

# Recess

CREATIVE PLAYGROUND

## NONNO WALKS

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“He ended yesterday’s walk with the words: “May we all heed this clarion call.” I knew what he meant. A call to higher understanding and empathy.”

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**Pre-Covid-19**, I was tightly wound around the un-ending to-do list of an independent, modern woman tangled in the minutiae of motherhood. Most of my time and energy was spent on balancing my career as an attorney with the demands of family and life in general. My 81-year-old father, on the other hand, has been in a much more relaxed place as a retired person for some time now. Fortunately for me, my father lives in the same neighborhood. He regularly checked in with a text message, “Hi. How are you? Have you been busy? Do you want to walk today?”

In the world before the pandemic, just the thought of adding one more task on any given day felt laborious and taxing so we rarely walked together. But the Covid-19 reality has reshuffled so much, including my need for exercise and getting out of the house. After I was sent home from my hospital office to work remotely for an indefinite period of time, these walks have evolved from a bit of an obligation to something that I looked forward to each day. All that was once certain was no longer certain. Work concerns and all the other parts of life that once demanded my time and attention were no longer important, and overnight, the highlight of my day became a simple text from my father requesting to walk with me.

In the beginning, our pandemic walks were a time for us to discuss world affairs and how we were each coping with the new and seemingly insurmountable challenges of this worldwide tragedy. In moments of vulnerability, my father spoke about his deep fear of being intubated and his bout with claustrophobia. Together, he and I considered plans and safety precautions to protect our family from both the known and unknown dangers of Covid-19. Like many, I felt responsible for the health and well-being of both my children and of my elderly parents. Intertwined with our discussions of our family’s personal challenges were more philosophical musings on how the pandemic has challenged, in some cases changed, social norms. We mused about how American society, usually so motivated by instant gratification, seems to be shifting its focus, albeit painfully, to a sense of softening, even empathy, a generosity and oneness in the midst of deep loss and desperation.

Our walks have become lighter and easier overtime. Soon we began to share a focus and admiration for the flowers we passed on these walks. We looked closely into their deep recesses and marveled at their color, smell, and shape. Dad began to take pictures of these flowers for what he proclaimed would be a “virtual bouquet.” Occasionally, he would be reminded of something he has felt or seen before. On these occasions, we will detour into my father’s life, dreams, or struggles. As a child, he immigrated to this country from Mexico, and since then, his life has been rich with experiences. And as I watched him admire a simple flower, I would see a man, who has lived through so much, who continues to learn, see, and appreciate the world around him. I felt inspired to find creative ways I could bring stability, inspiration, and joy to my family and friends, so I created a new ritual for our walks, where each day, we pause to take a picture to memorialize our journey. I had to assure my father that the photo would indeed bear a date stamp. That seems to be important to both of us.

Our conversations sprawled and touched all kinds of topics, because for the first time, we had time, or rather, we took the time, and we gave it to each other generously. On March 27, we talked about pizza, parakeets, and ventilators. On March 29, we talked about how my mother was a terrible barber, my father’s fascination with the show “Monsters Inside Me,” and the serious lack of PPE for hospitals. On April 1, we talked about how precious time is and how my father felt he hadn’t taken full advantage of the time he had with us early on in life. It was clear, I was a student learning so much about my father, and for the first time I was really hearing his story. It only took a pandemic and six feet of distance to give me the time and space to listen.

Now there is always a text mid-afternoon asking when and where we should meet. Would it be raining? Should we wear jackets? Are his granddaughters home? If so, he wants to meet outside my house so he can get a glimpse of his granddaughters from afar. I await these texts to plan the very significant and most important part of my day - my time with him. A walk around the block turns into unnoticed miles. We add turns and twists through the neighborhood so we can extend our

discussions. These moments that were in the beginning mostly mired with fear and frustration have become more entrenched with calmness. We savor peaceful moments, belly laughs, and sometimes tears.

My father had always been super human to me, but what I am learning is that he is both strong and frail, full of hope and fear. We are so different and yet the same, somehow. He knows this already. He has seen me through some of my most challenging times: divorce, spiritual and physical turmoil. And together we are living through a new kind of normal; we have become comrades with a unified vision and hope. I really listen to each word he utters as if maybe it may be the very last time I would hear him speak.

He ended yesterday's walk with the words: "May we all heed this clarion call." I knew what he meant. A call to higher understanding and empathy. A call to opening our hearts and minds to a new way of loving. My walks with my father remind me each day that there is freedom in confinement, there is beautiful adventure in listening, looking, and simply being together.

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