Taking the Long Road

Walking is not just for transportation, it can also lead to personal transformation

The Lookout Trail in Gros Morne National Park in Newfoundland.

BY DAWN MATHESON
PHOTOGRAPHY • ANDREW BEVERIDGE

It's 6 a.m.; I'm broken, beaten and desperately making plans to hightail it out of this present misery. Trouble is, I can't feel my feet. They've caught fire at the bottom of my sleeping bag.

Yesterday was hell. I'd walked 24 kilometres on day one of my pilgrimage — the famous one, Spain's Camino de Santiago, logged by millions since Roman times, 260,000 pilgrims last year alone.

Not that 24 kilometres is ***that*** many, I would have higher klicks in days to come, but these were kilometres trudged through snow, sleet and fog, in famine and fatigue with a loose bowel, ascending 1,400 metres above sea level on soggy, blistered feet carrying the load of a too heavy backpack.

I'd been warned. Jeanine, the loud Basque with the bulbous nose — the French lady who had kindly served garlic soup at the St Jean Pied de Port ***refugio*** (sleeping quarters for pilgrims) on the eve of my 31-day, 800-kilometre walk over road and trail to the cathedral of Santiago de Compostela in northwest Spain — had advised us to avoid the mountain pass.

There was a snowstorm coming. There would be no visibility.

Kind, silly hostess. She hadn't realized I had been training for this back in Guelph, climbing up the Cork Street hill to Church of Our Lady. Besides, the Belgian next to me at soup said there would be truck spray on the road. These were new hiking pants. I'd take the pass.

The yellow arrows guiding pilgrims along the way aren't much use in whiteout conditions. Of course I got lost, ran out of water and wept for my mommy at kilometre 10.

By day six, this upset was long behind me (yes, I hated days one through five). Walking then eating soup, walking then popping blisters, walking then thinking, walking then laundry, walking then wine, walking then writing, walking then sleeping. Repeat.

By just putting one foot in front of the other, never did a bird's song elicit such enchantment, a fellow human's shoulder slump arouse such compassion, an idea seem so perfectly obvious. The "long walk" turned out to be a beautiful way to get to know myself and the world around me. I was hooked.

Though rooted in Christian tradition, only about 40 per cent of pilgrims on Spain's Camino claim to walk in Christian faith. So, if not walking in devotion or worship to Christ, what are the other 60 per cent walking for?

Approaching 50, Guelphite Wendy Powell wanted to mark the transition with a significant undertaking. "I'd heard that when you walk the Camino, you don't come back the same person you left." In 2012, she went off to Spain.

In going on a pilgrimage, one is meant to leave behind the complications of home life to become a walker, to simplify, to abandon the familiar, sometimes even one's own identity. For me, since I walked mostly with those who spoke Spanish, I became the translation of my name, "Aurora." In 2001, Dawn stayed back in Canada; Aurora walked in Spain. Cheryl Strayed, the author of the bestseller "Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail" was Cheryl Nyland before choosing a new name for herself the year she embarked on her 1,770-kilometre hike.

In the spring of 2015, after losing to Lloyd Longfield in the nomination for Guelph's federal Liberal candidacy, Powell, for a second time, felt the pull of the long walk. "I needed to reboot. It was a real hit when I lost, and I needed to reflect on everything I had back in Guelph. It gave me so much time to think about my life. After the walk, I was ready to come home again."

Walking — not merely the unconsidered transport between point A and B, but walking for personal transformation, or at least as a way to shift a state of consciousness — is an idea as old as the hills. ***Solvitur ambulando***, a phrase sometimes invoked today by "thru-hikers" (long-distance trail hikers), is Latin, meaning "it is solved by walking."

Solo journeys on foot, like the Australian Aboriginal Walkabout, represent a rite of passage made to mark the spiritual and traditional transition into manhood. Conscious or intentional walking has been used as meditation for centuries. When we really slow things down, our breath and steps anchor us, says Tibetan Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh in his book "Peace is Every Step." "Walk as if you are kissing the earth with your feet," he writes.

