

Hill Climbing

“I’m a believer in momentum.”

—*Lance Armstrong*

I can remember the first time I ran along the countryside in Albany, Kentucky. A mile climbing up and down the hills seemed equivalent to at least five miles of the pancake roads in Indianapolis. To begin, there is a three-quarter of a mile hill climb I used to call *The Beast* but whose real name is Grider Hill. It starts straight up a boat launch ramp to a gradual upward slant through the parking lot, growing steeper as the road winds around the lodge and cuts through the foothill, which to me is a mountain but does not technically meet the requirements of one. I used to walk this hill, as I just couldn’t run it. I called it my heat-up instead of my warm-up, because walking it raised my heart rate more than running on the flat surfaces I was used to at home. One day, I asked a fellow runner and friend, Jimmie, who owns the lodge and dock, if she could run up Grider Hill. At 68 years of age, she could run it, and that inspired me, nearly 40 years her junior, to do it, too.

In the beginning, it wasn’t possible to scale it all at once, so I ran a little and walked a little, ran a little and walked a lot, until I reached the top. Every day, I did what I could, even when my glutes, hamstrings, and calves were screaming at me to stop and my voice of reason was urging me to rethink this.

My spirit trumped my body and my mind. I’d go home for a while, where I had to seek out hills a fraction of those in Kentucky, and return trying to rebuild my strength and endurance to get up Grider Hill. I never gave up or lost hope, leading to that miraculous day when I could run from the bottom to the top without breaks. The thrill of this must be equivalent to those who ascend to the peak of Mount Everest after trying countless times or preparing on other mountains for years. This Rocky Balboa moment left me raising my arms, pumping my fist, and jumping up and down in victory. As I witnessed the neon orange sun break through the haze and crest over the foothills while a herd of deer stood like statues curiously watching me, I could hear the song “Gonna Fly Now” from the

movie *Rocky*. I felt the true meaning behind the words for the first time, and I knew there was more to my life and more to all life.

Since that glorious day when I mastered hill climbing, I have always run up Grider Hill and every other hill I have met on my 6- to 22-mile runs. As I run up Grider Hill, I meet others who ask in amazement, “Can you run up this entire hill?” to which I always respond with sincere encouragement, “Yes, and you can, too. It takes practice and determination, but if you want to, you can do it too.” I also run into comedians who remind me to keep a sense of humor, as they pull alongside me and ask if I need a ride, continuing up the hill slowly with their truck engines sputtering.

Since conquering Grider Hill, I have never doubted my ability to climb a hill, no matter how monstrous it may appear. Step by step, I just do it. This is a cherished gift that I consciously work hard not to take for granted. Hill climbing has never been easy for me, no matter how many I overcome or how often. My body has adapted to the conditioning, but my breath is always more labored in a staccato rhythm no matter how good of shape I’m in. I like this sound, as I believe every breath we take is a prayer – a prayer of thanksgiving for the gift of this journey; a prayer for guidance as we travel into the unknown and a prayer for healing so we can step into more of who we are. Life isn’t supposed to be a steady flow of breaths so I welcome the intensity, knowing I will make new discoveries in this state.

Climbing Grider Hill and the hills of Kentucky is a reflection of the way I have approached my life when I had to make choices to get myself out of the circumstances where I felt hopeless, stifled, and trapped, forgetting the joy of life. Choice by choice, I have gotten where I wanted to go and beyond, but there have been as many moments of heavy breathing as there have been moments of effortless breathing.

At twenty-four years old, I had just moved back to my hometown where I wanted desperately to put my life back together. I thought everything would be okay once I got home with my circle of friends and family, but I got sick the second day on my new job. Standing

on the scales at the doctor's office caused me more panic than my high fever with hallucinations in the form of a light show, an inability to breathe more than a teaspoon of air and a cough that sounded like a fog horn. The petite nurse with a heart of gold spoke softly with the voice of an angel, "217 pounds." I immediately cried out in reaction to this reality check. This wasn't a whimper or a snivel where the nurse's reassurance could plug the dam, save the day and make it all better. This was a primal cry reaching from my soul to the ears of everyone in that building. The nurse who I outweighed by a hundred pounds or so put her arms around my waste and helped me into a room where I could lie down.

There I was lying on the crunchy paper that covered the brown plastic examination table feeling as if life had swallowed me whole and there was no way out. My arms folded into my chest with my fingers interlaced as if in prayer, I cried as I told myself that I was a worthless fat slob. I continued to wound myself over and over thinking about what a piece of crap I was for allowing this to happen. I broke down even harder in reaction to these punishing words. As if this wasn't enough torture, I told myself in the voice of a bully with ice water running through her veins that no one loved me and I would never be loved as long as I was a disgusting pig.

Dr. Dyson who had been my doctor since I was 16 entered the room where I was having a meltdown. With the compassion of Jesus, he stood there with his hand on my back, listening to me as I poured my guts out about what a mess I had made of my life. I told him about my drinking excessively every day not just on weekends, divorcing my husband who was as sick as me and moving back to Indy with nothing but debt and a closet full of clothes that didn't fit me. His presence calmed me as I knew he genuinely cared about me. He didn't try to fix my life or me; he listened, assuring me that I would be okay and some part of me believed him.

