

## Walking<sup>1</sup>

Rev. Myke Johnson

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Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church

### Opening Words

Rebecca Solnit

“Walking, ideally, is a state in which the mind, the body, and the world are aligned, as though they were three characters finally in conversation together, three notes suddenly making a chord. Walking allows us to be in our bodies and in the world without being made busy by them. It leaves us free to think without being wholly lost in our thoughts.”<sup>2</sup> Today we will ponder this most human of activities, and how it can feed us spiritually as well as physically.

### Readings:

From *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*

Rebecca Solnit<sup>3</sup>

I wasn't sure whether I was too soon or too late for the purple lupine that can be so spectacular in these headlands, but milkmaids were growing on the shady side of the road on the way to the trail, and they recalled the hillsides of my childhood that first bloomed every year with an extravagance of these white flowers. Black butterflies fluttered around me, tossed along by the wind and wings, and they called up another era of my past. Moving on foot seems to make it easier to move in time; the mind wanders from plans to recollections to observations.

The rhythm of walking generates a kind of rhythm of thinking, and the passage through a landscape echoes or stimulates the passage through a series of thoughts. This creates an odd consonance between internal and external passage, one that suggests that the mind is also a landscape of sorts and that walking is one way to traverse it. A new thought often seems like a feature of the landscape that was there all along, as though thinking were traveling rather than making.

From *The Confessions*

Jean-Jacques Rousseau<sup>4</sup>

Never did I think so much, exist so vividly, and experience so much, never have I been so much myself—if I may use that expression—as in the journeys I have taken alone and on foot. There is something about walking which stimulates and enlivens my thoughts. When I stay in one place I can hardly think at all; my body has to be on the move to set my mind going. The sight of the countryside, the succession of pleasant views, the open air, a sound appetite, and the good health I gain by walking, the easy atmosphere of an inn, the absence of everything that makes me feel my dependence, of everything that recalls me to my situation—all these serve to free my spirit, to lend a greater boldness to my thinking, so that I can combine them, select them, and make them mine as I will, without fear or restraint.

### Sermon

For the last several years, it has been a practice of mine to take a walk each morning around sunrise. I don't seek out exciting routes or spectacular vistas—I just meander around my own neighborhood for about half an hour, occasionally varying my path but other times following a familiar track up and down the street. I started to sometimes bring a camera on these walks, and that brought a new dimension to how I perceived my surroundings. In my old neighborhood, I accumulated photos of particular plants or objects through the variations of four seasons. There was an old fence corner that

1 Copyright 2016 by Rev. Myke Johnson. Permission must be requested to reprint for other than personal use.

2 Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*, (Penguin Books: 2001) p. 4-5

3 Solnit, p. 5.

4 Rousseau, *The Confessions*, quoted in Solnit, p. 18-19.

intrigued me with its rustiness and angles, and I loved to watch the ferns budding out from their first tiny shoots of green fiddleheads to a marvelous fan of leaves and tall seed stalks.

When we moved at the end of February, I began to walk in our new neighborhood. I went out our back door, and then wandered down the side streets, first looking for the entry to the trails in Evergreen Cemetery I had read about. It turns out our neighborhood is a labyrinth of sorts, with curving side streets that lead no where else, and only certain routes that will take you somewhere out of the maze. I was delighted when I discovered little blue signs labeled Neighborhood Byway, which tag the paths that lead to nearby schools and the back way to Stevens Avenue.

I noticed people with dogs going onto a path at the end of a dead end street and by following them I discovered the Hall Trail near Capisic Brook. I found a huge old grandmother tree a few blocks away, with the largest girth I've seen so far nearby. Given the season and lack of leaves, I don't even know what species it is, though I am wondering about maple, since there are maple seeds on the ground nearby. But it is beginning to bud out, and I imagine the mystery will come clear soon enough.

Along my walks, the cardinals have been singing their most beautiful dawn songs, naming their territories and wooing their loves. I am a tree person and a cardinal person and so I stop to touch the trees, and I stop to listen to the cardinal songs. I try to catch a glimpse of them, bright and beautiful and usually perched near the top branches. There are cardinals in our own yard too. Day by day, this walking is weaving a relationship between me and the new place in which I am making a home.

