

THERE'S A HOLE IN MY SIDEWALK
Autobiography in Five Short Chapters

Poem by Portia Nelson – Commentary by Dr. Dan Johnston

Chapter 1

*I walk down the street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I fall in.
I am lost I am helpless.
It isn't my fault.
It takes forever to find a way out.*

Chapter 1 Commentary:

Thinking over this chapter, recall your journey down the sidewalk of life. What has your experience been? What good times have you had? Do you remember some of the difficult times? Most importantly consider the question, "Have you ever fallen in to one of the holes in the sidewalk?" Have you been minding your own business when the bottom fell out? Have you suddenly found yourself in a pit of frustration, anger, anxiety, resentment, grief, or despair? Have you confronted loss, change, and challenge that caught you by surprise and seemed out of your control?

Chapter One is sometimes true and tells us exactly how life is. Sometimes as you walk down the sidewalk of life you wind up in a deep hole that is not of your own making.

- If you live on the coast during hurricane season the winds and rains may have come along and damaged your house.
- The company you work for may have gone bankrupt you lost your job.
- You return to your car in the mall parking lot and find that someone has smashed your fender.
- The death of friend brings grief.

Any of these events can place you in a hole of darkness, despair, anger, loss, anxiety, worry, or grief. You did not have anything to do with creating the situation but you must live with it. The hole can indeed be deep and dark, and you have to struggle long and hard to climb out of it.

This is the nature of life. Some things are out of your control. Unexpected events happen. Change always occurs. The most that you can do is adapt to them the best you can. You must struggle out of the hole into which you were thrown and journey on. Hopefully, you grow from such an experience and become a more mature person who is better able to cope with other pitfalls of life.

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Describe a situation in your life that sounds like Chapter One – address the following:

- **What happened?**
- **How did you feel?**
- **What did you do about it?**

Chapter 2

*I walk down the street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I pretend that I don't see it.
I fall in again.
I can't believe I am in this same place.
But, it isn't my fault.
It still takes a long time to get out.*

Chapter 2 Commentary:

With Chapter Two the question to consider is, "Have you ever found yourself in exactly the same hole more than once?"

- Are you in exactly the same bad relationship (but with a different person) for the twentieth time? Are you starting to wonder how all of these jerks *find* you?
- How is it that you always get into the same type of conflict with the boss? She is so negative and critical and always expects so much. She makes you feel miserable.
- Maybe you are in the midst of the exact "word for word" argument with your spouse or parents for the ten thousandth time. They says *this* and you say *that* just like you always do and you fall into the hole once again.
- Your son, mother, sister, or brother does that thing that they always do. It pushes your buttons and you respond as you always do. The cycle of conflict begins once again.
- You find yourself with the same people you got in trouble with previously – they don't care that you're in AEP or PTI – they want you to participate in the activity that got you in trouble before.

You cannot believe that it has happened one more time. You wonder, "Why does this always happen to me? Why do they always do this to me? When will they ever stop? Why can't they understand what they make me do?" If other people would just "act right" life would go better. You begin to work harder and harder to get others to change.

Describe a situation in your life that sounds like Chapter Two – address the following:

- **What happened?**
- **How did you feel?**
- **What did you do about it?**

Chapter 3

*I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I see it is there.
I still fall in ... it's a habit ... but, my eyes are open.
I know where I am.
It is my fault.
I get out immediately.*

Chapter 3 Commentary:

Chapter Three challenges us to wake up. Fall into the same hole often enough and you may come to a realization. With the frequent recurrence of the same or similar events you sense that these things do not happen by chance. Maybe this repetition is a pattern that is not just inflicted on you solely by others. Such a duplication of events must mean that you are playing a role in creating them.

As we go along the sidewalk of life we all fall into holes of psychological and spiritual distress. Sometimes it seems that we were shoved. Initially, it appears that it is not our fault to be in such a situation once again. However, as we continue in the journey of life we often find ourselves falling into the same hole more than once. When we do so we are given the opportunity of recognizing that there is actually a pattern in our lives. Patterns do not exist until an event happens more than once. A pattern cannot be recognized until we have encountered a situation (in all its various forms) several times. Only with repetition is it possible to see the pattern or cycle. Once the pattern is seen then the possibility of new insight arises.

The next time you find yourself once again in one of life's familiar holes, and are busy saying:

- "It is not my fault,"
- "Don't blame me."
- "Who is responsible for this?"
- "They are doing it to me again."

Call for a time-out. Now, look to see how you might be responsible for your situation. Ask yourself, "What did I do to get here? What role did I play in creating the circumstances that placed me in this hole?" The terrible truth is that if you are not responsible for being in this hole once again then you are in real trouble. This is because if you are not responsible, it must mean that someone is. Maybe, it is not just one person but a group of people like your coworkers or your family. It is even possible that the entire world has decided to conspire against you. If you are truly not responsible for your current situation, and you do not like being in these recurring holes then you face a dilemma. What you have to do is find out who is making you miserable. Next, you have to change that person, or group, or the entire world to make it or them be exactly the way you want them to be so that you can be okay. Your strategy becomes to change others.

