

THE ART OF SAUNTERING
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Reading: “Walking” by Henry David Thoreau

“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 pretense of going *a la Sainte Terre*,” to the Holy Land, till the children exclaimed, “There goes a *Sainte-Terrer*,” a Saunterer, a Holy Lander. They who never go to the Holy Land in their walks, as they pretend, are indeed mere idlers 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 in us, to go forth and reconquer this Holy Land from the hands of the Infidels.”¹

Walking for many people is a form of exercise. You see them bustling through the neighborhood or metro-park with exaggerated hip swings. Their arms are cocked and they wag their elbows far out to port and starboard sides. Occasionally

¹ Henry David Thoreau, “Walking,” *The Natural History Essays* (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith Books, 1980), pp. 93-94.

they check their pedometer or digital blood pressure cuff strapped to their arms. Some will bring their fingers to their jugular to measure their heart rate. Their minds are fixed on breathing or thinking about the “wall” that power walkers and joggers talk about.

Other people walk to observe the bird life or fauna. Walking along, they stop frequently to observe a flower or tree or bird. They may have a pair of binoculars or camera strung around their neck, or a magnifying glass poking out of a pocket. Their fanny backs are filled with field guides and notebooks. They glare at the joggers, bicyclists, and families with dogs who frighten away the rare bird species they had almost identified. I am not a power walker and I am guilty of stopping frequently on my walks to observe the wildlife.

Henry David Thoreau writes about another kind of walking. He writes about sauntering. The purpose and the art of sauntering is not body toning or the birder’s life list. The saunterer is one who loses his or her self walking across the holy land – *terra firma*. Indeed, sauntering abandons not only the conscious self, but also the world of commerce,

politics, technology, church, and education. With each step the saunterer sinks deeper down into the earth, like a man walking across quicksand. The feet disappear into the top soil, and soon the legs are absorbed into the fauna, hips and torso are swallowed by the earth, and the head slips into the loam. All that remains is a straw hat abandoned on the trail.

The art of sauntering is the losing of self to the holy land, the mind of nature. All religious transcendence is a matter of dying to self – of being so absorbed into the holy one no thought is given to self. Thoreau believes that sauntering is a matter of dissolving into the fields, woods, and streams. Self identity fuses into the creation, which may help us understand his comment, “Nature is my worship.”

Thoreau does not suggest that we lose our senses. Rather, when we saunter we return to the fullness of our senses. Taste, touch, sight, sound, and smell are clarified from all the artificial senses that swamp our daily lives. I can hardly stand to go to the mall because I am nauseated by the overwhelmingly sweet smells of perfume and candy. Sauntering restores us to our right mind and all her senses.

Our feet settle into the touch of gentle grass and dirt. Our eyes rest in the colors of nature. Our tongues savor the fresh water of rain and stream. Our ears hear the perfect pitch of songbirds. The winds sweep our ears clean from the pollution of traffic and media. Once again we smell rain before we feel it and savor the liquor of composting leaves.

The art of sauntering takes time, of course. One does not lose one's self with a quick sprint through the neighborhood park. Thoreau wrote, "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."² We have spent most of our lives building up our egos, cultivating our tastes, and refining our sensitivities. We have spent most of our days surrounded by the senses of an artificial and virtual world. Sauntering must surely require several hours a day to lose us, purify us, and bring us back to our right minds.

² Ibid., p. 95.

Now you might be thinking that this sermon has fallen into one of those simplistic, idealistic, and unrealistic homilies that might be nice to romanticize about but no-one can ever hope to achieve. After all, most of us have jobs, families, and hobbies, religious and civic commitments. The idea of spending forty minutes, much less four hours, seems ludicrous and totally unachievable.

I certainly have no interest in prescribing for you the art of sauntering or the amount of time you devote to it. But I will not abandon the essential truth that Thoreau is convinced of. Sauntering is essential to the preservation of our health and spirits. Our physical and mental healths are resuscitated in the art of sauntering. Our souls are revived as we sojourn the sacred fields, valleys, and woodlots. Yes, there are medications for depression and anxiety. Yes, there are memberships to the gymnasium, treadmills, and bicycles. Yes, there inspirational books, television psychologists, and religious services. But none of these offer body and soul the tonic of sauntering. There is a balm, not only in Gilead, but also in Walden Pond, the Appalachian Trail, and the Mojave

Desert. Listen to the holy writ of John Muir describing the waterfalls of Yosemite:

“The bridal veil and vernal falls are famous for their rainbows; and special visits to them are often made when the sun shines into the spray at the most favorable angle. But amid the spray and foam and fine-ground mist ever rising from the various falls and cataracts there is an affluence and variety of iris bows scarcely known to visitors who stay only a day or two. Both day and night, winter and summer, this divine light may be seen wherever water is falling, dancing, singing; telling their heart-peace of Nature amid the wildest displays of her power.”³

I am struck by Muir’s phrase, “their heart-peace of Nature amid the wildest displays of her power.”

