

Walking

[Abridged by Steven Marx]

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"The length of his walk uniformly made the length of his writing. If shut up in the house, he did not write at all." - Ralph Waldo Emerson

I wish to speak a word for Nature, for absolute Freedom and Wildness, as contrasted with a freedom and Culture merely civil,--to regard man as an inhabitant, or a part and parcel of Nature, rather than a member of society. I wish to make an extreme statement, if so I may make a emphatic one, for there are enough champions of civilization; the minister, and the school-committee, and every one of you will take care of that.

I have met with but one or two persons in the course of my life who understood the art of Walking, that is, of taking walks, who had a genius, so to speak, for *sauntering*; which word is beautifully derived "from idle people who roved about the country, in the middle ages, and asked charity, under pretence of going *à la sainte terre*"--to the holy land, till the children exclaimed, "There goes a *sainte-terror*", a saunterer--a holy-lander. They who never go to the holy land in their walks, as they pretend, are indeed mere idlers and vagabonds, but they who do go there are saunterers in the good sense, such as I mean. Some, however, would derive the word from *sans terre*, without land or a home, which, therefore, in the good sense, will mean, having no particular home, but equally at home everywhere. For this is the secret of successful sauntering. He who sits still in a house all the time may be the greatest vagrant of all, but the Saunterer, in the good sense, is no more vagrant than the meandering river, which is all the while sedulously seeking the shortest course to the sea. But I prefer the first, which indeed is the most probable derivation. For every walk is a sort of crusade, preached by some Peter the Hermit [\(1\)](#) in us, to go forth and reconquer this holy land from the hands of the Infidels.

It is true, we are but faint hearted crusaders, even the walkers, now-a-days, who undertake no persevering never ending enterprises. Our expeditions are but tours and come round again at evening to the old hearth side from which we set out. Half the walk is but retracing our steps. We should go forth on the shortest walk, perchance, in the spirit of undying adventure, never to return; prepared to send back our embalmed hearts [\(2\)](#) only, as relics to our desolate kingdoms. If you are ready to leave father and mother, and brother and sister, and wife and child and friends, [\(3\)](#) and never see them again; if you have paid your debts, and made your will, and settled all your affairs, and are a free man; then you are ready for a walk.

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I think that I cannot preserve my health and spirits unless I spend four hours a day

at least--and it is commonly more than that--sauntering through the woods and over the hills and fields absolutely free from all worldly engagements. You may safely say a penny for your thoughts, or a thousand pounds. When sometimes I am reminded that the mechanics and shop-keepers stay in their shops not only all the forenoon, but all the afternoon too, sitting with crossed legs, so many of them--as if the legs were made to sit upon, and not to stand or walk upon--I think that they deserve some credit for not having all committed suicide long ago.

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But the walking of which I speak has nothing in it akin to taking exercise, as it is called, as the sick take medicine at stated hours--as the swinging of dumb-bells or chairs; but is itself the enterprise and adventure of the day. If you would get exercise go in search of the springs of life. Think of a man's swinging dumb-bells for his health, when those springs are bubbling up in far off pastures unsought by him.

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Living much out of doors, in the sun and wind, will no doubt produce a certain roughness of character--will cause a thicker cuticle to grow over some of the finer qualities of our nature, as on the face and hands, or as severe manual labor robs the hands of some of their delicacy of touch. So staying in the house on the other hand may produce a softness and smoothness, not to say thinness of skin, accompanied by an increased sensibility to certain impressions. Perhaps we should be more susceptible to some influences important to our intellectual and moral growth, if the sun had shone and the wind blown on us a little less; and no doubt it is a nice matter to proportion rightly the thick and thin skin. But methinks that is a scurf that will fall off fast enough--that the natural remedy is to be found in the proportion which the night bears to the day, the winter to the summer, thought to experience. There will be so much the more air and sunshine in our thoughts. The callous palms of the laborer are conversant with finer tissues of self-respect and heroism whose touch thrills the heart, than the languid fingers of idleness. That is mere sentimentality that lies abed by day and thinks itself white, far from the tan and callus of experience.

When we walk we naturally go to the fields and woods; what would become of us if we walked only in a garden or a mall? Even some sects of philosophers have felt the necessity of importing the woods to themselves since they did not go to the woods, "They planted groves and walks of Platans" where they took *subdiales ambulationes* in porticoes open to the air. Of course, it is of no use to direct our steps to the woods, if they do not carry us thither. I am alarmed when it happens that I have walked a mile into the woods bodily, without getting there in spirit. In my afternoon walk I would fain forget all my morning occupations, and my obligations to society. But it sometimes happens that I cannot easily shake off the village. The thought of some work will run in my head, and I am not where my body is; I am out of my senses. In my walks I would fain return to my senses. What business have I in the woods, if I am thinking of something out of the woods? I suspect myself, and cannot help a shudder, when I find myself so implicated even in what are called good works--for this may sometimes happen.

