

SIXTY MILES TO PARADISE

By Karen Wyatt MD

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It was late February when I first saw the poster advertising a three-day, 60-mile walk to support women with breast cancer. I knew instantly that this was a challenge I should take on. In the midst of a snowy winter, my workouts had dwindled and I needed an inspiration to start exercising again. I would have five months to train for the walk, which was scheduled for August. It seemed like the perfect thing to do from a fitness perspective, but I felt a deeper motivation, as well. My 36-year-old niece and a close friend were both battling breast cancer at that time and since each woman lived in a different state, there had been little opportunity for me to show my support. Training for and participating in that three-day walk would be a way for me to make a physical sacrifice on their behalf. I started my training and fundraising efforts immediately.

However, I began to experience some doubts about the activity right away. A few of my colleagues questioned why I would even bother walking. “Why not just donate money instead?” I couldn’t explain to them why it felt so important to me to do the actual walking. And then, after the first week of training, I developed painful shin splints which interfered with my schedule and seemed to support the idea that it was foolish to put forth such effort, when raising money was the real objective. But, as I hobbled along my walking path one day, still feeling twinges of pain from my lower legs, it occurred to me that the discomfort I was suffering was quite small compared to the pain I have seen women with breast cancer endure. I thought of all the patients I have encountered who

have courageously faced mastectomy, chemotherapy, radiation and numerous complications, all in the effort to heal from breast cancer. They had no choice but to go through pain and suffering on that path. Whatever small discomfort I was experiencing was my choice; I could stop at any time and just donate money as my colleagues had suggested. But, I knew that there was a compelling reason for me to dedicate myself to this training and the completion of the sixty miles. I knew there was something valuable to be learned, even though I couldn't quite express it or formulate it in my mind.

And, then, as often happens when I am walking or running out in nature, the answer came to me. I remembered once hearing a lecture about a Buddhist practice called *tonglen*, which focuses on breathing in the suffering of another and, through the exhalation, sending joy, relief, healing energy or whatever might be needed by that person at that moment. One purpose of *tonglen* is to connect with suffering and cultivate compassion. I realized that I could practice *tonglen* during my walks, as a way to deepen my own experience and, perhaps, bring some form of relief to the women I was trying to support. My plan was to begin every training session by thinking about each woman I was dedicating my walk to and focusing on her particular situation, breathing in any pain or suffering she might be enduring and breathing out peace and relief for her to feel instead. One by one I focused on my niece, my friend, and several patients I knew. Then I added another woman who recently came to my mind: the wife of an old friend of my husband, one of his mentors in medical school. She, too, was locked in a fierce battle with breast cancer, struggling to regain her health.

As my training progressed, my walks became longer and so, too, did the list of women for whom I was practicing *tonglen*. I would remember another woman I knew or

would hear about someone else who was suffering and add her name to my roster. I was finding this practice very enjoyable. The miles seemed to fly by and I was never without something to focus my thoughts. But, then, around mid-March, I began experiencing an unusual pain in my right hip—something I had never felt before. The pain mainly occurred while I was trying to sleep and, at times, would awaken me in the middle of the night. I assumed it was a result of my training, but I couldn't exactly understand what was wrong. In fact, the pain never happened while I was walking—only later in the day and usually when I was at rest. I spoke to a few of my physician friends who also could not diagnose the cause of my discomfort. My hip examination was totally normal and no movements of the joint would elicit the symptom. And so, I decided to just accept this mysterious pain. Since my walks were still enjoyable and free of symptoms, I didn't think I was causing myself harm, and I recognized that this hip pain could have other significance for me. My choice was to go with it and see what happened. After all, I had chosen to practice *tonglen* to deepen my own understanding of suffering. It made sense that I should encounter some pain along that path.

As I continued walking during the spring and early summer months, the pain gradually became deeper and more intense. I would lie awake some nights, unable to tolerate the weight of the sheet on my foot because it caused a sharp stabbing sensation in my hip. However, just as before, the pain disappeared during the day and could not be reproduced on any physical exam. I was even more convinced that this was suffering of a spiritual nature and I interpreted that I should practice *tonglen* even more intently when the pain was present. When I was unable to sleep, I would breathe in deeply, focusing on taking in even more pain and breathing out peace in a long, slow exhale. Surprisingly, I

still enjoyed my training walks and felt well during the day. I could not explain what was happening, but I understood that the pain had a purpose and having that understanding made it tolerable.

