

A SORT OF CRUSADE

Walking through Literary Non-Fiction

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A Sort of Crusade: Walking through Literary Non-Fiction

I stepped from Plank to Plank
A slow and cautious way
The Stars about my Head I felt
About my Feet the Sea.
I knew not but the next
Would be my final inch—
This gave me that precarious Gait
Some call Experience.
-- Emily Dickinson

I used to read while I walked. I always had a book with me, a novel or a fantasy featuring talking animals and magical coincidence, so I carried my latest obsession out in front of my chest on the way to school, my thumb tucked in the lower crease of the opened pages, my fingers forming a webbed cradle.

Sitting on my butt back in my parent's living room, I immersed myself into books, inhaling passages and entering the words as though they were an actual destination, a world made of words. Walking also meant breathing everything in effortlessly - the sight of towering oak trees along the sidewalk, the smell of acorns pungent with decay and crunching underfoot, the rustle of the leaves. In *Wanderlust*, Rebecca Solnit called walking "a state in which the mind, the body and the world are aligned, as though they were three characters finally in conversation together." (5) She linked the effort of walking with the ease of thinking. "The rhythm of walking generates a kind of rhythm of thinking, and the passage through a landscape echoes or stimulates the passage through a series of thoughts" (5-6).

Joseph Amato's *On Foot* said walking *made* us think, once we gave up a propensity for using our knuckles in favor of standing on two feet:

Liberated hands played leapfrog with the use of tools and the shaping of the environment. In *The Hand*, neurologist Frank Wilson postulated that the brain's development followed rather than preceded the use of tools. Arguably, *Homo erectus* completed the remodeling of the hand, which opened "the door to an enormously augmented range of movements and the possibility of an unprecedented extension of manual activity" as well as to "the redesign, or reallocation, of the brain's circuitry." (23)

Two-legged walking was probably the first major adaptation associated with the divergence of humans from a common ancestor with apes. Once mankind began to walk, humans altered places to fit themselves and changed themselves to fit into these new places, though they did not saunter yet. Only civilization would afford the necessary leisure for that state of being.

Walking made me weightless, my preferred state, but when I tried to insert reading into that pleasure zone, my senses seized, ceasing to receive. Instead of intensifying the pleasure, bringing both passions to new heights of enjoyment, each was diminished. I missed opportunities like the red burst of a cardinal in a tree or pussy willows lining up on a winter-dead branch. My unsure footsteps took me off the path. The words came in short, sharp bouts. I constantly lost my place and found foreign thoughts in the sentences I had just visited. Finally I gave up trying to combine walking with reading, relying on my ability to multi-task only when I had to cram at the last minute for a test on my way to class.

I didn't come to the subject of walking in literature as a reader or a walker, although I am both. Instead, the action emerged as a central theme in my own writing. I wondered whether other writers shared the same experience. As it turned out, walkers were everywhere, from my antihero Thoreau to the protagonists in Cormac McCarthy's post-apocalyptic tale of survival, *The Road*. Even in the literature of my childhood. I fondly recalled the children of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* walking through Narnia, and Dorothy following the yellow brick road in *The Wizard of Oz*.

Amato praised the French writer Honore de Balzac for wondering in his 1833 work *Theory of Walking* why "no one has asked himself why he walks, how he walks, if he has ever walked, if he could walk better, what he achieves in walking" (1). Yet, walkers have been asking those questions ever since there was a chance to approach prey in a better way or a holy place to pay homage to. Walking is a choice, although sometimes we do it out of necessity. Solnit said the history of walking is unwritten, yet it is tucked into thousands of passages in books, songs, stories and poems. Writers have long championed the cause, sometimes to the point of preaching.

Walking provides the perfect communal experience. Whether we walk in groups as motivation to exercise or take solo jaunts to hear ourselves think; whether we walk out of pleasure or because we're stuck someplace; whether we've experienced unplanned epiphanies or set out to solve a problem – there is connection in walking. It gives us room for mental work. Walking allows us to take in the scenery and exposes us to other people. The buildings we pass, the trees we see, the crowds we navigate, all become part of the walk and, therefore, a part of us. I decided to examine the use of walking in non-fiction literature to explore these connections and try to understand our walking crusade.

Even though she didn't know it at the time, my mother came up with a plan that merged my two true loves. She started setting aside Saturdays for a walk to the public library about five miles away from our house. Maybe she wanted to save gas during the crisis years. The late 1970s and early 80s were a time of OPEC headlines and long lines at the filling stations. Or maybe she wanted the exercise. Jane Fonda and Cheryl Tiegs had just reinvented themselves as physical gurus, ready to shape your calves and thin your thighs to a disco beat. Whatever the reason, I treasured those walks.

The library need not have been the destination, yet to this day the Martin Memorial Library occupies a lofty spot in both my imagination and the landscape of downtown York. The library sits at attention on the corner of two of the town's busiest streets, a white cupola shining from the roof like a beacon. The mahogany front doors stand at least seven feet. It took all my weight to move them just a few inches so I could squeeze through, my eyes blinking to adjust to the thickly quiet darkness inside. The best part was the stoop, a swooping concrete space offering nooks and crannies among its stone corners where I waited for my family to finish checking out their books.

If, as Chet Raymo said in *The Path*, it is possible to know a landscape well, I knew this one. I knew which intersections offered a pedestrian crossing signal and which ones featured baby bunnies asleep under bushes. I knew where honeysuckles grew wild along old stone walls and where a corner porn shop might offer a peek into another world. But what I didn't know about my city could fill whole libraries. The building itself had its own history, one I would grow up and write about, layering meaning and experience onto a place I barely knew as a child. And that doesn't include the other buildings I passed, unnoticed.

Every pebble in the brook has a story to tell. So do a city's buildings. Raymo said "no one person has the time, knowledge or skill to learn everything about a landscape" (3). Fortunately, I have the Internet. I learned from a weblog, an online archive of rare postcards, that the library – my library – was named for a businessman who made his fortune selling carriages. Milton Daniel Martin left a large chunk of it behind after his death to finance the building's maintenance. People in my day always complained that there wasn't enough parking along the formerly cobbled streets where the library stood sentry, an unintentional connection to the passing of time bringing new challenges, the horse-and-carriages of Martin's day soon abandoned for cars.

