

WHAT IS WALKING?

I want to espouse a particular type of walking that suits me and explain why I feel it's the best kind of walking. Here goes...

I first started walking in the countryside when I was about 8 or 9 and my father, I'm guessing, wanted to 'man me up' as I was a bit too effeminate for my parents' liking. So he took me up some of the hills in Lancashire and Yorkshire, where we used to visit my grandparents in Nelson, Lancashire: Pendle Hill, which is visible from Nelson, Whernside, Ingleborough and Pen-y-Ghent. For me, it was just something to do, rather than a significant experience. Then I did 'hiking' as a Boy Scout from 10 to 15. 'Hiking' is in inverted commas because it was a recognised part of the Boy Scout programme: when we went on our annual camps, the older scouts went off in pairs on a 'hike' planned by a Senior Scout, carrying a heavy rucksack with tent, cooking gear, food, change of clothes and waterproofs. This killed walking for me: the route was prescribed by someone else, it was hard work going up and down hills with a heavy pack (our camps were always in hilly places) and it often rained. Of course, this was all supposed to toughen you up but for me, it just put me off walking in the countryside for about 30 years.

In the meantime, I got involved with swotting, sport, academic life, politics, drugs, 'alternative' life-styles, spirituality and meditation, as you do, roughly in that order. I only came back to walking in the countryside when I was 41. The ground had been prepared for me by starting to run as a way of keeping myself clear of a 6-month depression I went through in 1980. I found that I much preferred running in the countryside, which was easy to do as I was living, one after the other, in an ashram near to a river in India, in a commune in the Suffolk countryside and in a community in the Oregon hills, USA.

When all that was over, for a while I didn't know what to do with myself. So in May 1986, I took myself off on a continuous hike round the South-West Coast path to try and sort myself out and decide what to do next. I travelled very light – no more heavy rucksacks – with just a change of T-shirt, map and water. I stayed in B&Bs, without booking, covered about 25 miles a day and completed most of it, as far as Lulworth Cove in 22 days. I discovered I liked walking in the countryside, after all. In particular, I found that while walking I could access the meditative state that I had been cultivating in the ashram and other communities – in fact, it was easier for me than when sitting with crossed legs.

Long story short, I went back to the ashram in India for another spell, continuing with the meditation and the running by the river. There followed another depression – you might think, "Fat lot of good all that meditation did him", but that's another story. Coming out of that depression, I got myself a job as a charity shop manager with MIND and continued with the daily running on Hampstead Heath and an hour's meditation in the mornings. However, for my holidays (I was able to take two or three a year), I took myself off, usually on my own, to walk in the countryside all over Britain and Ireland. I have been doing that ever since

(the last 25 years), except that now I am retired I can do it for longer and more often and I'm going further afield around Europe as well.

I have found walking to be the best therapy, far better than counselling, and the best antidote to depression (I went through a third depression from 2007 to 2012). Every time I set off for a long walk in the countryside, I feel a lifting of my spirits. So now I take at least one long walk a week, weather permitting (which it usually does in S.E. England) and go on four or five longer trips every year. I write up these trips for this website, then start planning another trip, which gives me an enjoyable focus for my retirement – you could say I am addicted to walking but I feel it is a healthy addiction.

So now I consider myself an expert walker, although at 73 I am slowing down, cannot walk so far and have to be more careful on uneven ground. I have never had a 'bad' walking trip, although I've had a few 'bad' experiences (see, in particular, Trail 207, Macugnaga, where I got stranded outdoors overnight at 2000m). It's from this wealth of walking experience that these comments arise and against the background of the other experiences described above, especially meditation, that you may wish to judge what I have to say.

Attitude

For me, walking is all about the attitude with which we do it. There are several related aspects to this.

First of all, there's an attitude of openness – to our surroundings and to ourselves. Too often, in our daily lives, we are constrained by the demands of our tasks into a tense, focused concentration that eventually takes its toll on us, whether in the form of repetitive strain injuries or burn-out and stress. Walking offers us the chance to take a break from all that, allowing our minds and bodies to be open to the whole world around us and to be in tune with the evolutionary heritage of our bodies (the way our bodies are designed by evolution to work), i.e. to walk, rather than to sit at a desk or on an assembly line performing tasks that strain both mind and body.

