terry Fox can help to inspire us as we run our own spiritual Marathons of Hope, and to encourage us to build the godly character necessary to fulfill the offices being prepared for us in the Kingdom of God.

Discovering Spiritual Cancer

In what seemed like an instant, Terry's life changed forever when he learned that he had cancer of the right knee, which resulted in his having that leg amputated in order to save his life. Did we not also experience a life-changing event when God called us, an event that saved our lives? He opened our minds to see His truth and the truth about our spiritual health. We were filled with the leaven of this world; we had spiritual cancer—sin.

In an instant, we were faced with the piercing truth about man's, as well as our own, track record on this earth. The Bible clearly tells us in Romans 3:23, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (with the obvious exception of Jesus Christ). Members of God's church know Jeremiah 17:9

very well; most can quote it from memory: "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?"

God reveals to all mankind the dwelling place of our spiritual cancer: the human heart. If left untreated, this spiritual cancer carries the same penalty as physical cancer: death (see Ezekiel 18:4, 20)! The human heart—where sin festers to the point where it can become so out of control that one cannot grasp his own depravity—is incurably sick. In effect, we all need a spiritual heart transplant.

The people of God's church have been given an opportunity not afforded to the rest of mankind. God has essentially offered us this heart transplant—a cure to our spiritual cancer made possible by only two things:

- » The sinless sacrifice of Jesus Christ for all of the sins of mankind (John 3:16), and
- » The indwelling of God's Spirit to enhance the operation (II Corinthians 1:21-22).

By His merciful calling, God has given us the greatest hope possible that any human being can be given—the hope of eternal life in His Kingdom. In reality, God is the One who begins our spiritual Marathon of Hope.

Nobodies of the World

Terry Fox was just a young kid with curly hair who decided to make a difference by running across Canada to raise money for cancer research. He set this goal for the benefit of others, not himself. He knew the risks and the probable toll his run would take on his body, but he did it anyway. Not only was this a remarkable goal, but it originated with someone who came completely out of the woodwork. Terry was essentially a nobody.

We Christians share this same trait; we are not the movers and shakers of this world. We are not heads of state, royalty, leaders in government, or the academic elite. We are *nobodies*, plain and simple. This should not burst anyone's bubble. It is simply a fact of life.

The apostle Paul captures this beautifully in his first letter to the Corinthians:

For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called. But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, that no flesh should glory in His presence. (I Corinthians 1:26-29)

Let us take stock of our situation. God has given us the diagnosis that we are full of spiritual cancer—sin. He then offers us the only possible cure to our terminal illness: a heart transplant that can only occur through the shed blood of Jesus Christ and the indwelling of God's Holy Spirit imparted to us at our baptism (Romans 6:1-8). As nobodies, but equipped with God's Spirit, we begin our spiritual Marathon of Hope.

Nobodies Making a Difference

April 2005 marked the 25th anniversary of Terry Fox's Marathon of Hope, and to commemorate this event, the *Ottawa Citizen* newspaper ran a special feature entitled, "25 Days of Hope." It ran one article per day for each year of the anniversary, recounting stories of people whose lives intersected and were changed by the inspiring young man who ran the Marathon of Hope.

In one of these articles, "One of those moments that touched the soul,"² Marion Shynal reflects back to the ten-minute encounter that still burns brightly in her mind. It is because, she says, "There aren't many moments in a lifetime that touch the soul."

It was late afternoon on August 28, 1980. Ms. Shynal, her parents and her aunt drove along a remote section of the Trans-Canada Highway near the shores of Lake Superior. The family was enjoying the rugged terrain, punctuated by windswept pines and pink granite, when the sightseeing was interrupted by an oncoming police cruiser motioning to proceed with caution.

"I thought there was an accident," recalls Ms. Shynal. "But around a rocky bend, there he was: Terry Fox. He was running alone at the side of the Trans-Canada. His Winnebago was following behind, at a distance."

The Shynals pulled to the side of the road, as had a few truckers. There were probably about 12 people in all, said Ms. Shynal, on hand to cheer for the courageous young man.

"Terry ran by, and we all applauded, with big lumps in our throats."