The real beauty and power of Nature brings a heart peace to those who saunter through Nature’s light, water, air, rock, fire, and earth. This is the restorative salve that comforts the troubled and beleaguered modern soul. We are like the little infant who gets tired and cranky and finds no rest until she rests in the bosom of her mother. Our over-scheduled, over-committed, rushed, and bleary souls will find no rest until we saunter in the arms of Mother Nature.

³ John Muir, “In the Midst of the Yosemite Fall,” *The Wild Muir* (Yosemite National Park: Yosemite, 1994), p. 49.

Sauntering is health to our bodies and souls for several reasons. I believe that the first reason is that we are brought back to the source of our being. We are re-engaged with the power that creates us and sustains us. The further away we move from the energy that shaped our lives, the dimmer and weaker we become. The truth is that our lives are no longer connected to the direct current of existence. Rather, we are operating off of batteries, however energized they may be. Every battery eventually weakens and depletes. You often hear people say they go camping or fishing or hiking to “get my batteries recharged.” Sauntering is the act of reconnecting with the vitality of creation.

Sauntering is health to our bodies and souls because it lifts the veil of artificiality. Nature fronts only the real and vibrant. We are given the opportunity to see through glittered entertainment, plastic politics, and tinsel knowledge. Before the laws of nature the false prophets of religious ideology are shown to be buffoons. The sauntering soul is touched again by the real powers of life and death. We experience the essential facts of life and our place within it. There is no room

in Nature for pretense and euphemism. She displays the raw powers of life and death – the bloom of wild flowers on the floor of the desert after a rare thunderstorm; the ravenous flood and mud that sweeps through the valleys during a monsoon; the orgasm of volcanoes that burn all within the path of her lava; the gentle song of a mother cooing her child to sleep; the indifference of the male lion who eats his young; and the birth of the great panda no longer than my thumb. Without exaggeration, Nature displays the theater of birth and decay.

Sauntering is health to our bodies and souls because if we walk mindfully we will learn the laws of Nature. I stress the laws of Nature as free as possible from the layered cultural, religious, and political accouterments. If we wake up and pay attention we just might see the human being as a creature of nature, first expressed as an animal with all the instincts of survival and reproduction. If we do not understand the natural foundations of being human, no amount of psychological, sociological, or ideological pretense will empower us to appropriate self assessment. Our social policies will inevitably fail. Our foreign policy will fail. Indeed,

people suffer when we cloak them behind our world-view, political aspirations, or theological assumptions. Social and personal health will only be restored when we saunter through the reality of our natural being and accept the natural realities of being human.

Now I must warn you that sauntering has its risks.

Thoreau wrote:

“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 of certain impressions.”⁴

That is to say, sauntering just might turn you into a character.

You might become one of those people that others will editorialize as “an original.” Your hair might become sun bleached, your lips chapped, your hands calloused, and your skin deeply tanned. Ralph Waldo Emerson’s daughter, Ellen, wrote that she loved to receive Thoreau in their home because

⁴ Thoreau, p. 98.

he smelled like pine trees. Sauntering refashions your body to look increasingly like the natural world. You take on all of the pliability of oak trees bending in the howling wind, the power of waves roaring onto the shore, and the gentle touch of morning mist. Sauntering weathers your body and soul.

Sadly we are too often indoors. We live in weatherized houses; work in climatized office spaces, and ride shock absorbent vehicles interiorized in rich Corinthian leather. We lather our bodies with creams and lotions and don the most comfortable fabrics. We have thermal windows and thermal underwear. Thoreau hints that, likewise, our souls have become sensitive to the elements. He wonders that we have become thin skinned, soft and fragile. Soft we are susceptible to all kinds of impressions, like bread dough or silly putty. We are easily shaped by the fashions of clothing and thought. It is no wonder that the average American is so easily impressed with television commercials, cheap religion, and shallow politics. Thoreau would be stunned if anyone asked him, "Have you got your bling on?" He would not even understand

the question. But he would understand how it is that American culture is so adrift.

Sauntering is healthy for the body and soul. It is good for us to saunter, knowing that we never achieve the Holy Land. We do not finally arrive in Jerusalem or Boston. We may pretend that we meet our destination. Saunterers go to *la sans terre* but we never arrive there, we never conquer her, we never occupy the holy land. Indeed, there is not even an estimated time of arrival. Rather, sauntering is the art of the idle vagabond. Sauntering is like the photographer who must learn patience; waiting for the right lighting, composition, and expression. No amount of dark room manipulation can ever substitute for the original. Sauntering can never be replaced by Animal Planet. The art of sauntering is lingering long enough to absorb the beauty of Nature, the goodness of the wild, and the truth of creation.

The art of sauntering is holy travel, blessing our bodies and souls with health. From the soul of the saunterer come the words of this Celtic prayer:\

Blest be all creation
And all that has life
Blest be the earth
May it uplift our bed tonight
Blest be the fire
May it glow in us tonight
Blest be the water
May it bathe our being tonight
Blest be the air
May it make our night breath sweet.⁵

And with such prayers on our lips, I bid you sauntering souls
a *bon voyage*.

Finis

⁵ Ray Simpson, *A Holy Island Prayer Book* (Harrisburg: Morehouse Publishing, 2002), p. 45.