

More Than Just a Walk

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“How come we don’t walk to school?” Ryan asked from the back seat during the 3-4 minute drive to school.

When he asked, Ryan was a second-grader, and this was the first time he had questioned our daily driving habit.

We *could* walk; his elementary school is within walking distance. But we don’t.

Walking to school certainly has its benefits. We would save some gas. Save ourselves the hassle of looking for a parking spot. Help our environment while increasing our amount of daily physical activity. But we don’t.

“We don’t walk because of my legs,” I told him. It was a short answer, because I was afraid I’d cry if I tried to give him the longer answer.

The longer answer is that my legs are unpredictable. I might feel fine to begin the walk to school. I would most likely feel less than fine on the walk home.

I live with a rare autoimmune disease called Undifferentiated Connective Tissue Disease. It has overlapping symptoms of lupus, rheumatoid arthritis, and myositis which means each day, I experience levels of pain, fatigue, and weakness in my legs, with my left leg being worse than the right.

I became ill when Ryan was two. He has grown up (he’s now a seventh grader) knowing that there are certain things I can’t do (run) and certain things I do daily (take medication) and certain things I do often (visit the doctor).

Each afternoon before the dismissal bell, I would park near Ryan’s elementary school and take myself on a slow, leisurely walk in the neighborhood. I walk just for the sake of walking, because I know it’s good exercise. Because I like walking when I’m not hurting. Because I like looking at people’s gardens, and I’m a person who will stop and marvel and watch a butterfly or a hummingbird.

Even on those non-rushed neighborhood walks there have been scary moments. A tightening in my calf as I cross the street. A twinge in my left knee as I step up onto the curb.

Moments when I have to pause and hold onto a stop sign for support. Times when I have looked around and tried to calculate how far I was from school and if, in my increased-pain-state, I'd make it to the schoolyard before the dismissal bell rang.

I don't know if Ryan remembers (he was in kindergarten at the time), but there was an instance when he and I had walked to a neighborhood park to "shoot hoops." I felt fine walking there. I even did okay when it was my turn to shoot baskets. But on the walk back, my legs felt incredibly weak. Each step was a challenge. At one point, I had to sit down on someone's front lawn because my legs simply couldn't support me.

"Are you okay?" Ryan asked. His brown eyes looked worried, and he looked around as if to check that no one was watching us.

"I just need to rest a minute," I told him with a calm I didn't feel. Because now that I was down on the grass, I worried I wouldn't be able to get up. It was a less-than-graceful act that required me to get on all fours, with Ryan trying to pull me back up. That was the last time we walked to the park. We still shoot hoops, but now we drive there.

We also don't participate in "walk to school day," and we're the only family on our block that doesn't walk to school at least some days each week.

I've grown accustomed to taking multiple medications. I accept the fact that I see multiple doctors for multiple reasons and have blood drawn multiple times a year. But I still have a hard time accepting the fact that I can't walk the way I used to.

When Ryan was a few months old, I pushed him in his stroller to LACMA (Los Angeles County Museum of Art) and enrolled him in their NexGen program. The special program, providing free admission for a child until the age of 18 and one adult, meant a cheap outing for us, and we visited regularly. Always walking. Other days, we'd walk to the adjacent LaBrea Tar Pits and Museum which offered free admission to California teachers and children under the age of two.

Now, I'm no longer a teacher, and Ryan is almost 12 years old. Now, we're members of the museum. And now we drive there, too.

While most people don't think of Los Angeles as a city for pedestrians, our neighborhood is easy to navigate on foot. It had to be.

In 1998, when Paul, my then-boyfriend/now-husband, and I moved in together, we didn't own a car. We chose our apartment not just for its spaciousness, but also because it was within walking distance of more than one supermarket, a couple of drug stores, dry cleaners, and even a fast food spot if we craved burgers and fries.

While we now own two cars and have moved into a larger rental, we haven't left our neighborhood. In fact, I am almost 44 years old and have spent my entire life living within the same zip code. That wasn't part of a master plan; it's just the way things worked out.

So after Ryan was born, we made family walks a part of our usual routine. Paul and I would often stop at the local Coffee Bean to grab our favorite ice blended drinks before taking Ryan, cozy in his stroller, for a walk through the neighborhood.

After Ryan was born, I was often asked if I missed being pregnant. The answer was no. But I did miss having Ryan within me, sharing that intimate bond as he grew within my body, talking to him about my day and what was going on in the world, just as I had done when I was pregnant. We did that on our walks. I'd point out the colors of the sky, the cloud that looked like a turtle, the squirrel standing up on its hind legs. And the older Ryan got, the more interactive our walks became - looking at a Roly-Poly through a magnifying glass or blowing dandelions.

We never worried about getting in enough exercise; we were outside every day weather permitted, which in Los Angeles, was almost every day.

Until we couldn't.

We still go on family walks in our neighborhood. Because I'm stubborn. Because I want to share these unhurried moments and spontaneous conversations with Ryan. Because I don't want the pain to stop me from doing things I enjoy with my family. But we walk slowly, and sometimes not as far as other times.

A few years after Ryan asked me about walking to school, we were walking to our car after school, when Ryan leaned over and whispered, "They're going too slow." He was talking about the woman and child ahead of us on the sidewalk. I shook my head at him, though they were walking slowly even compared to my slow speed.

I waited until we were in the car to continue the conversation. “Ryan, those people back there were walking slowly. But we have to be patient. I walk slowly too. And I’m sure sometimes people think I’m going too slow. But I do the best I can, and maybe that woman was really hurting, and that was just the best she could do.”

He didn’t answer me then, but he heard me, because later that day, in the middle of homework, Ryan looked at me and said, “I’m sorry I said they were walking too slow.”

I smiled at him. “It’s okay.”

And I need to remember that it’s okay when I’m walking slowly too.