

THE BLESSING WALK



By Patrick Neman

The Blessing Walk

When I was a little boy, my family lived in a small town in northeast Ohio called Cuyahoga Falls.

“The Falls,” as it was called, was your classic midwestern town. It had well populated suburbs, a fine high school, and a downtown that consisted of - a Library, 2 cafes, 2 churches, a city hall, a gymnasium, and a gas station.

THE FALLS just happened to be, and still is, one of the best towns in the world.

I grew up on Ruth Avenue, the only child of Patrick and Barbara Hohman, in a neighborhood known as “River Estates.”

River Estates was REAL quiet, because it was not close to any big streets, and it was SHADY, because it was almost entirely covered by a towering canopy of oak trees.

At the end of my street, a steep forest path led down into the CUYAHOGA RIVER PARK, the most beautiful park I’ve ever seen. It has playgrounds and ballfields, and long forest paths that go all the way to Cleveland. The Cuyahoga River Park has all that... Plus a pretty cool river, too...

But the *best* thing about my childhood was that my *best friend* lived on the same street as me, four doors

down. His name was George Hohman. He was my grandfather.

George Hohman, and his wife, Zeta, had three children - two boys and a girl. But all their children, besides my father, had moved away some time ago. My grandmother Zeta died of cancer when I was five.

So, for most of my childhood, my grandfather lived alone.

But he wasn't really. He had two small dogs, a big front yard where he and I played catch, and a big wrap around porch, where all us neighborhood kids congregated almost every day in the summer to hear him tell his "colorful" (John Wayne would have been jealous) stories of World War II.

Oh, and one other thing – my grandfather was a GREAT backgammon player.

In the summer, we would have neighborhood backgammon tournaments on his front porch. I can still close my eyes and see him - rolling his dice, moving his pieces while "barring" ours, all the while chewing on hard salami and limburger cheese - a delicacy he willingly shared with the neighborhood dogs... and whatever children were brave enough to try it.

But the thing I remember most about my grandfather is that he loved to take long walks in the park... Whenever it was nice outside, he would either come get me, or I would go get him, and *OFF* we would go.

He called them our "Blessing Walks."

Our blessing walks, not to set too *spooky* a tone, always began in *TOTAL SILENCE*. My grandfather would look straight ahead, uttering not a word. Then suddenly, he'd STOP, and do something *completely unexpected*...like kneel down and pick up a stone...

“Look at this, my boy!” - he always called me ‘my boy’ - “don’t these little markings look like stars?” I would typically look at the stone or whatever it was he held for a few seconds, mumble something or other, then shrug my shoulders. My grandfather would smile at me and put the stone back on the ground.

“PRAISE THE LORD, MY BOY!”

Praise the Lord.

My grandfather said praise the Lord about practically everything we saw on our walks. If a large bird flew overhead, “PRAISE THE LORD!” If a field of grass was dotted with dandelions or little purple flowers...“PRAISE THE LORD!”

At first this seemed kind of strange to me - after all, no one else I knew ever talked like that - but after a while, it became, like his sayings, “normal as springtime rain.” My grandfather would look at the river, “PRAISE THE LORD!” He would see a hawk flying in the sky, “PRAISE THE LORD!” A field of daisies on a summer day, “PRAISE THE LORD, MY BOY!...”

Like I said, I know this all probably sounds kind of strange to most people’s ears, familiarized as we’ve all become with sunday “holy rollers” and such, but really it wasn’t like that. It was just him. Truth be told,

it actually made our blessing walks kind of nice. And besides, it gave my grandfather a chance to teach me a lot about nature...

SUCH AS, that the BLUE HERON is the exotic bird most native to our region...

My grandfather loved blue herons. He studied them meticulously - their migration patterns, their feeding patterns - everything about them. He did this so that we would know at exactly what time of the year they would come to our river. And when that time came - *OFF* we would go! “quicker than a squirrel!” as he put it, down to River Trail to greet them.

But don't get me wrong - our blessing walks weren't *just* about nature. They were about people, too. In fact, our blessing walks were probably about people even MORE than they were about nature...anyways it varied...But the important thing to remember about our blessing walks was that, no matter WHAT they were about or WHAT direction we took, my grandfather would ALWAYS, “like a good democrat,” conclude whatever matter happened to be under discussion with a “Well, God bless them” at the end... Often as not he would add a “Try to pray for them, my boy...” just for good measure.

This wasn't exactly what you would call a little boys' cup of tea, but I went along with it, as best I could anyways, for my grandfather...