In our mobile society, we don't often pay attention to our relationship to the very local place which we inhabit. But I felt spatially disoriented and off-balance after our move. I noticed the absence of a familiar view out my windows. Even the layout of our interior spaces felt backwards. Going outside and walking each morning is helping me to locate myself, to draw a new map in my brain and body.

Rebecca Solnit says, "When you give yourself to places, they give you yourself back; the more one comes to know them, the more one seeds them with the invisible crop of memories and associations that will be waiting for you when you come back, while new places offer up new thoughts, new possibilities. Exploring the world is one of the best ways of exploring the mind, and walking travels both terrains."<sup>5</sup>

Exploring neighborhoods like this reminds me of when I was a child. I remember going up and down streets and paths, and making new paths in nearby fields; I remember finding small hidden spots that could be for me alone. I remember a rock in a hedgerow that became my place to sit and think. Walking is the best way to become acquainted with our local habitat. On my outings in North Yarmouth, away from the roads, I followed a path through some woods and discovered an open field. Another time, traversing a field, I came upon an old farmer's pond surrounded by an earth berm. I felt like a kid when another trail led across the brook and out to a pond made by beaver dams.

When I began to reflect on the benefits of this practice of walking, I also thought of my friends who cannot go walking like this, either because they use a wheelchair to get around, or because, like my partner Margy, they suffer from physical ailments that limit their mobility. So I don't mean to universalize my experience or make assumptions about theirs. The greatest gift I receive from these

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5 Solnit, p. 13.

morning walks is the chance to be moving outside in the natural world. And that is partially possible for a person using a wheelchair, although many wooded paths are not accessible. I have taken many a great walk with a friend who was wheeling, and there are some accessible trails in the Portland area such as the Back Cove Trail or Eastern Prom Trail.

The best part of walking, for me, is a way to get outside—and I think we all need to get outside. For Margy, the best way to get outside has been to hang out in our own yard—where she could sit on the ground, do some planting or weeding, discover interesting bugs or mushrooms, and rest in between. This made it very important to us, as we moved into town, to have an adequate yard, a yard that felt connected to the natural world. As I have been venturing out into our new neighborhood, I also imagine bringing Margy to some of the lovely spots I find in ways that don't involve walking all the way from our house. If walking is difficult or impossible for you, I hope you might extrapolate from my thoughts some parallels that fit your own experience.

Another gift I receive from walking is that it brings me out of the realm of private interior space into a more public arena, where I can be surprised. Saturday morning, I walked over to the ponds at the Evergreen Cemetery, and then stopped to sit on a bench and watch the ducks. A man wearing a camouflage shirt was going by, carrying a huge camera and tripod. A while later he came back, just as I was getting up to leave, and he asked me, do you like birds? He had seen an owl and two owl chicks in a large pine across the pond. I followed him over to a small clearing where he set up the tripod again, and I looked through the viewfinder to see the two fluffy chicks on a branch in the sun. I had just walked under that pine several minutes earlier, totally unaware of the life above me. Walking can open us up to these moments of grace and beauty.

Henry David Thoreau wrote,

An absolutely new prospect is a great happiness, and I can still get this any afternoon. Two or three hours' walking will carry me to as strange a country as I expect ever to see. A single farmhouse which I had not seen before is sometimes as good as the dominions of the King of Dahomey. There is in fact a sort of harmony discoverable between the capabilities of the landscape within a circle of ten miles radius, or the limits of an afternoon walk, and the threescore and ten of human life. It will never become quite familiar to you.<sup>6</sup>

Sometimes walking will release the shadows that have been lurking in my unconscious. As I walk, I will find my mind unexpectedly working over a problem that occurred the previous day, that I had forgotten about but not resolved. As I keep walking, it somehow gets worked out in my thoughts and feelings. Another thing I notice. When I am working on a sermon, and find myself sort of stuck, if I go for a walk, I am more likely to come up with the next ideas, than if I stayed in front of that computer screen.