And this openness can – and for me, does – lead to gratitude: gratitude for the natural world in which we are walking, gratitude for the health of our bodies which enable us to walk, even gratitude for the walkers who have gone before us to create the path we are walking on. How many of us feel a sense of gratitude in our daily lives? Mostly we are too concerned about doing our job, looking after the family, getting to work or school on time, seeing the latest film, band or TV show to feel grateful for all that we have. Out walking, it's actually hard not to feel grateful for the clouds, the sky, the hills, the streams, the trees, the flowers and other plants, the wind, the sun, even sometimes the snow and the rain. And gratitude is not just a nice feeling, it's a healthy feeling that suffuses our body and our mind with a cleansing glow.

Gratitude leads naturally to respect: respect for nature, obviously, but also respect for ourselves as part of nature. It is dispiriting to see litter, especially plastic bottles, by the side of paths or, my particular bugbear, plastic bags of poo hanging on branches of trees. Then

there's the devastation caused by thoughtless walkers who blunder ahead on a path with no thought for where they are treading and what they are treading upon – treating nature as a handy resource to be exploited for their own convenience (the same goes for mountain bikers and fell-runners, by the way). This seems to me to be a reflection of the attitude of our society which has for so long exploited nature as a resource for our benefit, while at the same time destroying it – what Naomi Klein has called 'extractivism' (see my review of her book under 'Odds & Sods').

The contrasting attitude of respect leads us to walk carefully, dare I say mindfully, in nature and, to use another much-used phrase, to tread lightly upon the earth, leaving nothing but our footprints. Walking like this engenders an attitude of respect towards ourselves, too: if we respect nature, why would we also not respect ourselves, by enjoying every moment of the walk, doing ourselves no harm as we walk, not over-straining our limbs, taking enough breaks, not pushing ourselves to attempt things beyond our capacity and generally being in touch with the state of our mind and body?

Then there's relaxation. It's possible to walk with a tense attitude borrowed from the society we live in: rushing from start to finish, seeing how fast or how far we can go, keeping our eyes on the clock, taking short-cuts and hardly taking in the scenery at all, except maybe for a few photos on the summit or at the destination to prove on social media where we have been and how cool we are. To me, this is a travesty which I see too much of on the trails I tread, which tend to be on high mountain terrain. Why not slow down, take more breaks, go off at tangents to inviting spots we have noticed, forget about the clock for a while, allowing plenty of time if we have a bus or train to catch? Let the walking take the strain out of our mind and body – a healthier way of doing this than watching some spectacle or going shopping (now the most popular leisure activity, apparently).

Tied in with this relaxation, I think, are two more attitudes: curiosity and flexibility. What is the point of being out in nature without being curious about our surroundings and flexible enough to investigate whatever fires our interest? It's a boon to have the time and opportunity to go wherever our whim takes us, rather than merely making a bee-line for our pre-determined destination. Again, we can see the contrast with most of our daily lives where we have to focus on an end result with sustained concentration. Walking should be about releasing those constraints – the only concentration we need is where to place our feet on uneven or slippery ground, to keep track of where we are and to keep an eye on the weather.

Here's a quote that epitomises this spirit of curiosity from Alastair Bonnett, 'Beyond the Map', a book which describes 39 unusual places around the world but concludes with these words:

"Far from advising people that they have to troop off to one of the world's umpteen grindingly soulless airports and get a long-haul flight to find somewhere truly memorable, my advice is not to fly or drive anywhere at all. Set off on foot from your own front door and head in a new direction. Don't walk quickly or have your head down, and don't give up after half an hour. Let it happen and give it time. I'm increasingly convinced that walking is the

only real form of travel: everything else is just speeding past. It can be hard work: the experience you get will not be tailor-made, not packaged, not a cliché. There will be no forms to fill in; you won't be asked to remove your belt and shoes; there will be no guidebook." (pp. 283-284)

So, I'm suggesting, there are two poles to walking: one extreme set of attitudes is a reflection of our society: speed, focus and concentration, stress, taking nature for granted, setting a goal and 'going for it'; the other extreme is 'my kind of walking': slowing down to a leisurely pace, openness, gratitude and respect, relaxation, forgetting about goals in favour of curiosity and flexibility.

Ways of Walking

How we walk makes a difference to what I've said about attitude. I prefer to walk alone because that frees me from the inevitable distractions of another person. I have tried walking in a group a couple of times and hated it: I had to walk more or less at the pace of the group (actually the group leader's pace); I couldn't stop when I wanted to; and I was continually distracted by conversations from fully appreciating the scenery, the silence, the plant-life, in fact everything I enjoy most about walking. I've also tried walking with a partner, which was a lot better than walking with a group but there were still the same problems: my partner usually wanted to go faster than me and stop less often, and I was still distracted by her presence, if not by our conversations. The guide-books always recommend walking with another person on the kind of remote trails I like to tread for safety reasons but I never take their advice, relying instead on my phone, a torch, a whistle and a survival bag, were I to get into trouble (again see Trail 207, Macugnaga, for a case in point).

