



The Morning Walk



By Wm Peniston, MD

WHILE I WAS IN THE AIR FORCE in the 1960s, Lt. Gen. Richard Bohannon, USAF Surgeon General, instituted an Air Force-wide exercise program based on the research of Dr. Kenneth Cooper. Many of us at the time resisted, often with somewhat derogatory comments.

Our hospital commander, of course, strongly supported the program which only added to our derision as we thought him inept clinically. This, despite the fact that he started one of the first coronary care units in the Air Force.

I cite the above for two reasons: to show how far our profession has advanced regarding exercise during the last 40 odd years, and to show how immature we younger physicians could be on occasion.

As I look back, it seems to me that our opposition to Dr. Bohannon's edict was mostly to the regimentation and authoritarianism, and to the military in general. As the years passed, I became aware of the importance of exercise, particularly after my father had an infarct in 1955. So, in time I started jogging in the early morning and continued until the 1980s when my ankles, knees, and hips began to complain too often. So about 25 years ago, I switched to walking.

In more recent years, when my walks were in residential areas, I found it interesting to note the changes, particularly those occurring on a day to day basis. Many of course were structural in nature, such as remodeling, new driveways, and reroofing and these were always of interest to me.

But more interesting were activities that involved landscaping. Replacing unwanted plants, making raised flower beds, disrupting one side of a yard to construct a pool in back, and complete relandscaping of an entire front yard intrigued me. When such activities last a year or longer, it is always interesting to speculate: are they my type of weekend projects or are they done by owners due to budget limitations?

Although man's work is interesting, Mother Nature's is often more beautiful. Occasionally there are unsightly dying plants, of brown leaves of fall, but these are forgotten with the burst of glorious spring blossoms. Daffodils, tulips, irises, azaleas, hibiscus, rhododendrons and countless other cultured and wild blooms can be spellbinding. Unfortunately, the wonderful fragrances of some plants such as daphne, gardenia, and viburnum are usually too elusive for the average walker to come close enough to detect.

Most interesting of all during those morning walks, though, were my interactions with fellow walkers. While aiming for aerobic exercise, I always greeted my fellow walkers in some manner, usually verbal, but when earphones were obvious, a wave sufficed and commonly that was initiated by one of us when we were on opposite sides of the street.

But with teenagers the situation was usually very different. The most unforgettable incident was with a boy riding a bicycle. As usual my little border collie-mix was with me and, when the boy spied her, he jumped off his bike and ran over to her, proclaiming her

beauty. He was around 15 years-old and I found his enthusiasm and spontaneity remarkable.

Another teenager provided a series of encounters more interesting and gratifying. On first meeting, he appeared somewhat slovenly, slouching along with a less than cheerful expression. He gave no response to my initial greeting (did he hear me?) nor until our third or fourth meeting, at which time I thought I detected a grunt. He was obviously going to school and I usually walked around the same time but tried to change my route frequently.

We kept meeting irregularly and eventually his "grunts" became more coherent and he actually did say "Hi." Of even more interest, his appearance and demeanor improved with time. I am quite certain the change was due to events elsewhere in his life, at home or school or both, and doubt that I had much to do with it. But it is interesting to speculate, and perhaps a little gratifying, that I may have made a small contribution.

We never really are fully aware of the effects of our interactions with others, are we?

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