We chose a route for our walk designed to get us to the library in the least amount of time. This was important because my mother had three adolescent girls to motivate. I always felt happy to begin the journey, but my sister Monica, a year younger than me, resisted. She didn't like to read, so the promise of the library didn't shine as a reward. Mary-Anne, the youngest and the quietest, was stoic. She seemed content to be with the rest of us, neither concerned about the trip nor especially invested in the outcome.

First we walked through the field behind our house. An overgrown jumble of thistle and weeds, sometimes reaching knee-high, the expanse separated our suburban development from a row of townhouses beyond. It was anchored at one end by a tall chain link fence that divided the land from property belonging to the state police, a driving range where I took the test that would earn my license, and the other by a two-lane road. The field didn't serve much purpose, except to host a small baseball field where the ringing of bats provided the soundtrack on humid summer nights, yet it was our favorite place to play.

We'd stretch out in the grass looking for four-leafed clovers among the thistle. My sisters and I roamed the property, investigating every inch. We sampled the wild blackberries that grew in a bramble along one edge of the ball field, covering a twisted shrub that had grown to a length of about 12 feet and a height just right for little kids to squeeze into, the perfect dimensions for a clubhouse. We often crawled inside and set up house, using broad leaves from the neighborhood oak trees for dishes, making beds with piles of twigs and grass. Once we found evidence of a different sort of use for the public playhouse, a stack of porn. My first glimpse of the shape and length of a penis came from those pages.

Next, we ducked down a lane lined with all manner of trees, decadent oaks and stately maples. Huge willows weeping an abundance of tear-shaped leaves. Lindens and mulberries, dogwoods and ash. A universe of trees I'd spend the rest of my life naming, savoring the satisfaction of knowing a thing when I'd already fallen in love. This took us to our favorite park, a sprawling grove hosting a burbling creek with a rope swing and the best playground in the region, featuring an abundance of swings and a real maypole.

As I write this description, I recognize the similarities in a scene by Madeleine L'Engle, the author of some of the very books I carried around with me as a child. In her later years, after her children had grown and her house overflowed with grandkids, L'Engle penned a series of memoirs called *The Crosswicks Journals*, named for the Connecticut house she and her husband kept as a second residence. A place far enough in space and specifics from their urban lifestyle in New York City to offer a reprieve from work and the business of life, but close enough for a weekend or holiday away.

In the series' first book, *A Circle of Quiet*, L'Engle introduced us to both this place and herself in a jumble of descriptions and characters. They are "four generations under one roof," she wrote: "All to be together in Crosswicks, our big, old-fashioned New England farmhouse" (3). She took us on a tour of the big house and then she showed us the rest of the property:

I enjoy going out to the incinerator after dark and watching the flames; my bad feelings burn away with the trash. But the house is still visible, and I can hear the sounds from within; often I need to get away completely, if only for a few minutes. My special place is a small brook in a green glade, a circle of quiet from which there is no visible sign of human beings. (4)

And how did she get there? She walked. First to the brook where she crossed the lawn and went through the willow tree "which splashes its fountain of green down onto the grass so that it's almost impossible to mow around it" (4-5). And then to the pasture where she "wades through the wet clover."

Among descriptions of the walk were images from the physical landscape, as well as connections to larger events through L'Engle's explorations of history, science and her own impressions:

Once I'm over the stone wall, the terrain changes. I step into a large field full of rocks left from glacial deposits; there are many ancient apple trees, which, this summer, are laden with fruit. (5-6)

She visited a burning bush, imagining Moses' biblical version as a blueberry plant simply because she was surrounded by them. "The bush burned, was alive with flame and was not consumed, because as a bush, it was perfect" (6). Some might look for a literal

translation – the bush burned with red fruit or with the reflected fire of a man’s religious fervor – but L’Engle used the device to bring us deeper into her thoughts about pride and selfish choices, which put her at risk of losing what was most important to her. Family.

In each section L’Engle took detours to some other image or memory, walking us through her life. Now is the time I might tell you that my family was broken. My mom and my three sisters were all that remained from the original unit. We went on to form a new family. The house where we began our library crusade belonged to my step-dad, who had three children from a previous marriage. In a tumble of perspectives and changing personal histories, we would each walk forth to have our own children, start families and rearrange others.

Always we had this house to return to, as unconventional an anchor as L’Engle’s was conventional. At a recent backyard barbeque, I found myself being introduced to my step-dad’s third wife’s sister-in-law from her first marriage. When I visit from Alaska, I still walk through York with my step-dad, dissecting the neighborhood as we choose paths on a whim. I know that each one will lead to remembrances from Barry. No story is too small or personal. He’s as happy dissecting the rise of the two-party system in the United States as he is chronicling the divorce and remarriage of a friend who used to live in the house around the corner.

Barry and I often walk to the same park my sisters and I passed on the way to the library, the one where we caught crawfish in a small creek. From there we library crusaders headed east, trekking briskly along a busy road thick with exhaust fumes, our only reward for braving the stink a sniff of our favorite pizza place, the warm smell of red sauce, the spicy tang of mozzarella. We’d beg to go in and have a slice, but my mother

knew that she'd never be able to rally us if we ate so soon. Eating was saved for after our trip to the library, when we'd snack on the fruit and crackers she brought along. And maybe stop for a donut at the shop near the bus stop, one of the rewards made possible by our crusade.

After that trek across the industrial strip, past electric turbines and several large storage sheds, we'd arrive at the edge of downtown York. This was my favorite part of the walk. I loved approaching the city's embrace, a place where trees grew, birds flew and a river ran through streets interspersed with interesting buildings, some slumping from the weight of time, others a marvel of architecture with divots and turrets and stained glass windows. York is an old city, one of the first to be established in this country a quarter century ago, still, it is young in the eyes of the world. As an adult, I moved from that old/young city to one even younger in human terms. Yet Fairbanks, Alaska is nestled in an ecosphere with prehistoric ties found in the slow-growing boreal forest and the permafrost that preserves so many Pleistocene-aged critters under the soil. Even the bogs visited by the same dragonflies that flourished during the dinosaur age carry the connection to a long-ago past.

