

Gesundheit

As I slipped into a state of contented sleep on my flight back home to Tampa from Boston on August 3, 2009, my thoughts wandered back to memories, still fresh in my mind, of a peak experience – my first Pan-Mass Challenge ride from Wellesley to Provincetown, Massachusetts. Not 24 hours previously, I had willed myself through one of the most challenging and exhilarating physical and emotional journeys of my life. For two days, 165 miles and 46 towns, I rode my bike (real bikes have pedals) with 5000 teammates over the beautiful terrain of Massachusetts. That may be uncommon, but it wouldn't be noteworthy. Except for a few other things – for one, in that great peloton of riders were hundreds who had survived a much greater challenge, one that had already tested their will to shake the death grip of cancer. For another, thousands more of my comrades in sweat rode to memorialize the bravery of the children, parents, family or friends who left this life through a malignant disease. Every rider contributed to funding the development of new, more effective weapons for healers to take into battle with deadly rivals. These opponents were the body's own cells that in a moment could throw a molecular switch and turn a vigorous person into a fragile patient. Then there were the streets of New England, this weekend lined with souls showering us with cold water from their hoses while, in a continuous, gentle roar, invoking the two words that most inspired my strength, determination and bliss – “Thank you!”. No “Go get 'em!” no “You can do it! You can catch him!” from the spectators on the sidelines. This weekend, crowds continuously reminded us that while we had many stories and reasons to ride, we shared a single purpose and a common end.

The ride became even more meaningful for me because cycling directly in front, alongside or, rarely, behind me for the entire 10 hours in the saddle was my 22-year old son. His young strength fueled my old will power as we pedaled over the land and drank in the real valor of the people whose courage and commitment sealed our pledge to complete this crazy, amazing crusade. In two days of riding, eating, sleeping and sharing an experience of a lifetime, Jonah and I exchanged more words, thoughts and feelings than we normally would in a year. I confirmed my impression that he has grown into a deeply aware, purposeful, sensitive and social person. And when motivated, he can even wake up without complaining at 4:30 in the morning on two consecutive days.

All our fellow riders had their names and hometowns tagged to the back of their jerseys. Many also wore pictures of loved ones, statements of tribute and poems of devotion that marked their cause and flooded our hearts with tears, revving our collective understanding of the poignant beauty of life lived in relationship. So as we greeted each other in passing, we silently acknowledged the passage of time together, the blessing of feeling a solidarity with other human beings, and the wondrous beginning, middle and end of our trip through Massachusetts that traced a parallel course through the inner reaches of our souls.

While I set off on this, my first PMC ride, to test my legs and my heart, in the end I felt privileged to glimpse the eternal strength of the human condition. Along the way, I also confirmed that we can best promote our own health by contributing to the welfare of our fellow human beings. This ride was not just good for my heart, lungs and skeletal muscles, the effort also stimulated health-serving chemicals produced by my brain and nervous system. As a physician, I know that when we promote our mental

and spiritual health, we support all the other vital organ systems in our body. The brain regulates the biological impact of stress and satisfaction, and that, as much as any other factor, influences our health, well-being and ability to adapt to chronic illness and disability. That's why acts of kindness like volunteering, riding and fundraising for the Dana Farber Cancer Institute contribute to the possibility of preventing and curing these diseases and, just as likely, boost the participants' own immune system for the year ahead. I suspect that I helped myself even more than I contributed the gift of health to others. Sincerest thanks to my fellow riders and supporters in this year's PMC. I hope to see you next year. Until then, let's continue to exercise our body and our generosity if we want to stay well.