Maybe it is as simple as shifting my view from that of a screen about 14 inches away, to lifting up my eyes to an expanse of a quarter mile or more. Maybe it is the fresh air, or the sunlight. Or maybe it is the movement itself. Rebecca Solnit says, “The rhythm of walking generates a kind of rhythm of thinking.” She also says: “I like walking because it is slow, and I suspect that the mind, like the feet, works at about three miles an hour. If this is so, then modern life is moving faster than the speed of

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6 Quote by Solnit, p. 4.

thought, or thoughtfulness.”<sup>7</sup>

Jean-Jacques Rousseau says, “I can only meditate when I am walking. When I stop, I cease to think; my mind only works with my legs.”<sup>8</sup> I don't think that is quite true for me—there is a different sort of meditation that occurs when I am sitting still. But walking offers something to my spirit that other meditations do not. Buddhists have a practice called walking meditation, in which the practitioner brings their conscious awareness to the walking itself. Speaking about it, Zen teacher, Thich Nhat Hahn, writes:

In our daily lives, we usually feel pressured to move ahead. We have to hurry. We seldom ask ourselves where it is that we must hurry to.

When you practice walking meditation, you go for a stroll. You have no purpose or direction in space or time. The purpose of walking meditation is walking meditation itself. Going is important, not arriving. Walking meditation is not a means to an end; it is an end. Each step is life; each step is peace and joy. That is why we don't have to hurry. That is why we slow down. We seem to move forward, but we don't go anywhere; we are not drawn by a goal. Thus we smile while we are walking.<sup>9</sup>

Do I smile when I am walking? Not always. But walking does help me to let go of worries, and step into a sense of balance and gratitude, a sense of observation and appreciation of the beauty all around me. I feel myself expanding into a larger self, a self who is at one with this landscape, this community of beings all around me.

Perhaps on the opposite side of this walking without a goal—though not entirely dissimilar—is the practice of walking in pilgrimage. Likely the most well-known walking pilgrimage is El Camino de Santiago, in France and Spain, with over 100,000 people undertaking a sacred journey to Santiago de Compostela. The journey takes around three weeks and brings travelers to the cathedral where St. James is buried. Solnit observes,

Pilgrimage is one of the fundamental structures a journey can take—the quest in search of something, if only one's own transformation, the journey toward a goal... Pilgrimage is premised on the idea that the sacred is not entirely immaterial, but that there is a geography of spiritual power. ...perhaps it reconciles the spiritual and the material, for to go on pilgrimage is to make the body and its actions express the desires and beliefs of the soul. Pilgrimage unites belief with action, thinking with doing...<sup>10</sup>

Of course, the largest pilgrimage in the world is the annual Hajj to Mecca. It is a religious duty for all able-bodied Muslims to attempt the pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in their lifetime. While most pilgrims take all forms of transportation on their way to that sacred city, the religious rites during their time there include processions of hundreds of thousands of people, and walking counterclockwise around the Kaaba seven times. The body's movements become a vehicle for spiritual transformation.

In our congregation, we might be more attuned to a different type of pilgrimage that grew from these religious rites of walking and adapted them—this is the walk or march for a political cause. I think of

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7 Solnit, p. 10.

8 From *The Confessions*, in Solnit, p. 14

9 [http://www.dhammatalks.net/Books2/Thich\\_Nhat\\_Hanh\\_A\\_Guide\\_to\\_Walking\\_Meditation.htm](http://www.dhammatalks.net/Books2/Thich_Nhat_Hanh_A_Guide_to_Walking_Meditation.htm)

10 Solnit, p. 45, 49

Gandhi's 200 mile walk to the sea in 1930, called the Salt March. The British had put a tax on salt, and outlawed the ancient local practice of making salt from saltwater; so Gandhi determined that to make salt would be an important practical and symbolic act of civil disobedience to British rule. He began the 24 day walk to the sea with seventy-eight people, but by the end of the nonviolent campaign, over 80,000 Indians had been jailed for civil disobedience on behalf of self-rule.

Holding the record for walking for a cause would be Peace Pilgrim, who on January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1953 began walking across the United States on behalf of peace and disarmament. She gave up her given name, and all the accoutrements of ordinary life. She carried nothing but a comb and toothbrush and a copy of her message in the pockets of her navy blue tunic. She gave up using money, and as she said, "I walk until given shelter, fast until given food." She set out to walk 25,000 miles, and after achieving that goal in nine years, kept walking, without keeping track of the miles anymore for a total of 28 years. She traveled to all 50 states as well as Canada and parts of Mexico, with a message she was willing to share with passersby and anyone else who would listen. Later in her journey, she was a widely known public speaker.

