

Essay

WALKING and where it leads

Chapter 2

MY SECRET LIFE: Ten Tools for Transformation

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Walking Off My Anger

The summer after my junior year in high school, I got my first job, at the local hospital. Alone in a room with manual typewriter, table, chair and big round clock on the wall, I was to reformat a thick nursing manual eight hours a day, five days a week. Each morning I would buy two packs of Wrigley's gum in the hospital gift shop. When the minute hand on the clock hit twelve, I would stop, unwrap a new stick of gum and pop it in my mouth. Gum was both my way of keeping time and a reward for enduring another hour of tedium.

At 10:15 AM and 2:30 PM I would go to the basement cafeteria for my 15-minute break, and at noon, for one hour lunch. Everybody sat around listlessly smoking and drinking coffee. They talked about what they wanted to do for vacation, or how they were too tired to go on one. We all hated Mondays, and couldn't wait for TGIF.

By the end of eight hours my naturally fiery energy was so bottled up that I was furious. Is this what adults do? Is this what it means to be an adult? I made a vow to myself then and there: I would never live my life like that. Never spend my life working at something I hated, waiting for “time off.”

Looking back on this now, I am amazed at the strength of my silent assessment of adult life and my determination to live differently. The passion of this stance didn't seem in character with my otherwise obedient personality. Being preoccupied with Death, I was not much given to thinking about Life.

I kept my vow. Not once, since that time, have I been a full-time wage slave, trading my valuable time, talent and energy just for money. People think I'm lucky. They don't realize that my feeling of repulsion at this kind of death-in-life was so strong as a 16-year-old, that it set me on a different course altogether.

That summer after work, I would walk the two miles home, burning off steam. Burning off my fury at thinking about what it meant to “become an adult.” By the time I got home I felt better. And what is unusual here, *I was consciously aware that walking home from work made me feel better.*

From then on, walking became something I did whenever I wanted to feel better. No matter what the problem was, walking would help me iron it out. I am 54 years old now, and since I was 16 I have walked between three and five miles each day. No matter what the weather. No matter what my schedule. Walking is a priority.

As a professional astrologer, I would ask depressed clients about their exercise patterns, and advocate walking. I would tell them, “walking is my shrink.” They would laugh. “But I'm serious!” I would say. “Because I walk every single day, my energy does not get stuck.”

Like an increasing number of holistic practitioners, I see most disease patterns as originating in stagnant energy, so that the original flow within and among body, mind and spirit becomes distorted or shut off. A part of the self begins to separate out — in my case it was my anger, which had no outlet — and sucks energy from the whole. This energy drain is then experienced as lassitude, boredom — and ultimately, depression.

Boredom is a signal that something needs to change. And yet, when one is depressed, it takes extra effort to make that change. The more stuck the energy, the more its tendency to remain stuck. And vice versa. The more we move, the greater our tendency to remain in motion. In order to break the spell of the stuckness, there has to be strong internal or external motivation. Luckily, I *noticed* how walking helped, and so became internally motivated to help myself feel better by walking. That is how I discovered that walking was therapeutic.

I don't think that anyone who briskly walks at least a few miles on a daily basis can become seriously depressed. Walking intensifies breathing. Deep breathing oxygenates and energizes the tissues of the entire body/mind. A good workout on a daily basis is the best kind of medical insurance.

Walking and Self-Remembering

As a college freshman at Dominican College in San Rafael, California, I began to walk the lovely winding roads on weekends in the beautiful, wooded Marin hills. The sun dappling through eucalyptus trees and spreading oaks warmed my heart. The intense lime green of spring grasses and leaves excited me like a lover. I treasured those walks. They were something I conceived and executed alone. They were entirely mine. As my life was mine. I was away from home, on my own, feeling excited and expectant. Moving through space expanded my view of time. What lay ahead? What could I look forward to?

