



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

This Is Your Walk

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Hello, my name is Sarah Blood, and earlier this summer I got married. By the time the wedding came around I had been planning the event for over a year. I knew exactly what kind of cake we would have, and which type of pens the guests would use to write in the guestbook. I had specific microphones allocated for the ceremony and for the dancing, and I had a list of every photograph that we had to be sure was taken.

So, when it came time to rehearse the actual ceremony, the night before the wedding, I realized that I didn't know exactly how I was supposed to walk down the aisle. That was not in any of my spreadsheets. So, I asked the coordinator how I should walk up the aisle, and she looked at me, and she paused, and she told me, "This is your walk, take your time, enjoy it." These seemed to be a kind of magic words that broke me out of my wedding planning haze and made me realize and enjoy what was happening in that moment.

As I continued to think about her words, I also realized however, that it wasn't just my walk. There was my father, for instance, who was walking me down the aisle. One could argue that it was also his walk; his chance to show the community that he loved his daughter, and he wanted to give her his blessing as she started a new life. And I began to realize that a wedding, just like the other ceremonies that mark the landmarks of our lives are about the community. They are about receiving the blessing of the community.

We were happy to have Hannah perform our ceremony, which drew on multiple different traditions. We asked my father, who is a Lutheran with thinly veiled Southern Baptist roots, to read the "Love is patient, love is kind..." reading from the Bible. Brian's brother read a text from the Dalai Lama, and we ended with an Apache prayer.

The ceremony went well, and we all ate dinner, and as people began to settle into their post dinner conversations we began the toasts. As is traditional, my father gave the first toast. I had been a little bit hesitant about whether I should ask him to give a toast or not. I think my final decision was driven by a deep and secret hope that he would say something really nice about me, but I knew that there was some definite risk involved when I we handed him the microphone.

After my father thanked everyone for coming to the wedding, he pointed out my mother where she was sitting at her table, and he said, "I am very happy that my daughter asked me to read today from the Bible. My beautiful wife, Sue, always read the Bible to our children. She read them the Bible at Sunday school, she read them the Bible at home, and she read them the Bible at Vacation Bible School." My dad continued with several variations on this theme. It was a little bit awkward, but we moved on and got through the toasts. The next day I was wondering out loud why he felt the need to say that, and Brian's brother Keith was able to provide me with what I think is the correct explanation.

My dad wanted to make sure, that if there were any good, devout Christians at the wedding, they should know that he and my mother had tried their best. They had really done all that they could have done, and all that could be expected of them. His daughter may be a Unitarian, but he had really done all that he could. In a way, I think my dad was giving himself an absolution. He needed to forgive himself for his inability to pass his beliefs on to his daughter, in a neat and unaltered package.

I am glad that we asked my dad to speak at the wedding. Not because I wanted to make sure everyone at the wedding knew that my mother had read me the Bible but because I believe in community, and my dad is a part of my community. I wasn't sure whether my dad and I would each be able to make room in our walks for each other. I didn't know whether he would leave room for me to be unsure of the existence of God, and I didn't know whether I would be able to make room for him to make reference to his personal faith in the Bible. In this case though, for one day, we were able to strike a tenuous balance. The balance that we found wasn't completely comfortable for either of us, but it allowed us both to make room for each other. I also recognize that this isn't always possible. It requires that both people make room for the other

in order to walk together. There are cases where our loved ones refuse to accommodate us on their paths, and we must diverge for a time in order to protect ourselves and to keep our footing. These points of divergence and convergence are often prompted by major life events and the attendant ceremonies.

Our lives are punctuated by community rituals, and in each case the phrase, "This is your walk," or even, "This is our walk," can be appropriately used. We come together to receive the blessing of the community when we walk a new baby around the church, when we agree to accept that baby and nurture it as a part of the community. When the youth walk from one side of the sanctuary to the other to signify that they have come of age and are ready to enter the adult congregation. We could tell them, "This is your walk," and also, "This is our walk." The walking becomes a metaphor in the ceremony, and this metaphor includes those who cannot physically walk. For example, the labyrinth that we are building in the courtyard will be used for our spiritual walks, and it will be wheelchair compliant. The community ritual reminds us that there is something greater than ourselves. For some, this something greater has a god component, for others, the something greater is the existence of new ideas or the powerful presence of nature, Redwood trees reaching up to the sky, or the flower from a garlic plant, simultaneously pretty and stinky. For others, the something greater is the existence and support of the community itself.

I have been coming to Neighborhood Church for a little bit longer than a year, and I have been consistently impressed by the youth of this church. Every time that I have had the opportunity to hear them tell us what they believe I am struck by how thoughtful they are about life. And the truth is that they challenge me to ask myself what I believe. So, when I first started to attend this church I made a list of what I believed, and now, looking back on that list, there are several items that apply directly to the topic at hand. I believe in the value of a community of people helping the larger group and caring for each other. I believe in the search for wisdom. I believe in peoples' need to find peace however they can find it. I believe that religious rituals can provide comfort, and I believe that accepting people as they are is very kind.

