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Cultural Commentary
Exercise and Charity
by Barbara Apstein

Last fall, at a neighbor’s urging, I joined the Komen Boston Race for the Cure, an annual event designed to raise money for breast cancer research. On a pleasant September day, several thousand of us strolled (there had been an actual race earlier) along streets bordering the Charles River, for about 3 miles. The route ended in a large open field off Soldiers’ Field Road, where we listened to speeches and were awarded ‘goody bags’ of cosmetics, moisturizer and shampoo, as well as free samples of Yoplait and Ben and Jerry’s ice cream. While the Komen organizers were collecting money to cure breast cancer and generating publicity for their cause, the corporate sponsors of the event were wooing consumers.

Exercising for charity has become enormously popular during the past decade. Instead of being approached for a simple donation to a worthy cause, these days you’re more likely to be asked to ‘sponsor’ friends, the children of friends and co-workers who are walking, running or biking to combat diabetes, leukemia, cancer or heart disease. The events offer a range of difficulty, with the three-mile Komen event at the easy end of the spectrum. For those who are a bit more ambitious, there is the 5-day Avon Breast Cancer walk. Only the physically fit are encouraged to sign up for the two-day, 192-mile Pan-Mass Challenge bike ride or the week-long, 500-mile AIDS bike race. Exercising for a worthy cause, defined broadly enough to include anything from an afternoon walk to an arduous ascent of Mt. McKinley, is surely one of the most successful fund-raising strategies charities have come up with in recent years.

Why has this connection between exercise and charity ‘clicked’ so powerfully? Why does no one say “I’m happy to contribute to cancer research, and if you want to ride a bike 100 miles a day and sleep in a tent, it’s fine with me, but don’t confuse me by suggesting that there’s any connection between the two”?

The exercise/charity connection seems to draw on two American cultural metaphors: disease as battle and exercise as penance.

The view of a disease and its victim as antagonists locked in battle is embedded in our everyday language, even when the ailment is minor, as in a common expression like “I’ve been fighting this cold all week.” As Susan Sontag detailed in her book *Illness as Metaphor*, this implied comparison is particularly pervasive in discussions of cancer. Tumors are described as ‘invasive’ or ‘aggressive,’ the body mobilizes its ‘defenses,’ victims are said to ‘battle’ the disease, and if they die it is often ‘after a long struggle.’ Consistent with the logic of this fighting metaphor, the charity walkers, runners, bikers and climbers are seen as stand-ins for the victims; they are fighting the victims’ battle by proxy. The exerciser is not merely participating in a race; he or she is a protagonist in a battle against a deadly adversary. The more challenging and competitive the event, the more explicit the struggle metaphor becomes: the organizers of the Mt. McKinley climb explain on their website that ‘only about 47% of the climbers who attempt Alaska’sMt. McKinley, the highest mountain in North America, reach the summit. These are tough odds, but beating cancer can be even more difficult.’ The climber represents the cancer victim; his climb is analogous to the victim’s ‘struggle.’ Implicit in the battle metaphor is the faith that every disease can be ‘conquered’ if enough money is raised for research and treatment, and the power of this belief is reflected in the large sums that are raised. Participants in the Pan-Mass Challenge, which claims to be the most successful event of this kind, must raise $2,500 each to qualify; last year, more than 3,600 cyclists did so. In its 24 years of operation, the Challenge has raised more than $86 million for the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute.

Exercise as penance is less deeply embedded in our everyday language. You don’t hear people saying “I’m going jogging because I feel guilty and exercise will expiate my sins of sloth and gluttony.” Yet Americans’ fear that we have become a nation of couch potatoes, that we are growing inexorably fatter each year, is reflected in our vast diet and exercise industries. Seen in this light, the charity exercise events provide an outlet for communal penance, in much the same way as medieval pilgrimages did. The essence of penance is, of course, self-sacrifice. Pilgrimages were (and still often are) difficult, even dangerous journeys; during the Middle Ages, many pilgrims traveled hundreds of miles on foot along bandit-infested roads, and they were
often required to beg and fast along the way. While in many modern charity events the self-sacrifice is more symbolic than real (the Komen stroll was in fact quite pleasant), other events (biking, sometimes in the rain, climbing Mt. McKinley) can involve discomfort, exhaustion and even danger.

Pilgrimages are generally undertaken in groups, which means that there’s a social element. If we can judge from the most famous literary account of a pilgrimage in English, the one described in Geoffrey Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales, the devout and pious pilgrims were easily outnumbered by those looking for fun, profit, and, in one case, possibly a husband. Although we imagine the more serious participants quietly meditating as they ride along, there is plenty of laughing, joking and telling of off-color stories. Charity events too are typically very social. The atmosphere at the end of the walk/run/ride is festive and celebratory, with food and entertainment usually provided.

Distinctive clothing provides another link between charity exercise events and pilgrimages. The medieval pilgrim’s outfit typically included a long, coarse tunic with large sleeves and a leather belt suspended from the shoulders, from which hung a soft pouch in which the pilgrim would keep his money. He would carry a wooden staff, useful for fending off wolves and wild dogs, and wear a large broad-brimmed hat, which might be decorated with scallop shells or images of saints.

At today’s charity events, brightly colored t-shirts display at a minimum the name of the event, the city and year in which it is taking place, and the sponsors’ logos. Groups of participants can be identified by their own distinctive shirts. My neighbor Barney Hass, who rides in the Pan-Mass Challenge, is a member of the Parini Team, sponsored by Dave Parini, whose young son died of cancer. Barney wears his Pan-Mass Challenge shirt on the first day of the ride and his Parini Team shirt on the second day. Other kinds of visual imagery make a powerful statement. Among the Komen walkers, cancer survivors were distinguished by bright pink hats, and many participants had attached to their t-shirts squares of cloth printed with the names and photographs of loved ones. In the Pan Mass Challenge, a single rider on a tandem bike created a particularly haunting image, the second, empty seat a vivid reminder of the missing person.

The pilgrimage analogy breaks down, of course, when it comes to the key issue of destination. The charity journey does not end in a sacred or holy place; in fact, the destination generally doesn’t matter. What does seem to matter is that, through physical exertion and the sense of physical accomplishment, participants come to feel that they have made some very small contribution to the relief of human suffering. Drawing on the symbolism of the journey, charity exercise events tap into ancient impulses that transform a physical experience into a spiritual one.

—Barbara Apstein is Professor of English and Associate Editor of the Bridgewater Review