

## BLESSINGS DRAFT

I have to take my hat off to Michael. He really knows how to persuade people to speak in church while he's away.

Last month, just before our whirlwind trip to California, I told him about the extraordinary undertaking that has dominated the lives of the Slater family for much of the past year. Michael listened thoughtfully and then suggested that I share the story with all of you.

As I thought about it, I realized that it's not just the story of an amazing road trip. It's a story about the nature of blessings.

Several years ago Michael introduced this parish to a kind of call and response. We used it for quite a while. He would call out, "God is good," and the congregation would respond, "all the time!"

Let's try that now: God is good! [Listen for the reply.]

Good job!

I think Michael was trying to remind us that blessings don't always look like blessings. Sometimes we might be given a blessing that, at first blush, we'd rather not have.

In November 2011 I was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. It's hard to imagine Parkinson's disease as a blessing. But before you reach any conclusions, let me tell you what it has led to. Let me tell you the story.

Last summer our daughter, Shannon, told us about a really strange race she had just discovered. Shannon is the Slater family's most dedicated runner. Six years ago she celebrated her 40<sup>th</sup> birthday by running 40 miles. She has run a couple of marathons, and she frequently runs local 5Ks.

This new race was called the Dipsea, and it was legendary.

First run in 1905, it is the second-oldest footrace in the country. It starts in Mill Valley, California, winds through Muir Woods, and ends 7.4 miles later at Stinson Beach on the Pacific Ocean, where the runners presumably dip themselves into the sea. And thus the name.

The Dipsea is regarded as a strenuous race. The course is narrow, rutted and steep. It has an elevation change of 2,000 feet, climbing over trails named "Dynamite" and "Cardiac," then plunging down through the "Swoop" and over the rocks and roots of "Steep Ravine."

In Mill Valley, a quarter of a mile into the race, runners encounter three consecutive flights of stairs—676 steps—as tall as a 50-story building. Later they run over a narrow footbridge with no handrails, and near the end of the race they leap over a stile, where many of them fall.

The race is unusual in many ways. For one thing, the runners don't have to follow the same course all the way to the beach. There are some shortcuts they can take. This obviously favors local runners who know the territory.

For another, it's a handicap race. Race officials use age and sex to assign the runners to groups that start at one-minute intervals over a 50-minute time period. That explains how eight-year-old Reilly Johnson could win the race in 2010, and how 72-year-old Hans Schmid won in 2012. It explains why Alex Varner, who ran the course in the fastest time for six years in a row, never won the race.

We learned all this in bits and pieces during the autumn months, as Shannon discovered more about the Dipsea. Finally, around Christmas, she announced that she was going to try to run it. What's more, she would run it in my honor, as someone with Parkinson's.

Our son, Dickson, never one to pass up a challenge, said he would join her. The 2015 race would be run on Sunday, June 14. Gracia and I said that we would be there to cheer them on if they got in.

The race is limited to 1,500 runners, and some people say that the hardest thing about the Dipsea is getting in. There are several ways to be selected for the race. The first is to finish in the top half of the field in the previous year's race. Each year the top 750 finishers are invited back. Obviously, that didn't apply to us.

The next way is to be among the first 400 or so people to apply, but even this method is rigged to favor local runners. The application form becomes available on-line on a Saturday afternoon in April. Runners have to print it out, fill it in and send it to Mill Valley, together with their application fee, *by mail*. Shannon lives in Hendersonville. Have you ever tried to mail anything from Hendersonville on a Saturday afternoon? All the post offices are closed by noon.

Undeterred, Shannon found a local mail-processing facility and befriended the clerk who worked there. Yes, he would be working the afternoon the application form was posted. And yes, if she got her stamped, addressed envelope to him by 4 p.m., he would postmark it and get it in the outgoing mail that day.

Dickson lives in northern California. If necessary, he could even drive to Mill Valley to mail his application.

The third way to be selected for the race, if you missed out on the first two, is to present a sob story to the race committee. No joke; it's right there in the official information about the application process: They reserve an unknown number of slots for runners to basically beg their way in.

Shannon and Dickson decided to include sob stories with their application forms, to increase their chances for selection.

Shannon's sob story said that she wanted to run the race for Dad. She told how she raised nearly \$6,000 for the Michael J. Fox Foundation and trained for a year to run the 2012 New York City Marathon in my honor as a member of Team Fox. That was the year Superstorm Sandy canceled the race.