This solitary walking is just my preference because it makes it easier to cultivate and enjoy the attitudes from the previous section. I'm not saying this can't be done in the presence of other like-minded walkers, just that I find it more difficult, especially since my walking pace has slowed down as I get older.

There is a spectrum of words for what is essentially the same activity: covering ground using our feet and legs, and sometimes our arms and hands. Starting with the gentlest and finishing with the most strenuous, there's strolling, walking, hiking, trekking, scrambling, climbing and mountaineering. It seems to me that this spectrum of different ways of walking correlates with the ease with which it's possible to access the attitudes I'm espousing. To take the extremes, I've already described how slow, leisurely walking facilitates openness, gratitude, respect, relaxation, curiosity and flexibility. Mountaineering, by contrast, makes all this more difficult. If you want to survive, you have to be fiercely focussed and concentrated, even at the blissful moment when you reach the top of your climb (you can't stay too long because you'll get cold, you have to worry about getting down before dark). All this makes for tension and tunnel-vision, the very opposite of openness and relaxation.

As for gratitude and respect, I know that many mountaineers feel these, especially respect for the mountain without which their safety would be impaired. I'm just saying that the exigencies of the climb make it more difficult to be grateful and respectful. Look at the mess that is being left behind on Everest by the hordes of mountaineers trying to reach the top: tents, excess supplies, oxygen bottles, human waste and litter. More importantly from my perspective, look at the attitude with which many mountaineers set out: they wish to conquer the mountain, some of them wish to break records, to be the first to climb a new route, to climb the most challenging mountains, to bag all the Munros in Scotland. To me, this is the same attitude towards nature which has led us to exploit and degrade it ever since God told us we had dominion over nature. I have to ask: where does the impulse to climb mountains, especially the more difficult ones, come from? How much of the impulse is gratitude and respect and how much is competitiveness, the desire to conquer, to boost one's ego, to prove oneself, to be number one?

Now for curiosity and flexibility: there's no room for them on a climb. The route has been researched and decided. There's no space for deviation if you want to stay safe. The only place for flexibility is in deciding not to climb or to turn back if the weather conditions aren't right or the terrain is too difficult. This is no stroll in the park; this is serious planning and execution of that pre-determined plan.

So my claim is that as we move along the spectrum from heavy-duty mountaineering to leisurely walking, the attitudes of my kind of walking become easier to adopt. And I'm saying this from experience. I used to be a long-distance hiker and mountain-climber (though not of the ice-axe and crimpon variety) and I can safely say that I've only adopted these attitudes since I slowed down and gave up trying to get to the top of everything and to reach a pre-determined destination.

'Walking is not a Sport'

There's a tendency today to turn walking into an offshoot of our type of society: commercialised and goal-oriented. The opening sentence of Frederic Gros's excellent 'A Philosophy of Walking' sums it up nicely: "Walking is not a sport". In fact, the whole of his first chapter is brilliant on this point. Here are a few excerpts:

"Sport is a matter of techniques and rules, scores and competition, necessitating lengthy training."

"Sport is keeping score: what's your ranking? Your time?"

"Sport also obviously means cultivation of endurance, of a taste for effort, for discipline. An ethic. A labour."

"But then again it is material: reviews, spectacles, a market. It is performance. Sport gives rise to immense media ceremonies, crowded with consumers of brands and images."

“Walking is not a sport. Putting one foot in front of the other is child’s play. When walkers meet, there is no result, no time”

“And when you are walking, there is only one sort of performance that counts: the brilliance of the sky, the splendour of the landscape.”

“Efforts have nevertheless been made to create a new market in accessories: revolutionary shoes, incredible socks, high-performance trousers... the sporting spirit is being surreptitiously introduced, you no longer walk but do a ‘trek’. Pointed staffs are on sale to give walkers the appearance of improbable skiers. But none of that goes very far. It can’t go far.” (excerpts from pp. 1&2)

Too far for my liking, though. When I go into a walking equipment shop, I am bombarded with this variety of accessories. Don’t get me wrong, I like a selection of boots, socks, trousers, gloves, jackets and backpacks to choose from but I question the need for all the gadgets that are now on offer. Take the compass and the GPS. I have been carrying a primitive compass for 25 years because I was told it was essential and I have not used it once. If you can read a map, why do you need a compass? The same with GPS – and the map shows you so much more than the line of the route that you get with GPS (obviously, this doesn’t apply to downloading on Ordnance Survey map on your gadget). Just today I have read that Cairngorm Mountain Rescue have had three rescues in a row on Ben Macdui where no one in the group has had a map or a compass, only a mobile phone which was of no help.