Eventually, the weekend of the 60-mile walk arrived. Nearly 1,000 eager walkers gathered at the starting point to hear a kick-off speech by the race organizer. I was elated and filled with excitement that this long-anticipated event was finally taking place. Settling in on the 20-mile course, I found my pace and felt the joy of traveling by foot in beautiful weather side-by-side with so many other dedicated walkers. It was clear that everyone else had come here, as well, with a sense of purpose. Many of the participants wore t-shirts bearing the names of women with breast cancer on whose behalf they were walking, some of whom had already died of the disease. Others wore pink baseball caps, designating them as breast cancer survivors, walking to celebrate the fact that they were healthy enough to take on this 60-mile course. It was an amazing sight: a long line of walkers that seemed to go on forever into the distance before me and behind me, as well. I passed group after group of women and men who were singing or chanting marching songs, carrying posters, and dressed in imaginative pink costumes; we were, to a person, on a joyous mission. That night, I went to bed in my tent full of a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction for having completed one-third of the journey. As usual, my hip pain returned when I attempted to fall asleep, but after experiencing it for so many months, the pain had become part of my routine. I propped my right leg up on my backpack, trying to find a position that would allow me to sleep for a few hours before the next day's much anticipated adventure.

However, the second day of the walk arrived with blazing hot temperatures and a cloudless sky. Dehydration became a serious issue for all of the walkers as we pressed on through the searing sunlight over pavement that reflected heat of 120 degrees Fahrenheit. We consumed countless bottles of water and Gatorade in an attempt to balance our fluids, but still, many walkers ended up in the medical tent receiving IV solutions. The relentless heat gradually wore us down and there were no more cheerful greetings or marching songs heard amongst the weary participants. Pink costumes were bedraggled now; posters lay abandoned on the side of the road. We dragged ourselves over each mile, our legs swelling with edema and blisters from heat rash, exhaustion bearing down upon us. We were in the middle of our long journey, where reality erases illusion, unable to see light at the beginning or the end of this dark tunnel, uncertain when the agony would end.

As we entered the next town, I felt despair overtake me. I was questioning every aspect of this event and why I had chosen to be there. Nothing made sense to me at that point and I longed to be the kind of pragmatic person who could give up on something that was not going well and just quit this walk once and for all. But, that was not an option for me. I knew I could never allow myself to drop out as long as I was capable of taking one more step. And so, I was doomed to carry on in this misery. I had lost all sight of a higher purpose or meaning for this suffering. Placing one foot in front of the other over and over again, I stared at the pavement before me, numb and dull in the grip of dehydration and heat exhaustion.

But then, completely unexpectedly, I felt a few drops of cool water on my skin. Startled from my daze, I looked up to recognize that we had entered into a residential

area. We were walking past a yard with lush green grass where two young boys were playfully spraying water from a hose onto us weary travelers as we passed by. It was a miracle! That brief reprieve from the heat was lifesaving and I felt myself surfacing again, able to think a little and pay attention to my surroundings once more. On the very next block, with about a mile left in the journey for that day, I saw a woman sitting on a lawn chair in a driveway across the street. She was pale and emaciated, wearing a bandana to cover her bald head. She leaned back in the chair, barely able to hold herself up, but she was there to greet us as we walked past. I looked toward her and her eyes met mine, locking me in to her transcendent gaze. As she weakly raised one hand from the arm of her chair, she mouthed the words, "Thank you." I was instantly slain by this experience and burst into tears, understanding, once again, exactly why I was doing this, why I was enduring this pain. On the next street, a man held up a crudely lettered poster, bearing a photograph of a beautiful young woman. The sign read, "Thank you for giving my daughters hope. Their mother died of breast cancer." He was weeping as he held that sign high for all of us to read. My heart was broken open. I was emotionally undone, but suddenly I knew I had plenty of physical energy for all the remaining miles. It was so clear. It was so simple. It was about the journey: a journey of suffering on behalf of all who suffer, on behalf of all mankind. Bearing up under the load we have been given, enduring and persevering against all odds, breathing in the pain and breathing out peace: this is why we came.

From that moment on, though my body was broken down, sunburned, blistered, and parched, my energy and purpose for the walk were renewed. I barely slept again that night with the hip pain, but I knew it was part of the plan, a key to the journey. On the

final day of the walk I felt calm and serene, knowing I could finish the 60 miles and knowing, beyond all doubt, it was the right thing to do.

