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# Why Walk?

*An excerpt from the new book* Walking Distance

**Robert E. Manning**



*Editor's note: This is the first chapter of Walking Distance: Extraordinary Hikes for Ordinary People (Robert and Martha Manning, Oregon State University Press, 2013). The authors emphasize walking as an ordinary pastime. They encourage those who don't necessarily think of themselves as adventurers to explore beautiful places, and the book describes several manageable walks in beautiful, accessible places around the world.*

WHY WALK, INDEED? HISTORY CAN BE READ AS A MILLENNIA-long struggle to free ourselves from the need to walk. Freedom from walking has always been highly coveted, coming first to the rich and powerful; slaves carried their masters, knights rode horses, the rich owned carriages, and the upper and now middle classes drive cars. Today, only the less fortunate are forced to walk. Most people prefer to sit and ride rather than walk, or so it's been.

But things are changing as some people are now *choosing* to walk instead of ride, and this is most pronounced in leisure time as a form of recreation, and maybe something even more substantive. The choice to walk is in response to an apparent yearning to be more active and healthy, to do things in a more sustainable way, and to be more directly in touch with the world around us. The deliberate pace of walking allows us to more fully sense the world, to see its richness of detail, to touch, hear, smell, and even taste it. Like the more general "greening" of leisure, recreation, and travel, often called *ecotourism*, the choice to walk is based on principles such as appreciation of natural and cultural diversity; direct and authentic contact with people and the places they live; a need to slow our everyday, hectic lives; protection of the distinctive places that make our world so interesting; and investment in these places through direct economic benefits.

Walking the great natural and cultural landscapes of the world is an ideal way to pursue all these objectives. Walking's deliberate, human-scale pace encourages a deep understanding and appreciation of nature and culture, and this ultimately leads to preservation of special places. Walking contributes to

*A hiker on the Colorado Trail, a 470-mile-long route that traverses several ranges of the Rocky Mountains between Denver and Durango. The nineteenth-century prophets of Romanticism sent legions of walkers out of their gardens and into the wider and wilder landscape, where they searched for beauty and solitude.* ROBERT E. MANNING

personal health and fitness and has relatively little environmental or social impact. The small scale of walking makes use of facilities and services provided by local people, and resulting economic benefits flow directly to these communities and places. And walking is one of the most democratic and accessible recreation activities, demanding no extraordinary athletic ability, requiring relatively little cost, and it's appropriate for nearly all ages. But to more fully appreciate walking, let's take a brief stroll through history. . . .

### **Walking Through History**

The history of walking is a paradox; walking is integral to human development, but the practice of walking has declined precipitously. In important ways, walking is one of the things that makes us human. While scientists debate the origins of walking, it's generally agreed that walking on two feet or *bipedalism* emerged several million years ago as an evolutionary adaptation. There is more consensus about its implications. In her book *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (Viking, 2000), Rebecca Solnit writes that “[t]he only given is that upright walking is the first hallmark of what became humanity” and “[w]hatever its causes, it caused much more.” It freed what are now our arms, allowing humans to evolve into the ultimate tool maker, and our brains responded accordingly. Science writer John Noble Wilford writes, “Anthropologists and evolutionary biologists are now agreed that upright posture and two-legged walking—bipedality—was the crucial and probably the first major adaptation associated with the divergence of human lineage from a common ancestor with the African apes.” And renowned paleoanthropologist Mary Leakey wrote,

One cannot overemphasize the role of bipedalism in hominoid development. It stands as perhaps the salient point that differentiates the forbears of man from other primates. This unique ability freed the hands for myriad possibilities—carrying, toolmaking, intricate manipulation. From this single development, in fact, stems all modern technology. Somewhat oversimplified, the formula holds that this new freedom of forelimbs posed a challenge. The brain expanded to meet it. And mankind was formed.

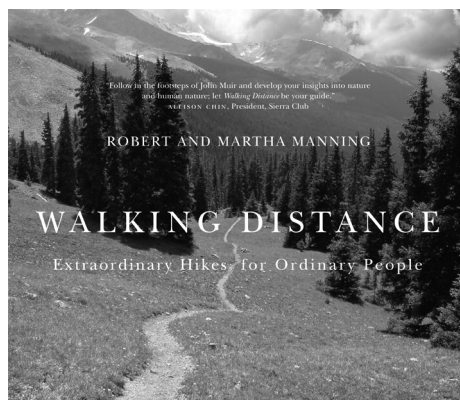
To reject walking is to turn our backs on our evolutionary history. But just as important, walking is a miracle—a biological and mechanical marvel and an aesthetic triumph. Of course, most of us take walking for granted; it's

