

Whitney

forests of Vermont's Green Mountains, climbing the alpine peaks of the Whites, culminating in the 100-mile wilderness of Maine.

On occasion, we would meet up as he came off the trail into a town. "It's easy," he would say. "Just one step at a time, putting one foot ahead of the other." Yet at the same time, that act, as he found out, is profound, deep, simple and meaningful, because of all the things that happen along the way. It's not just the strangers you meet but the thoughts you find, for on such a walk, you cannot escape yourself. One of the gifts of the trail is "Trail Magic," that serendipitous meeting of strangers, who may greet you, offer a meal or a shower, even a campsite or a cabin for the night.

A week or so ago, I found myself thinking about walking while waiting for my husband Eli and Gabe to climb Owls Head, the last of 48 4,000-foot mountains in New Hampshire, a genuine milestone for Eli. As I walk with them in my mind, nurturing an injured muscle, I am cultivating patience. I do not take walking for granted. In fact, I think of it many times a day.

In this case, I took a wonderful journey in my mind by reading *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* by Rebecca Solnit who parallels the act of walking with thinking. Solnit: "...the movement as well as the sights going by...make things happen in the mind, and this is what makes walking ambiguous and endlessly fertile: it is both means and end, travel and destination."

Walking is not analytical, but improvisational. It is an unfolding of a path we "read" with our feet. Like a book, there is no way to predict what lies ahead. Each step turns a page, and so there is a built-in call for patience, forbearance, openness for what lies ahead. As we walk, we blur the line between feet and mind, moving from reality to imagination and back again.

One month of walking influenced Robert Frost for the rest of his life. In 1912, virtually unknown and unpublished, Frost uprooted his family from the Derry

farm, and moved to the Dymock region of England where, within months, his first book, and then his second, were soon published. In England, he met Ezra Pound, and a group of aspiring poets later referred to as the Dymock poets, among them celebrated biographer and literary critic Edward Thomas. In August 1914, Thomas and his family rented a cottage across from Frost. The two friends met each day to walk Dymock paths in all kinds of weather, walking their way to new thoughts about nature, poetry, prose and the spaces between. For them, familiar paths became new for neither could predict how paths of thought would unfold. Frost later called Thomas "brother." When Thomas died in World War I, that month of walking became one of Frost's most cherished memories.

Mazes and labyrinths help us explore a specific kind of walking – a maze's confusion of alternative paths or the labyrinth's ordered, retraceable path returning "home." Solnit: "It was breathtaking to realize that in the labyrinth metaphors and meanings could be conveyed spatially. That when you seem furthest from your destination is when you suddenly arrive is a very pat truth in words, but a profound one to find with your feet."

A pilgrimage is another kind of walk, a physical manifestation aimed at a metaphysical goal. Walking is a way for the mind to meet the body. Solnit: "If life is a journey, then when we are actually journeying our lives become tangible...Labyrinths, pilgrimages, mountain climbs, hikes... allow us to take our allotted time as a literal journey with spiritual

dimensions we ... understand through the senses."

Virginia Woolf claimed, "there are no barriers on the moors, and you say hello to everyone...walking is classless, one of the few sports that is classless."

Not so for all of us. Throughout history, walking has defined public and private space – and the walking experience for men and women is worlds apart. Consider the public law about women in Middle Assyria from the 17th century to the 11th century B.C. Widows and wives were expected to wear

veils, while prostitutes and slave girls were required not to wear veils, thus dividing women by two social castes. The implication was that women did not walk to see, but to be seen. A man's sexuality remained private, yet a woman's sexuality became public business.

Historically, women's clothing constricted movement – tight or fragile shoes, high heels, corsets, girdles, very full or very narrow skirts, and veils curtailing vision. Domestication was another way to curtail a woman walking. Solnit: "In order to keep women 'private,' or sexually accessible to one man and inaccessible to others, her whole life would be consigned to the private space of the home that served as a sort of masonry veil."

So walk if you can. If for some reason, you cannot walk, then walk in your mind. The zen part of walking is the most joyous – not knowing what you will discover along the way – in yourself, in your companions, in strangers, in Nature. I wish you "trail magic" along the way.

Why walk? Solnit relates walking to the importance of musing.

"Musing takes place in a kind of meadowlands of the imagination, a part of the imagination that has not yet been plowed, developed, or put to any immediate practical use. Environmentalists are always arguing that those butterflies, those grasslands, those watershed woodlands, have an utterly necessary function in the grand scheme of things, even if they don't produce a market crop. The same is true of the meadowlands of the imagination; time spent there is not work time, yet without that time, the

mind becomes sterile, dull, domesticated. The fight for free space – for wilderness and for public space – must be accompanied by a fight for free time to spend wandering in that space. Otherwise, the individual imagination will be bulldozed over for the chain-store outlets of consumer appetite, true-crime titillation, and celebrity crises."

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