

# The Miraculous Power of Community



I just experienced a miracle today. I ran my second marathon ever.

As strange as it may sound, however, I didn't do it alone. It took a whole community of people around me to accomplish it. Let me explain...

For those who don't know, a marathon is 26.2 miles or 42.2 kilometres long. It's a grueling experience even for the best of runners, who do it in 2 to 2.5 hours. And since I'm not much of a runner, it truly is a long, LONG way to go. My first marathon last year took almost six hours!

What hit me as I prepared for this one is that running a marathon is a lot like recovering from addictions, or other serious bad habits. It takes training, perseverance and a commitment deep in our gut. But more than anything, it takes a community to cause such a miracle. Because for me, doing this -AND- recovering from serious addictions are both truly miraculous.

To help you understand that and maybe even encourage you in your own recovery, or with whatever you're facing, I'd like to share what this run was like. To give you a puff-by-puff, blow-by-blow description of how it felt to run those last eight kilometres (or five miles) of my second marathon. (*Note: In Canada, runners measure distances in "K"s or kilometres. One K is a little over one-half of a mile.*)

I'm at 34 K now -- and I'm in so much pain. Medics have been stopping when they see me. Police officers ask, "Are you okay?" It's like I shouldn't be doing this. If I was on my own, I would have quit at 18 K. And yet now it's 34 K and I'm still going...

My goal for today was to run this marathon in five hours. I wanted to beat my time from last year of 5 hours and 59 minutes. However after 18 K, my left knee was in serious pain and after 25 K, I was barely walking.

When you're in that kind of pain, the mind starts playing tricks on you. Like "Scott, maybe you should stop." Or when it's really bad, "Hey, stupid... STOP THIS ALREADY!" Or perhaps it's a different voice inside that says, "You failure. You didn't make your goal. You're probably not even going to finish. Why bother?" Listening to these voices reminded me a lot of when I was trying to stop my addictions. My mind was continually beating up on me, telling me I couldn't do it, that I was a failure, or worse. And when that happens and there's no one around to help, it's game over.

A few K ago, an experienced runner passed by me. He saw the way I was limping, barely able to walk. But rather than tell me to stop, he looked at me and said, "It's only pain." Then he kept on going... And I knew he was right.



A few minutes ago, I passed a woman who is also limping badly. This time I was the one who said, "It's only pain." She looked up, smiled at me and kept on going. She knew what it meant too. And that's the real message for today: "IT'S ONLY PAIN."

So what does that mean to me? It says, "Sure it's painful. But you're bigger than the pain. You can do this thing. And we're not giving up on you..." The runner who passed me was in tip-top shape. Yet from his words, he's obviously been where I am now at some point in his past. He knows something I don't. And he wanted to make sure I got the message and didn't quit. "It's only pain. But this is worth it. So finish, Scott... Even if you have to walk the last 10 K, who cares?"

In recovery, it's the same thing. You often have to do things that are very, very painful. Say you've been living dishonestly all your life and now you've got to tell the truth. That may get you in trouble and it's painful. Or maybe you've hurt people all your life. Well now you need to clean it up. You've got to go to the people you've abused, hurt or stolen from and make amends. They might not like you afterwards. It's painful. But that's how you recover. And "it's only pain"...

That's the first thing I teach kids in the Addiction Workshops I give. I draw a circle and say, "This is your life, your world. Now tell me what's inside your world." And they start sharing: "Depression. Anger. Fear. Loneliness." Then I say, "Outside this circle is where you want to be. Outside your problems, where your dreams once were, that's what you really want. But to get there, it's going to be painful." And it is, because it takes us outside of our comfort zone, beyond what's easy and comfortable.

After that, I teach them practical steps they can take to start creating healthy habits. Things like drinking water, exercise, telling the truth, making amends, and helping others. Those may sound like small things—and they are. But to someone hooked on a bad habit, they're huge. "Do you think I like drinking all this friggin' water?" I ask them. "No! I'd rather have a Coke or a chocolate shake." "Do you think I liked getting on a treadmill today? NO. I'd rather be lying on the couch watching a DVD." Or, "Do you really think I want to pay back the money I stole 30 years ago, or help drug addicts for free the rest of my life? NO! There hundreds of other things I'd rather be doing with my time and money."

