

MARATHON MUSINGS

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My daughter, Erin, and I ran our second LaSalle Bank Marathon in the welcoming, albeit windy, city of Chicago, October 22, 2006. Starting off side-by-side, stride-by-stride, in a sea of 33,633 (double that if you count every pounding foot) who would finish. The 35°+ temperature, 25 MPH gusting wind, and on- again/off-again mist built our determination to keep hypothermia at bay with a brisk pace. We were a little under-trained but, matching from black headband through Asics sneakers, we wore our crudely-lettered "Erin" and "Susie" performance shirts with excitement.

By mile 5, ready for a Gatorade stop, we sideline to grab a cup, take a few sips, throw it off, and resume running in the middle of the pack.

One tiny misstep: Erin went right and I went left. One huge consequence: the next 21.2 miles we were asking random traffic officers along the route if they'd seen someone who looked just like us? Okay, "us" is generous to me and not so kind to Erin, but the outfits did match...

It couldn't have been in sharper contrast with 2005 when we crossed the finish line hand-in-hand. We pulled one another through the final six dedicating each mile to a loved one, recounting stories about the person for the 9 minutes it took to finish the mile. Lovely.

2006? We were scanning faces at port-a-johns and every spot where encouraging spectators handed out bars, gels and goo. Tears and mild panic as I wrestled with how Erin would fare with no money (in MY shoe), no warm clothes (in MY bag), and, after a 2 mile walk to the hotel, no room key (in MY pocket). Sad.

Still in all, the experience turned out to be magnificent. Alone, I was forced to notice other runners more clearly. Those who struggled (carrying a few extra pounds), those who soared (in spite of extra pounds and being a decade older than me), those who moved with such gritty determination or in such pain, it was humbling. Shirts worn in honor of loved ones lost to cancer. Blood on sneakers. Someone clutching their gut on the side of the road. A spectator sign asking Nancy for her love and her hand.

And of course, all those crazy people shouting "Go Susie!!!" to a brown pony-tailed woman, desperately trying to catch her blonde pony-tailed, fleet-footed daughter. Yes, they deserve special thanks; especially the women in Chinatown who had a particularly endearing way of articulating "Sussss go susss" and the 2- year-old in his stroller, mimicking his dad...

It was an especially different kind of finish. We didn't connect at "Runners Reunite" among the 1.2 million spectators and throngs of finishers in the wind and the light rain. But the emotion of those who did was overwhelming. The intense young man in a suit, standing at letters G/H for over an hour, gripping a stunning bouquet of red and orange roses. The parents and siblings of a fresh-faced Irish boy in a group hug. The French team scanning the crowd at letters M/N for their last ami to finish.

Erin and I reconnected back at our most luxurious of hotels, the Drake. And after a steamy bath and a quick nap, we cleaned up well. In our dresses and heels we walked 'til we found the biggest, fattest filet and twice-baked potato dinner, with a celebratory martini by the piano bar at Gibsons, Steak house extraordinaire.

And as we recounted our separate stories and laughed about our wretched finishing times, we realized the story was one in the same: passion, determination, and love for the road...and each

other...pulled us up and got us through. Maybe not a personal record...but, definitely a personal best.