She said that I was doing much better because of exercise and medication, and that she and her brother Dickson would love nothing more than to bring Gracia and me to California to cheer for them while I can still enjoy traveling.

Finally she told the committee that it would be appropriate to celebrate, not only me, but also Robin Williams and all the Dipsea runners affected by Parkinson's over the years. (She had learned that Robin Williams ran the Dipsea in 1984. After Williams finished, he said, "Besides the hills, the stairs and the downhill, it wasn't bad.")

Dickson's sob story gave me credit for introducing Shannon and him to running. He told the committee that Parkinson's had brought an end to my running, and then, miraculously, a physical therapist in the LSVT BIG program had restored my ability to run.

He said he and Shannon were inspired to run the Dipsea with Dad cheering them on. "We want to race together to celebrate that Dad is running again," he said. "Won't you please let us run?"

Application day came and went. Shannon's application went out according to plan, but Dickson had miscalculated. He didn't drive to Mill Valley, he drove to Redding, thinking the post office there would be open. It wasn't. His application didn't leave Redding until the following Monday.

In early May the race committee posted the names of those who had been accepted. Shannon's name was on the list; Dickson's was not. Gracia and I said that we would be there to cheer for Shannon, and Dickson and his family made plans to join us.

Meanwhile, I had learned that the Dipsea depends on volunteers to help conduct the race. Gracia and I offered to help out on race day, figuring that would guarantee us a place on the course where we could watch Shannon go by.

And then the most amazing sequence of events came along in rapid succession in May and early June.

Dave Albee, a volunteer PR person for the Dipsea, got interested. He saw the reference to "brother Dickson" in Shannon's sob story, and he asked the race committee, "Where is brother Dickson?" They combed the list of applicants and, somewhat chagrined, told Dave that they had rejected his application and returned his race fee.

Dave asked the committee to reconsider, because it would make the story that much more compelling. They agreed, and they contacted Dickson and reinstated him.

Then Dave e-mailed Shannon. Her story had piqued his interest. Would she mind if he contacted her local newspaper to see if they'd be interested in it? Of course she wouldn't mind!

Shannon had booked a very expensive room in a Mill Valley motel, reckoning that Gracia and I could share it with her. But Dickson found a three-bedroom house on VRBO that would accommodate all seven of us for less than the price of the motel. Gracia e-mailed the owner of the house and made arrangements for us to stay there. We canceled the motel room.

Next, Geraldine Dinkins, a free-lance writer from Brevard, e-mailed Shannon. The Hendersonville Times-News had assigned her to write a story about Shannon's participation in the race, running in honor of her father. Was there a time she could interview the two of us? You bet there was!

Shannon and I really enjoyed the interview. Geraldine is about Shannon's age. She's a runner, too, and she knew all about the Dipsea. We spent an hour and a half telling the story and answering her questions. The paper had sent along a photographer who captured the bond between Shannon and me.

Then I got an e-mail from Kelly Lawson, the captain of the Dipsea finish-line team. She would be glad to have us on her team. What size tee shirts would we like?

I introduced myself to Dave Albee by e-mail, telling him that all four Slaters would be participating in the race. I told him he could find me at the finish line, where I would be the only person wearing a Team Fox ballcap. He replied, inviting us to stick around after the race for the post-race barbecue picnic and awards ceremony.

Shannon had seen a photograph of Alex Varner, the fastest runner in the past six Dipseas, wearing a Davidson College tee shirt. She e-mailed him, asking for advice on how best to approach the course. He congratulated her on getting in the race and graciously offered a number of very specific tips about running the race.

He said that the trail was just wide enough for one person, and that if she pulled out to pass anyone she would be running through poison oak. He told her to bring something to wash it off with at the end of the race. Oh, and the shower stalls at Stinson Beach would be closed because of the drought.

Gracia and I made a note to take a bar of Fels-Naptha and a gallon of water to the finish line.

Shannon planned to run in the Team Fox singlet from the New York Marathon. She got the Team Fox people to send a matching singlet for Dickson.

The Times-News ran Geraldine's story on the front page of their feature section on June 7. We sent the story to Dave Albee, who posted it on the Dipsea Facebook page. I also sent it to a number of friends, some of whom I hadn't seen in years. Many of them replied.

