Paths Are Made By Walking
by Nipun Mehta

[Offbeat Graduation Speech Gets Standing Ovation: 2012's Baccalaureate speaker at the University of Pennsylvania was an unconventional choice for an Ivy League school. To address their newly-minted graduates, aspiring to dazzling careers, they picked a man who has never in his adult life, applied for a job. A man who hasn't worked for pay in nearly a decade, and whose self-stated mission is simply "to bring smiles to the world and stillness to my heart". This off-the-radar speaker launched his address with a startling piece of advice. Following up with four key insights gleaned from a radical 1000 km walking pilgrimage through the villages of India. As he closed his one-of-a-kind Graduation Day speech, the sea of cap and gowned students rose to their feet for a standing ovation. What follows is the full transcript of the talk by Nipun Mehta. --DailyGood Editors]

Thank you to my distinguished friends, President Amy Gutmann, Provost Vincent Price and Rev. Charles Howard for inviting me to share a few reflections on this joyous occasion. It is an honor and privilege to congratulate you -- UPenn's class of 2012.

Right now each one of you is sitting on the runway of life primed for takeoff. You are some of the world's most gifted, elite, and driven college graduates – and you are undeniably ready to fly. So what I'm about to say next may sound a bit crazy. I want to urge you, not to fly, but to – walk. Four years ago, you walked into this marvelous laboratory of higher learning. Today, heads held high, you walk to receive your diplomas. Tomorrow, you will walk into a world of infinite possibilities.

But walking, in our high-speed world, has unfortunately fallen out of favor. The word "pedestrian" itself is used to describe something ordinary and commonplace. Yet, walking with intention has deep roots. Australia's aboriginal youth go on walkabouts as a rite of passage; Native American tribes conduct vision quests in the wilderness; in Europe, for centuries, people have walked the Camino de Santiago, which spans the breadth of Spain. Such pilgrims place one foot firmly in front of the other, to fall in step with the rhythms of the universe and the cadence of their own hearts.

Back in 2005, six months into our marriage, my wife and I decided to "step it up" ourselves and go on a walking pilgrimage. At the peak of our efforts with ServiceSpace, we wondered if we had the capacity to put aside our worldly success and seek higher truths. Have you ever thought of something and then just known that it had to happen? It was one of those things. So we sold all our major belongings, and bought a one-way ticket to India. Our plan was to head to Mahatma Gandhi's ashram, since he had always been an inspiration to us, and then walk South. Between the two of us, we budgeted a dollar a day, mostly for incidentals -- which meant that for our survival we had to depend utterly on the kindness of strangers. We ate whatever food was offered and slept

wherever place was offered.

Now, I do have to say, such ideas come with a warning: do not try this at home, because your partner might not exactly welcome this kind of honeymoon. :-)

For us, this walk was a pilgrimage -- and our goal was simply to be in a space larger than our egos, and to allow that compassion to guide us in unscripted acts of service along the way. Stripped entirely of our comfort zone and accustomed identities, could we still “keep it real”? That was our challenge.

We ended up walking 1000 kilometers over three months. In that period, we encountered the very best and the very worst of human nature -- not just in others, but also within ourselves.

Soon after we ended the pilgrimage, my uncle casually popped the million dollar question at the dinner table: "So, Nipun, what did you learn from this walk?" I didn't know where to begin. But quite spontaneously, an acronym -- W-A-L-K -- came to mind, which encompassed the key lessons we had learned, and continue to relearn, even to this day. As you start the next phase of your journey, I want to share those nuggets with the hope that it might illuminate your path in some small way too.

The W in WALK stands for Witness. When you walk, you quite literally see more. Your field of vision is nearly 180 degrees, compared to 40 degrees when you’re traveling at 62 mph. Higher speeds smudge our peripheral vision, whereas walking actually broadens your canvas and dramatically shifts the objects of your attention. For instance, on our pilgrimage, we would notice the sunrise everyday, and how, at sunset, the birds would congregate for a little party of their own. Instead of adding Facebook friends online, we were actually making friends in person, often over a cup of hot “chai”. Life around us came alive in a new way.

A walking pace is the speed of community. Where high speeds facilitate separation, a slower pace gifts us an opportunity to commune.