simple, even “pedestrian.” But in reality, it’s a symphony between our highly developed nervous, skeletal, and muscular systems; the balance and strength to hold ourselves upright on our two relatively small feet while moving one foot in front of the other for miles on end, over all sorts of terrain, without falling, and doing all this with little conscious thought. The aesthetics

of walking were widely appreciated for the first time with publication in the 1880s of Eadward Muybridge’s photographic “motion studies,” which used a battery of linked cameras to record the act of walking. Geoff Nicholson writes in his book *The Lost Art of Walking* (Riverhead Books, 2008) that “for me the walking pictures reveal the magical nature of something we take so much for granted.” We should appreciate and celebrate this gift by taking a daily walk.

While walking is thought to have contributed to development of the brain, there is no question that it has stimulated our thinking across recorded history. Aristotle is an early example, walking as he thought and taught in the Lyceum of ancient Athens. Other philosophers followed suit in what is known as the Peripatetic School (*peripatetic* meaning “one who walks”). More recent examples include the philosophers, poets, and writers of the Romantic Movement in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau set the stage for Romanticism by questioning Western society’s march toward increasing industrialization and urbanism. Joseph Amato, in his book *On Foot: A History of Walking* (New York University Press, 2004), calls Rousseau “the father of romantic pedestrianism.” Rousseau’s principal books, *The Confessions* and *The Reveries of a Solitary Walker*, encouraged readers to return to nature and simplicity and were informed by his own long walks. He wrote that “[t]here is something about walking that stimulates and enlivens my thoughts” and “I can only meditate when I’m walking. . . . When I stop I cease to think; my mind works only with my legs.”

Other great walker-writers of the Romantic period include William Wordsworth, Henry David Thoreau, and John Muir. Wordsworth walked extensively in England, particularly in the Lake District. His colleague Samuel Coleridge estimates that Wordsworth walked 180,000 miles over his





adult life. Wordsworth had the remarkable ability to develop insights and compose his poetry while he walked. Author Christopher Morley wrote, “I always think of him as one of the first to employ his legs as an instrument of philosophy.” It’s reputed that when a traveler asked to see Wordsworth’s study at Dove Cottage, his home in the Lake District, his housekeeper replied, “Here is his library, but his study is out of doors.”

Thoreau took up the Romantic mantle in America, walking extensively throughout New England and more intensively around his home in Concord, Massachusetts, and his retreat at Walden Pond. Eloquent (but often cranky), he advanced his transcendental philosophy, urging Americans to preserve remaining pockets of nature and to walk in the landscape to find manifestations of god and higher truths. His essay “Walking” is his classic statement, in which he wrote, “I think 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.” And in his sometimes arrogant but endearing way he wrote that “I have met 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*.”

John Muir carried the Romantic tradition westward, walking a thousand miles from Indiana to the Gulf of Mexico, then walking extensively in the Sierra Nevada Mountains of California throughout much of his adult life. His walks offered him deep insights into human relationships with the natural world, and he used walking as a metaphor near the end of his life when he wrote that “I only went out for a walk, and finally concluded to stay out until sundown: for going out, I found, was really going in.”

The rich set of ideas associated with walking, along with the very act of walking itself, have advanced an array of political causes. For example, the Romantic philosophy of Rousseau suggested an inherent value in the individual, and this in turn offered a powerful argument against the tyranny of a wealthy majority. These ideas helped inspire the Women’s March on Versailles in 1789 to protest the scarcity and price of bread, and this was an important precursor of the French Revolution. Other prominent examples include Mohandas Gandhi’s 240-mile Salt March in 1930 (protesting British taxes); Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s 54-mile march in 1965 from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, to protest unjust voting laws (this route is now memorialized as the Selma to Montgomery Voting Rights Trail); and Cesar Chavez’s 340-mile March for Justice in 1966 in California to protest treatment

of farmworkers. It's no coincidence that the autobiographies of King and Nelson Mandela are titled *Stride to Freedom* (Harper, 1958) and *Long Walk to Freedom* (Little, Brown, 1994), respectively. The marches noted above are a few of many over a long history of protests, demonstrations, and parades with strong political agendas: peace, civil rights, cultural pride, and much more. There have even been walks to protect walking as when several hundred people staged a mass trespass in 1932 on Kinder Scout in the Peak District of England, ultimately leading to legislation to assure the historic "right to roam." Joseph Amato suggests that walking in this way adds important elements of "earnestness," "solemnity," and "humility" that help to advance political causes, and that walking is thus "a form of public discourse," while Rebecca Solnit says that "walking becomes testifying."

