

In Conversation While Walking
July 2020

Often, in essays, the title is everything. It is a branch that bears the full substance of what is to follow. The title of a favorite essay, by Antonia Malchik, is “To walk is human; to reflect, divine”. In no way could I have moved past this essay without the intent to fully savor it. The author spurred me on, in that time in my life, when I was a neophyte to daily trekking on dirt trails and the road’s asphalt. Offering more than her exquisite title, Malchik wrote of her daily walks with her child, as if speaking directly to me: “I am far more aware now of how my senses help my brain filter and interpret the vast sea of information constantly shifting around me, allowing me to not just move through the world, but to understand my own place within it.” How would I deal with the raucous thoughts, emotions, worries that clutter my mind if I were to cease my daily walks? Pondering while pounding, I might call this treasured habit.

My grandmother’s soul moves within me when I set out on a summer’s morning, selecting one of the many routes that have now become familiar, like the rooms in my house. Like Malchik, my grandmother knew her place on the cherished walks that took her from her house to the stone remains of her mother’s property, down the hill to the new highway and back up Castle Hill to her front door. In spite of arthritis, she walked nearly every day, including that precious day when I walked with her, when she turned to me and said, “Everywhere here is home.” In walking, she was content and joyful. I am grateful that I inherited this love.

Each day now, I make my town walks. A friend tells me, “Alleys are better than asphalt, which is better than concrete sidewalks.” I heed her wisdom; I must balance between a good workout and kindness to my knees, my back. My body tells me, “You are no longer a young girl. I have served you well, but now I want the gentle life.” The alleys have their puddles and roots and their captured mid-morning warmth, but they provide this innocent voyeur a glimpse into the relaxed side of residents’ lives. The grass is not nearly as manicured as the front lawns. Dog bones and dog doo litter. Some beer cans near a firepit. It’s as if the back doors have been opened for me. I try to be discreet. I admit that I judge. But what would a walker think of my back yard, which is owned by the Labradors?

Walking. It once started as a mandate. It is now my necessity. Might I say it is a passion, a lifeline? For the clinical side of the exercise, I wear my dainty watch with the thin black rope wristband. No sports watch with apps for me. This little watch has a silent ticktock. I wear it to adhere to my doctor’s prescription, “One half-hour, no more, no less.” I break the rule when I discover a new block of houses where flower pots explode color. I break the rule playfully when any newness is revealed. I shush Henry David Thoreau’s desire for “the old familiar walk.” Let’s have an adventure, Mr. Thoreau! Let’s get lost!

Getting lost is a difficult task in my small town, but I attempt it. Paying no attention to street signs, I zig and zag. Wendell Berry suggests that “if you don’t know where you are, you don’t know who you are.” I know he speaks of a grander scheme, but on my lost-walks, I don’t care to know who I am. I am anyone. My path—all that I see, hear, touch—becomes my identity. All that is important is the question uttered by Annie Dillard, as she treks the Virginia trails: “Why is it beautiful?”

As I walk, my mind is not empty. I cannot still it from the incessant grinding and shifting and whirling—repetitions of concerns, long task lists, shreds of feeble prayers, eruptions of fear, wordless song rifts. It helps to take deep breaths. It helps to learn that St. Augustine said, “It is solved by walking.” I keep walking. I do not slow or stop.

My mind eventually slows, and I walk in a delicious internal silence as well as the silence of Nature, which includes the unobtrusive: bird song, pine needle song, and that strange crystal melody that comes from the sun’s rays dancing on fences and my own skin. I might enjoy the company of others on a walk, but there is something to be said for walking in aloneness. Wendell Berry writes of his walking time, that “we did not often speak,” and then provides the value of that choice: “we walked always in beauty.” At times, I almost feel the need to tiptoe, to hold my breath, to become invisible. Then I hear children laughing, and I gulp the air, scuff my feet, and grin.

As my mind settles, the delightful Other flows in. It is not enough for me to just notice. It is not enough for me to just glance through an open door. It is not enough to admire the near poetry of a well-coifed garden or the mother beckoning to twin daughters. No, it is time to imagine. It is time to tease out stories fixed into these quotidian details. I suddenly understand Thoreau’s desire for the familiar. The cottonwoods that never fail in offering shade, the scents that emanate from certain windows, the elderly couple who I frequently pass by. It is these repetitions over which I linger, and soon my thoughts assume some structure and curl into rough prose.

A story offers itself at the fishing lake. A young man sits on the pier with his young son. Both wear wide-brimmed hats, tennis shoes—no socks for the father, white ones for the little fellow. I catch a bit of the father’s words as I step onto the bridge over the lake’s outlet: “No, I don’t think they do.” They? The fish? Did the son ask if fish get cold at night? Might this man be instead an uncle? I will the father, in my writerly mind, to tell the little boy stories of his own fishing excursions with his own father. I picture the grandfather, telling his son why fish do not get cold at night.

It is on my walks that I let my attention and senses run free. How dirt changes texture. How lilacs’ color affects their perfume. How different leaves of different trees wave to me. How couples walk, in tension or in calm. How children use their voices. How my posture affects my body’s well-being. Annie Dillard touches me when she writes of her Virginia walks, “At a certain point, you say to the woods ... Now I am ready. Now I will stop and be wholly attentive. You empty yourself and wait, listening.” At the end of a narrow trail, on an early spring day, I forget the limitations of time and stop. About me dart red winged blackbirds, screeching particular messages of warning and welcome. One hovers on a stout stalk. I could reach out to it, but I recognize a warning in its black eye. The air smells acrid. I stare, empty my mind of all but the blackbirds, who puff and flutter. I wait and listen and know that I have now seen, for the first time, these incredible beauties.

On my walks, I tend to find what I haven’t been looking for. I often set out with an agenda of what to ponder, or what to espy. I am diligent in adhering to my tasks, but then I crouch. It’s a baby rabbit in the alley brush, an earthworm wiggling at the puddle’s edge. I might have missed

these little treasures. Words from Ann Patchett should rule my agenda: “Never be so focused on what you’re looking for that you overlook the think you actually find.”

I can travel in a car to the forests of our state, overwhelmed by the expanse of green on one rolling hill after another or of compressed black-blue clouds from which writhe bolts of lightning. I can ride my Townie bike, covering much more distance. But it is walking that feeds my soul and brings on a feeling of contentment, of freedom, a feeling so strong that I dramatically stretch my arms outward, upward. “There comes ... a longing,” writes Wendell Berry, “never to travel again except on foot.” I can’t imagine this gift of perambulation disappearing from my life. If I linger too long on the thought of someday losing the capability to stroll, I grow fearful, for, as Terry Tempest Williams tells me, “... and once [a person] can no longer walk with beauty or wonder at nature, their spirit will wither.”

I often travel incognito. In my sunglasses and wide floppy hat, I am nothing to anyone who passes me. Most walkers as well are tuned in to early morning music, the news, podcasts. I am discouraged, though, when a person does not respond to my greeting. Maya Angelou appeals to that part of me that turns inward, grumpy-silent, in a huff, when I feel rebuffed: “Good done anywhere is good done everywhere. ... Speak to people rather than walking by them like they’re stones that don’t matter.” I will therefore not give up offering a louder or repeated greeting to young or old, earbuds or none. The call-out is food for my soul. I feel I am not alone. I am one with all walkers, and like them, I have a purpose. Like St. Augustine, I go forth on my path, as it exists only through my walking. Like Thoreau, I believe that “an early morning walk is a blessing for the whole day.”

Like Annie Dillard, “I wake expectant, hoping to see a new thing.”