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>
> STEPHEN HENIGHAN, AUTHOR AND UNIVERSITY OF GUELPH PROFESSOR

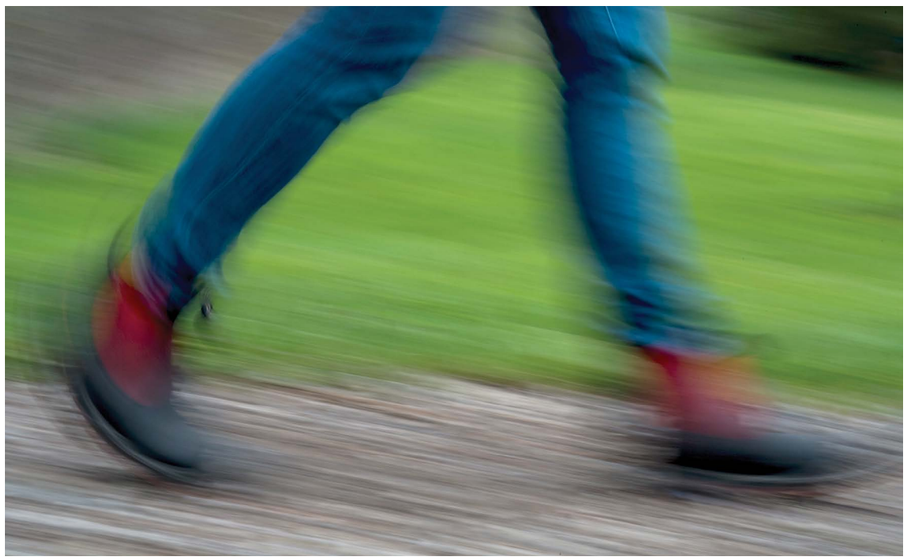
Canada's Inuit have long practised a custom of getting anger out by walking in a straight line across the landscape. A stick marks the point at which the anger is conquered, bearing witness to the strength or length of the rage. Last year, Guelph's Homewood Health Centre participated in the Canadian Mental Health Association's Mood Walks initiative for much the same purpose — the proven benefits of walking on one's mental health. Guelph Hiking Trail Club led 15 hikes with walkers from Homewood in 2015 and, just this past May, Homewood staff and clients were trained as certified hike leaders so they can guide their own.

Walking in a natural environment has an additional impact on both cognition and disposition. Naturalist, philosopher and poet Henry David Thoreau famously begins his essay on walking with, "I wish to speak a word for Nature, for absolute freedom and wildness."

When Guelphite Sheila O'Reilly walked the Camino in 2014, everything slowed down. "I became highly attuned and developed a heightened appreciation of the beauty in my surroundings like never before." O'Reilly began to read poetry after walking. A line in Raymond Souster's poem "All This Slow Afternoon" perfectly described O'Reilly's sense of oneness she felt with the natural world while walking in it: "Enough in such hours to be simply alive; I will take death tomorrow without bitterness."

"It was the simplicity of walking that gave me this insight," said O'Reilly.

Walking for walking's sake may be an old practice but, in contemporary society, it is a radical one. The three prerequisites for walking are, for many, in short supply: time, space and an able body. Covering the shortest distance in the least amount of time is valued most in modern society. We have lost unstructured time for it is unmeasured productivity. Cities are built for cars and "rapid transit." Private space is overtaking public space. Rural and wild lands are getting hard to find and to access.



Increasingly, we live in bodies that are more likely to incur injury by being too stationary than through movement. (I'm a culprit myself — neck and shoulder strain from sitting on the computer nine hours a day.)

Rebecca Solnit, in her wonderful tome on walking, "Wanderlust: A History of Walking," equates the rhythm of walking with the rhythm of thinking. "I like walking because it is slow, and I suspect that the mind, like the feet, works at about three miles an hour. If this is so, then modern life is moving faster than the speed of thought or thoughtfulness."

"I'm pretty well the only one my age I know who walks," said Ben Hohner, 24, a former Guelphite who works as a web designer in Toronto. Hohner walks four to five hours (sometimes up to eight hours) two to three times a week, going nowhere in particular. "It's freedom," said Hohner. "It helps me think, and I like to look around at things. Today, I found the biggest alley cat I've ever seen. It was awesome."

Nearly 50 years his senior, Nancy Steele, too, walks hours on end every day for the past 30 years throughout Guelph neighbourhoods with the intention of learning about the world around her. "Rarely do I ever miss. The only thing that will ever keep me in is an ice storm."

Lynn Broughton's urban meanderings have become her job. She conducts cultural and walking food tours of downtown Guelph with her company, Taste deTours. "I love the grit and grime of cities. There is beauty here only accessible from street level as a pedestrian," says Broughton, who sees herself as somewhat of a modern-day "flâneur," the aimless wanderer of the street from 19th-century Paris depicted in the poems of Charles Baudelaire.

Author Charles Dickens is in the same camp. He attributes the inspiration for his novels to his night walks on the streets of London brought on by insomnia. "If I couldn't walk fast and far, I should explode and perish."

Like Dickens, many of the world's greatest artists, thinkers and writers throughout history have credited the act of walking as integral to their creativity. For Charles Darwin, it was his "Sandwalk," a strip of land he leased from his neighbour. Over the years, he wore out a "thinking path" still walked today by tourists in the hopes of summoning up brilliant ideas for themselves.