While a city does not have to be valued culturally to be walked, the literary world hasn't taken much notice of any but the beloved cities – New York, London and Paris. I wonder whether Paris would have been a city of desire if not for the men who made it the city of their own desire, launching a literary tradition that celebrated the act of “writing about walking.” These *flaneurs* said a city must be walked to be appreciated. Paris birthed the movement, acting as the essence of alluring femininity with the curves of its streets and the graceful sweeping of perspectives between its classical monuments.

In his book *The Flaneur*, Edmund White found seduction in the city's blue windows, the drama with which the waiters cluster around a table in a first-class restaurant and the melancholy mood of an autumn day in the Bois de Boulogne:

The *flaneur* knows where to find the best sashimi and the best couscous, but he is not just awash with *bonnes adresses* ... He knows his way around the parks and marketplaces, the book stalls and the *grands magasins*; these are the word's first department stores, celebrated in Zola's novel *Le Bonheur des dames*, which ends with a massive white sale. (193)

White said the city is a reason to walk because "every district is beautiful, alluring and full of unsuspected delights" (17). He was a modern day flaneur, examining Paris' deep and intriguing history, from Colette to the Jewish ghetto to Sidney Bechet to its gay scene. Every park and building is a fascinating example of history and culture because it was once something else. "Nor would anyone imagine by just looking at the ghostly new opera house, that the Place de la Bastille was once the site of a prison" (189).

There was adventure in these shops and streets, exotic foods and tempting women. White was determined to take advantage of it, wandering through Paris and inspecting neighborhoods, recalling famous residents and scrutinizing social structure:

And no wonder Paris, land of novelty and distraction, is the great city of the *flaneur* – that aimless stroller how loses himself in the crowd, who has no destination and goes wherever caprice or curiosity directs his or her steps. (16)

I am fascinated by the elevation of urban walking as an art form, yet confused by its lack of staying power. What happened to the flaneurs? Why aren't there societies of flaneury in existence today? I want to join the movement, to participate in the revolution that

might have led to its gender-equality. I recognize myself in the description. It wasn't until after my son was born and I quit working at the age of 34 – the first time I'd been jobless since I was 14 and had a newspaper route – that I discovered the pleasure of meandering, walking aimlessly instead of as an act of exercise or to explore the wilderness on the practical “hikes” I'd taken as an earnest environmentalist college student.

Every city should offer a tour from the eye-view of a flaneur. In fact, every city should be built from the perspective of its walkers. Solnit's *Wanderlust* said the reality of a society of flaneurs may be elusive, but they are rooted in certain unmistakable constants, like “the image of an observant and solitary man strolling about Paris” (198). Flaneurs did not really exist, except, Solnit said, “as a type, an ideal, and a character in literature” (200). They proved that a city could be a wilderness offering explorers a chance to test their wits against all manner of dangers.

The flaneur emerged at a period in the early nineteenth century when the city had become so large and complex it was strange to its inhabitants. These writers walked the city to observe the new faces of humanity found in its streets. They used it as a sort of library of the human condition, exploring the city's history, economics and prejudices to tell the story of humanity. Eventually a crusade would be made to civilize this wilderness. The remote walkable spaces of Paris were destroyed in exchange for the image of a modern city, one that was clean, efficient and easily-navigated. This new modern city was also one that didn't force the educated or the privileged to witness the ugly face of humanity in the poor and the homeless. A hundred years earlier, at the turn of the 18th Century, America's most famous walker was walking away from the city.

The rise of Industrialization gave Henry David Thoreau a reason to fear the loss of the pleasures afforded by America's abundance, the tradition of fishing and the vicinity to nature's wild and carefree creation. He was advancing the cause of the Romantics, whom Amato said "argued for walking as a way to free the captive self from the artificial, urban and mechanical world" (104). Thoreau had personal reasons, too, for embracing nature. He'd had a hand in its potential destruction.

On April 30, 1844, Thoreau started a blaze in the Concord. According to an account in the *Boston Globe*, the fire was an accident, but the destruction of valuable woodland and the near-catastrophe angered the local residents and nearly ruined Thoreau's reputation. "For years afterward, Thoreau could hardly walk the streets of his hometown without hearing the epithet 'woods burner'" (Pipkin, online). He turned to working in his family's pencil factory, where he figured out a way to inject lead into a hollow pencil mold instead of cutting the wood in half and gluing it back together again.

The fire and the subsequent shunning of his community may have been what prompted the young Thoreau's move to his cabin in *Walden* "to front only the essential facts of life" (97). Walking to and from the pond fueled Thoreau's literary life, pushing him to new levels of madness in his concern for the harm humanity might do to its planet. Without the distraction of a job or the pursuit of an academic degree, Thoreau put himself to the task of solving the most pressing problem he knew. In the face of inexhaustible development, he argued that going on foot was the one true way to experience self, nature and truth as one. He was looking for control, his personal crusade.

For most of my reading life, I avoided Thoreau, resisting what seemed like judgmental pronouncements about the failures of humanity, what Solnit called his

sermonizing. I wanted the right to make my own mistakes. If I expected to find myself in agreement with Thoreau, I had no idea I'd discover our most ardent common passion in walking. From his new perspective at Walden Pond, away from everything he knew, Thoreau had the clarity he needed to take a walk into a familiar and foreign landscape, his own mind. He recognized both his inner savage beast – the man who wanted to devour woodchucks he met along a wooded path and hunt down deer to satisfy his hunger – and his instinct toward a higher purpose, a spiritual life.

He saw the connection between both selves in the act of fishing, something he had skill and a certain instinct for: “The wildness and adventure that are in fishing still recommend it to me. I like sometimes to take rank hold on life and spend my day more as the animals do” (229). But as Thoreau aged, he was troubled by the act and the reduction in his own sense of self-respect when he did fish: “Always when I have done I feel that it would have been better if I had not fished” (233).

