

NEVERMORE
A Toastmaster Presentation
By
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INTRODUCTION

Do you workout every day? Every other day? Weekly? Monthly? Once a year? Do you consider reading about a workout? Good. Now that I know where you stand on this issue, let me tell you something about myself.

NEVERMORE

Although it may not seem obvious as I stand here in my hot pink jogging suit, looking like a huge serving of cotton candy, I am a well-coordinated athlete. I won first place trophies in badminton, volleyball, table-tennis, golf and tennis before injuries and age imposed their limitations. Today, my primary activity is walking, which I enjoy and do every day. I have long legs and can set a good pace, doing two miles in approximately thirty minutes.

Walking weather -- not too cold, not too hot, not too wet, not too humid and not too windy -- came late this year. I only got in one good walk to break-in my new sneakers before I set out on the ten mile March of Dimes "Walk for Life," in Hyde Park, NY. The route went from the Franklin Delano Roosevelt's (FDR) home to the Vanderbilt Mansion and back. I was somewhat prepared since I had walked half that distance last year. However, what I did not realize, internalize or bring forth from my subconscious, was that the western side of the main road to the river is a sheer cliff, ending at the Hudson River water's edge.

The first half of the walk I had to traverse hilly and rocky terrain to descend to the river, while dodging slower walkers and mud holes. After brief stretch of flat roadway, I made it up the serpentine path to the Vanderbilt Mansion.

On the return to the FDR's Home, the path went back down to the river, past the Bard Rock trail, followed by a gradual ascent through the woods and back roads. At this point, I was doing well. I had a good pace and was confident I would make it through the full ten miles.

With an estimated fifteen minutes to go, I turned a corner, and faced the vertical rise of Curry Street. The slope of the street was so severe that one more degree off horizontal and cars would flip over backwards. And yet it was lined with houses and driveways, which I'm sure were imprisoned during inclement weather. These people had to be crazy. It was clear to me that there was no way I was going to get up this sheer, macadam cliff.

I looked around for help. Where was the Red Cross van? Where were the monitoring cars to help stranded walkers? Helicopters? Horses? A hay wagon? I saw nothing and no one for a

good ten minutes. Other walkers must have known about this and taken a different path. I didn't know and right now, didn't care. Evaluating my situation, I knew my choices were to waste away and possibly die at the bottom of the hill or try to get up it. I had to decide quickly because I knew that if I sat my muscles would tighten and I might never be able to get up again. Without benefit of ropes, harness, pitons and rock hammer, I started to climb the imposing road rock face.

Climb may be an overstatement. I do not believe any step I took moved me forward more than three inches, if that. But, I had made my choice and managed to keep a rhythm of baby steps – left, right, left, right. I kept my eyes downward. I knew I would get to the top, if not today, tomorrow. Focus. Breathe. Move.

The sound of voices pierced my concentration. Rescued. Thank God. I turned to see who my saviors were. In the center of the roadway, a trio of young boys, ten or eleven years old, were dancing up the hill as they laughed, talked and played. I could hardly believe my eyes. Their boundless energy left me behind in their wake. If I had been able to talk, I would have been speechless.

I have no idea how long it took to conquer that hill, but I did. Within fifteen minutes of reaching the top I arrived at the finish line. Twenty minutes later, I was soaking in a hot tub counting blisters and thankful I had made it home.

The next day, however, was a different story. My body ached all over. I could only walk on my heels and each step was an excruciating reminder of my ordeal. If I sat down, it took me almost ten minutes to stand. After four days, my recuperation was complete and on the next perfect day, I walked as if nothing had happened.

CONCLUSION

Was it all worth it? You bet! I am very proud that I did that horrific hill, one step at a time. I felt a strong sense of perseverance, accomplishment and satisfaction. But, just because I did it once, I can honestly say, Nevermore!

Challenges confront us every day. Some confound us and others put us in a holding pattern until we take care of it. There is the ever-present hope that these large challenges will go away or take care of themselves. Hope, in this case, solves nothing. I have developed a way to approach these problems and it relates directly to the Curry Street hill. When I am overwhelmed, I develop an initial hypothesis, which can be altered as necessary, and do one thing towards the solution. Then I take the next step.

One step at a time got me up the Curry Street hill and it will get me, and you, through anything. The next time you face an insurmountable challenge, don't be afraid, lose sleep or eat cold pizza for every meal. Think of me, in my cotton candy track suit, take that first step, and challenges will bother you -- NEVERMORE.

Thank you.