"All truly great thoughts are conceived by walking," said the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. "Before I compose a piece," said Erik Satie, the composer, "I walk around it several times, accompanied by myself."

"My mind only works with my legs," said French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Much like Guelph writer and English professor Stephen Henighan. "Walking is essential to my creative process (and my sanity). I write early in the mornings and carry my writing around with me the rest of the day. … When I start walking by myself, my writing floats to the surface and, usually without my even trying, the sentences that I will write the next morning begin to take shape in my mind."

For her final credit of her undergraduate degree at York University, Guelph artist Christina Kingsbury spent 10 weeks walking the Bruce Trail from Niagara to Tobermory with the intention of creating art inspired by walking. "My goal was to respond creatively to my body in motion and to my environment." Even more, Kingsbury says she approached walking itself as an art practice and a performance, as creativity in motion.

On my final day of my Camino, after 31 days of walking, my feet had become leather. I chose to walk my last 15 kilometres barefoot to get as close as possible to the earth and to play the part of the pilgrim as best I could. There is something in suffering and struggle that makes the journey so much more transformative. When I finally arrived at the grand Obradoiro square, facing the exuberant façade of the cathedral at Santiago with a pile of other pilgrims, I must admit, I felt let down. This was it? What now? But, of course, the journey continues. The road itself is the destination; walking it is the way.

It's been 15 years since I walked the Camino. I still take walks several times a week, thanks mostly to the Guelph Hiking Trail Club's extensive volunteer-maintained trails, including the Rail Trail from Guelph to Acton, which I walked the full length solo to mark my 40th birthday. I get in the forest and trek the Bruce Trail and hike out at Guelph Lake, plus I night owl, like Dickens, wandering through dark neighbourhoods and on downtown streets, yet it's been some time since I had embarked on a truly "long walk."

In researching this article, I learned that the 127-kilometre Guelph to Goderich Rail Trail is nearly 90 per cent complete. After 25 years in the planning, the route has just a few detours due to bridges out and some overgrown stretches. Heck, the world's longest network of recreational trails, the TransCanada, loops right at the end of my road! I'm feeling the pull.

There is magic in the simple repetitive ritual of putting one foot in front of the other. It's where mind, body, spirit and the outside world all line up.

TAKE A WALK

CAMINO DE SANTIAGO
santiago-compostela.net
BRUCE TRAIL CONSERVANCY
brucetrail.org
TRANSCANADA TRAIL
tctrail.ca
GUELPH HIKING TRAIL CLUB
guelphhiking.com
GUELPH TO GODERICH RAIL TRAIL
g2grailtrail.com

Writer Dawn Matheson ties her boots near the Ignatius Jesuit Centre in Guelph.

Guelph's Pilgrimage

In 2002, Guelph inaugurated its own pilgrimage when a group of walkers journeyed by foot from Ignatius Jesuit Centre to the Jesuit Martyrs' Shrine in Midland. It is an eight-day, 188-kilometre walk in August. It is predominantly Catholic but open to everybody.

"We don't ask people to profess their religious preference," says Rev. Roger Yaworski, executive director at Ignatius. "All are welcome." At 74, this August will mark his ninth time on a pilgrimage where he oversees most of the day-to-day spiritual programming for the group. "We had two Buddhists walk it once. People come from the States, Saskatchewan, Belgium. I just took a call from a grad student in Scotland."

Last year, 73 registered for the walk with the oldest at age 84. Hundreds of fellow pilgrims from the Hamilton and Toronto dioceses join the Guelph group en route. "The Toronto Polish Church is made up of predominantly families. You can meet a 12-year-old and she'll tell you she's walked it 10 times. People are pushing strollers and camping with grandparents from year to year."

Word is, the Toronto group is keen to market the Midland pilgrimage as a Canadian Camino. "There is a key difference between Spain and Guelph's pilgrimage though," says Yaworski. "The emphasis on our walk is community. You don't walk for yourself here. We all walk together as one, at four kilometres per hour, 20 kilometres, on average, per day." The highly ritualistic schedule includes mass, group prayers, nightly sacred sharing circle, verse and hymn.

At walk's end, pilgrims fill out an anonymous questionnaire on their experience. "After walking, layers of my façade peeled away," shared one walker. "There were times when I quietly wept, but mostly I wept with joy. Especially during the foot soak." (In addition to setting up tents, transporting luggage and making meals, volunteers set up a circle of chairs with basins of warm water and Epsom salts for weary walkers at day's end.)

GUELPH WALKING PILGRIMAGE 2016
August 6 to 13
Registration deadline: July 22
ignatiusguelph.ca/programs/walking-pilgrimage