He began to feel with every year that he was less a fisherman, this self-assessment leading to an examination of spirituality and sensuality. Not a religious-based sense of morality, but one that prompted him to observe his appetites, whether for food or lust or primal satiation. Thoreau saw all sensuality as one, whether a man ate or drank or slept. “They are but one appetite, and we only need to see a person do any one of these things to know how great a sensualist he is” (240).

In his quest to point out our mistakes, Thoreau may have lost sight of the place humans hold in nature. He forgot that we have a “commitment” to participate in the same cycle of evolution, of ebb and flow, of boom and bust, as the rest of creation. Nature is not pretty. By setting it apart from us, Thoreau may have done future generations a

disservice. What we have now in the United States is an understanding of “Nature” as a place only the privileged can visit. Wilderness as a public lands designation. Unwalkable cities compared to Europe’s grand walking tradition. Even the most ardent environmentalists seem resigned to the future destruction of our planet.

In *The Path*, Raymo pointed out the inevitable effects of the law of entropy: “As time passes, the universe moves – on balance – toward disarray” (170). In other words, everything falls apart. Humans are tied to the same cycle. People are as wild as the wilderness they sought to escape with their cities. Raymo said, “We are, all of us, building pinnacles of order in a universe that is destined, ultimately, to tumble all our towers to dust” (170). Instead of destroying nature, maybe humanity is only responsible for reorganizing it, like an ant colony creating its mound or a beaver damming the river.

Yet, Raymo, like Thoreau, declined to let humans off easily: “For better or worse,” he said, “the future of the planet has been handed to us, not by a deity but by fate” (171). We are not in control of the planet’s fate, no matter how we manipulate it for commercial gain or to stave off the destruction of the environment. And where did he discover all of this? On a walk through one mile of the universe, a small section of the planet, yet enough to make up his own universe.

If we pay attention during our walks through the universe, we’ll see that we’re unintentionally collaborating with the environment or maybe even being manipulated by the world around us. In *The Botany of Desire*, Michael Pollan made a case for a “coevolutionary” relationship with plants. Pollan found his new perspective on his knees in the garden, where there was “plenty of space left over for thinking” (xiii). He also spent a good deal of time walking, so his epiphany could just as likely have come on foot:

All those plants, which I'd always regarded as the objects of my desire, were also, I realized, subjects, acting on me, getting me to do things for them they couldn't do for themselves. And that's when I had the idea: What would happen if we looked at the world beyond the garden this way, regarded our place in nature from the same upside-down perspective? (xv-xvi)

In tracking the evolution of cannabis Pollan discovered the symbiotic Rosetta Stone between culture and nature. Could hallucinatory plant toxins function as a cultural mutagen? "Surely the shifts in perception and breaks in mental habit they provoke are among the methods, and models, we have of imaginatively transforming mental and cultural givens" (149).

What if plants had a hand in our desire to create civilizations? What if cities are a function of their desire? We already know plants played a part in the evolution of human spirituality. "As the sorcerers, shamans, and alchemists who used them understood," Pollan said, "psychoactive plants stand on the threshold of matter and spirit, at the point where simple distinctions between the two no longer hold" (152). Psychoactive plants were present at the creation of several different faiths, just as roads allowed monks to spread the word of their gods. Without plants and the act of walking, spirituality might not exist.

In *Wanderlust*, Solnit called pilgrimages, "the uphill road to grace" (45). They are "one of the basic modes of walking" and are "almost universally embedded in human culture as a literal means of spiritual journey, and asceticism and physical exertion are almost universally understood as means of spiritual development" (46). Religious people might plan a pilgrimage to reignite their faith. Solnit said a pilgrimage depends on the

idea that the sacred is not immaterial. Our religious traditions strike a balance between the power of love and the necessity of material details, so where Christ died becomes important, as well as where the Buddha was born. Walking to those sites connects them.

Walking has always been a spiritual endeavor for me. I felt most in tune with the God of my Catholic School on those walks with my mother and sisters. We passed several churches along the way to the library, which became my church, the holy place at the end of our pilgrimage. So far I'd been disappointed by the church's teaching that all the answers could be found in one book, which had been manipulated by the same church that had a stake in my behavior. The library represented the whole of human knowledge and an individual's responsibility to ask questions and face disturbing truths instead of being fed answers in a trough like sheep. I learned all of that on a walk, so the library offered a fitting end to this crusade, to choose for myself how I would learn.

On those pilgrimages to the library, I was engaging in the same journey that humanity has participated in for thousands of years. I may not have starved myself, although I was aware of the grumbling in my stomach by the walk's end. I may not have experienced hallucinations, although I've often tricked my brain by squinting into the sun, distorting my perception until I feel as though I am a part of the same light emanating through the trees' leaves.

My greatest spiritual epiphany came while I was walking through our neighborhood with my son. Stopping to notice a house slumping into its foundation, Owen asked why everything falls apart. I saw the connection I had with that house and the toys that lay broken back in Owen's room, and with my son himself. We would all die, reverting back to our very essence, the same matter that makes up the earth. That

revelation – more than any sermon – spoke to me of a potential spiritual commitment. I would be, not a Catholic nor a Christian, but a Spiritual Entropist. My church would be nature itself. And I would walk through it.

I moved to Homer after my first summer in Alaska. That's where I finally noticed nature as a connected system and not just isolated incidents of beauty. I walked almost daily from the paved road down the twisting, churning lane to my cabin. A claylike surface covered the path, sucking the shoes off feet when it wasn't frozen hard in the winter or dried out by the summer sun. I tracked the moon's cycle, watching as the seasons changed the very fabric of the soil. I saw the chain reaction that causes spring, beginning with the melting of icy edges. The snow seeping into the knuckled ground, heaved and hocked by hydrogen bonds. The warmth loosening the soil for the first buds.

