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Writing/Reasoning Foundations

The Best Gift I Ever Received

I wiped the sweat from my forehead as I kept telling myself that all I needed to do was put one foot in front of another, and eventually we would make it off the mountain. The dust was heavy in the air as the dry trail and beating sun made my friends steps kick up lots of fine particles. I was on the eleventh mile of a twenty-mile hike in the middle of nowhere Wyoming, and I was dead tired. It was just then that my vision started to blur, my legs gave out from under me, and I fell to the dusty ground, the pebbles pressing into my hands and knees. My lungs had started to constrict as a result of my asthma, and I started hyperventilating. My body was desperately trying to get more oxygen into my blood, but the high altitude, the allergens in the air, and my tired state had made it feel like I was breathing through a tiny little straw. I heard the voices of my friends as they gathered around me as if it was in a dream. Their cries of concern were lost on me as I lay there on the ground, certain I was going to pass out, or worse. Eventually my breathing stabilized, and I was able to hobble my way back down the mountain, but I felt completely embarrassed, ashamed, and weak because my lungs just couldn’t let me keep up with my friends.

This unfortunately wasn’t too uncommon of an experience, since I had been dealing with asthma since I was about twelve years old, and it had started to take a toll on my life. I had a hard time with keeping up with my teammates when I played sports, and it would also spontaneously flare up some mornings, making it impossible for me to go to school. I had spent a lot of time as a teenager in and out of doctor’s offices, and even the hospital occasionally. I distinctly remember being 17 years old and having a severe asthma attack. I was quickly rushed to the local children’s hospital in Indianapolis, Indiana. As I walked past little kids who were all there for health issues, I scratched the beard on my chin and felt like I was too old for this, and I shouldn’t be affected by my breathing this much anymore. I was taken to a room with the walls covered in blue and gold decorations for the Indiana Pacers, where I had to stay in bed with a breathing device strapped to my face for the next few days.

I often had times when I would be playing soccer or basketball with my friends and they would say things like: “Hey, don’t push yourself man.”, or “Did you remember your inhaler this time?”. Even though I appreciated people’s concern, it always made me feel like I was not as good as my friends, or weaker than they were.

I continued having breathing issues throughout high school, and I was even called down to the principal’s office at one point. He sat me down and told me I had missed so much school from being in the doctor’s office or hospital, that I wasn’t on track to graduate that spring, which was a particular low point. I had to retake a couple of classes online, and really dial in for the remainder of my time in school.

Things did start to get better for a while. I took a weightlifting class in high school and found it to be much easier than things like running and sports. It felt like a way I could be normal when it came to being physically fit. I didn’t feel like I was breathing through a filter when I was lifting, and it helped me to get in a bit of better shape.

Things continued looking up, until about the time that the Covid pandemic started, and then it all went downhill. I remember hearing about how this new disease was deadly, and that it particularly affected people like me with lung conditions. I got a little freaked out about it, and as a result, I barely left my house during the pandemic. Most of my days were spent going from my bed to my desk, to my couch, and back to my bed. It was horrible for both my physical and mental health, and my asthma problems began to get worse again. I started gaining a lot of weight, and I felt like all my movements were heavy, like I was moving through water instead of air, and the idea of running for more than for seconds was incomprehensible. I was at a real low point in my life health wise, and I hated myself for it.

Things continued like this for a while, until my birthday, when my brother gave me a pair of running shoes. I looked down at the white Nike Infinity Runs I had just unwrapped and thought to myself, “These are nice, but there is no chance I ever use them.”

I felt a little guilty about the idea of never using the clearly expensive gift my brother had given me though, and he was clearly excited about the idea of me using them. He was training to run a marathon, and he wanted me to go on a practice run with him. The idea of running a whole mile with him at that point seemed like a task equivalent to climbing Mount Everest, but I agreed anyway, certain I wasn’t going to be able to finish the mile.

I was one hundred percent right, and I remember flopping to the ground after running the slowest half mile that anyone had ever seen. My brother was very encouraging about the whole thing and congratulated me on running as far as I had. He then promptly left me in the dust, finishing his run at about three times the speed we were going before. I remember sitting on the cold, wet ground in the park, wheezing and coughing, and deciding that I had had enough. I was tired of the doctor’s visits and the embarrassment of sounding like Darth Vader when I breathed. I wanted to be able to run like my brother. I wanted to not feel like I was moving though a vat of Jello my whole life. I decided that I was going to join my brother again and run with him again the next day.

The next day was an identical copy of the first, a half a mile at a pace a sloth would scoff at. Just like the first time I collapsed in heap, my lungs begging for air, my muscles burning from lack of oxygen. It felt satisfying to be able to do it two days in a row though, and it was the most I had run in a long time. I decided I was going to do it again, and I would keep doing it, even though I hated every second of it.

The next few weeks passed by, and I kept at it. The results were mostly the same, but I did make some small progress. I would reach two thirds of a mile, instead of half, and little by little, I was wheezing less and less after I finished.

I’ll always remember the day I ran a whole mile for the first time. The sun was shining, the air was clear, I was feeling pretty good that day for some reason. When me and my brother started running, he decided he was going to trick me. Typically, our routine involved him tracking the distance we ran on his watch, and me just running until I couldn’t anymore. That day he decided to trick me a little bit, ad instead of telling me the actual distance we had run, he told me about a half of the distance we had gone. Like usual, I collapsed after he told me we had run half a mile. I was bent over, my hands on my knees, gasping for breath, when I saw the big, smug grin on his face. He showed me his watch screen where it said “1.00 Miles” and my jaw dropped.

I continued running with my brother for the next few months and I just got better and better. I was shocked to see how fast my distance improved, from a mile to two miles, to a 5k, and even a 10k. My speed almost doubled as well. The more I was running, the easier it was for me to breathe during other activities. I didn’t have to take a break after climbing stairs, and I could enjoy playing basketball with my friends again. I even went down a couple shirt sizes and four pants sizes. Buying a whole new wardrobe was one of the best feelings ever after being so overweight. It felt amazing to just walk into a store and be able to find clothes that fit me. I’ll always be grateful for my brother and the gift he gave me. Not just the shoes, but the ability to breathe and move like my old self again.