

ARTICLE FOR SUNDAY TRIBUNEHOW TO BECOME A COMRADE PAINFULLY BUT INNOCENTLY

- Dr. F. Van Zyl Slabbert, M.P.

Let me make it quite clear : I did not run in the same Comrades Marathon as Bruce Fordyce, Robb, et al. As far as I am concerned they could have been running the 400m at the Tokyo Olympics. That is why it made no impression on me when I was told halfway through my own struggle that Fordyce had won in just over 5½ hours. I was not beaten by him simply because I was not running in the same race.

No, the kind of Comrades Marathon that I ran in was not the one in which one tried to win against another or beat anyone else. With about 2 500 other runners I was running against myself and against the clock. We were not interested in being in the first 10 or coming in under 7½ hours because we knew we were not able to. The standard response amongst us to the question : "What are you going for?" was : "Durban, 10 (hours) 59 (minutes) 59 (seconds)". This common goal was the basis of our comradeship. It enabled us to share information, give encouragement to each other and to harden our resolve. For us "survivors", as we are known, the Comrades Marathon was simply a test of individual endurance. All of us had the same characteristic - it was written on our faces and in the manner in which we abused our bodies - determination. These two aspects : to reach Durban under 10.59.59, and determination, are the common elements of the "survivors" running the Comrades Marathon.

But there the similarity ends. If one begins to consider the reasons why these "survivors" run the Comrades, there appears to be no end to one's speculation. It is a question I asked myself many times when passing and being passed by my comrades. "Why is he/she doing it?". I saw a father who had run it many

times, nursing his son along his first run; another man, one leg mutilated by polio, shuffling past me - to beat me comfortably; a blind man being led by his friend; two beautiful black labradors running with their master; a woman staring unseeing in the direction of Durban who might as well have been running on a conveyor belt. The best way to be "dechauvinized" is to run a marathon - the ladies do not humiliate you, they simply make you feel humble by the quiet grace with which they run you into the ground.

Of course one asks oneself the question as well : "Why am I running it?" There are easier ways to satisfy one's vanity. After all, it can be a risky business for a politician, etc., etc. I still do not have a clear answer for myself. It is not just an ego-trip, although there may be something of that in it. It is not just fear of getting old and inactive, although there is some of that in it as well. Perhaps it is an awareness of having been given a healthy body that one has not even begun to do justice to as far as its abilities and potential are concerned. How will I cope emotionally and physically with stress? Well, running the Comrades is a very simple way of finding out.

Whatever the reason for each "survivor" running the Comrades Marathon, after sixty kms. they all share one experience - pain. Grated glass seems to grind in the knee and hip joints and the calf and thigh muscles contract and relax in rhythmic aches. It is quite amazing what physical variations people are capable of in trying to ease the pain. Some shuffle crab-like with short little steps; other lock the knees and walk as if on stilts; yet others walk backwards down-hill; only under extreme cases will anyone bend down to pick something up or tie a shoe-lace because it is so difficult to straighten up again. We all play unrehearsed parts in a vast impromptu open air pantomime.

And yet, through it all one notices them. They are quiet, helpful and very understanding. They never laugh at your discomfort but gently try to advise you on how to cope with it. "They", of course, are the veterans - the old warriors who have done it many times and who are the living proof that one's body can overcome the barriers that one is presently experiencing. They preserve one's dignity by reading the question in your eyes that pride prevents you from asking and they say : "Don't worry, you are going to make it". And one carries on.

The end is a jungle of competing emotions and physical experiences. It is not the cheering or the congratulations so much. It is more a feeling of being able to literally look back and say to oneself : "I've come a long way and I did it all by myself". And then to look around and see all the others who have innocently, but painfully, become comrades like yourself and to begin to realise what tests of endurance, like this race, are all about.

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