This wasn't technically the wilderness, but it was much wilder than the concrete sidewalks my family traversed on our walks to the library. The very use of the word "wild" is loaded. Declaring an area "wilderness" brings the threat of development to what we seek to protect from that inevitable tide. The wilderness Thoreau longed to save suddenly needs infrastructure to handle the new desire to visit. Thoreau's admonitions may be ringing in the minds of the creators of this new wilderness, but it's the tourists who will buy his words stamped on t-shirts as a souvenir when they come to visit.

And then there are the wilderness walkers who only attract notoriety when their quest goes wrong. Christopher McCandless made headlines in Alaska the year I moved here for something that happened after he walked into the woods. He went searching for a sense of his own spirituality – a crusade against conformity – and died because he lacked

the knowledge to do the same kind of surviving that came naturally to him in the civilization he left behind.

Tucked inside *The Accidental Explorer* is Sherry Simpson's story of visiting the site of McCandless's death. His actions had raised questions for her about the role of nature in our lives and the respect she felt it deserved.

Before we started our small journey to the place where Christopher McCandless died, I wondered whether we should travel on foot rather than by snowmachine. It was mid-April, probably the last weekend before the sketchy snow would melt and the river ice would sag and crack. If we waited a few weeks, we could hike the Stampede Trail to the abandoned bus where his body was found in 1992.

Wouldn't it seem more real, more authentic somehow, if we retraced his journey step by step? No, I thought. This is not a spiritual trek. I refuse to make this a pilgrimage. I will not make his journey my own. (115)

Simpson declined to give the trip any more spiritual weight than it merited. If walking made an action holy, is it a holy act? In the course of her writing, Simpson realized that it wasn't *where* he walked that harmed McCandless, whether he chose the woods or a city, it was because he had stopped walking, mistaking an abandoned bus for the shared shelter of humanity. He died because he wasn't prepared to go any further. He died because he'd made the destination more important than his quest.

Thoreau didn't want to go any further than his own neighborhood. He recommended that we live an examined life, a sensory existence steeped in observations, but he also valued imagination and the kind of transfiguration that came from reflection and spirituality. That's the nature I'm interested in when I walk. I want to know what's

happening in my own environment and why we so often overlook it, flattening the grass exploding with a wilderness of bugs and wild plants with our bags of gear as we get ready for an adventure of epic proportions, one that will fuel blog posts and cocktail party story hours for the rest of our lives.

For me reflection is essential, a path to spirituality. Walking becomes a literary device, a reason for self expression and reflection and maybe even an excuse for pursuing an endeavor of this manner. Thoreau told us to go into the woods so we can see what it really means to live, but in the end, he left those woods when he recognized the need to find a new route off the beaten track he'd so easily made for himself at Walden Pond. He might as well have said, "Go take a walk."

Thoreau saw himself as a walker, someone with a genius for sauntering. A Holy-Lander for whom "every walk is a sort of crusade, preached by some Peter the Hermit in us, to go forth and reconquer this Holy Land from the hands of the Infidels" (6). In his essay "Walking" he wrote of his longing for the simplicity and perfection of nature, something he saw man interfering with at every turn:

Nowadays almost all man's improvements, so called, as the building of houses, and the cutting down of the forest and of all large trees, simply deform the landscape, and make it more and more tame and cheap. (14)

I wonder if Thoreau realized that in this quest for order, man will inevitably create something that's, arguably, even wilder. As the flaneurs understood, cities, with their revolutionary acts of individuality, their creative centers and traffic hazards, are just as untamed and unrestrained as the wilderness. This contrast between what's natural (man?)

and what's artificial (man-made?) might be a tangent, a place where I become a zealot, arguing against a long-dead adversary.

I want to know what position man has in Thoreau's Nature with a capital "N." Isn't what humans create beautiful in its own natural way? Can a person spend her whole life walking in the cities and suburbs of her universe and still find a connection to nature and the gifts that might mean? I want to believe that humanity will always find a way to connect with life, like weeds growing through the cracks in a sidewalk. Although Thoreau didn't seem to share my concern when he said: "Hope and the future for me are not in lawns and cultivated fields, not in the towns and cities, but in the impervious and quaking swamps" (33). He seemed to be longing for Nature without the influence of man, maybe for a solitary life away from the difficulties that being among other people entail – the edges between us and the way we each go about fulfilling our desires. Did Thoreau walk to Walden to write a book about it? I'd like to think *Walden* is a masterpiece born of the authentic experience of one great man, a writer to the fabric of his being, but not a person who experiences things merely to sell books.

A section of the library is reserved for writers who walk in Thoreau's footsteps. In *A Wild, Rank Place*, David Gessner documented the year he spent at Cape Cod, retracing his hero Thoreau's journey while coming to terms with his father's cancer and his own battle with the disease. Gessner kept the famous literary figure as a companion:

When walking home drunk late at night, I would stop at a particular oak and mark my territory. 'I have watered the red huckleberry, the sand cherry and the nettle tree,' wrote Thoreau. Me, too. To this day I insist there was something religious about the experience. (15-16)

Gessner did the “Thoreau thing,” following the writer’s route up the outside of the Cape. He wanted to do something original, but ended up following the hordes of Thoreau wannabes, “individualists all – marching out over the dunes” (100).

While Thoreau once romanticized walking in the woods to change society’s perception, Gessner now romanticized Thoreau as a master of his own destiny instead of confronting him as a product of his times. Ultimately, he had to cast Thoreau aside when he got tired of trying to be an individualist “just like him:”

How do I justify “doing the Thoreau thing?” In following someone who was never a follower, in making an icon of an iconoclast? Why hero-worship a man who counseled men to be their own heroes? (118)

What Gessner seemed to be romanticizing the most were his own fears – of losing his father to cancer and, most unfairly, (since Thoreau warned of it himself a hundred years ago), of losing the wilderness:

A house sits precariously close to the edge of a cliff, its walkway dangling down the cliff front, as if someone had just gone sprawling in a tragicomic fall. But even this is a relatively minor sort of destruction – the sea can do much worse. We sometimes forget. In two hundred years we’ve gone from fearing to romanticizing the wild, as always most appreciating what is nearly lost. (110)

Gessner was frustrated by our manic consumption and material progress, but he appreciated that same mean embodiment in nature. The way it dragged “expensive homes down cliff sides, drowning gas stations, washing and sloshing through the stores of Commercial Street” (117). More of Raymo’s tumbling towers of dust.

