

RESCUE RUN BRINGS PAIN AND PLEASURE

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When I first started running, 13 years ago, the hardest part was getting out the door. That took willpower. But these days, I just go. Running has become a habit I love.

Yet it still has challenges, and I wouldn't want to run without them, particularly when some of the difficult tasks call on me, and me alone, to tackle them.

Take Rescue. That's what many local runners call a 16-mile run in the El Dorado Hills. Rescue itself is little more than a hamlet, about three miles into the route, consisting of a general store and a fire station. It is 45 minutes east of Sacramento, yet it is the hills that draw us. Sacramento doesn't have any, and runners are crazy enough to drive somewhere to find them.

Two Sundays back, I went there with friends. In addition to the usual series of ups and downs, we also ran in and out of fog.

Running through the denser shrouds of gray, everything near became intensely close - the breathing of others, the slap of feet, the beads of water on sleeves and hair.

In other places, the fog rose from the roads and fields, like Humboldt mist. The fields were shining, horses stood silently, and all things said, "Praise be."

But going to Rescue is never easy. Although I've gone there for more than 11 years, one stretch of hill is always hard. Until I reach the top, I'm never certain I'll get there. Doing it before is no guarantee.

The hill rises from mile 11 to mile 13 - and that's after facing a series of climbs almost as intense. This one, though, asks the most. It requires you to climb steeply, to hang on for two miles.

That day, as I attacked the hill, I noticed how our group spread out, some behind, some ahead. We were each in our own world, climbing on our own.

It made me think about how hills strike in our lives sometimes, hills like this anyway, where we're each, existentially at least, on our own, faced with the necessity of our own climbing.

You could see it among us. On the flats, we adjusted our pace for togetherness, some of us going a tad faster, others a tad slower, so that we could all run as a group and chat.

But once the hill struck, we each went into our own silent world, heads bowed, running with small, determined steps. No energy to see if someone else is keeping up. No energy to show some manners to the other runners.

Just moving up, trying to survive. Never sure until we got there.

But in the end, we all came together again on level ground, a mixture of friendship, relief and accomplishment. Rescue is hard. Every time. But when you stop at the 16-mile mark, it all seems worth it.

We patted our companions on the shoulders, maybe even hugged them. We drank some water, put on dry clothes, brushed our hair and joined the others for a chat and a laugh.

We felt good, reborn and full of love for life.

Rescue asks a lot, but we go there again and again because that's what we love. Here and there, we need to do tough things, even when they hurt. But if we hang on, the toughness is worth it.