I loved to watch the campus below receding as I gained height and distance. Finding my dorm window from the hilltop, I would mentally project myself back there in that room, obsessively underlining Augustine's *Confessions*, or longing for my high school boy friend — Dick was thousands of miles away at Yale — amazed at how petty my usual concerns seemed from the top of the hill.

Years later, when embroiled in some particularly sticky emotional stuff, I learned to project myself mentally to the top of a mountain, or a cloud, in order to get distance on things — and counseled others to do the same. In this way I began to cultivate awareness of two points of view — simultaneously. I was both in the situation, and not of it; both participating fully in experience, while also objectively seeing myself there, as an impartial witness. The Russian mathematician Ouspensky (following the philosopher Gurdjieff) called this practice “self-remembering.”

“Wherever you are in your life, whatever you are doing,” I recall Ouspensky saying in one of his books, “Stop. Just stop. Notice yourself. Notice what you are doing. Notice that it is *you* who is doing it.”

Most people are “mechanical,” he said. By which he meant that they are reactive. It is as if they are being pulled by strings from the outside, like automata, and have no inner core from which to move. He advocated “self-remembering” as a powerful technique for building an authentic inner core.

I read this when I was 27 years old, fresh out of my first marriage, a loveless situation that I had endured for more than six years. I was excited to be alive, and yet feeling utterly incapable of responding to life. Ouspensky's books became one of many lifelines helping to bridge the gap those six years had created between my personality-for-others and whatever it was that lay underneath. I knew something did. I was determined to find out.

Back then, I began to practice self-remembering on my daily walks through the cobbled streets of Cambridge, Massachusetts, bumping along the bricked surfaces with my little boys, one sitting in the stroller, one standing on the ledge behind. “Aha, there you are, you are *you!*” I would say internally, as I noticed myself gripping the smooth metal handle, or stepping with my left foot, then my right. “You are *you!*” — as I noted the color of the stop light, or listened to my child’s question.

Despite having two small children, I continued my practice of daily walking. Sean and Colin had been bundled inside the old buggy from the time each was one week old, walking, walking, up one street and down the other. Every day, rain or shine, snow or sleet. Nothing stopped us from getting out. The alternative would have been battering, child abuse. By this time, I was so furious and so frustrated in life that I was screaming continuously on the inside, and there were times I turned on our small cat, throwing it against the wall. I knew that if it were not the cat, it would be the children. Walking took the edge off, but it didn’t solve the problem.

Years before I had figured out that I didn’t want to work as a slave for money; now I was recognizing that as a wife and mother I was working as a slave, for no money. So while I call walking a tool for transformation, during those years in my twenties I walked to survive. Walking helped me live through that time and inflict a minimum of damage to both myself and others.

Walking and Smiling

I discovered something else while walking with the children on the streets of Cambridge, which, over time, would actually teach me how to thrive. I remember the moment clearly. I was striding briskly along, as usual, and happened to pass a tiny, frail old woman, tottering carefully on the sidewalk with her cane. I slowed down in order not to scare her, and then, smiled, to reassure her that I would not knock her down. The old

woman looked startled at my smile — and then smiled back! Her smile was like the sun breaking through clouds after a long period of rain. It warmed me inside. Then I *noticed* that her smile made me feel warm inside. That in smiling, we were connecting, no matter how brief. Our connection lifted my mood from what had become an increasingly morbid introspection. From then on I made it a point to look in the eyes of those I passed on the street, and smile.

One day, striding along by myself, I noticed that my fingers were typing into the air a certain sequence, over and over again. I focused on what they were “saying”: “I” (middle finger on right hand) “a” (little finger on left hand) “m” (forefinger on right hand) “a” (little finger on left hand) “m” (forefinger on right hand) “e” (third finger on left hand), “s” “s” (right finger on left hand, twice). “I – am – a – mess” . . . *I am a mess!* That was the first time I realized that I had been typing that phrase into the air. As the days went on, I noticed how often my fingers went automatically into that “typing” sequence while walking, and wondered for how long they had been doing so.