John Hanson Mitchell also approached Thoreau's legacy on foot, as he detailed in *Walking towards Walden*. Mitchell and two friends made the trip to pay homage to Concord and its luminaries. "There are many roads that converge in Concord, both literal and figurative, but I proposed that we attempt to walk there through a precolonial landscape such as Sir Henry might have known" (2). This meant bushwhacking through swamps and streams, backyards and woodland paths in an attempt to explore the undiscovered country of the known world.

Mitchell wasn't interested in remote territories "where no man, woman, or child has set foot in a thousand years" (4). Instead, he hoped to decode what the Spanish call *querencia*, the deep and abiding allegiance some people feel for a piece of land. The root of pilgrimage. Part of the spiritual balance between what happens in our minds (or hearts) and the material world. He traveled no farther than his backyard to discover the answers to the mysteries of sacred space. "As Henry Thoreau said, it is not necessary to travel around the world in order to count cats in Zanzibar" (4). Every walk is a crusade.

Some of today's most infamous writer/walkers seek fame or profit with their extreme sojourns. They must walk across continents and retrace historical treks. They are modern-day crusaders on a quest for the same miracles that required longer and more arduous journeys of the medieval pilgrims. Stories about Big Walks appeal to the public's fascination for those grand gestures, the kind McCandless received unintentionally. Solnit said each of these walks have some combination of three motives. They are undertaken to comprehend a place, to comprehend oneself and/or to set a record.

Author Ned Rozell wrote *Walking My Dog, Jane* after seeing a sign that told him he couldn't:

Someone posted a sign at the Alyeska marine terminal in Valdez, where supertankers sidle up to wooden piers for oil fill-ups. The sign says: At the terminal, walking, other than short distances from building to building, is not permitted. Nobody walks at the marine terminal. Nobody walks in Alaska's oil field, 800 miles to the north. Not many people walk in between, either. (1)

Rozell decided to do the unimaginable, and maybe even illegal. He walked from the pipeline's terminal to the oil fields where it begins. That walk provided the setting for encounters with both wildlife and the people who live in remote homesteads and cabins. He acted as a rural flaneur, documenting a different library of humanity.

I walk a landscape that might not be as wild as Thoreau's woods or as remote as Rozell's journey, yet the streets and pathways of Fairbanks offer a proximity to the limited abundance offered by the boreal forest's simple ecosystem. As vast as the undeveloped land that stretches across the Interior is compared to Thoreau's old neighborhood, the biodiversity is much simpler. It features only three or four species of trees. Each predator has been encountered over the accumulated years of my habit: bears in the dump, wolves in the dog yard, foxes along the edge of the soccer field. I know this universe well. For me it is both rural, far from the East Coast geography of my childhood, and urban, the second-largest city in the state.

This is where I come to terms with Thoreau's stern reproaches and my own guilt for not spending more time in the wilderness, something Alaska still has in abundance. I need both a home in the city and a place to walk. Walking is how I figure out who I am. It is the gift of instant reverie. Whether I was a teenager imagining my future while I walked along the beach alone, the rest of my family asleep in our rented summer cottage,

or a young woman exploring the far edges of my college town and discovering the remains of what was once a brewery, walking inevitably leads to other subjects. Sometimes they are physical ruins, while other discoveries were found tucked into my mental space. Walking is both connection and the creator of connections. As Solnit said in *Wanderlust*, “Walking is a subject that is always straying” (9). It is a bond between places and people, “one of the constellations in the starry sky of human culture, a constellation whose three stars are the body, the imagination, and the wide-open world” (290-291).

William Hazlitt, another writer who walked to escape into thinking, found the best company in nature, a term he used to mean “out of doors.” He was a purist, looking for the nurturing beat of solitude, going out of town in order to forget all that was in it. In his essay, “On Going a Journey,” Hazlitt talked about what he found on a walk:

We go a journey chiefly to be free of all impediments and of all inconveniences; to leave ourselves behind, much more to get rid of others. It is because I want a little breathing-space to muse on indifferent matters, that I absent myself from the town for a while, without feeling at a loss the moment I am left by myself. (181)

When Hazlitt spoke of leaving himself behind, I wonder if he meant his artificial self, the face he presented to the rest of the world. Only by walking could he escape the conventions of society. In that manner, Hazlitt preferred neither the city, as a flaneur did, nor Thoreau’s wilderness. He was content to travel where he would. “In the country we forget the town, and in town we despise the country” (187). Amato said changes in the condition of walking have always altered lives and societies.

On a walk with my son one frigid November day, we trudged a few blocks along the city's riverfront. I wanted to get out into the limited hours of daylight, to breathe icy air, no matter how polluted by the accoutrements of humanity. He wanted to stay inside and play with his toys. I tried to think of new ways to interest him in the walk despite the below zero temperature – sprints to see who could make it to the bench faster and promises to stop and build a snowman if we got as far as the power plant. On our return, we walked straight into the sun and were rewarded with the vision of a sundog.

I had never seen this phenomenon before moving to Alaska. The combination of the low angle of light brought about by northern latitudes and the extreme cold temperatures creates a condition where the sun's light is reflected back in a perfect circular rainbow. From our vantage point on earth, we can only see two strips of the colored band, framing the sun in a rainbow parenthesis. Pointing the sundog out to my son, I was transported back to the time and place where I'd first seen one. I was covering the Iditarod for the statewide public radio network at the halfway point in the village of McGrath. Part of my job meant standing around, waiting for the dog teams to arrive so I could interview the mushers about their experiences on the trail. They wanted to cross the wilderness alone. We wanted to know what they would find.

To warm my feet and stave off the boredom, I'd gone for a walk down to the Kuskokwim River, which fronted the town. Even though most waterways in the Interior of Alaska freeze up solidly during the long winter, I still approached the river cautiously; vigilant for overflow and other dangers that exist where large masses of water meet easy access. I took a brisk walk, savoring my heightened blood flow and the wonderland of white I passed through. As I turned to climb back up the bank, I spotted the sundog.