And that's the point: the steps of recovery are uncomfortable and can be painful, especially at the beginning. But once you get outside your comfort zone, when you start exercising those inner muscles, miracles will start to happen.

A few minutes ago, two young kids who were giving water to runners suddenly stopped what they were doing and started following me. Seeing the name on the race card on my chest, they began calling, "You can do it, Scott. You can do it. C'mon Scott, keep going Scott!"

Just now, another runner stopped and asked how I'm doing. "I'm in pain." "Yeah, me too," he said. But instead of running off, he stayed for a couple of minutes to talk and be there with me. As he left, he said, "Take care, Scott. We'll see you at the finish line."

God, it makes you want to cry the way people are... The godness of people sure comes out in a group.

Dr. William D. Silkworth, one of the earliest authorities on addiction, said the reason why we addicts do what we do is because of the sense of ease and comfort it gives us at first.

Addicts are in pain inside. And compared to the emotional pain we're feeling, it's easier and more comfortable to smoke a joint, drink alcohol, cruise pornography on the Net, inject ourselves, or even cut ourselves with a razor blade. We hurt that much.

So where does the pain come from? I don't know exactly. What I do know is that every addict I've ever talked to believes something is wrong with them. At some point in their life, they developed the belief they were bad, no good, or not worthy of love. Sometimes this came from their parents and siblings, or maybe they heard it from their friends—Or both. But they were told things like "You're stupid. What's wrong with you? You're a Loser! Why don't you shut up?" Those ideas then got reinforced by others, like kids at school or teachers (and for those older, their spouses or co-workers). And they came to believe it. That's the power of the people around us, our "community."

It takes a lot of reinforcement to turn those ideas around. To believe we really are loved and valued. That there isn't something wrong with us. That we are worthy of love. But since our parents and friends aren't likely to change, WE have to create communities of people around us who will see that, say it, and support the best in us.

"Would you like some water?" another boy asks me. All these kids out here helping us, it's incredible. There's hundreds of them, giving us water, Gatorade, gel\*... And whether I'm running or walking, people keep yelling at me: "You're doing great, Scott." "Right on buddy. Keep going!" [\*Note: Gel is a liquid food that replenishes salt and sugar in the body.]

So let's talk about community—the community of marathon running.

Fifteen years ago, I wrote down a goal that I wanted to run a marathon. However, no matter how hard I tried, I could never do more than five or six miles on my own.

Two years ago, I took a course that taught us about the power of community. They taught me that you've got to give and receive from others. That's how you create miracles, not on your own. And shortly after that, I bumped into an old friend who mentioned a place called The Running Room. It's a chain of stores that brings people together to train for running marathons. So I joined.

Training with these runners for several months, I discovered a power I didn't know I had and began doing things that seemed impossible. Many times when we trained it would be like "I can't do this. This is beyond what I can do." But I'd show up anyway and found I could keep up with the group. Each thing we did seemed like baby steps. But after four months of "just showing up," I'd run a marathon.

I'm at 36 K now. I'm glad to still be here... but I'm also disappointed. I've been walking the last 10 K when I should be running. I've trained for four months so I could run this marathon in five hours. And now I've failed...

That's another good reason to quit, right? I've tried and I've failed. Now the voice inside says "Go home you bum..." This is something most of us are really good at—beating ourselves up and quitting when it looks like we're not going to achieve our goals.

That's why being in a community is so important. YOU don't quit as easily because you want to stay with the people around you. And THEY don't want you to leave or stop either, so they cheer you on. You're much more

likely to reach that finish line if you're with people who believe in you.

It's the same with recovery. Twelve-step programs like Alcoholics Anonymous have helped thousands of people handle their addictions because they had others there for support. Conversely, if you stay with people who are doing alcohol or drugs, chances are your life will be very similar to theirs.

