

The Walk

By Justin J. Agoglia

Written in Starbucks, Commack, NY

(It's raining quite heavy, the clouds are dark, & lightening fills the sky. It looks so amazing)

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Over the past year, I purposely chose to focus my time with my family and a significant relationship. With what emotional energy and physical strength I had left in me, I felt this was where my priorities should be. Therefore, I didn't get involved with any volunteer work or other ministries. I spoke a few times, but other than that, I needed time to grieve the loss of my father and begin a new course of healing.

In addition, with my limited understanding about the bereavement process, I knew just enough that I couldn't run from my pain. I understood how much I loved my work, but that wasn't a good remedy. Immersing myself in my work or just busying myself with distracting commitments would only prolong my grief. Thus, delaying my pain would only delay my own ability to grow. And as a result, my current and future relationships would be in jeopardy. Therefore, I had two choices: 1) run from my pain, or, 2) slowly embrace this process. I chose the latter.

Because of this choice, turning away invitations to speak or partaking in things I really wanted to be a part of wasn't that difficult. But over the course of one year, I've been challenged to re-clarify my life purpose. One thing that happens to you after you lose a close loved one is that your purpose gets blurred. You become so disillusioned by the loss that your identity and overall purpose gets out of focus.

To be quite more candid with you, there were times I simply lost hope to live. I felt irrelevant and unimportant and I simply didn't want to live anymore.

My life seemed so insignificant as compared to the impact my father had on others that I questioned why I didn't get his illness. I don't have an answer for that but I had a choice: to be selfish or choose to live and invest my life in others. I'm committed to making a difference with the time I have left with my life and, even when my days are quite difficult (which I've experienced many times this year), I still try to anchor what limited faith I have in God.

For the past year, one ritual I've enjoyed has been walking Kole, our family dog (he's a mix of lab and a shepherd). This was an activity my father loved doing even after a strenuous day of work. Dad would arrive exhausted and Kole would greet dad with his infamous dance and howl. Kole's love for my father was so unique that dad felt like royalty whenever he was in his presence. Everyday was met with the same greeting. Dad always said that if we would meet the Lord each day with the same heart and passion that Kole greets him with, he believed our relationship with Christ would be so different.

I now personally have the joy of walking with this special creature everyday. He blesses me every time I'm around him as he once did with dad. Even when I traveled home from college, no matter if it was daytime or early morning, he would bolt down the stairs like a freight train, and then he would stand up on his hind legs, placing his two, front paws on the glass, sliding door. Everyone knew I was home because Kole made it clear. And then when I came in the house, he would jump up on me, give me kisses (little taps to my cheek), and then circle around the butcher block several times. What a greeting that was for me. He certainly has been a faithful and loyal companion over the years and has stood by my side through many losses, especially after dad died.

About a month ago as Kole and I were walking, I found myself asking what I could do to begin reaching out to others, something that I could

reasonably do under my current circumstances. Thinking back, I remembered past invitations I originally turned down or other events I wasn't able to attend, but, nothing caught my attention. Then, I realized my answer was right in front of me: it was the path on which I walk.

For the past year, I've had the privilege of meeting many of my neighbors along my street. Some have lived here for many years; others are new to the area. But on many occasions, I've come to learn more about them as they have walked out of their homes or as I pass their children playing in the street. I even had one mother come running out of her house just to say hello to me. She said she saw me walking and just wanted to come outside to say hello. Our paths first crossed on a day when her four children were playing outside with the neighbor's kids. I introduced myself to the mother and she followed by introducing herself. I was amazed at how much I was able to learn about her and her family by that one conversation.

Another neighbor has shared that her husband recently left her for another woman. As I converse with this mother, I can see the hurt written all over her face. Her sadness is apparent and her heart is heavy, not knowing the fate of her future.

Another couple was critically near divorce but, thankfully, they're still together. Every time I saw the husband in the fall, he would openly share his own personal struggles with me, from his marriage to his career. It is interesting to note that this same man was a volunteer nurse at the same hospital my father was in while he battled his illness. On top of that, he was stationed on the same floor my father was on. The way my father approached his illness impacted this man so much that, after my father passed away, he wanted to make dramatic

changes in his life, first and foremost was his relationship with his wife and, then his young daughter.

Another young couple - who I've only met one time - is always to themselves even when I see them. They don't seem too approachable; other neighbors share the same sentiment. I do know they just had their first child. Still, it doesn't matter how they approach me or others. I still pray for them, praying a blessing upon their lives.

There is one elderly lady who always seemed so angry. Whenever I saw her, she would never smile or say hello. I would, however, say hello even when she didn't respond. Thankfully, this summer I've noticed a little change in her: now she greets me with a wonderful grin.

This pattern of people opening a window to their heart seems to happen more and more as I walk with Kole. I'm touched by their candidness and often, I'm taken off-guard by how much they share with me. Maybe it's an indication of the depth of their pain. Or, perhaps, there may be another reason for their willingness to share a part of them with me. Clearly, it shows me that even as I wrestle with my own struggles, the people that live within my vicinity have deep wounds also. I'm not alone even though our pains are different.

Whatever the reason for their sharing with me, I've concluded that my ability to reach out was always directly in front of me. I've been walking this path for over a year now but, for the first time, my eyes were opened. Here was the opportunity to give away a part of me, the part that wants to reach out and give, not through my abilities but through my own brokenness. That was our common bond, that was our point of connection.

I believe a good part of the giving process for me includes waving to my neighbors, saying hello, or just offering a simple smile. It seems too insignificant.

But maybe that was part of the reason why some of these individuals felt comfortable to approach me and share. It's amazing when we can see that our hands, our lips, and tongues are more than just mere appendages that fulfill necessary needs. Shouldn't they be seen as powerful gifts given by our Creator? That's why when one loses such vital parts due to a tragic accident, an illness, or even a genetic disorder, they are such huge losses. It's because they are gifts that can truly touch the heart of another.

I think my greatest impact in "reaching out" has been in silent pray. Although I don't consider myself a "prayer warrior," I trust more in God's ability to hear my small prayers and then touch these people where they need it the most. Now as I pass each house, I pray for the individuals by name and specify their struggles or joys they've shared with me. What matters most to me is that my neighbors feel someone genuinely cares for them.

I now see my walk differently than I did before. As I walk with Kole and continually ask him, "Do you know who loves you?" and then respond with "Justin does!", I now see that my ability to reach out is right in front of me. My walk is more than a stroll. With a new set of lenses, I not only see the beauty of my surroundings, but also the landscape into the hearts of my neighbors - the area most fertile for life or death.

Hopefully my walk or my little waves or even a simply smile somehow touches a life. But my greater desire would be for others to sense Christ's immense love for them. I'm not sure how I'm doing with all of this. I simply will continue walking this walk, believing my Creator is doing something far greater and much deeper into these precious lives I now call my neighbors and friends.

Thought:

What about your “walk”? Even if you don’t have a dog, where can you walk where others are treading also? Remember that your ability to reach out lies not in your abilities and gifts; it’s at the root of your heart. In fact, your skills, your position, or even your economic status might just be the factor which prevents you from connecting with your neighbor or work associate. Our gifts can be a wonderful way to give, but don’t make that your starting point.

Start with your heart. Even as strange as it may seem for some, openly ask God to enlarge your heart and fill it with the compassion of Christ. Then, ask him to give you new eyes to, not only to **see** new opportunities, but, also **seize** those unique opportunities around you.