UNTIL, that is, I got to **HIGH SCHOOL** – In high school, and I think this is a completely accurate statement, my main hobby, occupation, and pastime,

was certainly NOT blessing people. And I can assure you, I pursued this pastime with gusto. And yet, even then, even in my darkest high school days, after I had completely exhausted myself with gossiping, reviling, and deriding practically *everyone* I knew - my grandfather would still say (sometimes driving me absolutely *crazy* in the process), “Well, try to bless them, anyways, my boy...” (*He always called me that!!*)

One day, after I had been in a fight at school, I went over to my grandfather’s house. He was there, as usual, sitting on the front porch reading his newspaper. I dropped my books down, gave them a little kick, and plopped myself without saying a word on the chair next to him. “What’s wrong, my boy?”... no answer. “Are you OK?” yeah. “Do you want anything to eat?” no. “How about a game of backgammon?” I nodded my head, and he set up the board. After I had calmed down a little bit, we talked about my day. Then he looked at me, and, with a twinkle in his eye said -

“Wanna go for a walk?”

An hour later when we got back from our walk, I picked up my books to go home. Upon reaching the sidewalk, however, I turned.

“I love you granddad,” I said.

He waved, like he always did.

“I love you too, my boy.”

When I became 18, I enrolled at Kent State University. The “Home of the Golden Flashes” was only a 15 minute drive from my house, a distance

easily commutable in my Old Car. But their rule was that all freshmen had to live on campus. So I packed my stuff into my Old Car and got ready to go.

Before leaving, I stopped at my grandfather's house and honked the horn. My grandfather came out and we talked for a few minutes through the car window. It seemed like I was moving to Antarctica. I promised him I'd call and come see him as often as I could.

“Good luck at school, my boy!”

He waved...

As I drove away, I happened to glance in the rearview mirror. I saw my grandfather, head bowed, walking towards the park.

I didn't see my grandfather, or any of my family for that matter, very much for the next few years. I joined a fraternity, (one of the more serious ones on campus, thank God), and proceeded to throw myself headlong into college life. I was also becoming (to my utter AMAZEMENT), pretty serious about my studies. I had qualified for Kent's "accelerated pre-med" program, and was on a steady path to graduate in three years, with honors.

It wasn't until the end of my first year, that I was finally able to come home for a few days before summer session began. And of course, the first thing I did was go over to my grandfather's house. There he was, just like always - sitting on his front porch, sharing hard salami and limburger cheese with a couple of the neighborhood dogs.

“Hey granddad!” I yelled out the window as I pulled into his driveway.

“Hey my boy!”

...Then, with that same old twinkle in his eye -

“Wanna go for a walk?”

It happened to be raining outside, but what did that matter...

“Sure!”

As we walked along, my grandfather told me that he had started volunteering some of his spare time at a homeless shelter in Akron. I was somewhat taken aback by this. I asked him how he liked it. “Well, there are some wonderful people there,” he said, “but also a lot of troubled souls.”

He stopped and looked at me in a strange way for a second.

“There’s a lot of hurting people in this world, my boy...”

Then - as if this was a completely natural transition - “HEY! Will ya look at that! Just look at those blue herons coming in for a landing! Nothing like blue herons on a sunny day!...PRAISE THE LORD, MY BOY!”

After I graduated from Kent, I applied, and was accepted into, Columbia University Medical School in New York. This was a HUGE step in my life, but I felt I was ready for it.

While at Columbia, I met a beautiful girl who also just so happened to be an aspiring writer. Her name

was Brandi. Brandi and I immediately fell madly in love, and were married in June of that year in a very small ceremony in New York.

A couple weeks later, I proudly brought my new bride (and our dog) home to meet my family. They ALL, of course, but ESPECIALLY my grandfather, loved her immediately.

Early the next morning, when my grandfather and I went on our walk, he began telling me some more stories about the homeless shelter where he was still working.

“You know, my boy,” he said, “I think I found a good way to help some of the people there, the most troubled ones at least, the ones who have mental illness.” This peaked my interest. I asked him what the “way” he was talking about was, but suddenly, for the first time that I could ever remember, my grandfather hesitated and seemed to be at a loss for words...

This only lasted for a few seconds, however, and “quicker than a squirrel,” he was back to his old self again...

“COME ON, MY BOY! (sometimes I wonder if he really even *knew* my real name :) “I wanna show you something!”

And off he went, My Best Friend...down the path to an old tree he had found with some ancient looking initials carved on it, surrounded by a heart...



A few months later, I got back to my apartment at Columbia late one night, to find a message had been left on my message machine. It was my dad. He said that my grandfather had been beaten up pretty badly at the homeless shelter that day.

“The doctor says that he’ll be OK,” my dad said, “but he will need to be in the hospital for a little while.”

I told Brandi I had to go, and she kissed me. I drove all the way home that night.

The next day, I went to the hospital to see my grandfather. But for some reason, when I got to the door of his room, I stopped. My grandfather was lying in bed. He was all bandaged up, and his arm was in a cast.

I stood there for a moment, not knowing what to do. Finally, gathering all my courage, I knocked on the door and walked in.

“Hey granddad...” I said.

At first my grandfather didn’t seem to know who I was.

Then he smiled.

“Hey my boy!”

I sat down next to him and held his hand. For the next half hour or so, we talked about various things – mostly about me – about school and Brandi and “Family Plans” he was determined I start to make...