The only reason I was able to run a marathon is that I joined a community of people who (1) had done it themselves, and (2) believed I could too. Throughout the training, they listened to me, talked to me and told me I could do it. They believed when I didn't, and encouraged me when I wanted to quit. That's the power of community.

Hey, suddenly I'm running again. Puff, puff, puff... I'm not thinking about the pain as much. There's a band playing for us. And people on the side of the road are cheering to keep us going. Puff, puff, puff... Wow...

Now a medic sees me and he's trying to pull me over. I must look pretty bad on the outside. But I know what to say to him. "Hey, thanks. It's okay. It's only pain..." If I'd said something else, he would have tried to examine me and take me out of the run. But it's my choice to be here.

I can't believe I'm still running. I'm in pain, but I'm doing it... Puff, puff, puff...

Early in my recovery, I attended 12-step meetings almost every day. These were really helpful at first, then the group seemed to get stalled. People were going to the meetings but not practicing the steps, and they were relapsing. Petrified this would happen to me – because I was told I had less than a 1% chance of recovery (due to my numerous addictions, including crack cocaine) – I began looking for people who were finding ways to continually stay sober.

One day I met a man with a fire in his eyes. He'd been clean for a long time, and he was passionate about helping others to work through the recovery steps. He introduced me to a new community of recovered addicts who were doing the same. I started feeling stronger, like I too was going to be able to make it.

Then something strange happened. People in my old group started to shun me. They told others I was radical, over-zealous and crazy, and tried to keep people away from me. And it hurt. I felt rejected and angry. People were stopping me from doing the one thing that could keep me sober. It felt like they were killing me. Even my own father said to me one day, "Why are you hanging around these losers? Why don't you get a life?" He actually wanted me to drink with him.

You're going to experience things like that too. As you take steps to change, not everyone around you is going to like it. Some friends and family may feel uncomfortable with what you're doing. They'll tell you that you're crazy or you shouldn't change, because they like you the way you've been. And it will feel like you are not okay, not loveable, all over again.

Don't believe it. Keep your eye on the finish line, of how you want to feel and how you want your life to be. Believe in yourself, and find others who do too.

Puff, puff, puff... wow, now I'm even passing people... and I've got a shot at still doing it—at being faster than last year! There's only 5 K left... "Go Scott..." "Thank you!" Puff, puff, puff... Hey, I'm really doing it...

Eventually, after 18 months, one guy finally let me help him. He was gay and I guess he kind of liked me. I didn't care; I just knew I had to help someone. And as soon as I had, I became a different person. All of a sudden, I had something different in my eyes. I was on fire like those other guys. And it came from helping just one other person.

I went from struggling, suffering and being depressed to "My life has a purpose now. It's got meaning!" I was excited and began to experience joy again. All it took was sitting down with this guy and listening to his problems. Helping him with his steps. I didn't judge him; I simply loved him, because he was just like me. That was when I learned this thing called "love" wasn't something I was supposed to "get." It was something I was supposed to give. I had it backwards.

I'm at 38 K now. This young guy runs up beside me and says, "How's it been?" "It's been hard, man. My left leg is hurting. What brings you out here?" "I just thought I'd do something to help." And I'm blown away. "What you're doing really makes a difference, man." "Well I've seen so many other people do it. You can do it too. I believe in you, Scott. Keep going. Take care..." And with that he went back to help someone else.

Wow, it almost makes you want to cry. Complete strangers... they just want you to succeed. They want you to have your life. That's what people really want. Beneath all the stuff we see, people really are good... ...Hey, I'm running faster now because of him... Oh my gosh, my knee feels like it's almost cured... But they cured it, not me... Maybe it's both of us together...

What's impossible for an individual is possible within the right group. A group that believes in you, that wants you to succeed. That's what I learned from this marathon.

