The 50 Mile Hike by Teresa Barker

Many years ago, the Oakton Stake sponsored a 50 mile hike on the C&O canal that took place every October. The goal was to walk 50 miles in 20 hours or less from Carderock to White’s Ferry and back. Checkpoints were along the way for safety and for those who wanted or needed to stop. I’d wanted to do this for years, but the timing was never right. In 1982, everything finally aligned. To prepare myself for the hike, I began walking a few miles on a daily basis. I was eager to finally attempt this great adventure.

At 10pm on a Friday night, 10 of us in our group started out in really good spirits. We were well equipped with our flashlights and backpacks filled with snacks, water and first aid kits. We had interesting conversations as we pushed through the night walking over a well maintained trail that was sometimes rocky, especially near Great Falls. When we made it to the halfway point at White’s Ferry, we had 25 miles behind us and it was gratifying. The sun was starting to rise and a delicious warm breakfast had been prepared. It felt good to stop, rest and refuel. Several people in our group had blisters or other physical issues and had to stop.

I was still gung-ho and eagerly pressed forward. At each checkpoint, there was water, snacks and lots of encouragement. Around noontime, there were only three left from our original group of ten. We stopped for lunch with 12 ½ miles to go. I sat down in the grass to eat and within 15 minutes, the soreness and stiffness set in. When it was time to go, I couldn’t get up. Someone pulled me up and I could barely stand up straight. I started to doubt my ability to keep going. I decided to quit.

I was afraid of doing permanent damage to my legs. A good friend, who’d done the hike before, promised me there would be no permanent damage or additional pain. She gave me Tylenol and shoved me on the trail walking with us for a while.

From this point on, our conversations were limited. We were too tired to talk. At least the trail was interesting, now that we could see the beauty of our surroundings which was previously masked by darkness. That helped take my mind off of the pain. I also discovered that if I ran a little, it gave my walking muscles a rest. I constantly prayed and talked to myself saying, “You can make it, you can make it” in cadence with my steps.

The last mile seemed like forever.  My family had agreed to meet me at the end and I will never forget the moment I first saw them.  All of the aches, pains, blisters and tears suddenly felt worth it as I ran up to them.  It was heaven on earth.

As my body recovered in the days that followed, I couldn't help but see the similarities between the 50-mile hike and our journey here on earth.  Sometimes the going is easy, but sometimes it's all we can do to stay on the path and keep going.  How blessed we are to have friends, teachers, leaders and the guidance of the Spirit to help keep us going when we feel spent and are considering turning back.  I can't help but imagine the glorious reunion that will come at the end of our earthly journey, as we run back into the loving embrace of our Father in Heaven.