

# Parting The Waters *Chapter 11*

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**W**hen others see me with a white cane, they make assumptions. It may seem that I have always carried one and that it is a natural part of who I am.

In reality, the cane is pretty new to me. It has become a tool I depend on now, but seventeen years ago, when I first admitted my need for it, admitting was a very hard thing to do.

A case manager had given me a cane to have in case I needed it in the late '70's. I kept it tucked deep inside a drawer. I didn't need it, and I did not want people to think I did!

As my vision declined, I was becoming more and more isolated inside my home. It was not safe to travel anywhere that was unfamiliar. I had tripped and had close calls crossing the street enough times to be a little scared. I couldn't use that cane, though. What if people thought I couldn't see!

In the late '80's, Paul Pirtle, my caseworker, convinced me that it was time to do training at the rehabilitation center in town. I had been dragging my feet on that for several years. Now I was becoming aware of my declining ability to do my housework and other normal functions. I knew he was right. I needed to have help in finding new ways to do the activities of daily life.

Help came in the form of a homemaker who helped me with a few hints and gadgets for cooking and sewing. There were crafts that could be done with no sight at all. There were opportunities to go out into the community and learn assertiveness skills in restaurants. It all was useful. I didn't feel so helpless as I faced my future.

An older gentleman appeared at the center one day. "Hi, Rita. I'm going to be your mobility instructor."

I shook his hand and shook deep inside, too. "I really don't know if I need a white cane," I explained to him gently.

"Well, let's just go out and I'll teach you a few things. Then, if you get to a place where you think you need it, you're ready."

Ray was an older man who was called out of retirement to help me. We went out to different residential areas, he would make me put on a blindfold, and then we would walk. It was hard to keep my bearings.

There was always a need to mentally think about the direction I was going and how many turns I had made. That was very challenging, especially since we talked as we walked.

It was surprising, what I found out about being blind during those lessons. Did you know that wind for a blind person is like fog to a sighted one? When the wind was blowing, not only was it cold, it was hard to get clues about my surroundings.

He helped me to pay attention to the changes in sound as I walked down the street, the deadness that was evident when there was a vehicle parked in a driveway or a structure close to the sidewalk.

Those were cold winter days. We walked as much as we could, then we would find someplace warm to talk. That was definitely the best part. Ray would tell me about his days in the service or working at the School for the Blind. We joked and laughed and forgot about the stressful lessons.

We had been walking around in different locations for several weeks when he turned to me in the cab of the van and said in a serious tone, “Rita, it’s time that you get out in the public and use that cane of yours.”

My stomach turned. “I don’t think I can, Ray.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t think I’m ready.”

“You know, Rita. You have been walking around not seeing for a long time. People who are around you often already know you can’t see. You haven’t been fooling anybody. You were just fooling yourself. I know this is hard to do for the first time,” he said with a gentleness in his voice, “but you need to think of someplace where you can use it where you will be the most comfortable. You think about that tonight and tomorrow you can tell me where you are going to make your debut.”

I knew someplace in my heart that Ray was right. It was so hard to think how embarrassing it would feel, actually walking out in front of people I knew. Oh, God, please help me do this, I prayed that night.

It didn’t take long to figure out where I would do my truth walk. The choir was meeting that night, as it did every Thursday night. Tonight, I would walk in there with my cane, I determined.

Ray and I had our lesson that morning. When he asked I told him my plan.

“Good. You will do just fine. You know, most people will be just fine with this, and if there is anyone who isn’t, what do they matter anyway?”

My husband drove me up to the front of the church and I stood out on

the sidewalk, taking a few deep breaths before I went inside. I had gone into that building and into the sanctuary many times. Surely, I could do it now.

As I walked into the darkened foyer without Karl to guide me, I realized how dependent I had become on him. I had to run my forearm against the wall where the doors were until I found the handle. Then, taking one last breath for courage and breathing a little prayer, I walked in.

The choir was up in front practicing. Slowly, I began my long journey to the front. I was nearly half way to my destination when something remarkable happened. I heard someone clapping. One by one the choir members stopped singing and began applauding. What a gift that was to me.

All my fears and embarrassment faded as I heard shouts of, “Way to go, Rita! Yeah, Rita!”

Ray was a wise man. He helped me to overcome a great obstacle I never could have surmounted without him.

What I discovered after that night was that this little white stick offered more help than I had ever imagined. When I was in a public place, I never had to explain that I needed help because I was visually impaired. Help was offered to me automatically. If I walked through a crowded mall, the people in front of me scattered. Ray had told me it would be like a bunch of chickens running to get out of my way, or like Moses parting the waters of the Red Sea!

My cane has become a very important part of life to me. I rarely am without it. Even in my dreams, I am usually carrying my cane. One important lesson I have learned is that when I am walking and I pay attention to what it is telling me, by sound or feel, I can be safe in my journey. If things around me distract me, or if I begin to think for one minute that I don't need it, I get into trouble.

Isn't that like you and I in our walk with Christ? As long as we pay attention to his leading and focus on what he is telling us, things go smoothly. It is when we are distracted by other things or become confident in our own ability that we fall off the path.

