Walking

by Henry David Thoreau

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 an 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 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 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 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, nowadays, 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 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,
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.

To come down to my own experience, my companion and I, for I sometimes have a
companion, take pleasure in fancying ourselves knights of a new, or rather an old,
order—not Equestrians or Chevaliers, not Ritters or Riders, but Walkers, a still more
ancient and honorable class, I trust. The Chivalric and heroic spirit which once
belonged to the Rider seems now to reside in, or perchance to have subsided into,
the Walker—not the Knight, but Walker, Errant. He is a sort of fourth estate, outside
of Church and State and People.

We have felt that we almost alone hereabouts practiced this noble art; though, to tell
the truth, at least if their own assertions are to be received, most of my townsmen
would fain walk sometimes, as I do, but they cannot. No wealth can buy the requisite
leisure, freedom, and independence which are the capital in this profession. It comes
only by the grace of God. It requires a direct dispensation from Heaven to become a
walker. You must be born into the family of the Walkers. Ambulator nascitur, non fit.
Some of my townsmen, it is true, can remember and have described to me some
walks which they took ten years ago, in which they were so blessed as to lose
themselves for half an hour in the woods; but I know very well that they have
confined themselves to the highway ever since, whatever pretensions they may make
to belong to this select class. No doubt they were elevated for a moment as by the
reminiscence of a previous state of existence, when even they were foresters and
outlaws.

"When he came to grene wode,
    In a mery mornynge,
There he herde the notes small
    Of byrdes mery synynge.

"It is ferre gone, sayd Robyn,
    That I was last here;
Me Lyste a lytell for to shote
    At the donne dere."

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 shopkeepers 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.
I, who cannot stay in my chamber for a single day without acquiring some rust, and
when sometimes I have stolen forth for a walk at the eleventh hour, or four o'clock in
the afternoon, too late to redeem the day, when the shades of night were already
beginning to be mingled with the daylight, have felt as if I had committed some sin
to be atoned for,—I confess that I am astonished at the power of endurance, to say
nothing of the moral insensitivity, of my neighbors who confine themselves to shops
and offices the whole day for weeks and months, aye, and years almost together. I
know not what manner of stuff they are of—sitting there now at three o'clock in the
afternoon, as if it were three o'clock in the morning. Bonaparte may talk of the three-
o'clock-in-the-morning courage, but it is nothing to the courage which can sit down
cheerfully at this hour in the afternoon over against one's self whom you have known
all the morning, to starve out a garrison to whom you are bound by such strong ties
of sympathy. I wonder that about this time, or say between four and five o'clock in
the afternoon, too late for the morning papers and too early for the evening ones,
there is not a general explosion heard up and down the street, scattering a legion of
antiquated and house-bred notions and whims to the four winds for an airing—and so
the evil cure itself.

How womankind, who are confined to the house still more than men, stand it I do
not know; but I have ground to suspect that most of them do not STAND it at all.
When, early in a summer afternoon, we have been shaking the dust of the village
from the skirts of our garments, making haste past those houses with purely Doric or
Gothic fronts, which have such an air of repose about them, my companion whispers
that probably about these times their occupants are all gone to bed. Then it is that I
appreciate the beauty and the glory of architecture, which itself never turns in, but
forever stands out and erect, keeping watch over the slumberers.

No doubt temperament, and, above all, age, have a good deal to do with it. As a man
grows older, his ability to sit still and follow indoor occupations increases. He grows
vespertinal in his habits as the evening of life approaches, till at last he comes forth
only just before sundown, and gets all the walk that he requires in half an hour.

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 dumbbells for his
health, when those springs are bubbling up in far-off pastures unsought by him!

Moreover, you must walk like a camel, which is said to be the only beast which
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."

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 Platanes," where they took subdiales ambulationes in porticos 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 for so many years I have walked almost every day, 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 farmhouse which I had not seen before is sometimes as good as the dominions of the King of Dahomey. 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 threescore years and ten of human life. It will never become quite familiar to you.

Nowadays 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 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 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 woodside. 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 traveler 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.

The village is the place to which the roads tend, a sort of expansion of the highway, 
as a lake of a river. It is the body of which roads are the arms and legs—a trivial or 
quadrivial place, the thoroughfare and ordinary of travelers. The word is from the 
Latin villa which together with via, a way, or more anciently ved and vella, Varro 
Derives from veho, to carry, because the villa is the place to and from which things 
are carried. They who got their living by teaming were said villaturum facere. 
Hence, too, the Latin word villis and our vile, also villain. This suggests what kind of 
degeneracy villagers are liable to. They are wayworn by the travel that goes by and 
over them, without traveling themselves.

Some do not walk at all; others walk in the highways; a few walk across lots. Roads 
are made for horses and men of business. I do not travel in them much, 
comparatively, because I am not in a hurry to get to any tavern or grocery or livery-
stable or depot to which they lead. I am a good horse to travel, but not from choice a 
roadster. The landscape-painter uses the figures of men to mark a road. He would 
not make that use of my figure. I walk out into a nature such as the old prophets and 
poets, Meno, Moses, Homer, Chaucer, walked in. You may name it America, but it is 
not America; neither Americus Vespuceus, nor Columbus, nor the rest were the 
discoverers of it. There is a truer amount of it in mythology than in any history of 
America, so called, that I have seen.

However, there are a few old roads that may be trodden with profit, as if they led 
somewhere now that they are nearly discontinued. There is the Old Marlborough 
Road, which does not go to Marlborough now, me- thinks, unless that is 
Marlborough where it carries me. I am the bolder to speak of it here, because I
presume that there are one or two such roads in every town.

THE OLD MARLBOROUGH ROAD

Where they once dug for money,
But never found any;
Where sometimes Martial Miles
Singly files,
And Elijah Wood,
I fear for no good:
No other man,
Save Elisha Dugan--
O man of wild habits,
Partridges and rabbits
Who hast no cares
Only to set snares,
Who liv'st all alone,
Close to the bone
And where life is sweetest
Constantly eatest.
When the spring stirs my blood
With the instinct to travel,
I can get enough gravel
On the Old Marlborough Road.
Nobody repairs it,
For nobody wears it;
It is a living way,
As the Christians say.
Not many there be
Who enter therein,
Only the guests of the
Irishman Quin.
What is it, what is it
But a direction out there,
And the bare possibility
Of going somewhere?
Great guide-boards of stone,
But travelers none;
Cenotaphs of the towns
Named on their crowns.
It is worth going to see

Where you MIGHT be.
What king
Did the thing,
I am still wondering;
Set up how or when,
By what selectmen,
Gourgas or Lee,
Clark or Darby?
They’re a great endeavor
To be something forever;
Blank tablets of stone,
Where a traveler might groan,
And in one sentence
Grave all that is known
Which another might read,
In his extreme need.
I know one or two
Lines that would do,
Literature that might stand
All over the land
Which a man could remember
Till next December,
And read again in the spring,
After the thawing.
If with fancy unfurled
You leave your abode,
You may go round the world
By the Old Marlborough Road.

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.