My vicinity affords many good walks, and though I have walked almost every day for so many years, and sometimes for several days together, I have not yet exhausted them. An absolutely new prospect is a great happiness, and I can still get this any afternoon. Two or three hours' walking will carry me to as strange a country as I expect ever to see. A single farm-house which I had not seen before is sometimes as good as the dominions of the king of Dahomey. [\(11\)](#) There is in fact a sort of harmony discoverable between the capabilities of the landscape within a circle of ten miles' radius, or the limits of an afternoon walk, and the three-score-years and ten of human life. It will never become quite familiar to you.

Now a days, 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.

A people who would begin by burning the fences and let the forest stand! I saw the fences half consumed, their ends lost in the middle of the prairie, and and some worldly miser with a surveyor looking after his bounds, while heaven had taken place around him, and he did not see the angels going to and fro, but was looking for an old post-hole in the midst of paradise. I looked again and saw him standing in the middle of a boggy Stygian [\(12\)](#) fen surrounded by devils, and he had found his bounds without a doubt, three little stones where a stake had been driven, and looking nearer I saw that the Prince of Darkness was his surveyor.

I can easily walk ten, fifteen, twenty, any number of miles, commencing at my own door, without going by any house, without crossing a road except where the fox and the mink do. First along by the river, and then the brook, and then the meadow and the wood-side. There are square miles in my vicinity which have no inhabitant. From many a hill I can see civilization and the abodes of man afar. The farmers and their works are scarcely more obvious than woodchucks and their burrows. Man and his affairs, church and state--and school, trade and commerce, and manufactures and agriculture,--even politics, the most alarming of them all--I am pleased to see how little space they occupy in the landscape. Politics is but a narrow field, and that still narrower highway yonder leads to it. I sometimes direct the traveller thither. If you would go to the political world, follow the great road,--follow that market man, keep his dust in your eyes, and it will lead you straight to it--for it too has its place merely, and does not occupy all space. I pass from it as from a bean field into the forest, and it is forgotten. In one half hour I can walk off to some portion of the earth's surface where a man does not stand from one year's end to another and there consequently politics are not, for they are but as the cigar smoke of a man.

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At present, in this vicinity, the best part of the land is not private property; the landscape is not owned, and the walker enjoys comparative freedom. But possibly the day will come when it will be partitioned off into so-called pleasure grounds, in which a few will take a narrow and exclusive pleasure only,--when fences shall be multiplied, and man traps and other engines invented to confine men to the *public* road; and walking over the surface of God's earth, shall be construed to mean trespassing on some gentleman's grounds. To enjoy a thing exclusively is commonly to exclude yourself from the true enjoyment of it. Let us improve our

opportunities then before the evil days come.

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When I go out of the house for a walk, uncertain as yet whither I will bend my steps, and submit myself to my instinct to decide for me, I find, strange and whimsical as it may seem, that I finally and inevitably settle south-west, toward some particular wood or meadow or deserted pasture or hill in that direction. My needle is slow to settle-varies a few degrees, and does not always point due south-west, it is true, and it has good authority for this variation, but it always settles between west and south-south-west. The future lies that way to me, and the earth seems more unexhausted and richer on that side. The outline which would bound my walks, would be, not a circle, but a parabola, or rather like one of those cometary orbits, which have been thought to be non-returning curves, in this case opening westward, in which my house occupies the place of the sun. I turn round and round irresolute sometimes for a quarter of an hour, until I decide for the thousandth time, that I will walk into the south-west or west. Eastward I go only by force; but westward I go free. Thither no business leads me. It is hard for me to believe that I shall find fair landscapes, or sufficient Wildness and Freedom behind the eastern horizon. I am not excited by the prospect of a walk thither; but I believe that the forest which I see in the western horizon stretches uninterruptedly towards the setting sun, and that there are no towns nor cities in it of enough consequence to disturb me. Let me live where I will, on this side is the city, on that the wilderness, and ever I am leaving the city more and more, and withdrawing into the wilderness. I should not lay so much stress on this fact, if I did not believe that something like this is the prevailing tendency of my countrymen. I must walk toward Oregon, and not toward Europe. And that way the nation is moving, and I may say that mankind progress from east to west. Within a few years we have witnessed the phenomenon of a south-eastward migration, in the settlement of Australia; but this affects us as a retrograde movement, and, judging from the moral and physical character of the first generation of Australians,⁽¹⁾ has not yet proved a successful experiment. The eastern Tartars ⁽²⁾ think that there is nothing west beyond Thibet.⁽³⁾ "The World ends there", say they, "beyond there is nothing but a shoreless sea." It is unmitigated East where they live.

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The West of which I speak is but another name for the Wild; and what I have been preparing to say is, that in Wildness is the preservation of the world. Every tree sends its fibres forth in search of the Wild. The cities import it at any price. Men plow and sail for it. From the forest and wilderness come the tonics and barks which brace mankind. Our ancestors were savages. The story of Romulus and Remus ⁽¹⁹⁾ being suckled by a wolf is not a meaningless fable. The founders of every state which has risen to eminence, have drawn their nourishment and vigor from a similar wild source. It is because the children of the empire were not suckled by the wolf that they were conquered and displaced by the children of the northern forests who were.