When two people get married, and they walk in a ceremony, the community gives them their blessing. That is why it is so important that we demonstrate with our sign out front and with our actions that we, the community, give our blessing to same sex weddings. Everyone has the right to grow up believing that they can find the person they love, and that their love will be blessed by the community to which they belong. People continue in their lives, and the funeral would be considered the final ritual for most traditions. In this final ritual we may be carried by those who are closest to us, acting as pall bearers. Some of you here today have recently participated in the dedication of a baby. Some of you have recently attended graduations, where students had their walks and formally received the blessing of their institutions. Some of you may, like me, have recently been involved with weddings, and some of you may be grieving someone who has recently passed. In each of these situations, we can take comfort in the ceremony of the community. None of us exist in isolation, we are all connected to each other, and we experience the blessing of our communities on our ceremonial walks.

I recently read an article about the dedication of a school for Native American adults in Fremont California. When the school opened, over 50 people from the community gathered at 5 am to participate in a blessing ceremony for the new school. The ceremony was called the "Walk of New Beginnings." The participants walked from the local high school, which had been housing the adult school program to the newly built Fremont adult school. Sage was lit and wafted through the air to bless the new location, in a process known as smudging, where the area is believed to be cleansed by the smoke. One of the students at the event said that "The purpose of the ceremonial walk was to put the bad energy behind them and to move forward in a more positive manner." After reading this article, I would like to add the "walk of new beginnings" to my repertoire of walking ceremonies.

The significant events of our lives are varied, and while some are joyful, some can be very difficult. We have all experienced times of difficulty and times when we were overwhelmed by life. In the introduction for his collection of poems, "Good Poems for Hard Times," Garrison Keillor recommends prayer, walking, and poetry. Of walking, he says, "Walking helps. Many people have pulled themselves up out of the pit by

the simple expedient of rising to their feet, leaning slightly forward, and putting one foot ahead of the other." This rang true for me when I read it. I remember when I was a freshman in college, I went from thinking I was one of the smartest kids in the state of Arkansas, to thinking I was probably about the 225th smartest kid in my incoming class, of 225 Caltech freshmen. It was a difficult time, but sometimes when I felt like I had no idea how to finish my problem sets I would go to the gym and get on the treadmill and just start walking, and I remember thinking, "Even though I don't have a strong understanding of Green's functions, I can accomplish something." My body can carry me forward, and I am in motion. This is not to say that walking is the only way to have this experience. One of my friends at school was in a wheel chair, and she once told me that when she couldn't figure out how to finish a math proof she would go out on the olive walk and go as quickly as she could forward in her wheel chair, just to get that feeling of forward movement. My husband and I like to walk around the Rose Bowl after church on Sundays, and a few weeks ago we saw a family walking with their dogs, and one of the dogs was an elderly golden retriever, the mother was pulling him in her children's red wheel barrow. I looked at the golden retriever, and in its face I saw some peace and some contentment, I saw a sense of forward motion. Recently, I was driving home from church on a weeknight. I was going East on Green street in my car, through Old Pas with my windows down, and I was joined by other cars, and bikes, and walkers, couples out to dinner, families with children, serious bike enthusiasts, and we were all traveling East together under the cover of an archway of trees, our hair buffeted by a cool wind. We were all going in one direction, on a one way street, and I felt a sense of common purpose and common motion.

One of the beliefs that I read earlier was that I believe in peoples' need to find peace however they can find it. I know that I have found peace from taking long walks. Thich Nhat Hanh is a Vietnamese Buddhist monk who was active in relief work for those who were displaced by the Vietnam War; he urged the US government to withdraw from Vietnam; and he was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1967. He is currently in exile from Vietnam and lives in France, where he is an important figure in Western Buddhism. He practices walking meditation. His instructions for walking meditation are these, start walking at a faster than normal pace, slow to a normal pace, and then slow until you become off balance, increase your speed just enough that you are comfortable. Walk with mindfulness of your breathing. Keep track of the ratio of steps to breathes and adjust as necessary. Keep a soft vision with relaxed eyes and smile with your eyes. Let your smile spread to your entire body. During walking meditation you do not set a destination so that walking becomes not a means but an end to itself. He says that every step should bring you back to the present moment, which is the only moment where you can be alive. When speaking to a Christian audience he advised them that each step they make, their foot prints onto the earth, and that they should practice printing serenity, happiness, and peace because when they go to heaven, they will need to walk in this way. The alternative would be to risk printing anxiety and fear on the ground of heaven and thus polluting it. He is training Christians for the ritual walks they will take in their version of heaven.

I am planning to try this walking meditation myself, and I am sure that as I practice it the words of our wedding coordinator will ring in my ears, "This is your walk." And I will be reminded of my dad, and how I love him even as he cannot have peace without the world knowing that my mother read me the Bible. She read it to me at home, she read it to me in Sunday school, she read it to me at Vacation Bible School. They have done all that could be expected from them, and this is my walk.