

**The VALUE Of SIDEWALKS**  
**and LIVING WHERE the SIDEWALK ENDS**

My dogs Dizzi and Molly Brown are not used to sidewalks. For some reason when the part of Little Rock we had lived in was developed they didn't require sidewalks. Molly Brown is 10 now and doesn't wander as far, but Dizzi goes to the end of her leash and that often takes her into the street here in Stockton. We have long referred to Dizzi as our Arkansas Brown Dog, and she is a bit of a good natured hick even if she can put together some mean-sounding barks. Molly is a bit more worldly, having been born in Florida and traveling as a pup to Southern California where she lived her first year before we moved to Little Rock. Neither of the dogs is all that excited to have boundaries, but even in Arkansas they lived in a fenced yard around the house and walked on the leash. For their safety, I have never left my dogs to wander without any limits, but the process of acclimating Dizzi to life with sidewalks got me thinking about the edges of society and the choices we make to live in cities rather than out in the woods.

Of course, I also have been thinking about the choice you made to call me as your minister and the choice I made to accept that call. Now I grew up in the suburbs of Chicago, so I started out with rows of houses beyond the sidewalks that lined every block along every street, with only occasional breaks for the few remaining undeveloped lots and for the green spaces of the Cook County Forest Preserve, which had its own trails. I was lucky to live just 5 long blocks from the forest preserve, so by the time I was 11 or 12 I was frequently out riding my bike with friends along Salt Creek between Bemis Woods and the Brookfield Zoo. In any case, I know suburban areas intimately, and this is my third time living in California, so it is not really a shock to my system to be back living in the land of sidewalks.

On the other hand, like many of you, I have also lived out beyond where the sidewalk ends. There were still sidewalks where I went to college and seminary, and even Riverton, Wyoming, where I served as student Associate Minister at the Methodist church mostly had sidewalks. I think it was the

little town where I served my first church out of seminary in Walden, Colorado where I first experienced life without sidewalks. Walden sits at a little over 8000 feet of altitude in the North Park basin surrounded by the Rockies, with the closest shopping in Laramie, Wyoming 60 miles away. Both weeks of summer were just beautiful in Walden, but all the farm and ranch folk were friendly if a little bit too much in survivalist mode much of the year. The winter was long and cold, and the warmest room of the parsonage heated by a wood stove. We brought my firstborn, Jessica, home into that setting just a couple of months after moving there. It was a hard place to live, though the surrounding natural beauty was amazing. When we moved to Great Falls, Montana, after a year, we re-entered civilization-- though the home we bought on the edge of town was in a section not fully covered by sidewalks, as I recall. My son Aaron was born in Great Falls, a generally more accommodating area!

A few years later, after my first divorce, I lived for 2 years in Kremlin, Montana, along the high line, 20 miles west of Havre. I served as Associate Minister in Havre, and Pastor to the 29 members of the Kremlin United Methodist Church. Kremlin also lacked sidewalks and a store and most of the things we might associate with society! It was surrounded by wheat fields, where I briefly worked on a farm when I was ready to take a break from ministry as I started to break away from United Methodism on my way toward Unitarian Universalism! Another experience of living beyond the sidewalks came after my second wife Jane and I moved out of suburban New Jersey into a rural resort area on the north end of the Poconos, near Milford, Pennsylvania. In that setting we were regularly visited by a herd of deer, a flock of wild turkeys, and an occasional Black Bear.

For most of us, sidewalks are just a normal part of civilized life, but historians know how much difference sidewalks have made in the development of this country. They are perhaps not quite as dramatic a factor as railroads and highways in the history of this nation, but they surely are symbolic of the transition from normative rural life to modern city life. There is a ghost town near Dillon, Montana called Bannack. It once was the Territorial Capital of Montana. It comes back to life one weekend a year for Bannack Days, but I contrast Bannack with another mining town, Virginia

City which quickly became quite a civilized town. I don't think Bannack ever built any sidewalks, but Virginia City is still a town and tourist destination in part because it built sidewalks.

When I was in high school and read Thoreau's *Walden*, I started a lifelong hunger for the wild, the untamed places, the land beyond the sidewalk. I later read John Muir and Walt Whitman and others who wrote of even wilder and more exciting places, but the hunger to escape society and commune with nature has never left me. It is in regular trips into the wilderness that I find my deepest sense of spirituality. When I was in the intermountain region, I frequently visited Yellowstone and the Tetons, and occasionally journeyed to Glacier National Park. When I was in California before, I went to Yosemite, Sequoia, and Kings Canyon National Parks and even more frequently to our own Camp De Benneville Pines in the mountains above Redlands and the LA Basin.