As she watched him make his way, Ms. Shynal said, she began to understand the enormity of Terry Fox's accomplishment.

"He was so alone out there in the wilderness, doing what he believed in, even when nobody was paying attention."

There are a couple of powerful statements contained in this excerpt—and please remember, this was only a ten-minute encounter!—that apply to us as we run our spiritual marathon.

Unfortunately, we do not have people standing on the figurative roadside, cheering us on. However, God is surely planting seeds in the minds of those with whom we interact, perhaps in preparation for a future time when they will be resurrected to physical life and begin to learn to live God's way. Then, and possibly only then, will people begin to understand the enormity of *our* accomplishment. It sometimes feels as if we are all alone, but like Terry Fox, we are doing what we believe in, even when no one is paying attention.

We *Can* Make a Difference

God's Word is replete with examples of people who have made a difference. We have been called to make a difference, not only in the Kingdom of God, but now as physical human beings on this earth.

The story of Naaman, the commander of the Syrian army, provides an illustration of this:

Now Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Syria, was a great and honorable man in the eyes of his master, because by him the Lord had given victory to Syria. He

was also a mighty man of valor, but he was a leper. And the Syrians had gone out on raids, and had brought back captive a young girl from the land of Israel. She waited on Naaman's wife. Then she said to her mistress, "If only my master were with the prophet who is in Samaria! For he would heal him of his leprosy." And Naaman went in and told his master, saying "Thus and thus said the girl who is from the land of Israel." Then the king of Syria said, "Go now, and I will send a letter to the king of Israel." So he departed and took with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten changes of clothing." (II Kings 5:1-5)

This is an account that God felt was important enough to have it recorded for all time. In this example, most readers quickly grasp the story line that involves Naaman going to Elisha the prophet to be healed of his leprosy. However, what about the person who is the catalyst in helping Naaman to be healed? Most of us pass right over this "nobody." All we are able to learn about her is that she is a young girl from the land of Israel who becomes the servant to Naaman's wife. She makes an impassioned suggestion to help Naaman become healed of the leprosy that plagues him.

Notice how Naaman recounts her words to the king of Syria: "Thus and thus said the girl who is from the land of Israel." He seems to trivialize her words to the king, maybe because of her position as servant. Yet this nobody made a life-saving difference in the life of a great and noble man (verse 1).

Do we have to be an important "somebody" to make a difference? Obviously, no! Do we get up each day determined to make a difference in some person's life? We can. It is an admirable goal.

In mid-October, the church of God will keep the Feast of Tabernacles. Here is a bold challenge: Attempt to make a difference in the life of one person in the church every day of the Feast. This may be as simple an action as inviting someone into our group of friends, taking him out to lunch or dinner, or just taking the time to get to know him better.

Further, may I also dare you to make a difference in the life of someone *not* in the church? We will be surprised how easy this is to do, and it will add to our Feast immensely. If "natural" opportunities do not seem to present themselves, then create them. We may have to put on our thinking caps!

We have added our rightful place to the spiritual marathon equation, not only in the eyes of God, but also in the eyes of the world. God certainly does not want us to remain foolish, weak nobodies, but to move and grow towards "the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:13).

Character

Although Terry Fox was athletic by nature, to run 143 marathons in 143 days was more than pure athleticism. What separated this incredible young man from the rest of the pack? What makes Terry's legacy live on twenty-five years later?

It can be summed up in one word: *character* !

Many exceptional athletes are not remembered simply because they did not display any character. Most elite athletes are selfish creatures; they spend their whole careers trying to better themselves, usually to attain the pinnacle of their sport. The few who reach this much-dreamed-about and coveted level enjoy all the accolades, praise, and idol-worship that come with it. Our Western culture today is dominated by idol-worship. Such athletes become "somebodies" that many admire. There is nothing

wrong with looking up to someone, but do those who admire superstars want to emulate their character—or merely their skill?

Though men like to be idolized for their skills and accomplishments, character is the most impressive trait that anyone can display. It is the most underrated, under-emphasized, and under-taught trait in society today, but when true character is displayed, nobody misses it. Character is unmistakable.

