

November 17, 2013 (morning before installation)
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Theme: Perspective
Sermon: Turn Around When Possible

Reading: “Autobiography in Five Short Chapters” by Portia Nelson

Chapter One

I walk down the street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I fall in.
I am lost... I am helpless.
It isn't my fault.
It takes forever to find a way out.

Chapter Two

I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I pretend I don't see it.
I fall in again.
I can't believe I am in the same place.
But it isn't my fault.
It still takes a long time to get out.

Chapter Three

I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I see it is there.
I still fall in... it's a habit.
My eyes are open.
I know where I am.
It is my fault... I get out immediately.

Chapter Four

I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I walk around it.

Chapter Five

I walk down another street.

Here ends the reading.

Sermon: Turn Around When Possible

I have absolutely no sense of direction.

In Divinity School, I took a year off to do my internship, and I moved out to New Jersey because I really wanted to work with a minister and congregation I had found there. I hadn't owned a car for years at that point. I walked everywhere and took the T. But in the New Jersey suburbs, owning a car was a must. There was no other way to get around. So I bought a car and started driving everywhere.

This was before the Global Positioning System, "GPS," was a common appliance. I had maps, and I even had directions I could print off the internet. But as soon as I made my first wrong turn—and I always made a wrong turn—I'd be done for.

One night I was heading over to join a family from the congregation who had invited me to dinner. I started driving the 5 or 6 miles to their house with plenty of time to spare. But I could not find their home.

It got to be dusk, and then dark. There was a street I was supposed to turn on to, quite near their home, and after a while I found the street sign, and made the turn. But I ended up lost again. I found my way back to that intersection and made that turn again and again and each

time, did not end up where I was supposed to. I did have a cell phone, and I called the family several times, they tried to help me, but finally the husband had to meet me in the parking lot of a Best Buy I had driven past several times, and lead me to their home. Pretty embarrassing!

What I finally figured out, after driving through that neighborhood in daylight another time, was that on closer examination, it looked like a vehicle had hit the street sign for the street I was looking for, and the street sign had gotten twisted about 90 degrees. I was turning away from the street I was supposed to turn towards.

As the poet said,

It wasn't my fault.
But it still took a long time to get out.

As you might imagine, the emergence of the GPS, in cars and on phones, has changed my life. I can find my way now. When I make a wrong turn—and I still, always, make a wrong turn, the GPS recalculates for me. It gets me back on the right path. “In 400 yards, turn right. Now, turn right.” But the direction that I hear most often on the GPS is probably “Turn Around When Possible.” If the computer had a personality, it would be very frustrated. “Again? She missed her turn again? Turn around when possible!”

The GPS I use in my car has the option of many different voices it can give directions in. There is the neutral male American voice, the nice British lady voice, the charismatic Australian voice. I could even choose the voice of Mr. T. “I pity the fool who doesn't turn right here!” At some point, I complained to my husband Ben that the last thing the GPS says when you reach your destination is “You have reached your destination” in a very flat tone. (Mr. T said “You have reached your destination, fool!”) Given my lifelong lack of direction, I wanted more fanfare when I actually managed to arrive somewhere successfully.

So then, Ben figured out that you can actually record your own voice to give directions. There are about 50 words and phrases you can record yourself saying and then you upload it to the GPS. So one day I got in the car and discovered my GPS now gave me directions in the voice of my husband. And when I got to my destination, Ben said, “You have reached your destination. Good job! [clapping!]” But, when I had to make a U-turn because I had once again, gotten lost, instead of the gentle “Turn around when possible,” Ben said, “Stop playing with the radio and pay more attention to the road....U turn.” Mixed blessings!

My friend Kim Luck has said that she wishes she had a GPS for her life. So many decisions would be easier, the path less confusing. “In 2 years, get married. Now, get married.” Instead of a GPS, she says, she has to trust her somewhat unreliable G.U.T....her gut.

We all have holes in the sidewalk we keep falling in. And even when we finally, one day, walk down a new sidewalk—well, that sidewalk probably has some holes in it too! We are always learning and growing and climbing up out of holes.

I like that the author of the reading, Portia Nelson, points out that sometimes when we fall in a hole, it isn't our fault. And sometimes, it is. Actually, if she had added another chapter, I would say that most of the time we fall into holes for a complicated mix of reasons that are both our fault and not our fault. The world is too complex to place blame on either me or you. Either way, we still need to climb out.