That last day I walked for a few miles with an African-American man, a minister who told me he was walking for his mother, the beautiful woman who had given him life. And he was also walking on behalf of all the other men who were unable to be there to honor their own mothers.

After we separated, I passed by two women who were abandoning the walk, sobbing with disappointment that they were unable to finish. And I understood that sometimes the journey doesn't allow us to finish—sometimes the lesson is in the leaving, no matter how much it disappoints us. I wished for peace for those two women, that they would forgive themselves for this outcome to their struggle; that they would know that it was meant to be.

The next rest stop we reached was decorated with palm trees made of cardboard and crepe paper and a banner that said “Welcome to Paradise.” Some of the walkers joked with the volunteers, saying “You seriously think this is Paradise?” But, I realized that the journey itself really is Paradise, even though it entails suffering and sacrifice. Perhaps we just don't understand the definition of spiritual paradise and, therefore, never recognize when it surrounds us.

Further along the walk that day, I came across a heavy-set woman who was limping in pain. She was wearing a t-shirt with a picture of her mother on the back. Looking down I noticed that she was walking without shoes, her feet covered with painful blisters. I started to reach out to her with concern, but when she turned toward me, I saw a look of courage, determination and resolve on her face. She did not need my

sympathy or support. She was fiercely on her path and knew it with every cell of her being. I simply nodded toward her and she nodded back, each acknowledging a fellow traveler in paradise.

At the final rest stop before the conclusion of the journey, the volunteers all wore angel wings as they handed out snacks and water bottles. I heard one of them saying, with certainty, to each and every walker: “You’re going to make it.” I understood that this journey will never be easy, but the encouragement and inspiration we need will be woven into the path, if only we are able to perceive it.

Finally, the end of the walk arrived with an enormous sense of relief and accomplishment. I took off my shoes, changed my shirt and doused myself with water. I sat in the cool shade for awhile until I felt inspired to watch the other walkers as they arrived at that finish line. I stood in a group of onlookers, lining the path and cheering. There was the minister who was walking to honor his mother! He cried unabashedly as he completed his journey, at last. So many people whose paths had crossed with mine over the past three days, walkers and volunteers alike, now streamed into the holding area. We were one massive family who had just completed an amazing journey together. All of them felt so familiar to me though I had never met them. We were strangers, but of one heart that day. The number of walkers approaching the field began to diminish as the event wound to a close. But I stayed on the sideline, surveying the last few stragglers making their way home. Finally, I saw her: the woman with bare feet! I knew she would do it; I knew she could finish. Her face, now stained with tears, still bore the determination I had seen earlier in the day—a look that would come to mind many times

over the following years, reminding me just what it takes to complete this journey in paradise.

Over the next few days after the walk, my hip pain gradually subsided, disappearing as mysteriously as it had begun. I thought I understood what it represented: that it was my crucible of suffering, given to me to deepen the experience of this walk, to teach me greater compassion. But a few days later, my husband received a phone call from his old friend, his mentor in medical school. His wife had just died of the breast cancer she had been fighting. He told us that the cancer had spread and become unresponsive to treatment. He went on to say that doctors had found a metastasis to the bone of her right hip in mid-March. She experienced excruciating pain in that hip for just three days and then the pain had suddenly vanished. Her doctors were amazed and could not explain it, but they were grateful that she lived her final months with relatively little pain. She had been able to enjoy the company of her children and grandchildren in those last days with peace and relief.

I now know that as travelers on this planet, each on our own uncharted and unfathomable path, we are all connected. We are each a part of every other being, sharing the suffering that is inherent on this journey. And I know that each of us possesses the capacity to lighten the burden for others, to help them reach their destination. This breathing in of the agony of life and breathing out the solace of peace is one of the ways we can be of assistance to others and to ourselves through this passage. It will require all the determination and courage we can muster, and we will be pushed to the utter limit of our fortitude. But, we will find what we need along the way: a few sprinkles of cool water, a smile of gratitude, and perhaps an angel or two to whisper

words of encouragement. You see, this, I learned, is truly paradise: to embrace all the suffering you have been given; to proceed along the path before you, no matter how treacherous; and to celebrate, with gratitude, that we are all connected in this divine and perfect journey of life and death.