



by Jan Johnson

W A L K I N G W I T H G O D

Honestly, I really didn't mean for it to become a "spiritual" experience. I needed to vary my aerobic workout routine, so I began an arm-swinging high speed walk in our housing tract. But my teenage daughter was embarrassed to have Mom turning nearby corners in workout shorts, so I took to a lonely canyon road, cluttered with garbage and swathes of mud.

Perhaps because practicing the presence of God has been my favorite spiritual discipline, God showed up in everything around me. The tumbleweeds nested at edge of the road represented the stumbling blocks of my life—annoyances with those I loved, reluctance to do difficult things, yearnings for a problem-free life. So I scooped up those tumbleweeds and hurled them off the cliff-like side of the road into the creek below.

Over the years, the mountains in the distance have become massive

symbols of God's presence. I've named the peaks for Bible phrases or life lessons God has taught me. During a painful church split, the sharply pointed peak became: "Don't forget to love" (the point of the gospel). I've never thought very hard about these truths because I've been too busy panting, chugging water and heading into the wind. I've simply gazed as I've walked, and days later I've found myself loving those I've disagreed with.

Because I often listen to worship songs as I walk, my sense of God's great majesty is expanding. During certain songs (please don't laugh), I do a few twirls in the road, while watching out for gravel trucks. Also while enjoying God's presence, God reminds me of folks to love and people to whom I should pay more attention. As a result, my service to Christ has become more a part of

who I am, rather than special moments of being *Super-Christian*.

Conversations With God

My walk doesn't look like prayer, but it is. God engages me in conversation, giving creative methods for dealing with my teenagers, new ideas for my work and just the right words to say to my discouraged husband or friends. Because my particular job causes me to

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"live in my head" all day, I need this walk to force me "out of my head" into a rugged physical effort that clears my circuits. Freed from my own clever ideas and agendas, I can more easily hear God's unexpectedly practical ideas.

Many times, especially in the earliest years of this walking regimen, the “committee that lives in my head” took over for minutes at a time. One committee member, Ms. Anger, focused on someone I was mad at and what I’d tell him or her if I ever got the chance. Then I’d feel guilty that I’d stolen time from my God-filled reverie. One particular day, I stopped, stomped my foot in disgust and crossed my arms. I demanded that God jettison these negative thoughts from my mind.

If you’ve ever put God on the spot this way, you know what happened. Nothing. A boulder didn’t fall from the nearby cliff. A lizard with a sign on his back didn’t cross the road in front of me. As I began to shuffle along, I wanted to kick myself. I looked up at the cliff beside me and thought of my son, who taught rappelling. He could have shimmied up and down that cliff with skill. But I would have been stuck on a ledge somewhere, clinging for life and breath. The word, “clinging,” changed everything. As I heard myself think that word, I thought of a psalm: “My soul clings to you” (Psalm 63:8).

Walking While Focused on God

Suddenly the point of my canyon road walks (the aim of my life, even) became clear—to cling to God. Striving to do spiritual disciplines perfectly, or even to live life perfectly, was *all about me*. I needed only to cling to God with everything I had. As I connected to God through disciplines such as Bible study, prayer and service, God would change me. I invented my own little saying: “As I do the connecting, God does the perfecting.”

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Armed with this graced insight from God, I’ve learned to usher the “committee members” (Ms. Victim, Ms. Rescuer, Ms. Perfect Christian) to the door of my mind gently whenever they appear. Getting frustrated with them doesn’t help—it just makes me forget God.

Finding God in the mundane seems like it should happen on a sunny afternoon while watching geese swim in an idyllic pond. Sometimes it does, but I’ve had to remind myself that God often shows up in unexpected, gritty situations when you’re feeling edgy and sweaty.

Others have verified this by telling me of their close-to-the-bone conversations with God while mowing

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the lawn, shooting hoops or constructing a compost heap. Why does it surprise us that God’s presence becomes obvious in such vigorous and tactile situations?

If you’re a shepherd, God might show up in a bush that burns too long. If you’re a hardworking, water-toting Palestinian woman, God might show up as a thirsty out-of-towner at your well. If you’re a swindler and manipulator, God might show up as a wrestler who makes sure your hip socket is never the same. The lives of Moses, the Samaritan woman and Jacob demonstrate to me how God shows up in mundane moments and unexpected places, and that God wants me to respond.

Moses had to ponder the bush and walk over to it. The Samaritan woman had to keep from smarting off to the Jew who didn’t belong in her neighborhood but requested her help anyway. Jacob, desperately stuck between a rock (Laban) and a hard-hearted brother (Esau), waiting in the night at the River Jabbok, had to wrestle his way into blessing. God wants me to respond by participating in conversation with him.

Staying alert this way makes life much more exciting. I keep my eyes open for this incognito constant companion, anticipating his next move, looking for his invisible kingdom. God’s companionship becomes the most pervasive thing in life. □

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