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"I have met 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*."

—Henry David Thoreau

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One of the political causes closest to many walkers is conservation. The prophets of Romanticism sent legions of walkers out of their gardens and into the wider and wilder landscape, where they searched for beauty and solitude. In this way, walking evolved into an attraction, not just a means to an end. Of course, this meant that walkers needed wild places to walk in. Walkers banded together in what have become powerful social forces, such as the Scottish Rights of Way Society (founded in 1845), the Commons Preservation Society (founded in England in 1865), the Appalachian Mountain Club (founded in America in 1876), the Sierra Club (founded in America in 1892), Wandervogel (founded in Germany in 1896), and the Ramblers Association (founded in England in 1935, now known simply as Ramblers). These organizations have been instrumental in environmental conservation and preservation, and organize trips for millions of walkers each year.

Walking and conservation have a parallel track in cities as well as wilderness. (In fact, it's not uncommon to read about urban areas as wilderness of a different kind.) Walking in cities also appeals to those with a sense of adventure. In Paris, it was the flaneur or bohemian who famously explored the city's



*A statue of pilgrims points the way to the Santiago de Compostela on the Camino de Santiago in northern Spain.* ROBERT E. MANNING

nooks and crannies and, in the words of Walter Benjamin, went “botanizing on the asphalt” in the nineteenth century. But Charles Dickens may have been the ultimate urban walker, logging as many as 20 miles a day in his native London, giving him welcome respite from his writing desk and providing his writing with observations of the often grim details of city life. The golden age of city parks in America—such as New York’s Central Park, Philadelphia’s Fairmount Park, and San Francisco’s Golden Gate Park—occurred during the same period as the Conservation Movement, and with similar causes and consequences: residents of densely populated cities demanded open space and safe, clean places to walk, and this led to development and conservation of many of the world’s great urban parks.

Walking can also have a strong spiritual dimension that is most evident in the pilgrimage. Pilgrims have been walking for centuries to holy sites around the world to seek spiritual guidance, to be healed, as a form of penance, or to fulfill religious obligations. The oldest and largest pilgrimage is the Hajj, in which all Muslims who are physically able and can afford to do so must walk to Mecca, Saudi Arabia, to participate.

Two to three million pilgrims annually participate in the Hajj. It’s thought the Hajj dates to the time of Abraham, around 2000 BC. Most pilgrims join others in large groups on their way to Mecca and, once there, walk counterclockwise seven times around the Kaaba, the holy building that Muslims face during prayer.



Christian pilgrimages to Rome, Jerusalem, Santiago, and other holy sites began in medieval times. Today, many of these pilgrimages are walked for cultural as well as religious reasons. It's thought that mazes and labyrinths may have a spiritual origin, and they are first mentioned in Greek mythology. Labyrinths are condensed forms of the Christian pilgrimage; they are often found in churches or churchyards. The labyrinth at Chartres Cathedral in France may be the oldest of this type, dating from the third century. Geoff Nicholson notes that there are currently a number of labyrinths in American prisons designed to instill peace and calm in those who choose to walk them.

### **The Fall and Rise of Walking**

Despite the historical significance of walking, it's suffered a steep decline over the last hundred years in response to the revolution in transportation. While all forms of mechanized transportation have allowed increasing numbers of people to ride rather than walk—a choice most people have exercised when presented the option—it's the car that relegated walking to the back seat. Most people drive back and forth to work, to the store, running errands; most children take the bus or are driven to school, socializing them to mechanized transportation. In the process, we've transformed much of the world to accommodate the driver—and at a cost to the walker. City streets are straightened and widened for more and faster traffic, making walking difficult, unpleasant, and often dangerous. And vast suburbs have been developed on a car rather than human scale: distances from home to work and shopping are beyond the reasonable range of walkers, and there are often no sidewalks. American historian Lewis Mumford wrote that the car is responsible for “the end of the pedestrian” and that “in America we have pushed the elimination of the pedestrian to its ultimate conclusion—the drive-in market, the drive-in movie theater, and the drive-in bank.” Even vacations are often spent driving for pleasure. Offices and public buildings also discourage walking as most are equipped with elevators, escalators, and other “people movers.” Even the modern home with en suite bathrooms and other conveniences is designed to reduce walking; for example, multiple bathrooms reduce trips throughout the house.