And then there’s walking poles. It seems almost obligatory these days to have two long pointed poles, which I see walkers wafting in the air, hardly touching the ground. What’s the point? Are they simply a fashion statement saying “I am a serious hiker” or are they some kind of security blanket? I carry one short pole which I’ve had for 20 years and is now totally blunt but it still does its job, which is to help me balance on awkward ground and to prod unstable rocks or marshy ground to see if they are safe to tread on. The point, ferrule and tip, which we are encouraged to renew when they wear down, are totally unnecessary as far as I can see, except in snow or on scree, which I try to avoid.

I expect there are also gadgets to tell you how far you have walked, the temperature, your heart-rate, even the speed you are walking. I don’t want all this stuff - it would just be a distraction.

Why is Walking Good?

So why is walking good for us? It’s not just a question of improving our fitness – there are other ways to get fit – but walking does help. Unfortunately, my kind of walking falls short because we are supposed to walk briskly to get the most benefit, fast enough to increase our heart-rate and speed up our breathing. Well, that doesn’t happen for me but I can still feel the benefit of a 10k walk – and on walking trips of three weeks I usually lose about 11 pounds in weight (5 kilos).

No, the main benefit of walking is to our whole body/mind system. The two aren't independent of each other. There's something about the rhythm of walking – some say it's the same rhythm as our heartbeat, speeding up as we walk faster – that brings us in tune with our bodies and creates a feeling of being in tune with the world around us. This happens for me without fail every time I go for a long walk and is the main reason I love walking so much.

The rhythm of walking may also act to induce a meditative state rather like a repeated phrase or mantra does in sitting meditation. This is something I discovered for myself on my first long walk round the South-West Coast Path and is why I took to walking so enthusiastically after that: I found it more effective and more enjoyable than sitting still to meditate.

When we add in the benefit of the endorphins that exercise is supposed to generate in our bloodstream, the benefit of fresh, unpolluted air and being away from the noise most of us have to live with, we can see how walking gives a boost to the whole body/mind system. So much so that it is now being prescribed by doctors for mental as well as physical health problems. As I've already said, this has worked for me in recovering from depression.

Another factor is the psychological benefit of a change of environment. We leave behind our everyday routines and that simple change can help us to see things differently and to gain new perspectives on our lives.

All of this is why walking can lead to 're-creation': our bodies are in tune, our minds are relaxed, our environment has changed so new thoughts can more easily arise. And, I find, the less I'm thinking about any problems associated with the walk (am I on the right path? is it time for lunch? what can I do about that blister?), the more likely this is to happen.

People often talk about walking as recreation, making it sound like another sport or pastime, all lumped together as 'recreational activities', and it can be like this for some people. However, I want to talk about walking quite literally as 're-creation'. By 're-creation', I mean all sorts of things: from feeling better about ourselves, to finding solutions to any problems we may have, to becoming clearer about where we want to go in life, to creating our own 'philosophy of living'. Let's have a few examples:

Soon after I retired, I went off to the west coast of Scotland for some island-hopping. On Ardnamurchan (OK, it's not an island), I was sitting on a beach and felt so at peace with myself and the world at this particular spot that I wanted to share it. I felt it was to do with that particular spot where everything seemed just right: the waves, the breeze, the rocks around me, the views, the sounds of the seabirds. Not being much of a poet, I decided to write about what led me to this particular spot and to continue doing this for the rest of the trip. When I'd done this over a few trips, I sent the results to a few travel publishers, all of whom turned me down; so I set up this website and started to add photos to the words. In this way, walking helped me to re-create myself by giving me something I love to do in my retirement.

Recently, I read about Novak Djokovic, the tennis player, going on a 5-day hike in the mountains with his wife and taking stock of his life on a peak: "We sat down and just looked

at the world from that perspective”, he said. After that, he came back from a 2-year slump in form and won Wimbledon and the U.S. Open.

Another more famous, or perhaps infamous, example is Theresa May’s penchant for making big decisions on her walking holidays. Apparently, she decided to stand for the Tory leadership on one such holiday and to call the 2017 British election on another.

And how about this one? Jesus went into the wilderness for 40 days and 40 nights and came back clear about what he had to do. I don’t know if he did much walking but I bet he did (he was a great walker).

