



Why We Walk

Jennifer Graf Groneberg

When autumn comes to the mountains of northwest Montana, it announces itself quietly, mostly in absences. Gone are the RVs towing boats, the buzz of jet skis on the lake, the crush of cars heading north to Glacier National Park. Gone too are the hummingbirds and the bees, the snakes and the bears, the turtles and frogs and toads—even the woods take on a sort of hush. Wisps of smoke hang above small houses in the cool morning air; here and there, larch needles turn the color of pumpkins. It's then that I'm reminded of my first year in the

folks that anyone would walk simply for the sake of walking.

The well-meaning queries of the locals were my first inkling that walking might mean different things to different people—or even, different things to a single person, at various points in a life—as evidenced by the many verbs we use to describe the act

of putting one foot in front of another. We ramble and amble, strut and stroll, hike, drift, march, stride, pace, tramp, stalk, swagger. We roam, rove, wander—words that especially suggest wooded paths and pensive hours. On bad days, we trudge and we slog. On good, we parade and promenade, mosey and meander.

There are legendary walks: to the North and South Poles, on the moon. There are historic ones, such as the Lewis and Clark Trail, the Appalachian Trail, the Trail of Tears. Since the ancient days of wandering prophets and peripatetic philosophers, the act of walking has not only inspired our feet, but also our hearts and minds.

*The Lost Art of Walking:
The History, Science, Philosophy,
and Literature of Pedestrianism*

By Geoff Nicholson

Riverhead ~ 2008 ~ 278 pp.

\$24.95 (cloth)

On Foot: A History of Walking

By Joseph A. Amato

NYU ~ 2004 ~ 331 pp.

\$39 (cloth)

Wanderlust: A History of Walking

By Rebecca Solnit

Penguin ~ 2000 ~ 326 pp.

\$14 (paper)

For me walking has to do with exploration, a way of accommodating myself, of feeling at home,” writes Geoff Nicholson in his book, *The Lost Art of Walking*. “When I find myself in a new place I explore it on foot. It’s the way I get to know that place. Maybe it’s a way of marking territory, of beating the bounds. Setting foot in a street makes it yours in a way that driving down it never does.” Nicholson is best known for his self-described “study of obsession and obsessives” in novels like *Bleeding London* and *The Hollywood Dodo*; he finds similar material among walkers like the artist Mudman, who covers himself in mud to walk the city streets, and Captain Robert Barclay Allardice (1779-1854), a Briton who was one of history’s first competitive pedestrians and who achieved the record of walking one mile an hour for a thousand consecutive hours.

Joseph A. Amato takes a different approach in *On Foot*. “This book is not a story of great and monumental walks,” writes Amato, an academic historian perhaps best known for his 2000 book *Dust: A History of the Small and Invisible*. “Rather, it is intended to be a narrative of human walking through the ages, the story of its major forms and transformations.” Amato chronicles such episodes as Rome’s building of roads, the rise of Romanticism, and the eclipse of American walking by motoring.

Just as no two walks are ever the same, no two books about walking

are the same, either. But the act of walking is not new, so books about walking tend to tread (so to speak) on common ground. Author Rebecca Solnit, whose book *Wanderlust* predated Amato’s and Nicholson’s, typifies the genre by discussing the physiology or biology of walking, beginning with man’s early evolution. As Solnit explains:

Paleontologists, anthropologists, and anatomists have launched a passionate and often partisan argument over when and why the ancestral ape got up on its hind legs and walked so long that its body became our upright, two-legged, striding body. They were the philosophers of walking I had been looking for, speculating endlessly about what each bodily shape says about function and about how those forms and functions eventually added up to our humanity—though what that humanity consists of is equally debatable. The only given is that upright walking is the first hallmark of what became humanity. Whatever its causes, it caused much more: it opened up vast new horizons of possibility, and among other things, it created a pair of spare limbs dangling from the upright body, seeking something to hold or make or destroy, the arms freed to evolve into ever more sophisticated manipulators of the material world.

This notion—that the ability to walk opened up vast new horizons of

possibility—is one most parents can recognize from firsthand experience. The moment when a baby takes his or her first step marks the beginning of the end of total dependency; that first step opens up the world to exploration. More than just a way of getting from one place to another, beginning to walk means an entirely new way of being in the world.

I came to understand about this new way of being in the world particularly clearly after the birth of my second son, Avery. Avery is a fraternal twin, and five days after his birth, he was diagnosed with Down syndrome. When Avery was very young, I read the growth and development charts adjusted for children with Down syndrome. In my mind, I put Avery at the top of the class. He would do everything early for a child with Down syndrome, which just so happened to be very close to the ages typically developing children do things. Without even realizing it, I was willing Avery to be “normal.”

By the summer Avery turned three, it was clear to me that my original plan for him was not coming true. I had to admit that we weren't where I'd hoped. I found myself in the half-remodeled baby section of a supermarket, alone in the wide, empty aisle, reaching up onto a metal shelf, lifting down an umbrella stroller. Previously, we'd managed without one. But this is where we were: he needed it. It was a defining moment; in pulling the stroller off the shelf, I

let go of what I'd been holding onto for thirty-six months—the idea that Down syndrome wouldn't matter, or rather, that it might matter to other people, but not to us. I was wrong—it mattered very much, but not for the reasons I might at first have guessed.

