

“Walking on Our Heals”

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When I was six years old my family moved to a new house with a big spacious backyard. It was the home I grew up in until I went away to college. Our home was the only house on the entire block when we moved into it and it was surrounded by citrus groves and fields. Shortly after we moved into our new home my father began building a barn at the far end of our backyard.

One summer evening I decided to go out on my own and investigate my father’s work. From the eyes of a six-year-old it was a mammoth structure and all too inviting. I liked the smell of fresh timber and tar paper; to climb the handsome jungle gym of rafters and walking planks.

I was barefooted that evening as I walked to the far end of the backyard. As I approached the barn, I felt pain in the bottom of my feet. It was a piercing pain. I looked down and wondered why the grass I was standing on was hurting me so much. That was my first discovery of thorns. I wasn’t standing on grass. I was standing in the middle of a large patch of thorns. I was surrounded. The soles and heels of my feet were completely covered with those skin-piercing thorns. My feet began to bleed. Confused, tears began to flow. And I did the only thing a six-year-old in that predicament would do. I screamed for my MOM!

No answer came. No sight of that woman in her apron rushing out the back door to snatch her child up from his dilemma and his hurt. I was too far away from the house to be heard. The only thing left to do was to walk through more of those thorns.

And so I walked very, very carefully on my tiptoes, picking the thorns from my heels as I went along, and not without a great deal of cursing, even for a six-year-old.

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Eventually, I got back to our house where my mother dried my tears, put cold packs on my feet, and rocked me to sleep in the family rocking chair.

It was from that day on that I began walking on my toes. My identical twin brother didn't walk on his toes, so it was a heredity thing. It didn't matter from that day on if I had shoes on or not. I walked on my toes wherever I went. I should have figured it out back then when people would say, "That Dave, good kid, but a little light on his toes." Anyway, it was from that day forward that all that toe walking began to affect my posture. I was developing a swayed back.

One day, a few years later, in school, a teacher took notice of my posture and sent me to the school's posture teacher. Elementary schools actually had such teachers when I was a child. His job was to teach children proper posture habits. He quickly saw that my swayed back was due to my walking on my tiptoes.

Besides teaching me some exercises that would correct the sway in my back he matched me up with a classmate of mine who walked around pigeon-toed. He taught us some hand signals that we were to signal one another with if I caught my classmate walking pigeon-toed , or he caught me walking on my toes . When signaled, I was to then concentrate walking on my heels.

The two of us walked around school with our eyes fixed upon one another's feet. Well, a half hour of that routine and I was through with that exercise. But my classmate wouldn't give up. For days, I mean days, that kid followed me around school signaling me to get off my toes and to walk on my heels. I wasn't sure which was the worse, to go through life with a swayed back or to have this kid following me around school like those feeder fish, remoras, that eat the parasites on a shark's back. Finally, just to get this kid off my back, I began to walk on my heels. My posture began to improve. I learned, had to learn, and am still learning, how to step out on my heels.

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Most, really, all of us have had some experience in our lives when we have been hurt. Sometimes that hurt is traumatic. Sometimes it is a slow growing, disguised hurt. But whether it is traumatic or disguised, it is no less painful. It can feel as painful as those thorns were to that six-year-old boy standing in the middle of a patch of thorn on his way to inspect his father’s barn. It can be as physical as the blood that dripped from his feet, or as emotional as the unanswered cries for his mother.

Hurt leaves us vulnerable. It can make one overly cautious and even leery of feeling, of risking, of loving, of living, of stepping out, forward with confidence. And when that happens the postures of our spirits begin to sway, to take a shape that they are not meant or designed to take. That can happen with us as persons, in relationships as couples, as families, and yes, even as congregations.

So, this morning, in the time we have together, allow me the role of the posture teacher and offer up us some exercises that can help improve our postures, that shape our spirits, so that we are healed in the ways we are with ourselves, with one another, and the world, so that we may learn to walk on our heals (with an A).

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These exercises take, As Matt Meyer from last week would say, “Take practice practicing. They come in the form of Four questions, three of which I’m going to site from the Comedian Craig Ferguson from a recent article I read on mindfulness.

The first question to ask oneself is, “Does this need to be said?” Does the thing that I’m thinking from the back of my brain, the amygdala that tells me to fight or flee, need to actually be said at all or should I let it go? We all recognize when that part of ourselves begins to speak. What we want to say feels like it comes from the gut.

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The other day it shouted out to me. I was sitting on my balcony, watching boats go in and out of Boca Ciega Bay, when I saw a boat on which two flags were flying. One was an American flag and the other a Trump flag. Now, usually I would just scoff at the Trump flag but on that day, I saw that that Trump flag was hoisted above the American flag. I so wanted to yell at the top of my lungs at the captain of that boat that was a few hundred yards away. Having read the mindfulness question the day before, I asked myself, "Does this need to be said?" The answer was, No. Asking ourselves this first question helps us not to say something we might wish we could take back. It is like the hand signal shown to that little boy on his toes to pay attention where and how you are standing, walking in your relationship to self and to others. I think my neighbors were glad I asked myself the question, and as comedian Ferguson would say, "Nah, fuggedabout it!"

The second question that helps us to improve and shape our spiritual posture is to ask ourselves the question, "Does this need to be said by me?" Now we are beginning to notice our feet. The question starts the process of moving our thought from Amygdala to the frontal cortex of our brains. I'm aware you, if not all, then most of you, especially our Pastoral Associates, are knowledgeable of these functions of the brain. But what I would like for us to take away from this question is sometimes others can say, or get more quickly to the subject, better than ourselves, to produce the outcome we ourselves want.