I didn't leave the doctor's office cured of all that was ailing me, but there was a glimmer of hope even in my feverish state. Since I had a balance of \$16 in my checking account and my health insurance hadn't kicked in yet, my mom had to pick up the prescriptions for me. This tormented me further to ask my mom for money because I

done this countless times for no good reason and never kept my word to pay her back; but I vowed this time would be different.

I stayed with my mom so she could take care of me. The time was a blur as I was barely able to move from the bed except when I was forced to take a bath when I wet the bed from coughing so explosively. I prayed that I would never forget what it felt like to cough this violently and to gasp for air, thinking this would help me quit smoking, but it didn't. Being this ill, I didn't even think about drinking alcohol, smoking or eating. Seven days later, I emerged 10 pounds lighter with very little desire to partake in my usual activities. My appetite for drinking and smoking gradually returned but both were more moderate with sporadic binges.

My first paycheck was for only one day so I paid my mom back the money for my prescriptions with my second paycheck which felt astonishingly good and responsible like I was a grown up. She tried to tell me not to worry about it feeling sorry for me because she knew I was broke, but the new me that was determined to keep her head above water just wouldn't hear of it. The third paycheck I joined Weight Watchers to keep the momentum going with eating less and facing the music with weekly weigh-ins which gave me much needed accountability.

I began moving my body, walking and doing a Kathy Smith 40 minute aerobic workout video. I did as much as I could do each day until I could complete the entire 40 minutes. There were times that I would stop at the gas station on my way home from work to buy a pint of Ben and Jerry's Coffee Toffee, eating it all before I ate my Weight Watcher's frozen dinner. The next day I would get moving again and start anew, feeling stronger from this act of kindness towards myself.

I stopped meeting my friends on the weekends for drinks, and I was limiting my drinking to beer only, a few here and there. After an especially hard day that left me feeling almost as awful as stepping on the scales at the doctor's office, I picked up a cold case of Bud Light and a sack of White Castles, drinking and eating until it was

gone. I passed out and didn't go to work the next day. This would be my last bender.

An alcoholic friend who was still drinking came into town with her husband on business. I met her at The Circle Centre Mall near their hotel so we could shop because this was something we had never done together. We didn't talk about her drinking or my not drinking; we shopped. She hadn't seen me in five months; she held my face saying with full appreciation, "Your eyes are so clear. They are so blue and the whites are so white." She got choked up seeing the possibilities within her through my eyes.

I hung onto smoking until the bitter end declaring to anyone who snared, "Hey, everyone needs a vice and this is mine!" My body was 127 pounds, a fit and slender size 6, looking like the picture of health. There wasn't a stronger pro-cigarette debater than me so other smokers loved having me on their side. There was a rattle in my chest that persisted for almost a year. I'd get a round of antibiotics and it would go away for a week or two and come back again. The doc sat me down, looked me in the eye and said, "I won't give you anymore antibiotics after this. You have chronic bronchitis which is only going to lead to emphysema."

My mom had recently told me that her dad, my grandpa was a heavy smoker and had died from emphysema complications. I didn't want to die and wanted to be able to do all of the things that brought joy into my life. Flashes of me trying to hold a portable oxygen tank while riding a Sea Doo, scuba diving, water skiing, working out at the gym, walking the neighborhood and giving sales presentations popped vividly into my psyche like a slide show. I knew it was time to quit smoking so I traded addictions. I started running, well let's say that I started trying to run 10 feet and then walked 50 feet. It worked! Eleven years later, I'm still running. Running reminds me of the miracle of the body to repair itself when we treat it as the sacred vessel it is. Running encourages me to run towards life, pursuing dreams, embracing change and enjoying the journey.

Whenever I am running down Grider Hill and greet those walking up it, they sometimes make sarcastic comments like, "The only

reason you're smiling is because you're going down not up," or "It's easy for you to be happy—you're heading in the right direction." This used to irritate me, allowing myself to be offended by the limited perceptions of others. I'd replay all that I had gone through to get where I was wearing my past as a badge of honor and needlessly whining over their remarks, "They have no freakin' idea what it has taken for me to climb this hill. Just because I can now do it and can breathe easier going down the hill doesn't mean I haven't had to push through the discomfort."

In the clarity that comes from my time on the roads, I am now powerfully aware that we can't expect others to understand where we started from, the exertion we have put into getting where we are, and the struggles and triumphs along the way – all of this is part of our solo journey. We can't put in the effort, looking for recognition or for any other reason than we simply want to see what's on the other side of life. Our actions can inspire others to find their own way, and the wisdom from our experiences can help to uplift them as they climb their own hills.

Meditation: *What obstacles have you climbed in your life? Are you able to recognize the courage it has taken to overcome these challenges? Are you able to honor yourself by standing in your full strength built one step at a time?*

Action: *Take your age and break it into brackets like from 1 to 5, 5 to 10, 10 to 15, and so on. List in each category at least one act of courage you displayed that led you to where you are today. Then stand up, raise your arms in victory, jump up and down, and savor your Rocky moment!*