As we traversed rural India at the speed of a couple of miles per hour, it became clear how much we could learn simply by bearing witness to the villagers' way of life. Their entire mental model is different -- the multiplication of wants is replaced by the basic fulfillment of human needs.When you are no longer preoccupied with asking for more and more stuff; then you just take what is given and give what is taken. Life is simple again. A farmer explained it to us this way: "You cannot make the clouds rain more, you cannot make the sun shine less. They are just nature's gifts -- take it or leave it."

When the things around you are seen as gifts, they are no longer a means to an end; they are the means and the end. And thus, a cow-herder will tend to his animals with the compassion of a father, a village woman will wait 3 hours for a delayed bus without a trace of anger, a child will spend countless hours fascinated by stars in the galaxy, and finding his place in the vast cosmos.

So with today's modernized tools at your ready disposal, don’t let yourself zoom obliviously from point A to point B on the highways of life; try walking the backroads of the world, where you will witness a profoundly inextricable connection with all living things.

The A in WALK stands for Accept. When walking in this way, you place yourself in the palm of the universe, and face its realities head on. We walked at the peak of summer, in merciless temperatures hovering above 120 degrees. Sometimes we were hungry, exhausted and even frustrated. Our bodies ached for just that extra drink of water, a few more moments in the shade, or just that little spark of human kindness. Many times we received that extra bit, and our hearts would overflow with gratitude. But sometimes we were abruptly refused, and we had to cultivate the capacity to accept the gifts hidden in even the most challenging of moments.

I remember one such day, when we approached a rest house along a barren highway. As heavy trucks whizzed past, we saw a sign, announcing that guests were hosted at no charge. “Ah, our lucky day,” we thought in delight. I stepped inside eagerly. The man behind the desk looked up and asked sharply, “Are you here to see the temple?” A simple yes from my lips would have instantly granted us a full meal and a room for the night. But it wouldn’t have been the truth. So instead, I said, “Well, technically, no sir. We’re on a walking pilgrimage to become better people. But we would be glad to visit the temple.” Rather abruptly, he retorted: “Um, sorry, we can’t host you.” Something about his curt arrogance triggered a slew of negative emotions. I wanted to make a snide remark in return and slam the door on my way out. Instead, I held my raging ego in check. In that state of physical and mental exhaustion, it felt like a Herculean task-- but through the inner turmoil a voice surfaced within, telling me to accept the reality of this moment.

There was a quiet metamorphosis in me. I humbly let go of my defenses, accepted my fate that day, and turned to leave without a murmur. Perhaps the man behind the counter sensed this shift in me, because he yelled out just then, “So what exactly are you doing again?” After my brief explanation he said, “Look, I can’t feed you or host you, because rules are rules. But there are restrooms out in the back. You could sleep outside the male restroom and your wife can sleep outside the female restroom.” Though he was being kind, his offer felt like salt in my wounds. We had no choice but to accept.

That day we fasted and that night, we slept by the bathrooms. A small lie could’ve bought us an upgrade, but that would’ve been no pilgrimage. As I went to sleep with a wall separating me from my wife, I had this beautiful, unbidden vision of a couple climbing to the top of a mountain from two different sides. Midway through this difficult ascent, as the man contemplated giving up, a small sparrow flew by with this counsel, “Don’t quit now, friend. Your wife is eager to see you at the top.” He kept climbing. A few days later, when the wife found herself on the brink of quitting, the little sparrow showed up with the same message. Step by step, their love sustained their journey all the way to the mountaintop. Visited by the timely grace of this vision, I shed a few grateful tears -- and this story became a touchstone not only in our relationship, but many other noble friendships as well.

So I encourage you to cultivate equanimity and accept whatever life tosses into your laps -- when you do that, you will be blessed with the insight of an inner transformation that is yours to keep for all of time.

The L in WALK stands for Love. The more we learned from nature, and built a kind of inner resilience to external circumstances, the more we fell into our natural state -- which was to be loving. In our dominant paradigm, Hollywood has insidiously co-opted the word, but the love I’m talking about here is the kind of love that only knows one thing -- to give with no strings attached. Purely. Selflessly.

Most of us believe that to give, we first need to have something to give. The trouble with

that is, that when we are taking stock of what we have, we almost always make accounting errors. Oscar Wilde once quipped, “Now-a-days, people know the price of everything, but the value of nothing.” We have forgotten how to value things without a price tag. Hence, when we get to our most abundant gifts -- like attention, insight, compassion -- we confuse their worth because they’re, well, priceless.