Second Corinthians 5:7 says, “For we walk by faith, not by sight.” In other words, this walk is so easy we can do it with our eyes closed? Well, maybe, we rely on our faith in Christ, not on what our earthly eyes tell us.

Several years ago, between the time I graduated with my Social Work degree and my time at the rehab center, I worked for a couple years for a professional organization. I had an office in my house, which worked well with my elementary-aged children.

The salary wasn't great, but I had a long title and I was given a chance to travel to the national headquarters in Washington D.C. for a few meetings.

The first trip out there, I went alone. Karl was staying home with the kids. I could tell he was afraid to send me off on my own to a big city I had never been in before.

I assured him about my travel arrangements. "I will get off the plane, get on a shuttle to go to the subway, and then it is only a couple blocks to the hotel. I will be just fine."

I wasn't as confident in my ability to do this as I let on, but I didn't want him to worry. I had no white cane with me then. I would need to ask for help, that was my only option.

The flight went fine. When I entered the luggage area and picked up my bag, I noticed a sign overhead that pointed to the shuttle, just as I had been told.

I had never even seen a subway. There wasn't much light in the area where the tickets had to be purchased. I stood in front of the machine, uncertain where I was going and unsure of how to use the machine to pay my fare even if I had known.

I was praying hard when I was approached by a couple dressed like hippies from the '60s. I thought they must be angels, because they asked if I needed help. When I admitted I did, they helped me buy the ticket, rode with me on the subway, and before they left the train, they told me, "The next stop will be where you get off. You need to use your ticket in the turnstile to get out of the subway, so don't lose it!"

I was on my own again. My ticket was so damp from my sweaty palms; it took several tries to make it open the turnstile. The guard looked at me with suspicion and made an accusation that I was trying to ride farther than I had paid to ride. I told him I hadn't—just as the ticket clicked open the gate.

I asked him how to get to my hotel, noticing that I had a half hour to arrive there before my meeting. It was cutting it close but it was only a couple blocks.

I left the subway station and started walking to cross the busy street. I made it safely to the meridian. Then I stopped to readjust my suitcase.

The coat I was wearing had been comfortable in South Dakota that morning, but now, the sun was beating down. I took the coat off, flung it over my arm, picked up the suitcase and started crossing when the light turned for me.

A car turned the corner so close to me that I felt it against my coat! Didn't drivers know about pedestrian right-of-way out here?

I walked down the street in the direction the guard had pointed out. I walked and walked and walked, but there was still no hotel in sight.

It was nearly a mile before I spotted the sign for the hotel in the distance. I picked up my pace a bit. That half hour was used up, and I still had a few blocks to go.

At last I arrived at my destination. I walked in, readjusted my things and began to walk with renewed confidence across the lobby to the front desk twenty feet in front of me.

What happened next was disastrous! I had no depth perception. The three steps down to the lower desk area came as a total surprise. I felt myself falling, bumping against the hard steps and landing in a heap on the lobby floor. My pantyhose were shredded and so was my spirit. I sat there and began to cry. I could have put up with any one of my misfortunes of the last hour, but this last one was more than I could bear.

Hotel personnel ran from every corner, certain of a lawsuit. They were kind and helped me to a chair where I could weep in private.

"You just sit here and take it easy. Are you all right? Do you think anything is broken?"

A supervisor type appeared. "We want our paramedic to have a look and make sure you're all right, Ma'am."

The paramedic bent down and began to examine the knee that had taken the brunt of the fall. A woman from behind the front desk came rushing over with a telephone.

"Mrs. Weber? Are you Mrs. Weber?"

"Why, yes. I am," I answered.

"It's your husband," she explained.

Oh, no. I had promised I would call Karl as soon as I arrived. I didn't plan on arriving so late. I knew he would be concerned.

"What's going on?" Karl demanded as I picked up the phone. "I called a while ago and they said you weren't there yet. I called again and the woman said, 'she can't speak to you right now. She's with the paramedic!'"

Of all the things my husband did not need to hear, his greatest worry had seemed to be happening. After all, he had warned me not to take a subway from the airport.

I hurried to calm his worst fear, received a clean bill of health, changed

panty hose, and resumed my schedule without incident. But, that was the last time I ever traveled anywhere alone! I know the Lord is with me and I can trust him to help me, no matter where I go, but my husband wants to be with me, too!

## *I Am There*

Words and music by Rita Weber

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Stranded on my journey, wishing I was home,  
Feeling so abandoned and alone.  
Crying out to Jesus, "Oh, Lord, what should I do?  
I need a little help to get me through."  
The two looked more like hippies than like angels standing there.  
They came to me that day  
To help me on my way.  
God was faithful in answering my prayer.

For the Lord said,  
"I will never leave you.  
I will not forget you,  
For your name is written here on the palms of my hands."  
"I will never leave you,  
I will not forget you.  
Just call my name.  
I Am there."

"Do you think a mother could  
Forget her nursing child?  
Yet, I tell you, even if she could,  
I will not abandon you,  
I'll be right by your side.  
I will hear you when you call.  
I will catch you if you fall.  
You are never alone,  
For I Am there."