



## How a startling diagnosis has led to a different lifestyle

BOB SMIETANA

# Walking in a New Direction

A mile into my workout at the gym and I start dreaming of cake. Chocolate cake with butter cream frosting that's chilled but not frozen—cold enough so the cake and frosting are firm and rich and so sweet that you lose yourself in the flavor.

And French fries, crinkle cut and just snatched from the deep fryer so crispy they almost snap when you take a bite. With buckets of ketchup on the side and a Blue Moon beer with a slice of orange to wash them down.

I could eat these things. Then I would die. Not right away but sooner than I want to. Before my children are grown and settled into lives of their own. Before my grandchildren are born. Before I have time to enjoy growing old with my beloved.

Four months ago a very nice nurse from my doctor's office called with the news that something was wrong with my blood work from a routine physical. A normal fasting blood sugar level, taken after not eating for eight hours, should be around eighty. My fasting blood sugar was 243—or three times normal and just below the level that requires a trip to the emergency room.

That test meant that I, like about 25.3 million other Americans, according to the American Diabetes Association, had diabetes. Even worse, the high blood sugar had begun to affect my kidneys, putting me at risk for kidney failure in the future. My body had become a ticking time bomb.

I had known for months that something was wrong. I was ill-tempered and flew off the handle at the

slightest frustration. Once, while driving home from vacation to the East Coast I began screaming at my wife in the parking lot of a Dairy Queen after eating a mocha blizzard—God only knows what my blood sugar was at that point. My eyes would not focus when I tried to read a book, and sometimes it felt like my blood was literally on fire.

A preacher once told me that the New Testament Greek word *metanoia*—which my Bible translates as “repentance”—really refers to a complete transformation, or metamorphosis. He said that it literally means to stop walking in one direction, to turn around, and begin walking the opposite way. Diabetes for me has meant that kind of transformation.

I had lived for years on fast-food cheeseburgers, coffee with extra sugar, fries, and pasta—those were my main four food groups, with a side order of garlic bread. They have all been banished, replaced by yogurt and bananas, salads made of carrots and baby spinach and romaine lettuce and sometimes goat cheese, and on more than one occasion, fresh asparagus along with whole wheat tuna wraps.

Every day without fail I walk two or three miles under God's blue sky and bright shining sun. It's amazing



how many problems melt away after forty-five minutes walking in the fresh noontime air. Every night I take two tablets that help my body cope with sugar. I hate feeling dependent on them, but if I want to live and keep my kidneys, I need them for now. The great irony is that I feel better now that I know I have diabetes than I did before my diagnosis, when I was sick and didn't know how near to death I was.

In the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy, the people of Israel stand outside the promised land with their leader Moses. He gives them a choice: “This day I call the heavens and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the LORD your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him” (30:19-20, TNIV).

So today I will choose life. I will not eat cake. Instead I will wipe the sweat from my eyes and continue running as fast as I can into the future. ■

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