It was only a few years ago, that I really became aware that Thoreau's sojourn at Walden pond was subsidized and supported by his friend Ralph Waldo Emerson, who owned the land. Emerson's writings about nature and society have left their own imprint on many of us. Today too much of the wilderness has been tamed, but pieces still remain in the National and State Parks and even in bits in our own yards. I was blessed to have a bit of wilderness in my back yard in Little Rock, and I am again blessed to have a bit of wilderness to enjoy in the form of a beautiful redwood here in my back yard in Stockton. The sidewalk may go around my block but it doesn't go around my tree!

As human beings we adapt well to city and suburban life most of the time, with only occasional outbreaks of rioting, but our spirits also need time to go beyond where the sidewalk ends, to sit on the beach at the ocean, to climb a mountain, to hike in the woods, to stare at the stars and planets in the night sky. Such moments rejuvenate our spirits, remind us of our place in the universe, both humble and exalt us. Part of us remains animal, not fully tamed, not really domesticated.

I'm looking forward to becoming acquainted with the Delta and its natural and protected wetlands. I brought with me a canoe and a kayak and a couple of inflatable boats, so I am looking for opportunities to go exploring. I thought I might drive out to look for big trees tomorrow for my day off, but keep me in mind if you are looking to share an adventure! I have enjoyed the first 50+ years of my life and I fully intend to enjoy whatever years I have left! Stockton may be a bit urban or suburban, but it is so close to so many beautiful places. Thanks for bringing me here!

Unitarian Universalists tend to support groups like the Sierra Club, World and National Wildlife Funds and groups, Oceana, the Humane Society, and Defenders of Wildlife and a variety of Conservation Groups. We value, appreciate, and enjoy the natural world. We may not worry as much as some religious communities about what may or may not be beyond this life, and we have a range of beliefs about heaven and any possible afterlife. We include both atheists and theists, believers in God, the Goddess, the Interconnected Web of life, Science as the ultimate word, and those who only believe in humanity and the world we see. We generally agree on the importance of justice, equality, compassion, and care for the world in which we live. Though we tend to be mature white folks, we are welcoming to all who come and we believe deeply in diversity and acceptance.

Soon we will have some events to explore how best to live out our values, hopes and dreams together. We will be looking at our vision for how the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Stockton will live out its mission. Together we will help shape our vision and mission of what the church is becoming, building on the foundation of 100 years of service to Stockton and the world. I consider it an honor and privilege to serve as the first settled minister of this church's 2<sup>nd</sup> century! I look forward to the ministry that we shall share together in coming days, months, and years!

Even as much as the church building is surrounded by sidewalks we must find new ways to invite the natural world into our religious home. Already we are surrounded by beautiful gardens full of amazing Roses and Agapanthus! I particularly enjoy both of those varieties of plants. Arkansas was too hot and humid in the summer and too mild in the winter for growing

many roses, but had too frequent frost for agapanthus, citrus and most hibiscuses.

One of the dangers of not venturing out beyond the end of the sidewalk is to remain ignorant of the natural world, to believe that society is all that there is. We who dare to go beyond the end of the sidewalk have so much broader understandings of the universe and our own kind than those who never leave the city. Those who never leave the city cannot really see the full array of stars and planets in the night sky, for the lights of the city make that impossible. Those who never leave the city cannot see the full run of rivers from the mountains through the forests to the sea, nor see so many animals in the wild. There is just so much world to see beyond the end of the sidewalk!

We who see further must be protectors of the spirit of the wild. We must be interpreters to others of the needs of our planet, we must be voices for conservation of the natural world, even as we also speak justice for GLBTQ and Q persons, and for the poor, and for immigrants, and for those of many hues who have suffered prejudice and injustice. Those of us who have benefitted so richly from gifts of the universe and generations before have the opportunity to pay forward those blessings by the lives that we live and the stories we tell, by the work that we do and the causes we champion. Of those who have been given much, much is expected! It is now left to us to be voices for the future!

Step carefully when the sidewalk ends. Notice the creatures you see and the places you go. Beware of the occasional rattle snake or grizzly bear, but walk on into the wilderness, for there are amazing things to see and do! Live fully and let your stories be an inspiration for those who will follow! Carry the spirit of the wild wherever you may journey! So may it be.

Shalom, Salaam, Blessed Be, Namaste, and Amen!