Thoughts Out of Season
Occasional Reviews and Notes
Of Mutual Interest
Compiled by Tim Froward

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Author Berry Lopez[1]

No Matter Socks and Shoes

[Not everyone can walk. That capacity may be denied to us at birth, or we may lose our cherished mobility over time, with age, accident or poor health. Walking is, for our purposes now - and beyond, a metaphor for being; for being in a place and time. For those of us who arrive there it is a gift received. We should share this gift no matter socks and shoes.]

Barry Lopez, nature writer extraordinaire, once remarked that one of the first things he did when arriving in a new landscape was lace up his shoes and have a stroll. But Mr. Lopez didn't walk the way most of us walk. Open ended, without rush, bird books in his suitcase and his entire body tuned like the stiffened ears of an arctic fox, he felt the dirt crunch under his toes, ran his fingers through dew on the leaves, noticed what's growing in the nooks, listened to what birds were yapping and — I'm speculating here on this last one — welcomed notes of sunset-mud up his nostrils, as from a '96 bottle of Chateau Margaux.

Study after study after study has proved what we feel, intuitively, in our gut: Walking is good for us. Beneficial for our joints and muscles; astute at relieving tension, reducing anxiety and depression; a boon to creativity, likely; slows the aging process, maybe; excellent at prying our screens from our face, definitely. Shane O'Mara, a professor of experimental brain research in Dublin, has called walking a "superpower," claiming that walking, and only walking, unlocks specific parts of our brains, places that bequeath happiness and health.

[1] Barry Holstun Lopez (January 6, 1945 – December 25, 2020) was an American author, essayist, nature writer, and fiction writer whose work is known for its humanitarian and environmental concerns. In a career spanning over 50 years, he visited more than 80 countries, and wrote extensively about distant and exotic landscapes. Lopez attended the University of Notre Dame, earning undergraduate and graduate degrees there in 1966 and 1968. He drifted away from the Catholicism of his youth. However, daily prayer remained ever important to him as a continuous, respectful attendance to the presence of the Divine.

I have no beef with any of this, but I believe we have it backward. We are asking what we can get out of a walk, rather than what a walk can get out of us. This might seem like a small distinction, a matter of semantics. But when we begin to think of walking in terms of the latter, we change the way we navigate and experience — literally and figuratively — the world around us.

To understand the difference, we need to ask more about what Mr. Lopez explained is the purpose of all this sensory input. “The purpose of such attentiveness is to gain intimacy, to rid yourself of assumption,” he wrote in his essay “A Literature of Place.”

When I first read that line, I’ll be honest, I didn’t get it. What does intimacy have to do with assumption? And what does walking have to do with intimacy? And what does “assumption” mean?

I pulled out the dictionary. “Assumption” is a knot of a word, meaning both an act of taking on, such as a new job, or taking control. It also means you believe something to be such: “I assumed that was the case.” When you give the word “assumption” a kick, the shell cracks and you can see the yolk of possession. Ownership. Responsibility. Taking on. Anticipation. Judgment.

I came to truly understood the power of Mr. Lopez’s observation when I was on the edge of something. I’m a climber, skier and trail runner, but each time I went out, I felt oddly disconnected to those very same places I pined after. I sought them feverishly, yet when I arrived, I felt like a foreigner, a squatter even, never at home or at peace. The mountains had lost their joy. In truth, I was lonely, and a bit desperate.

And so, I tried ways of throwing myself into the wild. I ran deep into the Rocky Mountains while on 24-hour fasts, used exhaustion (as well as some mind-altering drugs) to loosen the grip of reality. I put myself in front of the most gorgeous places on earth. I climbed frozen waterfalls and remote desert towers. I ran at night, during hurricanes, and bobbed face up, in the middle of lakes, in the middle of the night, in my birthday suit. I was searching and searching — for what, I did not know — and in the process I was failing and failing, powerless to pry the lid and taste nature’s mysterium tremendum.

Then I read Mr. Lopez and he called me out.

I was neither attentive nor meeting the wild on its own terms. I was merely trying to pry something from the wild for my own benefit. Which means I wasn’t seeing the wild at all.

I started walking around my neighborhood more. Compared with those wild places, this was unremarkable: pacing down a sidewalk of 10-year-old maples, across cracked squares of pavement, alongside a ditch bursting with spring runoff. But I turned it into a practice of sensation. I listened. I felt. And in a remarkable way, the neighborhood came alive — alive in a way that those mountaintops or the wildflower-strewn rivulet in the valley below never had. My senses, once atrophied, came to life, and with them, so did the world around me.

My experience, which took me from the rugged wild to a tamer, humbler landscape outside my front door, went against the grain of a few hundred years of traditional nature writing, but so be it.

My strolls taught me that walking truly is a discipline and an art. The discipline of removing assumption — thinking that something is going to be beautiful does as much damage to a place as thinking it will be

ugly. It is an art of attention. There was no satori, or breakthrough moment. I had the kind of experience young lovers do when, after hanging out every day for two months, it finally occurs to them they're in love. They smile, but they can't remember the precise moment their love began.

I realized the main thing preventing a more intimate connection to the natural world was concept — the mysterious filters our mind lodges between us and the world, at every turn, at every second, in just about every interaction. Concepts can be good: We get the concept of "mortal danger" when a car is hurtling toward us. But concepts, also a form of assumption, can neuter experience because pure sensations become impure when we judge them. Concepts are what we deploy when we ask what we can get out of a walk, rather than the opposite.

Researchers who study our brain activity while we walk use the term "automaticity" to describe how our body behaves on a stroll. Automaticity is defined as "the ability of the nervous system to successfully coordinate movement with minimal use of attention-demanding executive control resources."

We should leverage the gift of walking to stop thinking and start doing, apparently, what walking is asking us to do — pay attention to the stuff of place, the place itself. To arrive at that point takes time, and discipline, but when it does, delight bubbles up, a "praising of the mysterious and tender touching we are so often in the midst of," according to Ross Gay, poet and author of "The Book of Delights." Place comes to life, any place, from the life we gave it, from attentiveness.

When I walk, I say, "Now I'm walking." I ring a bell in my mind to get prepared. It doesn't matter if I'm going to the store or for a lunchtime stroll to catch a glimpse of a sexy tree — I know I'm walking. I breathe. I swipe left on everything that tries to lodge itself between me and the world. Pebbles crunch underfoot. Leaves smile in my eyes. Sounds emanate from bottomless wells. The world gets younger, exalted. I see, smell, hear and feel things I didn't before. It's not profound, not magic, but it is impossible to tie a ribbon around.

Not everyone can walk. That capacity may be denied to us at birth, or we can lose mobility over time. But walking is, in the end, a metaphor for being, a place and time — a place-time — gifted to us.

We could all use that gift.[2]

[2] Sanzaro, Francis (2022, Sept, 16). The Next Walk You Take Could Change Your Life. *New York Times Company, Kindle Edition*, Most Emailed. This article is quoted in it's entirety. Francis Sanzaro is the author of "Zen of the Wild: A Philosophy for Nature," "Society Elsewhere: Why the Gravest Threat to Humanity Will Come From Within," and other books. Mr. Sanzaro is a climber, a mountain athlete and the author of "Zen of the Wild: A Philosophy for Nature."