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Life consists with Wildness. The most alive is the wildest. Not yet subdued to man,

its presence refreshes him. One who pressed forward incessantly and never rested from his labors, who grew fast and made infinite demands on life, would always find himself in a new country or wilderness, and surrounded by the raw material of life. He would be climbing over the prostrate stems of primitive forest trees.

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Where is the literature which gives expression to Nature? He would be a poet who could impress the winds and streams into his service, to speak for him; who nailed words to their primitive senses, as farmers drive down stakes in the spring which the frost has heaved; who derived his words as often as he used them--transplanted them to his page with earth adhering to their roots;--whose words were so true, and fresh, and natural that they would appear to expand like the buds at the approach of spring, though they lay half smothered between two musty leaves in a library,--aye, to bloom and bear fruit there after their kind annually for the faithful reader, in sympathy with surrounding Nature.

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I would not have every man nor every part of a man cultivated, any more than I would have every acre of earth cultivated; part will be tillage, but the greater part will be meadow and forest, not only serving an immediate use, but preparing a mould against a distant future, by the annual decay of the vegetation which it supports.

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We hug the earth--how rarely we mount! Methinks we might elevate ourselves a little more. We might climb a tree at least. I found my account in climbing a tree once. It was a tall white pine on the top of a hill, and though I got well pitched I was well payed for it, for I discovered new mountains in the horizon which I had never seen before,--so much more of the earth and the heavens. I might have walked about the foot of the tree for three score years and ten, and yet I certainly should never have seen them. But, above all, I discovered around me,--it was near the end of June, on the ends of the topmost branches only, a few minute and delicate red cone-like blossoms, the fertile flower of the white pine looking heavenward. I carried straightway to the village the topmost spire, and showed it to stranger jurymen who walked the streets,--for it was court week--and to farmers and lumber dealers, and wood-choppers and hunters, and not one had ever seen the like before, but they wondered as at a star dropped down! Tell of ancient architects finishing their works on the tops of columns as perfectly as on the lower and more visible parts! Nature has from the first expanded the minute blossoms of the forest only toward the heavens, above men's heads and unobserved by them. We see only the flowers that are under our feet in the meadows. The pines have developed their delicate blossoms on the highest twigs of the wood every summer for ages, as well over the heads of Nature's red children, as of her white ones. Yet scarcely a farmer or hunter in the land has ever seen them.

Above all, we cannot afford not to live in the present. He is blessed over all mortals who loses no moment of the passing life in remembering the past. Unless our philosophy hears the cock crow in every barn-yard within our horizon, it is

belated. That sound commonly reminds us that we are growing rusty and antique in our employments and habits of thought. His philosophy comes down to a more recent time than ours. There is something suggested by it not in Plato⁽¹²⁾ nor the New Testament. It is a newer testament--the Gospel according to this moment. He has not fallen astern; he has got up early, and kept up early, and to be where he is, is to be in season, in the foremost rank of time. It is an expression of the health and soundness of Nature, a brag for all the world--healthiness as of a spring burst forth--a new fountain of the Muses,⁽¹³⁾ to celebrate this last instant of time. Where he lives no fugitive slave laws are passed. Who has not betrayed his master many times since last he heard that note?

The merit of this bird's strain is in its freedom from all plaintiveness. The singer can easily move us to tears or to laughter, but where is he who can excite in us a pure morning joy? When, in doleful dumps, breaking the awful stillness of our wooden side-walk on a Sunday--or perchance a watcher in the house of mourning--I hear a cockerel crow far or near, I think to myself there is one of us well at any rate, and with a sudden gush return to my senses.

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We had a remarkable sunset one day last November. I was walking in a meadow the source of a small brook, when the sun at last, just before setting, after a cold grey day, reached a clear stratum in the horizon, and the softest brightest morning sun-light fell on the dry grass and on the stems of the trees in the opposite horizon, and on the leaves of the shrub-oaks on the hill-side, while our shadows stretched long over the meadow eastward, as if we were the only notes in its beams. It was such a light as we could not have imagined a moment before, and the air also was so warm and serene that nothing was wanting to make a paradise of that meadow. When we reflected that this was not a solitary phenomenon, never to happen again, but that it would happen forever and ever an infinite number of evenings, and cheer and reassure the latest child that walked there, it was more glorious still.

The sun sets on some retired meadow, where no house is visible, with all the glory and splendor that it lavishes on cities, and perchance, as it has never set before,--where there is but a solitary marsh hawk to have his wings gilded by it, or only a musquash [muskrat] looks out from his cabin, and there is some little black-veined brook in the midst of the marsh, just beginning to meander, winding slowly round a decaying stump. We walked in so pure and bright a light, gilding the withered grass and leaves, so softly and serenely bright--I thought I had never bathed in such a golden flood, without a ripple or a murmur to it. The west side of every wood and rising ground gleamed like the boundary of elysium,⁽¹⁴⁾ and the sun on our backs seemed like a gentle herdsman, driving us home at evening.

So we saunter toward the Holy Land; till one day the sun shall shine more brightly than ever he has done, shall perchance shine into our minds and hearts, and light up our whole lives with a great awakening light, so warm and serene and golden as on a bank-side in Autumn.