

## Step by Step

How far is it? How close can I park? How many steps? Not to worry. I can manage. My problem is nothing dramatic. Simple forthright diagnosis: DJD in both knees. Arthritis? Yes, but DJD, degenerative joint disease. In other words, the knees are shot.

Yes, they're worn out. My back, too. Is it a surprise that I unconsciously begin to count as I trudge the long corridors from Maria Fifth Floor to the other end of my Notre Dame of Elm Grove world, Holy Family Chapel. You would think some pious mantra would mark my hobble, but I catch myself saying "one, two, three...twenty-five, twenty-six, twenty-seven...eighty, eighty-one, eighty-two, until I skid to a mental stop and realize what is going on in my mind and body. Every step, a victory. A slow, plodding victory. Sister Alexius hustles past with her armful of music. Sister Karen emerges with her walker, shrugging, "Why do we have to have a 7 a.m. Mass—it feels like midnight." Sister Esther Mary heads for the balcony with "When I see you, I know I'm on time." I miss meeting Sister Cedilla, 96, hustling along on her motorized vehicle still full of energy until her recent death. I trudge down Caroline Hall in the slow lane. It is a little more direct than Theresa Hall. How many steps to the chapel? I've never really counted footsteps. Stair-steps I know. Six steps down to the garden door, then three easy ones up at the chapel to the chapel entrance. Strong handrails at both ends. And my arms and legs share responsibility for these downs and ups.

DJD. How has this happened? Who am I? Is this the same person who biked sixty miles from LaCrosse to Sparta?

The one who walked all the way from Via della Stazione Aurelia to Hospital Salvator Mundi in Rome? Who climbed Granddad's Bluff in La Crosse? Played tennis and field hockey and softball by the hour?

Did I really walk from Murray Avenue through Lake Park, down Lake Drive, to McKinley Marina and up St. Mary's Hill, then through the neighborhood to our SS. Peter and Paul home.

Did I really manage the cobblestones and hills of Rome? Was I the one on that long Sunday walk of reconciliation and sharing from Monte Verdi Vecchio to St. Paul's Outside the Walls, and the endless, joyful walk back—how many kilometers? —to Piazza di Spagna and Via del Babuino and then after taking two buses home faced the last long climb up the generalate hill.

What has happened to those knees? I plan ahead now. I mentally measure the distance and weigh the cameras before going from my fifth floor room to the grape arbor. Yes, I'll need wheels to move my camera and take those pictures I promised Judy. Wheels, yes.

How far is it? How do I feel? I reach for my walking stick, my third leg when I venture out for a walk. Why am I surprised? DJD is like this. The great gifts of railings and elevators are matched by the gift of simple, supported mobility. I get where I need to go. I learn to dovetail errands. I smile when the rhyme of Hilaire Belloc pops into my head:

*“The snail does the holy  
will of God slowly.”*

Step by step. Moment by moment. Week by week, month by month, I walk. I waddle. I stop to flex my creaky knees. I take more time. I count my steps. I bless the wonder of walking. I joy in the memory of effortless walking, climbing, discovering, searching, when eyes and heart delighted in the places my feet, my ankles, my knees, my hips—even my arms—could take me

Mountain paths, dusty roadways, wooded parks, rocky shores and sandy beaches, museum corridors and multi-tracked railway stations, mountain shrines, and hilltop monasteries—thank you, knees for every step. Thank you, body. Thank you, Creator and Giver of life.

And thank you for the simple gift of finding new ways to retrieve dropped notes, to put on my socks, to tie my shoestrings, and to reach bottom shelves.

Thank you for reminding me that I am walking an inner journey too, even as I limp along at a strange, simple, grateful pace. Or is it a strange, simple, grateful *peace*? “Thee God I come from to Thee I go” wrote Hopkins. Step by step. Step by step. Until at last “I run, I run, I am gathered to your heart.” (Alice Meynell)

– Mary Luke Baldwin, SSND