

Be a Berean!

The Bereans ...received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day. (Acts 17:11)

["Be a Berean" will regularly cover topics that arise during the "Acts 29" and "Lifted Up" Bible classes. Contact Franklyn Pfeil—liftedup@lockportalliance.org—with questions or comments.]

"Dark-night Saving Time"

In the distance, one by one, the streetlights begin to light up Niagara Falls Boulevard. The taillights rushing that way and the headlamps rushing this way form thin red and white strands. Three-quarters of a mile away, the sounds of traffic don't reach me. It's a movie with the mute on.

A chain stretches across the road winding around Oppenheim Park. The empty courts and pavilions and playgrounds are reminders of summer. The lodge is closed for the season, the doors padlocked. The only sound's the wind, sweeping through leaves that should have fallen weeks ago.

I know just when leaves should fall, because I've been a cross-country runner for forty years. When the clock is turned back an hour in the fall, my after-work run ends in gathering darkness. Over the years, along my accustomed routes, I've noted which trees still have their leaves at the time change. And even though we "fell back" a week later this year, my trees held more leaves than ever before. I consider them mine until April, because until then it's unlikely that another soul will see them. Until then, it's just me, in my green and white and golden garden.

At the end of October in 1968, I was 15 years old when my world unraveled in these back stretches of Oppenheim Park. I was a hotshot runner then, undefeated thus far that season. The culminating race, the Niagara Frontier All-League Meet, was to be held at Oppenheim Park, I read in the paper. Lockport High School was the overwhelming team favorite. They would be led to victory by sophomore Frank Pfeil, the paper said. Little did I know that time was lurking, crafting the inevitable opportunity to lead me out of grace.

At the time, I didn't know where Oppenheim Park was. But when I got off the team bus, I sensed I was at home. The narrow entrance off of the Boulevard opens up into wide, flat expanses with level footing. I was 15, I was undefeated, and over these meadows, I thought, I would fly.

The race was 2.5 miles long. I came off the line like I was shot out of the starting pistol. It was my custom to run immediately to the front and settle the issue within the first 2 miles. This day seemed no different.

At two miles, I was home free. There were fifty yards between me and 2nd. Nobody would make up 50 yards on me in just a half mile. I settled into a familiar hard cruise. At about 97 percent effort, I could hold this speed forever, it seemed, without touching my guts or the gear that I kept in reserve.

While everyone else cheered as I ran by, someone out of place caught my eye. One of my friends, a junior varsity runner who'd already run his race, was gesticulating up ahead. His arms, as they waved me onward, were too insistent, his body language too urgent. As I turned left around a red flag, I shot a glance back. Ninety-seven percent effort was not going to win today.

With just under a half mile to go, I immediately pressed on it. I took it to almost maximum effort. But it was still too far from the finish to go absolutely all out.

Now the cheers were turning to voices of alarm. Though you should never look back on a straightaway, I did. Two runners, from LaSalle and Kenmore East, were locked in a duel with each other, while gaining on me.

I took it to the limit, into that gear I usually saved for the last 400 yards. But there were 600 yards left.

As the two battled step-for-step with each other, the Lockport pack was closing to within striking distance of them.

Two hundred yards from the finish, my kick fizzled. Quickly, very quickly, they were upon me, six of them. A brown jersey from LaSalle shot by, then a yellow jersey from Ken-East. Then in a rush came the four gold and blue Lockport jerseys, my brother among them. He shortened his stride in uncertain hesitation. "Get in front of those guys," I yelled out to him and to the others from Lockport...

"Lockport High School dominated the Niagara Frontier League Meet," the paper read the next day, "led by the surprise third-place finish of John Pfeil."

I was dismayed more than distraught. And I was happy for my brother. He became a name that day. Though I would go on to win many a race, never again would I go unchallenged from the very start. Though I got faster and faster throughout high school and college days, never again would a meadow be a runway from which I would take off and fly. From that day forward I toiled at my sport. The fields yielded praise begrudgingly, if at all.

About ten years after high school, my Dad's health, never good, began to deteriorate. One day during his decline, he caught me off guard when he told me, out of the blue, that the best day of my life was the day I got beat at Oppenheim Park. "Something that needed to be broken was broken that day. It seemed at the time like a turn for the worse. But you just wait. As time goes by, you'll thank your lucky stars."

I didn't quite know what he was saying, or why he'd brought it up. Characteristically understated, he rarely talked on the philosophical plane. And the incident, though memorable, had been only briefly traumatic. I thought he'd perceived a significance that wasn't really there.

Sometime in the early 1990's, ten years or so after my Dad had died and twenty years after the race he'd commented on, I picked up a Bible. I thought that a person who'd read just about everything, as I had, should be able to say he'd read the Bible. It was intellectually embarrassing not to have read it.

In the opening chapters of Genesis, the first book of the Bible, a shining land grows dark. Henceforth, the land would yield its fruit only by the man's forced effort, and the woman would bring forth a child in sorrow. At the end of Genesis, a man forsaken by his brothers--thrown into a pit and left for dead--ends up being the person who saves Egypt, and his own family, from starvation.

The man told his brothers, "*But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive.*"

I must have read right over that line the first time I read the Bible. I read right over it the second, third, and fourth times, as well. But one year as I read it, I recalled my Dad saying, "It seemed at the time like a turn for the worse. But you just wait. As time goes by, you'll thank your lucky stars."

Maybe my Dad was right. Maybe it was that race that did it. Or maybe it was later on in life when far darker days arrived. But somewhere along the line, as he'd said, "Something that needed to be broken was broken."

My Dad said I'd thank my lucky stars. I don't. But I thank Jesus, who, later on in His book, said, "*Blessed are the poor in spirit,*" then carried sin and darkness and death to Golgotha, where His Father turned them into life and light.

Somewhere along the way, your stride was broken. Or your heart was broken; or your dreams, or your health, or your marriage, or your family; or promises that you'd made, or promises made to you. Something was broken because it needed to be.

Blessed are you, broken in spirit. It was for you that His body was broken. It had to be, *to save many people alive.*

Blessed are you, broken in spirit. *For yours is the kingdom of heaven.*

Scripture cited: Genesis 50:20; Matthew 5:3.

It is our fervent hope that you will 'be a Berean' by attending one or more of these Bible-based classes this week! —

“Acts 29” Bible Class—Sunday at 9:45

“Everyday Wisdom for the Average Joe” (men)—Sunday at 9:45

"A Gentle and Quiet Spirit" (women)--Sunday at 9:45

"Speak God's Word"--Sunday at 9:45

“Lifted Up” Continuous Bible Class—Thursday at 6:00 p.m.