On our walking pilgrimage, we noticed that those who had the least were most readily equipped to honor the priceless. In urban cities, the people we encountered began with an unspoken wariness: “Why are you doing this? What do you want from me?” In the countryside, on the other hand, villagers almost always met us with an open-hearted curiosity launching straight in with: “Hey buddy, you don’t look local. What’s your story?”

In the villages, your worth wasn’t assessed by your business card, professional network or your salary. That innate simplicity allowed them to love life and cherish all its connections.

Extremely poor villagers, who couldn’t even afford their own meals, would often borrow food from their neighbors to feed us. When we tried to refuse, they would simply explain: “To us, the guest is God. This is our offering to the divine in you that connects us to each other.” Now, how could one refuse that? Street vendors often gifted us vegetables; in a very touching moment, an armless fruit-seller once insisted on giving us a slice of watermelon. Everyone, no matter how old, would be overjoyed to give us directions, even when they weren’t fully sure of them. :) And I still remember the woman who generously gave us water when we were extremely thirsty -- only to later discover that she had to walk 10 kilometers at 4AM to get that one bucket of water. These people knew how to give, not because they had a lot, but because they knew how to love life. They didn’t need any credit or assurance that you would ever return to pay them back. Rather, they just trusted in the pay-it-forward circle of giving.

When you come alive in this way, you'll realize that true generosity doesn’t start when you have some thing to give, but rather when there’s nothing in you that’s trying to take. So I hope that you will make all your precious moments an expression of loving life.

And lastly, the K in WALK stands for Know Thyself.

Sages have long informed us that when we serve others unconditionally, we shift from the me-to-the-we and connect more deeply with the other. That matrix of inter-connections allows for a profound quality of mental quietude. Like a still lake undisturbed by waves or ripples, we are then able to see clearly into who we are and how we can live in deep harmony with the environment around us.

When one foot walks, the other rests. Doing and being have to be in balance.

Our rational mind wants to rightfully ensure progress, but our intuitive mind also needs space for the emergent, unknown and unplanned to arise. Doing is certainly important, but when we aren't aware of our internal ecosystem, we get so vested in our plans and actions, that we don't notice the buildup of mental residue. Over time, that unconscious internal noise starts polluting our motivations, our ethics and our spirit. And so, it is critical to still the mind. A melody, after all, can only be created with the silence in between the notes.

As we walked -- witnessed, accepted, loved -- our vision of the world indeed grew clearer.

That clarity, paradoxically enough, blurred our previous distinctions between me versus we, inner transformation versus external impact, and selfishness versus selflessness. They were inextricably connected. When a poor farmer gave me a tomato as a parting gift, with tears rolling down his eyes, was I receiving or giving? When sat for hours in silent meditation, was the benefit solely mine or would it ripple out into the world? When I lifted the haystack off an old man's head and carried it for a kilometer, was I serving him or serving myself?

Which is to say, don't just go through life -- grow through life. It will be easy and tempting for you to arrive at reflexive answers -- but make it a point, instead, to acknowledge mystery and welcome rich questions ... questions that nudge you towards a greater understanding of this world and your place in it.

That's W-A-L-K. And today, at this momentous milestone of your life, you came in walking and you will go out walking. As you walk on into a world that is increasingly aiming to move beyond the speed of thought, I hope you will each remember the importance of traveling at the speed of thoughtfulness. I hope that you will take time to witness our magnificent interconnections. That you will accept the beautiful gifts of life even when they aren't pretty, that you will practice loving selflessly and strive to know your deepest nature.

I want to close with a story about my great grandfather. He was a man of little wealth who still managed to give every single day of his life. Each morning, he had a ritual of going on a walk -- and as he walked, he diligently fed the ant hills along his path with small pinches of wheat flour. Now that is an act of micro generosity so small that it might seem utterly negligible, in the grand scheme of the universe. How does it matter? It matters in that it changed him inside. And my great grandfather's goodness shaped the worldview of my grandparents who in turn influenced that of their children -- my parents. Today those ants and the ant hills are gone, but my great grandpa's spirit is very much embedded in all my actions and their future ripples. It is precisely these small, often invisible, acts of inner transformation that mold the stuff of our being, and bend the arc of our shared destiny.

On your walk, today and always, I wish you the eyes to see the anthills and the heart to feed them with joy.

May you be blessed. Change yourself -- change the world.