This was my introduction to the ways of self-sabotage (though it would be many years before I could really focus on it). So, while I was learning how to smile consciously, thus lifting my mood at will, as well as connecting, however briefly, with others, I was also riddled with unconscious undercurrents that were continuously undermining me.

Contemplating My Life

When I was 30 years old I found myself in Marin again, this time as a teacher at New College of California, an experimental college. It had been twelve years since I had last walked there. The hills were the same, the trees and grasses and breathtaking views and green were the same, and yet I was different. I had real experience under my belt now, and that had changed me. How? I wondered. What does it mean to “have lived through” something?

One year later, right before school began in September, I was abruptly fired from my position. They told me I was “too experimental” for that experimental college. I have only dim recall of the terrible months that followed. I do know that each day I dragged myself out to walk, shivering in the cold fog and rain. The fog outside reflected my inner condition. On the one hand, being fired had shocked me into numbness; on the other hand I knew that if I was to go forward, I had to make sense of what had happened. Now I really had my life to contemplate. Here I was, thirty years old, and my budding career as a college teacher was over! What regular college would hire me when an experimental college had fired me?

During this time I was also introduced in a very real way to the idea of relativity in perception. The same hills I had walked both when I was 17, then at 29, and now at 30, looked entirely different. The vistas which seemed to open to infinity when very young had turned grey and sodden. Looking into the woods, I no longer saw sunlight dappling leaves. I saw the tangled chaos of my own confusion.

After a few months I moved to Mendocino County, seeking refuge by walking the cliffs above the ocean, the mysterious whispers of ancient forests. As usual I walked miles each day. The fresh humiliation of my firing gradually began to fade — or, I realize now, it sunk down into the unconscious, only to awaken, with a start, years later.

Dream Comes True!

After another six months, I moved again, back to my old home town, Twin Falls, Idaho, to marry my high school boyfriend. Like in a fairy tale, finally, after 12 long years apart, during which we had each endured difficult marriages to others, Dick and I came together. Our dream had come true!

Each day I walked around the square mile of farmland on the edge of town. On the same roads along which I had once galloped my horse, as a young girl. I felt free then,

free as a bird. Now, despite tearful happiness in my emotional reunion with Dick, I longed to gallop again. Each day, walking that first mile, I would feel unaccountably low, confused. Why am I so frustrated, when I am so happy finally getting together with my true love? What am I doing here in my hometown? Why am I on this planet? Who am I? Then, hips and thighs opening to the future, I would feel the rush of energy as I hit my stride. As I had as a child, once again I was awestruck by my own smallness in the vastness of desert sky. The world was utterly open-ended, infinite. Yet I was walking an exact, straight, foursquare grid, caught like a bird in a cage. I told my new husband I felt like a bird that had landed on his branches to rest. Two years later, with his reluctant permission, I flew off.

Walking in the Tetons

Now, living in the mountains of western Wyoming, I take my pick of literally hundreds of places to walk, every day. In early morning or late afternoon in summer I walk along the Gros Ventre river near my yurt in Kelly. When working in Jackson, I walk up a trail into Cache Creek Canyon just outside town, or I hike to the top of Snow King mountain. On weekends, I might hike trails in the Tetons, or walk the road to the warm springs, two miles north of Kelly. In winter I cross country ski, a particularly aerobic form of walking. When I first moved here, 14 years ago, my lungs weren't as strong as they are now. It feels as if I have more energy for walking every year I'm here, and yet, as usual, the walks continue to mutate in their meaning.

The energy of the Tetons is intense, crystalline, electromagnetic. Many people speak of how they were forced into confronting their "stuff" when they moved here, that these mountains wouldn't let them do anything else. The same is true for me. When I moved to Jackson I was a peace activist, networking the tri-state area of Wyoming, Idaho and Montana for a publication for peace activists that I had begun with another woman during the years when Reagan was calling the MX missile "Peacekeeper," and the Soviet Union "the evil empire." My walks, like my whole life, during those days, were more like

forced marches. I had a job to do. I had to save the world. And nobody was buying it. No matter how forcefully I argued against the 50,000 nuclear missiles the U.S. had pointed against others, nobody seemed to be listening. Time after time, as I spoke to small groups in various towns, I would watch their eyes glaze over. The further they receded from my speech, the more furious I became. What was wrong with these people? Don't they know that the world is about to blow up?