I pointed it out to the cluster of people gathered at the checkpoint, but nobody knew what it was or how it came to be. It took my return to civilization and access to the Internet to discover what it was I'd seen, but it changed the way I looked at the sun forever. I don't think I needed to be in a rural place to notice it that first time or even on a walk. What I do need as a writer is an opportunity to make an observation, have an emotional reaction, make an intellectual inquiry and finally create a memory that could be accessed again.

In *Spell of the Sensuous*, Abram found his senses unlocked by a trip to the "undeveloped world," meaning wildlands where man has not commanded the landscape to do his will:

There the air is a thick and richly textured presence, filled with invisible but nonetheless tactile, olfactory, and audible influences. In the United States, however, the air seemed thin and void of substance or influence. It was not, here, a sensuous medium – the felt matrix of our breath and the breath of other animals and plants and soils – but merely an absence and was constantly referred to in everyday discourse as mere empty space. (26)

Must we leave the developed world to unlock our own capability of tuning into the earth's textures? Do our tactile, olfactory and audible capacities become stunted unless they are exercised in a new dimension uninhabited by human presence? Abrams seemed to think that human accessories and artifacts obscure the availability of sensory capacities. Maybe we carry the necessary change of perspective around inside us, waiting for the right experience to alert us to its presence. I wonder if instead of travelling thousands of miles to find undeveloped nature Abram just needed to take more walks.

So, what of walking and writing? Even though I longed to merge it with reading, walking is where I first learned to write. My mind found words to match my stride. Sometimes I'd think about a problem, framing conversations and solutions sentence by sentence. Other times I conjured up memories, scripting them along with dialogue and scene. When I began to write for a living as a reporter, I would go for a run to jog out the point of a story, looking for a connection between regulatory changes to the mining industry and the people who lived in the towns built by mining. By the end of my run, the story would have a shape. I don't know what it is about jogging or walking that helped this mental practice, I only know that it did on a regular basis. Later when I was a jobless single mother, my mindful writing took a creative turn. Instead of fleshing out news stories and assignments, I started composing essays and poems, wandering off the beaten path of my former pyramid-style pieces. I had hours of time to fill, what Amato called the means and leisure to walk, so I pushed my son in a stroller. We had no destination and I sauntered instead of setting a brisk pace. For some writers, walking transcends its role as a reward, becoming an impetus for creation rather than just a break from the mental rigor.

The prolific writer and teacher David Huddle approached writing with the discipline of his erect walking style. He never seemed to wonder or wander while walking, his steps fell with a purpose, yet it was easy to catch him distracted, lost in his own thoughts and in need of hints as to the identity of a former student or acquaintance. When I saw him at graduate school, his wife was often walking with him, providing gentle reminders of the day's events. I met him when they were old enough to marry off their daughters. Did this arrangement come with age? Yet in his writing Huddle was precise, a clicking metronome of dialogue and description.

In *The Writing Habit*, Huddle used walking – or better yet running, the best way to exercise the body so it can nurture the precision of steady, regular writing – as a way to get inspired or a reward for the hard work of writing. He once spent several months living the life of a writer exclusively, no family or students to distract him. Those months at a cabin beside Lake St. Clair were the one period of his life when he called himself a runner, “or more accurately a jogger” (2). The run was a “reward” for working through the morning hour. He saw it as a source of accomplishment. “Just as I had had to work up to my three or four hours of fresh writing a day, I had gradually to increase my running distance” (3). During these runs, there were rules:

The road around Lake St. Clair is a very hilly 2.3 miles long. When I began running in early February, I could trot only about a quarter of the way around it without stopping to walk – and I would always walk the rest of the way around, often picking up my pace again after I’d caught my breath. When I left Lake St. Clair in mid-May I was jogging (vigorously) around it twice without stopping. (3)

There wasn’t much on those runs to entertain or pleasure him, other than the occasional sighting of a pileated woodpecker, a blue heron, wild turkeys and various other birds.

The real reward, though, came at the end of an afternoon work session. That’s when Huddle luxuriated in the pleasure of merging movement with space. He rewarded himself with a walk around the lake:

I made myself walk slowly and try to observe my surroundings as carefully as I could. The world itself seemed especially charged with energy; it became an intense presence in my life. I was primarily interested in birds – I’d bought a field guide and began keeping a list of the birds I saw – but I also became a student of

the landscape, the variety and quality of light in different weathers and at different times of day. I suspect that the attention I paid to the world of my 2.3 mile walks around St. Clair was of benefit to me in my writing. The fiction I wrote during those months seems to me informed by the world's presence and to articulate an intense connection between my characters and the world around them. (4)

The words in this section seemed to hum with energy and motion, a stark contrast to the logical conclusion that came with the "reward" of a run. There was sensuousness and the happy surprise of a benefit to his writing in the rhythms of sentences and the depth of the connections between Huddle's characters and the world he wove for them.

For me writing is like walking. Once I discover a satisfying path, I return to it over and over again. The same themes echo through my essays, like the flowers I watch bloom on my walks each spring. I've long ago given up hope of being the gardener who can manage this abundance of life. Instead I savor the sight and the smell of what grows wild along the river that runs through my city. Breathing out carbon dioxide for the plants to use in their photosynthesis, I'm as much a part of this garden's ecosystem as the bees that spread pollen or the rain that waters the roots. Sometimes I need to get lost to make new discoveries, like a teal, one of the migrating birds that return each season to nest in the willows along the river. Sometimes walking leads to pain, a twisted ankle or an insight into a childhood hurt I'd long forgotten. Walking offers me new perspectives, a way to process anger and an avenue for unexpected joy.