Why would someone choose walking as the means to work for peace? Solnit wonders about that too. She writes that perhaps Peace Pilgrim felt "the world was in such trouble that she herself had to drop her ordinary name and ordinary life to try to heal it." Or "if she could break with the ordinary and go forth unprotected by money, by buildings, and by a place in the world, then perhaps profound change were possible on a larger scale."<sup>11</sup>

Marches and political walks carry a form of spiritual energy as well as well as political power. They bridge the divide between our personal convictions and public spaces. They often bring together the strength of many people in opposition to the oppression or destructiveness of the status quo.

In our time, in an age witnessing the perils of fossil fuels and climate change, walking has taken on a new symbolic and practical significance for those involved in social change. After a massive oil spill in 1971 in San Francisco, John Francis decided to stop riding in any motorized transportation. For 22 years, this son of African-American working-class parents walked everywhere he went, including across the country, hoping to inspire others to drop out of a petroleum based economy.<sup>12</sup> He became known as the planetwalker. After a short while, he also stopped talking. He communicated by rough sign language and written notes and his banjo. He says he took his vow of silence because he was arguing all the time.

In 1990 he began speaking again, and the day after he spoke, he was struck by a car. People around him wondered if the universe was giving him a message. He wondered that too, but he refused to ride in an ambulance, and walked to the hospital. Four years later, he made a choice to start riding in cars again, because he felt he might be a more effective environmentalist if he did so. During his silent time, he had earned a Ph.D. in land management, and he was later recruited by the Coast Guard to write oil spill regulations, and by the United Nations Environment Program to serve as a goodwill ambassador. In 2005, an interviewer from Grist magazine asked him about another long walk he was about to start, "You've talked a little bit about how you hope walking will affect the world around you. How about the world inside you? How will this time be different?"

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11 Solnit, p. 56-57.

12 <http://grist.org/living/hertsgaard-francis/>

He answered:

I don't know how I'm going to change. I don't know how it will change me. That's part of the mystery of walking, ...that the destination is inside us and we really don't know when we arrive until we arrive. One of the biggest epiphanies that I've had was that, you know, environmentalists like to look at the industrialists or at the developers and say, "They gotta change. If they would change, everything would be all right." But really, we all have to do that. We all need to look at ourselves. We need to re-imagine ourselves.

The built environment of suburban life was designed around the automobile. For our culture to shift from a fossil-fuel economy to a renewable and sustainable economy, we will need to rethink how we organize our world, so that transportation becomes more often about walking and less often about driving in cars. That can't happen merely by the actions of courageous individuals, but by a collective effort to shift our thinking and our expectations. For my generation, the car was a symbol of freedom, of agency, of the power to go places and do things. Perhaps for the next generations, that symbol of freedom will be our own two feet, or the wheels we can propel by sustainable means. In a post-carbon world, perhaps the parameters of our lives will again be shaped by walkable spaces, with mobility support for all of those who need it.

I see that I have meandered quite a bit on this journey of reflection on walking. I've looked at how walking helps me to connect to the natural world, and also the very local world of my new neighborhood. I've touched on Buddhist walking meditation, and explored the idea of a walking pilgrimage for spiritual or political transformation. I've wondered about how we might need to reshape our world toward more walking, given the realities of a post-carbon future. This is one of those reflections where there is no destination, no major point that I am trying to make.

A labyrinth is another form a walking meditation, in which one follows a circular path that loops in and out until it reaches the center, and then winds back around to the outside again. We don't need to get anywhere to find that we have been on a journey. I hope my words today have created a small such journey for us. As you leave this place in which we gather, may you be conscious of the walking that you are doing step by step.

*Closing Words*

Antonio Machado, translated by Willis Barnstone,<sup>13</sup>  
Walker, your footsteps  
are the road, and nothing more.

Walker, there is no road,  
the road is made by walking.

Walking you make the road,  
and turning to look behind  
you see the path you never  
again will step upon.

Walker, there is no road,  
only foam trails on the sea.

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13 *Border of a Dream: Selected Poems*, translated by Willis Barnstone