

WALKING ON THE EARTH – UCOT 1/17/21

Rev. Gary Kowalski

“I like to walk alone in country paths,” says Thich Nhat Hanh, “rice plants and wild grasses on both sides, putting each foot down on the earth in mindfulness, knowing that I walk on the wondrous earth. In such moments, existence is a miraculous and mysterious reality. People usually consider walking either on water or in thin air to be a miracle. But I think the real miracle is not to walk either on water or in thin air, but to walk on earth.”

Miracle or not, walking seems to be what we were built to do. Many animals can run faster. Pound for pound, chimpanzees are four times stronger than we are. Birds can fly. Fish can swim. A sperm whale can hold its breath for up to 90 minutes under water. But human beings seem to be nature’s champion walkers. Not even an antelope or a buffalo or mule can outdistance a person striding at a steady gait. Our nomadic ancestors walked out of Africa to eventually cover six continents. So was it our big brain or our two feet that brought us this far? If you want to know what God intended putting us on this planet, the answer is open to interpretation. But if you want to know what Evolution had in mind, the answer is fairly clear. Mother Nature gave us big toes and long legs, designing us to walk.

“Walking is the best medicine,” according to Hippocrates, and modern physicians agree. A study by the National Council on Aging found that seniors who walked forty-five minutes a day showed a significant increase in their thinking skills. Other research suggests that walking can reduce your risk of diabetes, prevent glaucoma, and help you live longer. The conventional wisdom that ten thousand steps a day are the key to fitness is mostly malarkey, a marketing myth originally promoted by a Japanese company in the 1960s selling pedometers. They hit on

10,000 steps because the Japanese character for that number resembles a person stepping out in full stride. Better research from the Harvard School of Public Health suggests that 4,400 steps, about two miles, will give you most of the health benefits of longer hikes. So Dori and I set that as our daily minimum during this pandemic. We've kept it up. We've been religious about it, so to speak. It's our way of keeping sane. And for me, at this point in life, three or four miles a day is a reasonable distance.

Having recently turned sixty-seven--a number divisible just by itself and one--I joke that I'm now in my prime. But in olden days, I did some real rambles. Jaunts. Excursions. Tramps and trudges even. At around fifteen miles into a hike, the endorphins usually kicked in, so I felt that I could go forever, that soaring, sailing sensation that athletes describe as being in the flow. And more than once, I walked far enough to leave my poor dogs exhausted, literally unable to get out of the car once we returned home. Apparently for longer distances sweating provides a big advantage over panting. Now it doesn't take much exertion at all for me to break a sweat. But that's okay. I'm not in it to break records.

Almost all spiritual traditions endorse walking as a balm for the soul as well as a boost for the physique. The Christian tradition of walking the labyrinth is at least as old as the cathedral at Chartres, dating from the thirteenth century, where a curvaceously spiraled pathway paved into the floor of the central nave is the largest from medieval times. Eleven concentric circles divided into four quadrants converging on a six-petaled rosette offered devout pilgrims a symbolic trip to the Celestial City or Jerusalem, a shortcut to bliss if you will. The 272 stones may or may not represent the number of days in human gestation: nine months, the time needed to fully *become*. Some said the penitent would traverse the nearly three hundred yards of the full course on their knees. But how the labyrinth was really used in ancient times is mostly lost in legend.

A few miles from our home in Santa Fe sits a Buddhist shrine, the Kagyu Shenpen Kunchab Bodhi Stupa from the Tibetan tradition, the like of which can be found the world around. Wherever it's located, in Sri Lanka or Thailand or like ours on Airport Road next door to a trailer park, the stupa represents Mount Meru, the cosmic mountain that connects heaven and earth. Often the mound contains relics or may be surrounded by prayer wheels. And as with the labyrinth, worshipers march in slow, contemplative circles, circumambulating in a clockwise direction while uttering blessings for the enlightenment and happiness of all beings.