It's also what I'm creating through the Addiction Workshops I do in schools. It's one thing to give a awesome talk to an assembly; I'm honoured when people say that. Then kids show up in my workshop and I get to make a difference by listening to them, and giving them steps for creating positive new habits. But the reality is, I'm not as powerful as the communities they live in.

The only way I can make a sustainable difference with those kids is to help them - and their teachers & counsellors - to create their own communities. Communities that acknowledge and empower them. Where people are committed to helping each other do the work and achieve their goals. Communities that don't make them wrong when they fail. And that continue when I'm not there. That's what it's all about.

Hey, it's 12:24 ...Oh my god, it's going to be close... If I finish before 12:55, I'll have broken my time from last year!

Before I reach the finish line, I also need to tell you something—and it's this. Without a shadow of a doubt, I know you are going to fail along the way. That's why I don't expect you to completely stop drinking or doing all drugs (or other habits) today. That will take time. And even if you commit to taking great positive steps, you're still going to fail to do them sometimes. But that doesn't mean YOU are a failure. You've just failed at something. But YOU are not a failure.

"Goooo, Scott... Yeayyyyyyyy..." "Thanks everybody! Thank you for being here!" "Way to go! Woooooo..."  
...Hey, I'm at 40 K... Puff, puff, puff...

That's the real ingredient, a group of people cheering you on. And that's what I want for you, is to be in a community where people are helping, believing in, and cheering each other on. You want others to succeed. And they want you to succeed. Because you succeeding means we all succeed...

Puff, puff... cough, cough... It's 12:28, and 2 K to go... Geez, I'm going to break my record... Even with almost a 10 K walk, I'm beating my record... I can't believe it... Puff, puff, puff...

It doesn't matter how long it takes. It doesn't matter how hard it may be. Just don't quit. It's only pain...

When you don't feel like doing that one push-up a day – and your mind tells you all the reasons why you shouldn't – just do it. It's only pain. When you don't want to drink the water, or tell the truth, or make amends, or call up your buddy and make sure they did theirs too, take that one more small step and keep going. I know you can do it...

Because you know what? Ultimately, it's more than just being part of a community. It's about helping another person achieve their results. My experience is that when you do that, your problems will take care of themselves.

Only 1K to go... I'm still running!... puff, huhuh, puff... unbelievable... puff, huhuh, puff... I've gone from "it's only pain" to "there is no pain"... puff, huhuh huhuh... There's just commitment... see the end... focus on the results...

I can see the finish line now. ...Huhuh huhuh... faster, faster... ohhh, it hurts...The band is starting to play for me now... Wooooo hooooo....! "Wait till the midnight hour, just wait till the midnight hour..." Cindy, my girlfriend, is going to be at the finish line. She's going to be so proud...

My god, this feels so hard... "Keep going Scott, stay with it!" ...huhuh huhuh huhuh... the last 400 metres feels like 10 miles... I just want it to be over now...

Huhuh huhuh... cough, cough... 300 metres to go... huhuh huhuh... "Keep going Scott, you're almost there buddy"... huhuh huhuh... 200 metres to go... huhuh huhuh... 100...

(on the loudspeaker) "We've got Scott Gallagher from Toronto coming to the line!"... puff puff, huhuh huhuh... I did it! ...Ohhh myyyy, 5:43... I DID IT!"

As I make my way to the runners' table and receive my medal, people beside me are crying because they made it too....

So how am I feeling as I stand here, bent over, at the finish line? I feel proud. Grateful. Deeply satisfied... I call this a miracle, a real miracle.

The miracle is the power of humanity. That what one person can't do on their own can be accomplished in a community. That I didn't quit. That people were there with support and encouragement all along the way. And that I allowed it in and was willing to believe it was true.

My whole life used to be about thinking I was alone and had to do everything on my own. I tried and failed at so much. Now that I give to others and allow people to contribute to me, I've got a life that I love and I'm living

powerfully. Now I choose which communities to be part of. And that's the difference. I know the community is more powerful than I am.

That runner was right. It was only pain. I kept on going... And I'm so grateful to have done it.