Suddenly, we were famous. But even better, the story put Parkinson's disease front and center. Shannon and I each sent congratulatory e-mails to Geraldine, who ducked our compliments and said she felt honored to tell our family's story.

Dave also had contacted the Sylva Herald, who told him they would run the story after the race, when I could bring photographs from California. They assigned Nick Breedlove to interview me then.

The week before the race Dave e-mailed again. The Dipsea Race Foundation Board of Directors invited all four Slaters to attend their Hall of Fame dinner, to be held Friday night before the race. We would be their guests, seated at Dave's table. Would we mind being introduced publicly? We accepted with pleasure.

The weekend itself was something of a blur. Gracia, Shannon and I left Greensboro/Spartanburg for San Francisco at 6 o'clock Friday morning. We rented a car and drove to our rental house in Mill Valley, where we met the very charming 81-year-old woman who owned the house.

She was wonderful, and the house was perfect. It was full of art and artifacts that reflected her varied interests and travels, and it had a view of the upper reaches of San Francisco bay.

The rest of the Slater contingent—Dickson, Teresa, Trinity and Noah—arrived at the house soon after we did, a welcome reunion.

Shannon and Teresa scouted the Dipsea course Friday afternoon—Dickson had already seen the course—and the four race participants attended the Hall of Fame dinner that night. We were honored, not only to attend, but to be embraced by the group and welcomed into the Dipsea family.

It seemed very much like a family. We met the foundation officials and many other people connected with the race—all of them volunteers. We were struck by their commitment to the race and by the race's strong traditions. There was the man who had run the race 50 years in a row, the four high-school athletes who were awarded college scholarships, and this year's Hall of Fame inductee, Barry Spitz, who had served as the public-address-system announcer at the finish line every year since 1982.

Race day dawned foggy and cool. Gracia and I dressed in layers and drove to the finish line before 7 a.m. We picked up our volunteer shirts and reported in to Kelly Lawson, who introduced us to the rest of the team—about 20 people--and gave all of us our instructions.

We were on the "decompression" team, stationed just beyond the finish line. Our job was to monitor the runners who had just finished, to keep them moving out of the way and see that they got medical attention if they needed it.

Barry Spitz and his microphone were installed on a flat-bed truck near us, and he told everyone when the race started and gave updates as to who was leading at various places along the course.

Before long the first finisher hove into view and crossed the line. Then the second, and the third. I was struck by how the winners hung around to greet each new arrival, as if welcoming them into a club. By tradition, the first 35 finishers each year are given a black shirt bearing the number of their finish.

Then the mass of runners began crossing the line and things got pretty hectic. Kelly had told us that we would be excused for a few moments to greet our children when they finished, and when we heard Barry Spitz announce "Shannon Slater," we were ready to give her hugs, sweat and all.

It seemed a long time before Dickson's name came up. He had started nine minutes after Shannon, and had taken a minute longer to complete the course, having turned his ankle along the way. We hugged him, along with Teresa, Trinity and Noah.

I didn't know until after Shannon and Dickson finished that each of them was sporting a heart on the back of their singlet with the slogan "For Dad."

When the race results were posted the next day, Shannon was in 687th place, with a time of 1:18:51. She had started 40 minutes behind the first runners, and by my calculations, she had passed 198 of them. Dickson placed 905th, with a time of 1:19:45. He spent the next week on crutches.

Shannon summed up the event in a thank-you e-mail to Dave Albee: "I had the best time. All the runners around me were incredibly polite, encouraging, and kind. The sense of community and multiple generations of family was blissful. The weather was divine. And the course itself was stunningly beautiful. Runners saw the back of our singlets, and cheered for Dad as we went past. The one word that I can use to sum up the 2015 Dipsea is exhilarating."

After we got home I took some photos from the race to my interview with Nick Breedlove, and he wrote a nice piece that helped call public attention to Parkinson's. The Sylva Herald ran it prominently in the June 25<sup>th</sup> edition.

You might think that's the end of the story. But the 2016 Dipsea is scheduled to be run on June 12. Kelly Lawson has e-mailed Gracia and me, hoping we can serve on the finish-line team again next year. Shannon finished well enough in the race to be invited back, and Dickson is already working on a new sob story.

There seems to be no end to this series of blessings. And none of them would ever have happened if it weren't for my Parkinson's disease.

God is good!

[Gesture for a response.]

Amen.