What holes have you fallen into? Did you fall again and again? How did you get out? Did someone help you? Or are you still making the climb?

I had an experience of climbing out of a hole I thought I would share with you. In the same way that I apparently was born without a sense of direction, I was also a very, very shy child. Painfully shy. On family vacations at the beach my little sister would make new friends

instantaneously, running off into the ocean with someone she met 30 seconds before. I could barely make eye contact with anyone I didn't know. Going to new places without a friend to rely on was deeply, physically painful. I had terrible anxiety if I was on my own in a social situation. Shyness makes it hard to approach people and it can also make an impression of coldness or haughtiness, which makes it even harder for other people to approach you—a double-edged sword. I was really nervous going off to college, and having to make all new friends.

So on that first day of college orientation, I walked into the big concert hall where all the other freshman were gathering for a speech by the Dean. Hundreds of kids filled the room, and the concert hall's stadium seating loomed above me, filled with strangers. My vision swam.

And I thought to myself, quite literally, "It is time to make a choice about who I want to be." Did I want to continue being a shy person, whose own fearful behavior made it hard to make friends? Did I want to go sit by myself and avoid eye contact and be afraid? Or could I choose another way?

I walked up the steps into the crowd. I looked around. I saw a face I recognized, someone who had moved into a room on the same hall as me earlier that day. And I said, "Can I sit here?" I sat down next to her and I said, "My name is Claire." And then the girl on the other side of her I didn't recognize said, "Oh wait! I know you! A friend of mine went to your high school." And she introduced herself. And we all started talking. And I wasn't shy any more.

Okay, that is not true. I was still shy. But I refused to act shy any more. I still had the same fears and anxieties in the back of my mind. But instead of continuing to let my fear dictate my behavior, I acknowledged the fear, and then did the opposite of whatever it were telling me to do.

I don't really know what pushed me to make that change that day. But it felt like a leap of faith. And it was transformative.

Now, 15 years later, I very rarely feel that shy self any more. If I feel stressed in a social situation, that stress is an internal reminder to stand tall, make eye contact, and introduce myself to whoever is looking a little alone, a little standoffish, in the corner of the room. I hope that my experience as a secret formerly shy person pushes me to reach a hand out to someone still living in the hole I used to be stuck in.

It really helped that the first people I started talking to that day were kind, friendly, and open. In a lot of ways, I reached a hand out of that hole, and without even knowing it, they pulled me up and helped guide me down a new sidewalk. I'm still friends with them, today, in fact. It is amazing what can be born out of a little eye contact and introducing yourself.

I'm reminded of another old story. It goes like this. A guy falls in a deep hole. A doctor walks by, writes a prescription for the guy, and throws it in the hole. Then a priest walks by, writes a prayer, and throws it in the hole. The guy is still in the hole, helpless, when finally a friend walks by and jumps in the hole. "What are you, nuts? Now we're both in a hole!" the guys says. And the friend replies, "Yeah, but I've been down here before, and I know the way out."¹

How are you helping other people get out of their holes? Are you taking the time to reach out, to share a kind word?

I think we are asked to do this work on both a small and large scale.

The Philipines has fallen into a hole it simply could not have avoided. Typhoon Haiyan was terrible in its devastation. It was no particular person's fault and yet this storm was everyone's fault—because I believe humanity has caused the climate change that leads to these super-storms. The work of environmental justice is life or death. We can find another way, but it will take a lot of work.

¹ Who knows who originally wrote this, but Aaron Sorkin used it in *The West Wing*, and it was recently re-used in the January 2013 issue of *Esquire*.

Part of what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist is that we believe we are all connected, all part of an interdependent web of existence. And so, as people of faith, we are called to try to fix the sidewalk. All the sidewalks! Everyone's sidewalk, everywhere!

And that is hard work, especially as we are no better than anyone else, and our own sidewalks have plenty of holes.

So here we are,
trying to pave the way to a better world
while also doing our own work of climbing out of holes,
and trying to open our eyes to the pitfalls in front of us.

That seems like work enough for one life.
It's a good thing we have each other.
Take my hand.
I am grateful that we are walking together.

Amen.