

Still Steps by Lindy Schneider

To walk is to journey. To walk is to chart the life you seek to live. Footfall after footfall, steadily towards the moment where you turn around and walk back the way you came. Every culture has the metaphor of the pilgrimage running through its fabric and in this world we live in today, it is no different. We are pilgrims in daily life, each cycle of sun and moon takes us closer to the source. On a heroine's journey we unfold a story that can never be replicated. To walk is to rehearse a life informed by spirit, nature, the very essence of our souls. And to walk in nature is one of the most essential actions we can take as we step the pilgrimage of life.

Walking in nature is an act of mindfulness. The steady rhythm of the heart matches each step you take, a sense of unison is created that allows the heart and mind to inform one another in new ways. The space around you becomes the space in your head, the waving pathway the path of your heart.

Walking is essential to awareness. Walking in nature is the way we come to understand our deeper world, to garner a sense of the quality of our lives and to connect deeply with the underlying nature of life in all its glory. When we walk regularly we embrace a practice that leads to clarity. Walking stills our racing thoughts and allows them to return to the vast oceans of our interiors creating a space for new ideas to crescendo from the depths of our subconscious.

We walk away from ourselves as we walk into ourselves. It saves our souls and it soothes the questions that cannot be answered. What cannot be solved by the ruminations of the mind can be handed with grace to the seasons, the tides and the trees, and nature herself will speak to us in a way that reveals the truth of our bones and clear a path through thickets we thought impenetrable.

To walk is to allow the senses time to breathe. The green world that is the domain of our travels quells our need for more, as we rest our bodies against a cool wedge of space where all is well and complete. We do not need to race, we do not need to arrive. We simply need to companion the tall trunks of grey ghost that mark our way and let a new compass guide our feet. Nature is complete in her offering to us. We need for nothing when we experience a fullness of the soul that transcends the glorified needs of a modern world.

If we cannot walk in a real space in real time, then we can walk in the heart, mindfully travelling spaces we access from our interior world, the place of our most ancient memories. In this way, we can walk anywhere we please, in any time we please, and I can be on a trek to Machu Picchu as much as I am the aqueduct that snakes the base of Mt Donna Buang, the mountain where I live. My steps take me along the deep curves of the mountain's belly. My breath captures the purest essence of new life released in a deep exhale by the manna gums. There is no moment in time that carries us in our aliveness as much as the moment when our in-breath is nature's out-breath. The blood coursing in our veins is the same blood that feeds the rivers, bathing tree roots and matter, sustaining flora and fauna as it mingles with the clay of our bodies and returns to its source.

A world of information exists in our walking worlds. Signs from nature, metaphors of our being, all the animals, all the birds, trees and hills conspire to enrich our souls and draw aside the veil that separates us from the true order of things. Nature tells us all we need to know, holds the answer to any challenge we might encounter. As we step into stillness and resonate with our land, barefoot and humble is all we ever need to be to fulfil our visions and lead our deepest lives.

Walking has saved me so many times I feel her as my closest friend. She is a balm for hurt, a rest from difficulty, a blessing and an elixir of truth. I feel I would be quite mad if not for walking the paths that etch their way through this pocket of the green world I occupy. Through the seasons, my

feet leave soft shadows, first in dust, then fallen leaf, then snow that melts into the small fronds of green life reaching for the Spring sun. In this constant change I am witness to all of existence, and my place in the world is as simple as my hand.

Walking with mindful intention and attention is a sacred act; sometimes it is fruitful to share this space with another pilgrim – someone who also realises the path. When I walk with my friend Linda something vast opens up between us, an energy that does not feel present in other ways we share time. Our creative spirits seem to expand and mingle among the trees and ferns, and we feed from nature and each other with a vigour that can only be described as joyful and intense. Our friendship is deepened with each walk we take, our silences more profound, our support of one another's creative pursuits, and beauty as women, a direct expression of our encounters together. A walk with Linda is a creative tonic, our ideas blossom and we step away at the end with new visions and projects. I didn't plan for this friendship, or for the walking, to be such a significant part of how we exist together - it bore itself out of a need to find expression for the soul's purpose. We have walked for years – through all of life's ebbs and flows; through miscarriages; through pregnancies and through children; through change and challenge; and through love and loss. When I miss her presence in my life, I can go to the trees and hear them whisper her name. If I look to the horizon I can bear witness to the lines of my friend's face etched in the vista that is nature's record of time and tide. My love ones all exist as trees. We all carry the forest deep within our flesh and stand together with the inherent and random beauty of rocks and trees in harmonious discord. Symbiotic, complementary, complete.