This is the trap of playing, "Let's fix you." Husbands and wives and parents and children often play this game. One spouse shows up at the counselor's office claiming that their mate is the problem. Parents bring in the child saying the child's behavior needs to change. Children say that their parents make them act this way. Employees blame the insensitive boss. The overworked boss criticizes the inefficient employees. No one is responsible for anything.

Playing "Let's fix you" doesn't work. Have you ever tried to change someone? Of course you have. Maybe just change a small child making them just a little more the way you want. Perhaps you have tried to make a few minor adjustments in another person's personality. It seems that if you just gave this person a little bit of a "tune up" then you might be able to live with them. Did you succeed? The answer is, "No!" Changing others is an extremely difficult if not impossible task. The other person may actually try to cooperate but often cannot make or sustain the change. Your effort is directed in the wrong direction.

Fall into the same hole enough times and you might awaken to the true nature of the problem. *You* are responsible for being there. *You* played some role in the process. *You* must change. Learning this is good news. If you can find out what you are doing and stop then you can avoid these holes into which you keep falling. Having some responsibility for your problems means that you have control. All you have to do is to change yourself and the situation can improve. While this task is very hard, it is at least possible. Changing others is not.

- When you find yourself once again in that *same* bad relationship, but with a different person, you need to realize that it is *you* who is making the same mistake over and over. Maybe it is time to ask yourself, "What am I doing?" "How did I get here once again?"
- When you are in that same tired old argument, ask what did you do to get there? When you wake up with a hangover once again, ask what went wrong with my resolve to never drink or smoke weed again?

When you discover what you are doing, or why you are doing it, then change is possible. You can begin taking responsibility for yourself.

If you change yourself your experience of the situation will change. Surprisingly, if you do this, the other people you were wanting to change may change as well. You cannot change others by directly trying to influence them, but if *you* change yourself then they may be forced to change as well. Once you are different and can maintain that difference then others around you are given the opportunity to change in relation to you. By effectively changing ourselves we may actually change another person, a group, and perhaps, the world. But we must start with ourselves. When you start with yourself a good place to begin is with your attitude.

Describe a situation in your life that sounds like Chapter Three – address the following:

- **What happened?**
- **How did you feel?**
- **What did you do about it?**

Chapter 4

*I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I walk around it.*

Chapter 4 Commentary:

Chapter Four is indeed a new chapter in your life. Once your responsibility is seen you can change. You can begin avoiding the holes on *that* street of life. You are now able to see what is coming, because you know your pattern. This knowledge gives you control and you can intentionally respond to life in a different manner. A different response gives new possibilities.

When someone invites you into a familiar hole, you do not automatically enter. Your friend, who has been awaiting your arrival to leave for a party, (despite the fact that you are attempting to refrain from being in an environment that will tempt you to use alcohol or drugs) cannot be counted on to make the right choices for you. It's up to you to "walk around the hole" – you cannot afford to get another charge on your record – it's all about the little choices YOU make.

Describe a situation in your life that sounds like Chapter Four – address the following:

- **What happened?**
- **How did you feel?**
- **What did you do about it?**

Chapter 5

I walk down another street.

Chapter 5 Commentary:

Chapter Five is a new day. Finally, you change streets. You change your inner dialogue and behavior so completely that the old pattern no longer occurs. Once on the new street, you must be careful because, unfortunately, this street will have its own holes. It will have holes that you have never seen before. But you now know the rules about the "holes" in the sidewalk. The first time that you encounter one you should ask, "How am I responsible?" It may be that you are not responsible, but the sooner you ask this question, the sooner you can take charge of your life.

This process is like a spiral that leads us upward towards psychological and spiritual wholeness. The sidewalks of life do not go in a straight line. They may not be flat. They may be like a trail that winds round and round a mountain until it reaches the top. Each time you break out of an old pattern of thinking and living, you begin a new switchback that leads you ever upwards to the fundamental goal of life.

Fall into enough of the holes in the sidewalks of life and you may become whole. Through the lessons of the holes of life, you approach wholeness. Becoming whole means striving to be all that you can be. All potentialities are explored. You know what you do, and why you do it. Choices are made, and you are responsible for these choices. The holes in the sidewalk are actually invitations to grow. Are you open to the invitation?

Please describe the Lessons Learned from the holes you have fallen into repeatedly – address the following:

- **How have your poor choices impacted you and the ones you care about?**
- **What have you learned about yourself during your struggles to get out of your hole?**
- **How will you use what you've learned to make better choices?**

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