Walking in a Japanese or Chinese garden is another form of meditation. Though wandering rather than strictly circular in form, the path in such a setting is meant to replicate the journey through life itself, from birth to death, from innocence to wisdom, from youth to maturity. While English and European gardens may appear cultivated or even contrived, the Eastern way is to mimic nature, pruning in a way to look unpruned. Bridges in these gardens zig and zag, for example, to make us slow down. Getting there quickly is not the goal. And even in modern Japan, when planning a public park, the walkway is the element that architects consider last. Rather they allow people to stroll, to follow their own impulses and inclinations, and then where passing feet have worn the grass away, designers pave that path.

In her book *Earth Wisdom*, Delores LaChapelle observes that Taoism shares the same premise. "The character for tao," she explains, "is made up of two pictographs, *châo* representing a foot taking a step, and *shou*, a head." The juxtaposition of shou (head) and châo (foot) emphasizes the idea of wholeness . . . the joining of mind and body. So the footbone really is connected to the

headbone, in Chinese philosophy. In reflexology and Oriental medicine, a massage directed between the big toe and its neighbor can relieve headaches, even migraines, and while I don't pretend to understand the theory, I can personally testify that when Dori rubs my feet it alters my entire attitude about the world.

"The way to solve a problem is to take a walk." The quote has been variously attributed to the Greek thinker Diogenes, to St. Jerome and others, but there's a Latin motto for this nostrum: *Solvitur Ambulando*. Solve it by walking. Bipedal locomotion really does seem to lubricate the creative juices. The Irish mathematician William Rowan Hamilton walked miles every day for seven years pondering a single recondite problem before he finally tread on the solution of quaternions, a four dimensional number now used in everything from computer animations to space navigation, signalling the birth of modern algebra. An annual Hamilton promenade now commemorates his Eureka moment starting at the Dunsink Observatory and ending at the Broom Bridge in Dublin. Philosopher Immanuel Kant was so famous and punctilious about his daily constitutionals that other citizens of Konigsberg said they could set their watches by his perambulations, while the poet Wordsworth was estimated to have walked roughly 180,000 miles about the English countryside in the Lake Country. Thence came lyrics like "I Wandered Lonely As A Cloud."

I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils;
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

Probably Wordsworth wouldn't have noticed the daffodils at all if he'd been doing seventy-five miles an hour on the interstate, or sitting in front of his laptop. But thankfully he wasn't. Thoreau remarks that "you must walk like a camel, which is said to be the only beast that ruminates when walking. When a traveler asked Wordsworth's servant to show him her master's study, she answered, 'Here is his library, but his study is out of doors.'"

A Spanish poet, Antonio Machado, writes,

Traveler, your footprints are the road, nothing else.
Traveler, there is no road;
you make your own path as you walk.
As you walk, you make your own road,
and when you look back
you see the path you will never travel again.

My own walks aren't always so disciplined or so inspired. I used to consciously watch my footfalls like watching the breath, and the practice can bring a kind of reverie. Now I mostly just walk for the sake of walking, not to attain any satori or altered state, but to get outdoors and soak up sun and wind. But a good walk can help quiet the static. It lowers the level of mental chatter. Walking can sometimes uncloud and restore senses grown dull with too much time spent on the computer or reading headlines, God forbid.

I'm the wrong person to ask if you're looking for directions to the New Jerusalem, but I do believe that it's a way and not a destination. The Open Road that Whitman celebrates is not a geographical highway but a way of proceeding through life. The endless vistas and wide open spaces he sings are inside. "Not I, not anyone else can travel that road for you," he says. "You must travel it for

yourself. It is not far, it is within reach. Perhaps you have been on it since you were born and did not know”

“Whoever walks a furlong without sympathy walks to his own funeral,” says Whitman, “drest in his own shroudBut whoever walks with mind and feelings outstretched walks in oneness with the infinite.” We needn’t go far to find the Holy Land. It’s most important to move to the rhythm of our own pace. The miracle is not walking on water, but walking on the earth, with delight and simple satisfaction in being a good animal doing what this human creature does best.

Lao Tze teaches that, “Without stirring abroad, One can know the whole world.” But stepping through the front door helps in my experience. The longest journey may be the journey inward. But the fastest way in may be to grab your shoes, a couple of stout poles and head for the nearest trail.