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Matters of Consequence

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Matters of Consequence

In June last year I began to walk the nature trails around my community. I set out just before sunrise each morning, and over the summer I learned how long it would take to get to various landmarks to meet the sun's first light.

The summer warmed me and by fall my spirit was renewed. I knew where and when the sun would pour its rays through tree branches onto the river signifying the start of my day, and I had learned my place in the landscape, something unknown to me in my four years in this place.

Autumn was a golden time along the river. Some days I escaped from campus to take in the afternoon spectacle and hear the fall sounds. It was the best prep time I've yet devised for my evening classes.

By late October I was forced to face the truth about North Dakota: winter comes fast, hard, and stays a long time. Reluctantly I joined the 6 a.m. walkers at the local mall. At first all the joy went out of my morning walks. The canned music, dark store fronts, and no opportunity to glimpse the sunrise were conditions I found loathsome.

In time I began to notice the other walkers. Some were my age and younger but the majority were retirement age and then some. What motivates them to leave their beds in -60°F weather and drive through snow and wind to walk repeated 3/4 mile circuits through an environment that never varies except during sidewalk sales days?

I don't have an answer exactly, but I noticed some walked in pairs, male-female, holding hands. Some walked in groups, chatting with each other and calling out to fellow trudgers. I became particularly interested in a group of four men who arrived separately but joined together while doing the circuit. I learned they were golfers because we sometimes passed each other and they delighted in overtaking me, though they often cheated to do so. These passings provided an opportunity to overhear their golf talk.

One morning they invited me to join them but I kept my accelerated pace, assuring them as I passed that I knew very little about golf. They said if I joined I could pick a new topic. Maybe next time, I said over my shoulder.

I've watched these 70-something men for several months now and I've learned that they care about each other. If one of them doesn't show up by a certain time they try to recall if he said he'd be late, went to visit a relative, had tests scheduled at the clinic, or didn't look so good yesterday. They slow down sometimes or sit on the benches and take a break if one of them can't keep up. They tease each other about their infirmities, comment on clashing combinations of attire, and harass passersby. I don't think I'm supposed to know this, but these guys are a support system for each other. Evidence that we are all called to nurture, some of us later rather than sooner.

Spring will come again. First there will be flooding to prevent me from getting on the walking paths by the river, but eventually I will experience a reunion with the sunrise. I won't miss mall walking, but I'll think about those men from time to time. Maybe I'll see them when I walk along the golf course. Maybe, if they take good care of each other, we'll spend winter mornings together at the mall next year.