This is the question that at times I am guilty of not asking myself soon enough, and so committee meetings go on longer than need be. We've all be in those meetings at one time or another, right? Someone makes a comment about a given subject that is to the point and well stated. But for the next 10 minutes the same comment is repeated in a number of ways by a number of people, myself included....the phrases I usually use go like, "I want to echo....I want to affirm what so and so just said....Let me restate what..."

That's when I'm not noticing I'm up on my toes. "Does this thing need to be said by me?" Sometimes, the answer is Yes. And, so often, the answer is No.

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The third question. “Does this need to be said by me now?” Timing can be everything as to whether we are heard or not, whether our message gets through or not. Whether in leadership positions or in marital bliss, asking ourselves that question is like the signal whether it’s safe to step down, fully on our heels. Say it when it doesn’t need to be said now and the reaction can be painful, like thorns. Say it when the signals indicate, “This is a good time to say it,” you will gain a sense of accomplishment, and most importantly of being heard.

Three questions of mindfulness that help us to do as Lea Morris sang at the beginning of this sermon, “To look inside,” to signal to our spirits, pay attention, look carefully how you’re walking.

“Does this need to be said?”

“Does this need to be said by me?”

“Does this need to be said by me now?”

Those signals lead me to a fourth question. It is the one to which, I believe, lies at the heart, not the gut of the amygdala, the discernment of the cerebral cortex, but at the heart of what it is to be a free, grace-filled human being. The question is simply this, “Is the thing I want to say or do bring justice into not only other human beings’ lives, mine included, but at some level, to all of what I would call, God’s creation, to that infinite mystery to which we bow down?”

I’ll conclude with a dream I had just a few days ago. The structure of the dream is one of those reoccurring dreams I have from time to time, and they usually stem from some anxiety I am feeling or experiencing in my waking life. The dream went like this...

I am called upon to preach but I have no transcript of my sermon. There is a crowd waiting for me to enter the pulpit. In this dream, they are all standing, waiting. Usually, in such dreams I cannot locate my pulpit robe or stole. Not in this dream.

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I'm dressed in normal street clothes. I get behind the pulpit but still no transcript of a sermon to be found. I'm anxious. Most often in these type of dreams I end up preaching a fabulous sermon extemporaneously. Not so in this dream. I look down at a shelf in the pulpit and spy a book that is light red/maroon in color. I pick it up, open it, and it automatically flips open to a passage, Micah 6: 6-8. Some of the words look like they are written either in Aramaic or Greek, I'm not sure which. And then I wake up, but I remember the citation.

It's like 3:00 o'clock in the morning. I think to myself, "I've got to be sure that when I get out of bed in a few hours I will have to look that passage up. I wonder what it says, and I go back to sleep. 7:00 a.m. my dog Mindy tells it time for her breakfast, and I get out of bed. After putting her dog dish down I grab my Bible, open it up, and it is bookmarked right at Micha 6:6-8. I'd not looked at that passage since read at Aryna husband's, Neal Bastisste's memorial service back in December.

It's that passage in Hebrew prophetic literature that asks, not unlike the fourth question I presented to you, "...what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" Whether we call it mindfulness, or by some other prophetic name, the question of justice stands paramount in what we ultimately value. Do our words and actions have us walking firmly in the ways we have experienced healing, those words, and actions we've received signal to us the posture our spirits are meant to take to be whole, that enable, make possible, for us to walk with confidence on those heals of ours?

I didn't start walking on my heels back in elementary school right away. It sometimes took another person, that kid back then; like Rev. Roberta and Meredith are to you now, to signal this is the moment, to dare, to step forward fully on your feet with confidence, even though feeling vulnerable. And like that kid, a promise we won't be so hurt again in just the same way as when I found myself in that patch of thorns one summer evening. I learned something that day. Don't go to the barn without

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sandals on your feet. I wouldn't feel that pain again in that same way but I still had to learn to stop walking on my toes.

It's taken some time to learn and practice practicing that. and still on occasion I find myself on my toes, especially when dancing. But here is what I've learned in the process and I invite you to consider it. Once walking on our heels we are no longer the persons we once were. Our posture in the world begins to take on the shape it was meant to take. The person who lost their hearing but is given it back again through state-of-the-art hearing aids or surgery, can hear not only beautiful music or delight in a grandchild's laughter, but now they are also able to hear the cries of those who are hungry and homeless. The person whose cataracts are removed from their eyes can once again see clearly a beautiful sunset, or the glee in their lover's smile, but are now also able to see the brutality by which a black man in this country dodges or confronts each day when driving in their car.

Open your spirit to do those things that are mindful of your and another person's worth, the worth of this planet upon which we live and sustains our being, and you'll be walking on those heels of yours. Never the same person again. Unitarian Universalist values and principles, Jesus' sermon on the mount, Yahweh's covenant with Abraham, beg us to do justice and in so doing a person comes to know themselves as a person of worth. In my book, in my dreams, nothing else is of any greater consequence than that.

When I was asked to be your pastoral minister, I asked Susan Gore what it was that this congregation needed in pastoral care. Her response was immediate, “Rev. Dave, we need you to come love us. This congregation needs some lovin’.” I've tried to be mindful of her plea back then by asking myself at times, “Does this need to be said? Does it need to be said by me? Does it need to be said by me now?” The answer to all three of those questions today is a resounding YES. Friends, love one another. Be about the healing you have begun, and you will indeed walk on your heels, so that

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others will come to know that you hold them as persons of worth. That is the work of justice.

May it be so and Amen