In the anthology *The Walker's Literary Companion*, the editors referred to a walk as the model of a well-lived life:

One always in motion but at different speeds, moving forward but with circlings back and pauses along the way, encouraging obstructions and bearing burdens and perhaps for a time overcoming both, immersing oneself in detail and then gaining perspectives, shifting from social to solitary occasions, growing in self-consciousness and knowledge and recovering innocence, becoming the “host” and being the “guest” and the “stranger,” encountering those who embrace and those who reject your walking status, feeling isolated and feeling communal, witnessing the good and evil events of humankind. (11)

I walk in spite of what others might think of my situation, a product of the original dividing line between those crusaders who rode and the pilgrims who walked, whom Amato called “peons” from the Latin for “foot soldier” (61). I walk my son to school and to the new library in my life. I walk to appreciate the journey rather than make it easy.

Lia Purpura used walking as a metaphor for new perspectives and unexpected opportunities in her book of lyrical essays, *On Looking*. She described the unexpected gift of time as a walk: “That week time was ample, broad as a boulevard, a stroll, a meander. Not a tour. Not a map or a path to be found. School was canceled. Scents fully unfolded – coffee, chocolate, and milk marbling together on the stove, thinnest skin to my touch and life and eat” (93-94). Walking was also an action. It provided momentum for her stories and a direction for her thoughts to travel in:

I was walking through the yellow-brown stubble in early fall, after the last hay was cut, when I saw a deer. It was curled in a grassy depression just before a stand of trees. The deer was so small that I startled it, it didn’t stir and I saw near the jaw a quarter-sized hole. The body was perfect except for the hole, which was

terribly precise. The hole was deep, and the blood hadn't slipped in runnels all over but dried black at the rim. I had never seen a deer that close. So I stayed.

(120-121)

Over and over again, she walked through the essays in this book, her sentences meandering along with her: "Down to the lake, to the spot under trees, to the open space between overturned boats again" (121).

In *Wanderlust*, Solnit said rural walking found a moral imperative in the love of nature while urban walking had always been shadier, with a propensity for soliciting, cruising and "other activities that hardly have the high moral tone of nature appreciation" (174). There was a time when women wandering the streets ran the risk of being arrested as streetwalkers. Now a walker may just as easily be mistaken for a poet or a singer. Solnit offered the example of Patti Smith who was asked what she did to prepare for her onstage performances. She said, "I would roam the streets for a few hours" (186).

We may not be able to walk where we want. Sometimes a favorite grocery store is cut off by the construction of a new highway. Our jobs are maybe too far to reach within the limited amount of time we don't already have tied up to commitments of family and leisure. Like ants finding a new route, we flow around obstructions or use vehicles to accommodate the fast pace of society. It's not always easy, but we can always walk. From room to room, moment to moment, to a neighbor's house, up the driveway, up the stairs and to the library.

If, as Thoreau said, every walk is a sort of crusade – a quest to control our surroundings, to seek exercise or entertainment or food – it also offers a chance to ask questions about who we are and the sort of society we live in. Just like Balzac wished we

would do. Every walk is an opportunity to see things in a new way: the flaneurs observing Paris culture or the celebrated big walkers of this generation. Women like Patti Smith and Lia Purpura, who at one time could be arrested for simply walking the street, now find their creative voice in a walk. A walk is a chance to accept the ultimate truth. That things change. That we might lose what we have. That we will lose everything someday.

Crusades seek to control. Walks show us that we have no control. Everything falls apart, but from that will come new life, all part of Pollan's evolutionary plan. One of the perverse pleasures of my childish library crusades was the privilege of not having to walk home. My mother always made sure she had enough money for a return trip on the bus. I loved the soft feeling of the seat underneath my tired legs, the luxury of the unread library books in my lap, the feeling of floating above the city like Amato's Roman soldiers from their superior perch on horseback above the crowds. And while I could never simultaneously combine my two desires, reading and walking, only by travelling under some other means could I indulge in the act of reading on the way home. In that space I had the time to fall in love with a new book and dream of future walks.

No one perhaps has ever felt passionately towards a lead pencil. But there are circumstances in which it can become supremely desirable to possess one; moments when we are set upon having an object, an excuse for walking half across London between tea and dinner. – Virginia Woolf

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Translations in context of "crusade to" in English-French from Reverso Context: Canada, through its Department of Foreign Affairs, has displayed great leadership in its crusade to ban land mines. The Pope envisions a sort of crusade to liberate the land. Le Pape imagine alors une sorte de croisade pour libérer le pays. The ministry is actually leading a genuine crusade to destroy the previous regime's leaders. Le ministère mène une véritable croisade pour décapiter les leaders de l'ancien régime. Thus the pontiff ordered a new crusade to be proclaimed. Ainsi, le souverain pontife a ordonné une nouvelle croisade pour être proclamée. It's about this crusade to make things right. C'est à propos de cette croisade pour faire ce qui est juste. The crusades were a series of military expeditions promoted by the papacy during the Middle Ages, initially aimed at taking the Holy Land for Christendom. The concept of a crusade was developed in the eleventh century partially as a result of organised Christian forces fighting Muslims in Sicily and Spain. The Holy Land had been in the hands of the Muslims since 638, and it was against them that the crusades were, at least nominally, directed. Expansionism along with desire for adventure, conquest and plunder seem to have been at least as influential in attracting Christians to the cause as the remaining Crusades were failures of one sort or another and, instead, contributed to the heightened tensions still visible in the Middle East today. In particular, the Fourth Crusade which ended in the sack of Constantinople stands as a bitter monument to the carnage and vandalism perpetrated by modern westerners on the East. In the end, almost no one gained anything of worth from the Crusades. They diminished not only the Pope's credibility as a spiritual leader but also Europeans' hopes of expansion along with their general acceptance of cultural diversity. The Crusades are in fact the crusade against child obesity is likely to produce, not healthy outcomes, but miserable children and anxious parents and epidemics of dieting and eating disorders. Nonetheless, I'm somewhat sympathetic to their crusade against horrible animal living conditions. In this regard, he is not an armchair liberal, his crusade against hatred, neo-Nazism etc seems to be an integral part of his public identity. We all need to support the crusade against corruption. His crusade against greyness is in part a response to his experience of Czechoslovakia which, as a dual passport holder, h