

The GUARDIAN DOG

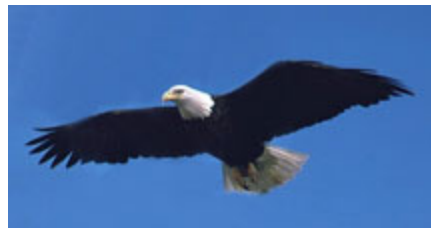


Stephen P. King

"Limitations are those spiteful little hindrances we set upon ourselves".

THE GUARDIAN DOG

By Stephen P. King



As a virtual life-long runner who had arrived at the half-century mark, I had decided to devote a good portion of 1999 to celebrating my existence by fulfilling one of my unmet athletic goals.

From a young age I had been fascinated by endurance athletes and distance events such as the Le Mans 24hrs car race, the English Channel swim, Lands End to John O'Groats runs and the popular turn-of-the-century multi-day pedestrianism competitions. After a number of 50 mile and 50 kilometer races, I had completed my first 100 miler at the age of 23years. There was never a shortage of races to contest in England or in other parts of Europe and some seemed to hold an inexplicable attraction that would draw me to explore the possibilities. One was definitely the London to Brighton (53 miles) race-walk that was hosted by the Stock Exchange every year. I had desperately wanted to win that, but it was not to be as I finished eighth, third, and on two occasions second, on my four outings over the course. It did however, bring out my family in support, and their encouragement made a big difference. My Mother appeared to share my appreciation of what it took to undertake and draw out the best in oneself in accepting such a challenge.

I have a vivid schoolboy's memory of her standing in the middle of the finishing straight of a 400 meter race yelling at me, totally oblivious to the fact that another runner was racing in that lane and charging down on her. When you are 14 years old that sort of a display in front of your peers can create conflicting feelings!

I had won a U.S. 50 miles race-walk title in 1973 and had been dabbling in both walking and running events for my club. In 1974 I had read a story in my favorite athletics journal about a major running event in South Africa called the Comrades Marathon (56 miles) and I had vowed that some day I would run in this event. Already existing for fifty years by that time, the event was beginning to garner world-wide prestige for the caliber of athletes it attracted, the amazing scenery, the toughness of the course, and the athletic talent that South Africa was producing, despite their non-eligibility for major international events at that time.

I emigrated to Canada three years later and organized a running club and some races in my new hometown of Penticton, B.C. It has since become more well known due to the fact that it is the site of the Ironman Canada Triathlon Championship, which attracts some 1800 athletes from nearly 40 countries. I have been the race announcer and a three-time finisher of this event since its inception in 1983, and have made many friends and have met many wonderful people as a direct result. This has included some South Africans. From conversations with them it would appear as though it were impossible to live there and call yourself an athlete if you had not at least finished the 'Comrades' at some point in your career. During one post-race chat in 1996 I happened to mention my long time intent of someday racing the Comrades. A year later I was emceeding the awards on stage in front of over 2,000 people when my co-host presented me with a cheque from the athletes that would buy me a ticket to THE race. I at first thought it was a bad joke, then tears welled up and I was temporarily speechless, an unusual occurrence I am told.

Over the next year I was certainly not wanting for additional information or advice on the event, as Comrades finishers sent me maps, pictures, family and friends addresses and from one U.S. triathlete there arrived eleven hours of video Comrades race footage. My wife Jean, and I had decided that we would save for an extra year so that we could have the full African experience and that I could get motivated by my shift into the over-50 ranks.

With the promise of start-line accommodation and local guide services by an Ironman and 16 time Comrades finisher I'd met during the three day Ultraman Triathlon in 1994, the only thing left for me to do was to qualify for the June 1999 event. This meant running at least a certified marathon race, within a certain time limit and by a certain date. The qualifying event I chose was an inaugural 50kms race to be held in Kamloops, B.C., on February 7th. The race was to be named the 'Brass Monkey' 50kms a sure sign that the race director was another British import!

My parents and siblings all lived close together and throughout the last couple of years I would hear that my Mother was unwell and suffering from some medical setbacks. In 1970 her own Mother, my Grandmother, had passed away with cancer at the age of 75. She had quietly and with dignity suffered the pain that spreading cancer had caused. As a result of an upbringing that led her to believe that you shouldn't burden or trouble others with your problems, including your doctor, no one knew how serious her illness was until it was too late for any real help. I was 21 years old and very shaken by the loss of someone I knew loved me unconditionally. I also became very aware and comforted by what I sensed was her spirit presence watching over me.

In November '98 things started to take a turn for the worse and it was suggested that I go home to spend some time with my Mother on the premise that it was a way to celebrate my 50th. My Mother's main concern initially seemed to be whether or not I would recognize her, given the hair and weight loss. In fact I was pleased to find that, as we perused old family photo albums, she had lost none of her ability to remember family history and details long forgotten by myself. The whole family gathered for a 'birthday party' and I was invited to speak. In the couple of days prior to this I had learned of my Mother's true intent around an issue that had always disturbed my brother and I when we were quite young. Upon hearing her loving Motherly intention about that issue, I'd had a major epiphany. Teary-eyed, I haltingly told the story, and in my own way tried to honor her intents and my own love for her, somehow knowing that this would be the last opportunity I would have to publicly do so.

Her spirits had seemed lifted by my visit and she had pulled upon her resources to be able to physically get around and actively partake in the family functions. She accompanied me to the airport for my return journey to Vancouver a we both knew that it would be the last time we would see each other, and it was with a quiet resignation and loving gentleness that we hugged and kissed goodbye for a final time.