It has been said that character is built fastest through adversity, and this was true for Terry. Every one of those "25 Days of Hope" articles touched on various points of his character. For instance:

Because Terry was finishing his run for the day, the Shynals had a few minutes with him. "He was so polite and soft-spoken. And he was very humble, which drew me to him even more."

After a couple of pictures, a handshake and an autograph signed on the back of a paper bag, the Shynals were once again on the road, awed by what they had witnessed.³

We are called to build a different type of character, the very nature and character of God. This character has a unique trait that separates it from the character of the world. It provides an example that makes those who are not in God's church know that God's way of life is warm and inviting, one that draws people to Him. Building this type of character is the loftiest goal for any human. Of ourselves, we could never attain it, but as Jesus Christ pointed out to His disciples, "with God all things are possible" (Mark 10:27).

These days, it is "easy" to stand out from the pack by demonstrating godly character. Doing so may not always bring positive results or praise, but it does plant seeds in others' minds, which may germinate immediately, or the next day, week, month, or year—possibly even years or decades down the road. The point is that, when we correctly witness for God by being excellent examples of His holy, righteous character, we leave an indelible impression in the minds of those in whom God wants it left.

We have now moved on from the diagnosis of our terminal illness, been baptized, and are well underway on our spiritual Marathon of Hope. Our goal is to inherit the Kingdom of God, and we have strived to have His very character developed within us. Now what do we do with it?

A Great Message for the Future

Referring to Terry Fox's achievements, *Ottawa Citizen* reporter Carrie Kristal-Schroder writes, "He taught us that one individual can make a difference, that life isn't just about ourselves—it's bigger than that."⁴

We are living in a time when many people in the church of God are enduring sore trials. A number of church members are tired because their race has been so long. Others have contemplated throwing in the towel, and sadly, some *have* thrown it in, considering their trials too difficult to endure.

We must not give up! Why? Because this is not just about us! God the Father and His Son Jesus Christ have provided us, and the rest of mankind, with the greatest hope possible: the opportunity to be spirit members of the Family of God. John 17:3 gives us a taste of how glorious this will be: "And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have

sent." What an awesome thought! It should cause us to think seriously about the importance of our roles now, while we are still physical human beings.

Have we ever considered that, as resurrected "former human beings" in the Family of God, *we* will be able to give the people who live during the Millennium something that even God the Father and Jesus Christ cannot? Astonishing but true! What is the one thing that Jesus Christ and God the Father have never done? They have never sinned. We, of course, have all sinned, but our human faults will serve a positive use. If nothing else, our lives of overcoming and growth will be used as examples, and as converted spirit beings, our very glorified existence may inspire millions to overcome. This sheds an exciting light on Isaiah 30:20-21:

And though the Lord gives you the bread of adversity and the water of affliction [which help to build character], yet your teachers will not be moved into a corner anymore, but your eyes shall see your teachers, your ears shall hear a word behind you saying, "This is the way, walk in it," whenever you turn to the right hand or whenever you turn to the left.

What will it take to back up our saying, "This is the way, walk in it"? God will give us the ability to build virtually instant credibility with those who will live as human beings in the World Tomorrow. We will be able to provide them with a hope that is unique, based on *our* human experience—a hope that they, too, can overcome through God's Spirit and inherit His Kingdom. They will look at us and declare, "If he could do it, then, with God's help, so can I!"

Terry Fox died on June 28, 1981, one month before his twenty-third birthday. Since his death, more than \$360 million has been raised for cancer research as a direct result of his efforts. The "Terry Fox Run" is held yearly in sixty countries around the world.

Like Terry, we have been called to be a part of something much bigger than ourselves. God has called us to make a difference, and our difference will have consequences far beyond what Terry ever achieved. We will administer God's government as kings and priests with Jesus Christ (Revelation 5: 10)!

One of Terry's best-known phrases is, "Nobody is ever going to call me a quitter," so as we continue to run our spiritual Marathon of Hope, we need to remember what a privilege it is to be in the race at this point in history. If we do not quit, our lives, which may be marred by many trials and afflictions, will not only benefit us, but will provide hope to countless people in the Kingdom of God.