The Spirit of Sauntering: Thoreau on the Art of Walking and the Perils of a Sedentary Lifestyle

by Maria Popova

Why “every walk is a sort of crusade.”

“Go out and walk. That is the glory of life,” Maira Kalman exhorted in her glorious visual memoir. A century and a half earlier, another remarkable mind made a beautiful and timeless case for that basic, infinitely rewarding, yet presently endangered human activity.

Henry David Thoreau was a man of extraordinary wisdom on everything from optimism to the true meaning of “success” to the creative benefits of keeping a diary to the greatest gift of growing old. In his 1861 treatise Walking (free ebook | public library | IndieBound), penned seven years after Walden, he sets out to remind us of how that primal act of mobility connects us with our essential wildness, that spring of spiritual vitality methodically dried up by our sedentary civilization.

Illustration by D. B. Johnson from Henry Hikes to Fitchburg, a children’s book about Thoreau’s philosophy.

Intending to “regard man as an inhabitant, or a part and parcel of Nature, rather than a member of society,” because “there are enough champions of civilization,” Thoreau argues that the genius of walking lies not in mechanically putting one foot in front of the other en route to a destination but in mastering the art of sauntering. (In one of several wonderful asides, Thoreau offers what is perhaps the best definition of “genius”: “Genius is a light which makes the darkness visible, like the lightning’s flash, which perchance shatters the temple of knowledge itself — and not a taper lighted at the hearthstone of the race, which pales before the light of common day.”) An avid practitioner of hiking, Thoreau extols sauntering as a different thing altogether:
I have met with but one or two persons in the course of my life who understood the art of Walking, that is, of taking walks — who had a genius, so to speak, for sauntering, which word is beautifully derived “from idle people who roved about the country, in the Middle Ages, and asked charity, under pretense of going a la Sainte Terre, to the Holy Land, till the children exclaimed, “There goes a Sainte-Terrer,” a Saunterer, a Holy-Lander. They who never go to the Holy Land in their walks, as they pretend, are indeed mere idlers and vagabonds; but they who do go there are saunterers in the good sense, such as I mean. Some, however, would derive the word from sans terre, without land or a home, which, therefore, in the good sense, will mean, having no particular home, but equally at home everywhere. For this is the secret of successful sauntering. He who sits still in a house all the time may be the greatest vagrant of all; but the saunterer, in the good sense, is no more vagrant than the meandering river, which is all the while sedulously seeking the shortest course to the sea.

Proclaiming that “every walk is a sort of crusade,” Thoreau laments — note, a century and a half before our present sedentary society — our growing civilizational tameness, which has possessed us to cease undertaking “persevering, never-ending enterprises” so that even “our expeditions are but tours.” With a dramatic flair, he lays out the spiritual conditions required of the true walker:

If you are ready to leave father and mother, and brother and sister, and wife and child and friends, and never see them again — if you have paid your debts, and made your will, and settled all your affairs, and are a free man — then you are ready for a walk.

[...] No wealth can buy the requisite leisure, freedom, and independence which are the capital in this profession... It requires a direct dispensation from Heaven to become a walker.
Thoreau’s prescription, to be sure, is neither for the faint of body nor for the gainfully entrapped in the nine-to-five hamster wheel. Professing that the preservation of his “health and spirits” requires “sauntering through the woods and over the hills and fields” for at least four hours a day, he laments the fates of the less fortunate and leaves one wondering what he may have said of today’s desk-bound office worker:

When sometimes I am reminded that the mechanics and shopkeepers stay in their shops not only all the forenoon, but all the afternoon too, sitting with crossed legs, so many of them — as if the legs were made to sit upon, and not to stand or walk upon — I think that they deserve some credit for not having all committed suicide long ago.

[...]

I am astonished at the power of endurance, to say nothing of the moral insensibility, of my neighbors who confine themselves to shops and offices the whole day for weeks and months, aye, and years almost together.

Of course, lest we forget, Thoreau was able to saunter through the woods and over the hills and fields in no small part thanks to support from his mom and sister, who fetched him fresh-baked donuts as he renounced civilization. In fact, he makes a sweetly compassionate aside, given the era he was writing in, about women’s historical lack of mobility:
How womankind, who are confined to the house still more than men, stand it I do not know; but I have ground to suspect that most of them do not stand it at all.

Thoreau is careful to point out that the walking he extols has nothing to do with transportational utility or physical exercise — rather it is a spiritual endeavor undertaken for its own sake:

The walking of which I speak has nothing in it akin to taking exercise, as it is called, as the sick take medicine at stated hours — as the Swinging of dumb-bells or chairs; but is itself the enterprise and adventure of the day. If you would get exercise, go in search of the springs of life. Think of a man's swinging dumbbells for his health, when those springs are bubbling up in far-off pastures unsought by him!


To engage in this kind of walking, Thoreau argues, we ought to reconnect with our wild nature:

When we walk, we naturally go to the fields and woods: what would become of us, if we walked only in a garden or a mall?
One can only wonder how Thoreau would eviscerate this formidable set of civilizing regulations at Walden Pond, his beloved patch of wilderness. (Photograph: Karen Barbarossa)

But his most prescient point has to do with the idea that sauntering — like any soul-nourishing activity — should be approached with a mindset of presence rather than productivity. To think that a man who lived in a forest cabin in the middle of the 19th century might have such extraordinary insight into our toxic modern cult of busyness is hard to imagine, and yet he captures the idea that ”busy is a decision” with astounding elegance:

I am alarmed when it happens that I have walked a mile into the woods bodily, without getting there in spirit. In my afternoon walk I would fain forget all my morning occupations and my obligations to Society. But it sometimes happens that I cannot easily shake off the village. The thought of some work will run in my head and I am not where my body is — I am out of my senses. In my walks I would fain return to my senses. What business have I in the woods, if I am thinking of something out of the woods?
Illustration by Emily Hughes from *Wild*;

Walking, which is available as a free ebook, is a brisk and immensely invigorating read in its entirety, as Thoreau goes on to explore the usefulness of useless knowledge, the uselessness of given names, and how private property is killing our capacity for wildness. Complement it with Maira Kalman on walking as a creative stimulant and the cognitive science of how a walk along a single city block can forever change the way you perceive the world.