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Walk the walk: a vocation of justice

by Jocelyn A. Sideco

Young Voices

I was hungry, tired, sweaty and responsible for seven high school students. We had just walked through the city of New Orleans praying the Way of the Cross through the lens of justice, injustice, and dignity of each person. After miles of walking, praying and singing, we got to the Mississippi River only to discover that we must return to our vehicles, where we started.

Alex, the other faculty chaperone, offered to walk and pick up a car while I shepherded the teenagers through the French Quarter. We needed to make it to Café Reconcile for lunch before they closed at 2:30 p.m. It was 1:51 p.m. and counting.

As we paraded through the Quarter on Royal Street, we ran into brass bands and street performers that reinforced our expectations of good music and good fun. We saw beautiful pieces of art inside the galleries, bumped into a few other sightseers, and walked briskly to shorten the time and distance between us and our lunch.

Our hopes of catching a streetcar were dashed when it passed us without stopping. I suppose I should grow in some kind of understanding; after all, the streetcar was bursting at the seams with locals and tourists alike.

So we continued to walk. Alex picked up half of the group and drove to Café Reconcile while four of us remained carless, running out of time.

So we continued to walk. With the gentle breeze and the ease of spring on our side, our strides took us from one block to another, one corner to another. We swiftly took the most efficient paths from point A to point B: straight lines.

As we continued to walk, I noticed I was a good 10 people's length in front of the group. "You should walk a marathon, Ms. Sideco," one of the students said. "You're really fast!" said another whose legs seemed too long to control. Their only real chance to catch up with me was when we considered pausing at the light.

I began to walk backward as if I were giving them a tour of the city on foot. I found myself encouraging my students to dig deep and keep walking. I took their orders along the way and texted them to Alex so our timing would work out. I began counting down the blocks left in our journey as though to signify our success upon completing the previous feat. Little smiles would emerge at the corners of their mouths and an audible sigh seemed inherent in the moment.

With each turn at each corner, the students' energy level seemed to fade. There was a moment when I began to consider how food could not and would no longer be enough of a motivation to counteract the exhaustion and the rising disappointment each new block represented. The "Are we there yet?" sentiment seemed to loom over us like a dark cloud waiting to take the main stage when thunder called it to action.

Then the hope of the end came into full view. "Three blocks!" I cried. The students seemed to perk up -- their eyes brightened, their shoulders stretched tall, their strides became confident and certain.

Looking back, I began to see how leadership works: Some people lead, some people follow, some people encourage, some people undermine, some people motivate, some people are ambitious, some people accept the bare minimum as sufficient enough.

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This walk through New Orleans guided the way I have come to understand my experience of managing and leading a nonprofit agency amid the disaster and brokenness of everyday life.

A shared vision and purpose enhances each person's potential to self-initiate and cooperate with others.

Leaders must be at the front and walk alongside. If the distance between those following and those leading becomes too great, this lack of communication will result in a breakdown of the process. And soon enough, the vision will be lost and uncertainty will plague those following at the turn at each corner.

Leaders cannot just say one thing and expect people to blindly follow with similar charisma, energy and clarity. Leaders must empower those who follow by fostering a safe environment where they are appreciated and where they can risk the big strides, even in uncertainty.

And timing is crucial. Depending on others and not giving into doubt allow the grace of the Spirit to work and gently fill those luminal spaces.

We walked those 1.9 miles within 35 minutes. We celebrated with sweet tea and generous portions of the best catfish in town. The story of our day goes like this: We walked the way of justice; we walked the way of "just us."

[Jocelyn A. Sideco is a retreat leader, spiritual director and innovative minister who specializes in mission-centered ministry. Visit her budding new online ministry, In Good Company, at contemplativecompanions.org or email her at jocelyn@contemplativecompanions.org.]

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