Then he began to tell me about how things had been going at the homeless shelter - how there had been a few fights there recently, fights that the staff had

broken up. But this time, when no one else intervened, he had tried to break it up himself.

“I guess I’ve lost a step or two over the years, my boy...” he said, knitting his brows. “You may not believe this though, but when I was a younger man, I could’ve handled it like a champ...”

I told him I *KNEW* he could - That’s how we won the War! We laughed.

After a few quiet moments, I said “Granddad, I wish you wouldn’t go back there anymore...”

My grandfather was silent for a long time. Then, using all his strength, he turned over in the bed as far as he could and looked at me.

“You know, my boy, this might sound kind of corny, what I’m about to tell you, but its true. From my very earliest memories, going all the way back to when I was just a little fella playing in my grandfather’s backyard, I’ve always felt like this life is an incredibly wonderful thing, kind of like a beautiful painting or something. Now the problem is - this painting, it’s beautiful all right you see, but the only thing is...for some reason I just can’t quite figure out, it’s never quite finished. And, you know, maybe I’m getting old my boy, but lately I’ve started to see people that way too – all the people I meet, like at the homeless shelter for instance – like they’re kind of that way too - a work of art that’s just not quite finished yet... Now, none of us knows for sure if we’ll ever be able to finish it, but don’t ya see, my boy?” he squeezed my hand...“don’t ya see? that doesn’t matter...we should never stop trying.”

He was quiet again for a moment, and when he continued it was as if he was lost in thought -

“Somehow, we just have to find a way to keep going, my boy... even if it takes all our strength...we just have to find a way to keep on going...til...”

He closed his clear blue eyes for a second. When he opened them again, he looked at me and smiled...

“...Well, I guess you could just say, til our whole life becomes a Blessing Walk.”

I held his hand for a few more minutes. Then I said “Granddad, I gotta go.” I kissed his forehead and told him that I would come back to see him soon.

As I was turning to leave, he raised his good arm and waved, just like always.

“God bless you, my boy!”



That was the last time I ever saw my grandfather. Three months later, during my second year of med school, I received a call from my dad telling me that my grandfather had died.

Brandi and I drove back to my old home on Ruth Avenue, to find my parents sitting alone on the living room couch...They told me my grandfather had been beaten up again.

“This time it was by someone,” my dad said, “who your grandfather had really taken a special interest in.”

I hugged my mom and dad.

“Your grandfather was a very special man,” my mom said.

I didn't know what to say in response. I mumbled something about having to go for a walk, and left Brandi, looking concerned, sitting with my parents.

Outside, I stopped in front of my grandfather's house. His chair was still on the porch. It felt for all the world like he was going to just come through that front door any minute now with that twinkle in his eye, wave at me and say - “Wanna go for a walk?”

I would have to go on this one alone.

A couple years now have gone by since my grandfather's passing. After I graduated, Brandi and I moved back to the Falls - not to my old neighborhood of River Estates, but to another very nice one. I landed a coveted job as intern at Cuyahoga Falls Hospital, and Brandi managed to get a job doing what she truly loves - teaching literature to children - at Lincoln Elementary, one of the schools nearby.

I have thought about my grandfather a lot since his passing. But I still don't understand why it had to happen. I don't really understand anything at all.

One day, as I was walking in the park, a man I'd never seen before came up to me.

“I know you!” he exclaimed.

I started to say, “I’m sorry, but...”

“I knew your grandfather!” he interrupted. “A few years ago I was staying at the homeless shelter in Akron, and your grandfather *really* helped me! Whenever I was mad at someone, which was just about all the time in those days, he would always come over and talk to me and calm me down... He would say – let me try to remember his exact words –

‘Rather than being mad at someone, you should ask God to bless them instead. This may or may not be an easy thing to do, but do it anyways. And it may or may not help that other person, but...’ how did he put it again? Oh ya... ***“but it’ll get you over the hump...”***

“Well, I tried it! And it works!!”

I looked at him in amazement. I asked him how he knew me.

“I recognized you!! Your grandfather used to show us pictures of you two all the time!”

He hesitated for a moment, then continued.

“I heard about what happened to him. I’m very sorry. He was a great man, your grandfather. You are very lucky to have had a grandfather like him...”

He looked down and shuffled his feet.

“Well, I gotta go. I just wanted to tell you this.”

He got into his car and started the engine.

Just as he was about to drive away, he rolled down his window and waved,

“GOD BLESS YOU, MICHAEL!”



I walked down the path to River Trail.

Our old park seemed like it was especially full of sounds that day - of birds and baseball games, of young people laughing, and children climbing monkey bars and running around on the playground... It had been a pretty overcast day up to now, but golden rays of sunlight were just beginning to poke through the clouds overhead.

I had been walking along like this for a while, when suddenly a splashing sound on the river made me look up -

A blue heron, running lightly
upon the surface of the water,
was straining to reach the speed
necessary for takeoff.

It spread its long wings, raised
its majestic head to the sun,
and began to fly.