You will also probably know that many new ways of looking at the world have come while their creators have been walking, going beyond ‘re-creation’ into the realms of ‘creation’ or ‘creativity’. I won’t bore you with a list but it’s a long one – and there’s a book which describes some of these thinkers who have come up with their ideas while walking. It’s Frederic Gros’s ‘A Philosophy of Walking’, already quoted from above, and which I review on this website under ‘Odds & Sods’. He also steals some of my thunder by discussing ways in which walking can benefit us – all done with typical French verve and flair. My review is a bit scathing in places but on re-reading his book my estimation of it has gone right up.

There’s one more aspect to this re-creation for me – and it’s the hardest to explain. That is the simple, unmistakable, profound joy that can arise while walking. Adding everything I’ve said together perhaps provides the conditions for this joy to arise, but not an explanation. That’s something I prefer to leave as a mystery, a mystery never better expressed for me than by Nan Shepherd in ‘The Living Mountain’, already quoted at the end of Trip 12, ‘The Dolomites’:

“Now and then, unpredictable and unforgettable, come the hours when heaven and earth fall away and one sees a new creation. The many details...come for a moment into perfect focus, and one can read at last the word that has been from the beginning.”

“These moments came unpredictably, yet governed, it would seem, by a law whose working is dimly understood. They come to me...most of all after hours of steady walking, with the long rhythm of motion sustained until motion is felt, not merely known by the brain, as the ‘still centre’ of being...Walking thus, hour after hour, the senses keyed, one walks the flesh transparent. But no metaphor, *transparent*, or *light as air*, is adequate. The body is not made negligible, but paramount. Flesh is not annihilated but fulfilled. One is not bodiless, but essential body...”

“...It is a journey into Being; for as I penetrate more deeply into the mountain’s life, I penetrate also into my own. For an hour I am beyond desire. It is not ecstasy, that leap out of the self that makes man like a god. I am not out of myself, but in myself. I am. To know Being, this is the final grace accorded from the mountain.” (excerpts from pp. 82-84)

What is Walking?

After all that, what then is walking – or at least, the kind of walking I’m recommending (let’s call it ‘Re-creational Walking’)? I’ve talked about the attitudes I think we should adopt when walking, about a spectrum of ways of walking that I think affects those attitudes (from leisurely walking to mountaineering), about how ‘walking is not a sport’ and about why walking is good for us.

I see a common theme in all that I have said: how this kind of walking is in contrast to the kind of society we live in: a society that values success, winning, size, wealth, competition, punctuality, consumption, technology and continual upgrading of gadgets. There are inevitable downsides to all this: climate change, pollution, stress, noise, losers, health problems both mental and physical, and exclusion of those who don’t ‘measure up’. Re-creational walking is an antidote to all this nonsense and, after all, is akin to what most people do when they just ‘go out for a walk’. I’m just trying to upgrade it into something philosophical, adding some social-psychological touches and applying it to other types of walking like hiking, trekking and scrambling.

To try and make this more convincing and easier to digest, I’ve drawn up a list of contrasts as a kind of summary:

OUR KIND OF SOCIETY	RE-CREATIONAL WALKING
	Attitude
Constrained	Open
Taking things for granted	Gratitude
Harming nature and ourselves	Respect for nature and ourselves
Tension/stress	Relaxation
Tunnel vision	Curiosity
Goal-oriented	Flexibility
	Way of Walking
‘Getting somewhere’, competitive, achievement	‘No particular place to go’, wandering
	Equipment
Gadgets, accessories, all the latest gear	Just the essentials, travelling light
	Mind and Body
Stressful	Relaxed

Speedy	Leisurely
Time-regulated	‘All the time in the world’
Air pollution	Fresh air
Noise pollution	Silence (apart from natural sounds)
Mind-oriented, leading to unhealthy bodies	Body-oriented, leading to healthy minds
Meritocratic, hierarchical	Open to anyone
Routine	Varied (apart from repetition of steps)
Delayed gratification	Constant gratification
Choices limited by others	Free to choose for ourselves
Winners and losers	No winning or losing
Knowledge, facts	Not knowing, mystery, wonder
Serious	Fun
Prosaic	Inspirational, creative

My complaint is that too much walking, from my observation, partakes of the same values as the society we live in. Let’s not pollute walking by importing those values. This website seeks to encourage the kind of walking that is a sanctuary where we can re-create ourselves away from our over-commercialised and over-stressed society.

For me, that’s what walking is.

My thanks to Manu Bazzano for helpful comments on the first and second drafts of this article.