Over the next few months my family kept me updated, and by February the calls had a greater urgency to them, and on the 4th I received a call at work telling me the family were all at her bedside and doing their best to comfort Mother and each other. In the early morning of the 5th she asked to be released from the pain, almost apologetically, just like my Nan, and at the age of 75 Mom too passed away.

Although I had been expecting the worst, and knowing I was not immediately able to fly back, I decided to do the 50kms qualifying race and therefore hopefully the Comrades as a way to honor her, though my heart was not really into it. Jean came with me to provide some support. Jean too had been very hurt by the loss as she and my Mother had gotten on very well over the years.

Fifty kilometers is a reasonably long way to run under any circumstance, but on race morning, two days later, it was hard to summon up the enthusiasm to run at all, let alone be competitive. With a field of just eight runners and no spectators, barring support personnel, it was quite obvious that it could also be a very lonely run. I determined to just go through the motions and get it over with no matter what it took.

For the first five or six kilometers I ran alongside another competitor from Washington who I had met at previous races. We exchanged pleasantries, but my mind was elsewhere and I'm sure I must have appeared strangely aloof to him. By eight kilometers I was out in front on my own and going into my own inner world to escape what I couldn't yet allow myself to fully express.

For whatever reason I have always felt some affinity to eagles, and those who have visited our home or my office have encountered the various forms this affinity has taken; cards, books, articles, sayings, paintings, plates and carvings. When I see an eagle I just 'know' that things are going to be okay. I feel that it is my Grandmother making me aware of that loving resonance and appreciation for life that she gave me.

At around ten kilometers I was shaken out of my inner world by a noise and I glanced over to my left to see a bald eagle perched on top of a waist-high fence only a few feet from me. As I looked in amazement it flew up ahead of me and rested atop a tree, looking down upon me. I arrived below the tree and stopped, raised my arms up said "Thank you". A seemingly absurd thing to do and no doubt the sanity of my actions would have been questioned by any onlooker, but it just seemed to naturally occur, and off I ran, knowing that all was going to be well.

My pace quickened and my spirit lifted and I began to notice the beautiful country that I was running through. Lots of farms and smallholdings, with only the occasional vehicle on the road to disturb the ambience. My running form was feeling relaxed and fluid, my inner space felt relaxed and open to acknowledging my good fortune in whom I had known and in what I had experienced in my life to that point.

At 25kms this ambient state was switched to `on alert` by the peripheral awareness of a big form heading towards me from one of the nearby fields. Having been badly mauled by my favorite dog as a kid and also once having a dog sink its teeth into my leg during a track race, in complete defiance of the owner's commands, I was not exactly overly-comfortable or enamored by any breed of any size or shape.

Thinking that maybe it would not bother me if I quickened my pace for 20-30 meters, I upped my speed, though to no avail, as there in front of me was a large chocolate-colored lab appearing to want my acknowledgment that my pace was way too `soft` for this sure four-footed ditch-bounding `best friend` wannabe. Once I had verbally and almost trippingly indicated my awareness of the lab's presence, it was satisfied to hold back at my pace and stay at my side, with an occasional move to the front when we approached a cattle guard. Thinking little of it initially and expecting that it would last just a couple of kilometers at most, both my wife and I started to get a bit concerned when after five kilometers it was still there. I asked Jean to give it some water and see if she could get it in the car in order to take it back to where it had joined the race. It doggedly refused either offer. At 35kms there was no sign of the lab tiring and I had noted how comforted I was beginning to feel with its presence. I had less concern over its lack of desire for rehydration and repatriation. In the next ten kilometers there were two other dogs that separately tried to leave their mark on myself and/or my companion, but my faithful friend sent them on their way. The environment felt so natural that Jean had given up trying to coax the lab away, recognizing that I had not appeared at all concerned since the first few kilometers and even the race director had driven up alongside me to enquire if I was the dog's owner.

Time had appeared to float by and I was becoming aware that this journey had become relatively effortless after seeing the eagle and gaining a running companion. With less than a half mile to go a van pulled up and the couple inside declared their ownership and fears regarding a dog-hostage situation. I assured them their family member was there out of choice, but their fears were heightened as it refused their offer of a lift. We ran across the finish line together. I stopped, sat down on the hood of our car, looked up and saw the lab looking at me. I nodded, it nodded back, turned around and then jumped into the back of the family wagon. The owners told us that some neighbors had spotted their AWOL pet running down the road after a 'jogger', and they had been driving back and forth for a few kilometers, not believing it would have run 25 of them, far from its familiar and comfortable surroundings, with no water and apparently none the worse for wear.

As Jean and I watched the van heading back down the race route I turned and said, "You know what that was all about don't you?" Jean responded, "Yes, it was your Mother".

With Jean being one of the most skeptical people I know when it comes to such matters, I would normally have been surprised at such a response, but this was not a normal day and her response seemed just as natural as the presence of the eagle and the lab. The owners had told us that they thought they had lost their pet as the nearest runner behind me was over eight miles back. Yes, the bonus was WE had not only run the race but had also won it. This race Mum had run with me, giving me encouragement, just as she had so many years earlier when she ran on the track in front of me.

As a footnote, we went to Holland, Egypt, Kenya and to South Africa. The African adventure turned out to be an experience far exceeding our best dreams and hopes, but that's another story. The Comrades race more than lived up to its reputation. With over 14,000 starters, hundreds of thousands of spectators, a tough, demanding course, cheers of "Go Canada" almost the entire way, and a final half mile in which I do not remember my feet touching the ground, and then crossing that finish line. My 25 year-old dream was now a reality. I had also achieved all of my goals, to finish in the top 500 (I was 435th), to gain a silver medal for my finishing time, (the time goal was 7:30, I did 7:11:12), to place in the top ten masters (I finished 7th) and to be the top Canadian.



The completion of a 25 year dream