Avery's walking, when it finally began, was like the tide coming in. You knew it was happening, but it occurred so gradually that you didn't notice it. He'd take steps in secret, when no one was watching. He'd be by the couch one moment, and then at the window the next. Or he'd stand, take a few steps, and then clap for himself so hard that he tipped over, the sound of his cheering the only clue that anything had transpired. The delay was genetic—part of it was Down syndrome, and part of it was temperament. He is the child who likes to cuddle, the child who likes to read, the child who will study your face in quiet contemplation. He is his mother's child, who has fallen down enough to realize that every step is taken in defiance—of the slippery wood floor, of the rocky trail, of the simple truth of gravity.

Avery was the last of my children to walk away from me, which made it all the more bittersweet. Some days, I thought, What's the rush? Where are we going, that we have to get there so fast? I'd think of roots, of what it means to be grounded. And yet—walking means freedom. I wanted Avery to be free.

The word *essay* is linked to the French verb *essayer*, which means “to try” or “to endeavor.” I once heard writer Teresa Jordan explain her approach to crafting essays this way: an essay is like a mountain that we walk around, looking at it from all sides, trying to see it in its entirety. Or, as Rebecca Solnit writes in *Wanderlust*, “Language is like a road; it cannot be perceived all at once because it unfolds in time, whether heard or read.”

There are walks that don’t work, just as there are essays that don’t work, or words that never come. It’s called getting lost, and we’ve all done it, at one time or another. Writers who write about walking tend to note the similarity, as Nicholson does:

With writing as with walking you often find that you’re not heading exactly where you thought you wanted to go. There’ll be missteps and stumbles, journeys into dead ends, the reluctant retracing of your steps. And you have to tell yourself that’s just fine, that it’s a necessary, and not wholly unenjoyable, part of the process. It’s an exploration.

This echoes that worn pearl of twentieth-century pop wisdom: *It’s not the destination, but the journey that counts*. That saying especially resonates because of the pace of modernity: our zippy lifestyle, with our big highways and fast cars, leaves too little room for explorations; it

is a maxim repeated all the more for being acted upon less. But the sentiment itself is not new. As Solnit explains in *Wanderlust*, the faithful of days gone by valued their wayfaring for its own sake:

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—and for pilgrims, walking is work. Secular walking is often imagined as play, however competitive and rigorous that play, and uses gear and techniques to make the body more comfortable and more efficient. Pilgrims, on the other hand, often try to make their journey harder, recalling the origin of the word travel in *travail*, which also means work, suffering, and the pangs of childbirth.

The pilgrimage’s union of walking *to get somewhere* and walking *for the sake of the walk* is all but lost in the modern world. Today, when we walk we do so mostly for transportation, to get somewhere. But as even that purposive walking has become much rarer amid sprawl, millions among us have taken to hopping on treadmills for walks that go nowhere at all. Solnit notes how these peculiar non-journeys distort the connection between space and time. The treadmill completes a transformation begun by the railroad—an erosion of “the experience of space.” We now

speak of our trips in terms of hours or days instead of miles. And on the treadmill, travel is “measured entirely by time, bodily exertion, and mechanical motion. Space—as landscape, terrain, spectacle, experience—has vanished.”

If how we traverse the world affects how we understand it; if our culture and our language are shaped in countless ways by different kinds of walking; if every new mother anticipates her child’s first step; if upright walking is a hallmark of our very humanity—then what does it mean that we are now so often sitting and riding? In the last century, as the automobile went from luxury to ubiquity, we have been remade. We are no longer pedestrians; we are passengers. We still walk, but it is not our main mode of moving around. We risk losing touch with something that has fundamentally shaped who we are.

But there is hope of recovery and remembrance. Choosing to walk in a riding society, Amato writes, returns us “to our first self”:

It delivers us to the simpler movement of ambling and flowing, which may fit and serve the movements of our mind and spirits better than sitting and riding. Indeed, the more we supplant walking with riding, the more we may feel compelled to go on foot to heal and to amuse ourselves. Walking, after all, is perhaps our best way to be face to face and

arm and arm with others, our neighbors, and the earth.

A walk once might have been a restorative for the unquiet soul; now, Amato suggests, a walk might remind the soul of itself.

And how did my walk in the mountains, on the quiet country road, turn out? It’s been so many years that I can’t remember. Or rather, there have been so many walks along the same ground, so many steps laid one over another, that they have all fused into one single walk that I’ve committed to memory, a walk that never actually happened but feels as true as if it had. In this walk, there are three children, babies I’m pushing in various strollers, then toddlers with sticky hands in mine, then tow-headed boys always in need of haircuts. We walk beneath starry skies and bright sunlight, moonrises and sudden summer hailstorms, under shimmering aspen leaves and fir boughs tipped with snow. We walk together and apart, sometimes talking as we walk, other times lost in our own thoughts, and it’s in this memory that I most understand the nature of walking in all its incarnations—an act of history, a physical memory, a rhythm of movement, an expression of intellect, a way of marking time, and mostly: an endeavor of the heart.

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