There is juice in walking, a succulence of experience that has its origins in the purest form of pleasure. Nature never needs to be reminded of her pleasure. She is perpetually delighted in her offspring, forever present to the magnificence of creation. When we have nature as our friend, we connect to a wisdom that is only describable in poetry and ecstasy. The act of bringing walking and nature into one can be both saviour and inspirer.

When Linda and I wander the paths of our natural world, our talk is only of real things, our longings and confessions. We understand and encourage, there is no space for idle chatter or empty words. Nature quietly urges that we be real, just as She is. Nature opens us up to the understanding that our words contain the symbols of a world that is constantly under creation. And we are infinitely woven into the cycles of growth and decay, even as our words spill into the soil and cease to be.

There was a time when my step quickened for no reason. Others moved quickly through landscapes and I was curious to know why. I wondered, *If I gained so much from walking these paths, what would I discover if I moved quickly in this land?* I started to run. I ran to see if I might see more. I ran to feel the rush of wind redden my cheeks. I ran to arrive somewhere else in new record times. I ran because sometimes it felt good to feel numb. I did not need to think so much. I could be unconscious yet in the world. But my feet broke the ground. My steps became thunder. I stopped looking to my east, my west, my north and my south and instead became focused on the piece of earth my next step would dent. Instead of admiring the twisted roots and rocky outcrops of my path, I began to fear the terrain for its random ability to make me stumble and fall at any moment. The friends I had made in the natural world now heard me coming and no longer waited pathside to greet me. I felt the seasons differently and I lost my connection to 'tree time' the sense of space and wonder that is not related to the ticking of humankind's clock. Although I was alone, I felt I was running with the masses, a marathon of life to be endured not enjoyed. I ran away from myself more than I ran to any kind of destination. My muscles hurt immediately, but my heart grew painful in ways that were remote and insidious.

I ran until nature urged me to stop. 'Where are you going?' she said. 'I am right here.' Lying vulnerable on the earth, I looked to the sky through tree ferns and dappled light. Tendrils of green, new shoots of life wrapped their tiny fronds about my limbs and infused my weary bones with the alchemy of sun, air and soil. My gasps slowed to breaths, long cool gum-scented breaths, and my restlessness gave itself over to the reflections of the mountain on my river. When I rose from my leafy bed, I once more had the light step of one who feels her place in all things.

A walking union with nature embraces stillness and tiny steps, clear vision and an ability to peer beyond the surface or ordinary things. A walk in nature is the source of healing for all our sufferings. As we gather momentum, we step into a place where life can flow as the river. It is a life that is free of plans and deadlines, a life of meanderings into and through the valleys and peaks that define us. A walk in nature is the balm for our hurts, and the energy we need for a day of sweet life. Nature provides us with many trails to wander and holds as gently as we carve out new paths to discover all the places we can call home. Without a sign-posted destination we are free to be wherever we are, free to survey and notice what is important and let the voice of the heart rise above the din of life. Birdsong becomes windsong becomes my song.

We walk out in a direction to which we feel led, but invariably we return to the moment we left behind – richer for the experience and elevated in some way so that life takes on the quality of a sacred spiral. We step forward but we are always deeply supported by the place of our birth, our soul's roots in the earth, branches skywards to the heavens of time. When you walk life, you do not leave behind who you really are, but simply shed by the roadside that which no longer serves you to return to the earth. You gather the fruits of your being along the way and share your bounty with those who walk alongside you.

Nature is simple.

A simple walk is a simple life.

One is the other and one is all.

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