

WALKING THE PATH, CLEANING THE GUTTERS, AND HEARING THE VOICE

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Metaphors taken from a country walk provide a backdrop for educational and spiritual preparation as an instructor moves the teaching of spirituality and social work into the innovative modality of a retreat class setting. The intensity of such a setting demands that the instructor not only prepare to "talk the talk" (lectures), but more importantly spend time in preparation to "walk the walk" (centeredness).



The day is early; the walk is similar to ones taken many mornings since our move to this home over eight years ago. This home is my retreat, and a retreat for others. This home came our way during a time of difficult transitions, yet walking through the doors a peace was felt and a vision seen. The vision was the large, adjoining room providing a safe and secluded setting for my private practice, uninterrupted time to prepare for teaching at the graduate level, and solitude to write.

Today I write about my walk, for indeed the walk this morning was different, even though the path was the same. During the past twenty-four hours a northeastern storm came through, bringing torrents of rain and wind and shaking autumn trees of their remaining leaves. My walk always takes my feet down a quiet, winding country road. The beautiful scenery takes my mind from the stretching my legs encounter as I walk the gradual sloping hills. I intentionally chose this path for exercise and meditation.

Today, however, the walk is not quiet, for sounds of a rushing stream fill the air. The gutters at the side of the road have overflowed, spilling rainwater onto the roadway so that I need to weave in and out to avoid wet feet. The walk is not peaceful, but calculated, as I must use caution not to slip on the fallen leaves under foot. I do not hear the forest sounds of birds, chipmunks, and deer, for the animals have taken refuge

from the storm. Although the storm has ended, the wind rises up occasionally to remind me of her mighty power. Ahead the country road is flooded, and I move to the middle of the road to keep my feet dry and to continue on my journey. I look to the side of the road and see streams that were not there on previous walks, streams that have formed from the overflow of rainwater rushing down the side of the hill.

Life is much like a morning walk. I long for a morning walk of warm, refreshing air, a beautiful sunrise, and the sounds of nature as my symphony. Yet rushing streams, coming from nowhere, forcing one to the middle of the road to survive, often overrun life. Life can feel like a northeastern storm, cold, harsh wind and rain coming from an uncommon direction. Life takes deep concentration so one does not slip on the many obstacles on the path.

I think this morning of the life of my students, remembering my days of graduate schools and a doctoral program. What a slippery, harsh path that was for me. The path must be similar for my students. I see their anxiety, their fear, their insecurity, the juggling of school, work, and family, and I wonder what resources they have for their winding path. Perhaps my creative innovation of moving the class on Spiritual and Religious Dimensions of Social Work Practice into a retreat format will not only be educational,

but also provide a resource and respite for students on their journey.

My walk now takes me to higher ground, a flat, straight country road that passes beside a farm with a beautiful pond. Although the pond has over flown and puddles remain on the road, the walk is calm and quiet. The water here has run off and the level ground provides safety and security as I move my feet forward. A flock of wild geese have gathered beside the pond, finding strength and solace in each other's presence. In the distance is a lone mountaintop, and beyond the peak the skies are clearing.

My desire is that the retreat setting will be a time for students to experience some higher ground amidst their turbulent path through graduate school. I hope students will find some level ground for reflection, meditation, and how to help others in their work, for to bring peace and tranquility to others we must first have this for ourselves.

Returning home, I notice that my driveway is flooded. The water is rushing down *my* street, flooding into *my* driveway as the leaves inhibit the water from moving down the hill and into the nearby stream. I take my garden rake and pull the piles of leaves from the rushing water. I find I need to go deeper and deeper into the water to pull out clumps of wet leaves and place them into the nearby trashcan. Soon the water in the driveway empties out and continues on down the hill, emptying into the stream and rushing to an unknown destination.

My preparation as instructor at the retreat requires that I reach deep within, pulling out those clumps of wet leaves that might inhibit the work I can do with students. I need to examine the stale water in my life that has gathered from holding on to past storms. I need not only to understand the storms in my life, but also to allow the rushing waters the ability to carry the effects of the storm downstream and out to sea. Before I can be with others in their storms and help them find

safety and quiet on higher ground, I need to have my own gutters cleaned.

My morning walk is *my* spiritual dimension to *my* professional practice. In the beginning of the walk the struggle is understood. The end of the walk the struggle is resolved. Each day the walk is different. Each day I must listen attentively to the Voice on the walk. Today, as always, the Voice is clear. Today I heard the Voice in the rushing waters, the clogged gutters, the overflowing driveway, and the slippery leaves. I embraced the Voice in the calm waters of the higher ground and the community of geese. I look forward to a retreat of calm waters and a community of students where together we can hear the Voice on the path.

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