The decline of walking has caused considerable angst among people who choose to walk (or who would like to have that choice). Rebecca Solnit suggests taking an ecological approach by considering walking an “indicator

species for various kinds of freedoms and pleasures: free time, free and alluring space, and unhindered bodies.” In this context, walking might be considered “endangered.” She argues that modern transportation and technology lead us to transcend space and time, alienating us from the material world, and leaving us “disembodied.” “It is the unaugmented body that is rare now,” she writes, “and that body has begun to atrophy as both a muscular and a sensory organ.” Joseph Amato suggests that the car has altered our relationship with the world, making the walker “feel like a trespasser on the earth,” and that in the process it has “transformed . . . human senses of space, time, and freedom.” Social critic Marshall McLuhan warned us against allowing technology to rule our lives, observing that cars have transformed cities into places where traditional walking patterns now constitute illegal “jaywalking.” In science fiction writer Ray Bradbury’s short story *The Pedestrian*, the protagonist is rousted by the cops because he’s found to be walking. Sociologist Jean Baudrillard observed, “As soon as you start walking in Los Angeles you are a threat to public order, like a dog wandering in the road.”

But this doesn’t have to be the future of walking, and trends suggest that walking is entering a new phase in which increasing numbers of people are choosing to walk for many of the reasons outlined above. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, most countries have established extensive systems of public parks, forests, and trails, and these demand exploration and the close inspection that is only possible on foot. Government agencies and nonprofit citizen groups continue their good work toward expansion of these places and the opportunities they present to walkers. All parts of the world have great cultural landscapes where people and the environment are intertwined in distinctive, harmonious, enduring, and sustainable ways, and many of these regions can be walked on safe, well-marked, and managed trails, served by public transportation and local facilities and services. Many cities are working hard and successfully to accommodate the needs of walkers through pedestrian malls, better sidewalks and lighting, and greenways to connect home, work, and recreation. Citizens groups such as Feet First in Seattle, PEDS in Atlanta, Philly Walks, Walk Austin, and Britain’s Ramblers and Reclaim the Streets are helping lead the way, as well as the New Urbanists, a philosophical school of planning that wants to place pedestrians at the center of an urban renaissance. Private enterprise is playing an important role as well by providing walkers better shoes and clothing, lightweight equipment, guidebooks, and a host of other commercial support services.

This increasing suite of walking opportunities is responding to changes in society. Obesity and related health issues are an epidemic in America and other places, and walking is an antidote, an exercise that is accessible to nearly everyone and universally recommended by the medical community. Parents are worried about their children losing contact with nature—what Richard Louv calls “nature deficit disorder”—and walking in parks and related areas can reconnect people with the environment. Adults of all ages caught in frantic lifestyles are looking for ways to slow the pace of life and walking offers life at a more human scale. Walking guru Colin Fletcher wrote that walking is the yin to life’s more hectic yang, and we need to find a balance between the two.

### **Walking the Talk**

Walking is simple; Geoff Nicholson writes that walking is analog in a digital world. But it can also be profound. This essay began by interpreting its title as a question: why walk? It can now be restated in declarative form: we walk because it’s a celebration of our evolutionary heritage, it stimulates our thinking, it’s a form of political expression, it contributes to conservation and sustainability, it deepens our understanding and appreciation of the world, it can be a means to explore spirituality, and it makes us healthier and happier in the process. But in today’s world, walking is a choice we must consciously make; it’s more conventional and easier (in some ways) to sit and ride. In an especially appropriate turn of contemporary phrase, we must “walk the talk.” By choosing to walk, we make a lifestyle choice, fulfill a commitment to ourselves and to the environment, and make a political statement about what we think is important.

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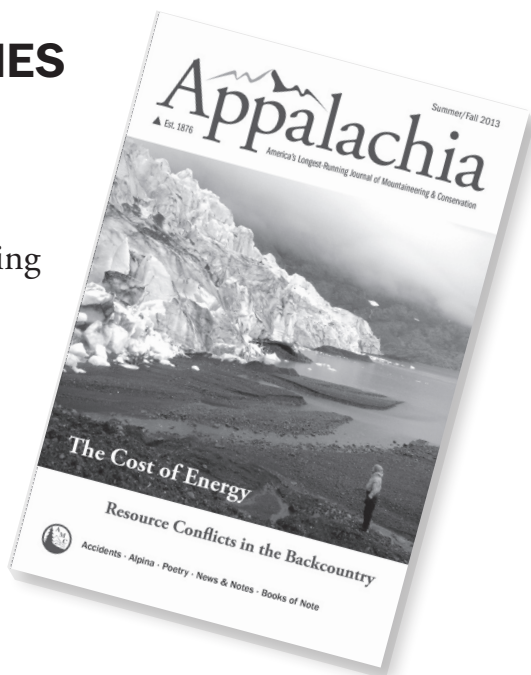
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