My secret preoccupation of childhood was now front and center, and had been ever since I read Jonathan Schell's moving series, "Fate of the Earth," in the New Yorker, in December, 1981. Schell broke the conspiracy of silence I had reluctantly maintained for 40 years. Finally, it was time. Time to speak the unspeakable. Time to turn the tide before it was too late.

And nobody was listening.

The difficulty I had in holding people's attention in my public lectures was compounded by near-constant quarreling among the all-volunteer staff of the magazine, as well as turf battles with other activist organizations. I raged at the hypocrisy between our message of peace and our own petty little wars.

At some point the truth dawned on me. I was a *violent* peace activist. I, who was so determined to create peace, had been fighting the whole world! The horror of that recognition was shocking and absolute. I immediately stopped my involvement in the publication I had founded, and moved from the town of Jackson to a small yurt in a compound within the village of Kelly, directly across the valley from the Grand Teton itself. For four months in the winter of 1983-84, I sat in front of the firebox and stared into the fire, contemplating my life. Seeing the mental and emotional violence in it, all the way through.

Wracked by guilt over my own part in the warlike atmosphere that prevails, I began to investigate my life. Determined to dismantle the conditioning which had created violence within me, I wanted to go back to the beginning, to leave no stone unturned, to start all over again.

I thought this investigation would take a year or two, at most. HA! My probe into the origins of the wars within my own psyche took seven years. For those seven years I was preoccupied with my own inner life, what had formed me. Though I was working as an astrologer, and though I had plenty of friends and good times, my main work was on this inner level, and I spent upwards of eight hours a day sifting through memory, tracking the causes of war within myself.

Walking and Breathing

One of my main techniques for healing during those years was a certain type of breathing I would do during daily walks. Early on, in this process, I was struck by the differential between the exquisite natural beauty of my environment and how awful I felt inside. Outside of me was this glorious world, and inside me was hell. Gradually, I learned to consciously breathe in that glory, that wonderfully pure mountain air, and to just as consciously breathe out what felt like noxious gases seeping from a black tarry mass inside my solar plexus. The sense of awfulness was so great that it felt like a huge heavy stone was lodged inside my stomach. I literally couldn't stomach it anymore. Whatever "it" was, it was indigestible. I had to get rid of it. How? By breathing.

For several years, during those terrible times, every day when I went out for my walk I would begin this pattern of conscious breathing. Breathing in the beauty and loveliness and purity of the natural world and breathing out the ugliness and the blackness inside. During this period I would walk until the inbreath felt equal in quality to the outbreath, until the awful gaseous residue of that day had been released and my breathing returned to a state of equilibrium. I found this technique to be of enormous

benefit in my work to release the toxic matter that had been buried all those years, and which, during my early- to middle 40s, was bubbling to the surface with a vengeance. It meant that each day, during my walks, simply by breathing with conscious intent — take in the clarity, let go of chaos — I could release a tiny bit of what had held me prisoner of hatred and anger for so long.

Toward the end of those seven years I found myself in relationship with a man who was emotionally tied to his ex-wife. Every three weeks he would drive seven hours to visit his children and sleep in the same bed with her (“for the sake of the family!” he would vow . . . “we don’t *do* anything!”) So every three weeks, like clockwork, I felt abandoned. And of course he spent holidays with them.

During this time I had proudly considered walking to be my daily meditation, the hour or two when I could get away from it all and return, refreshed. What I was actually doing was using my daily walks to obsess about my triangle with this man and his ex-wife. I was hating them both, and constantly thinking about their relationship. In my imagination I would move them, like pawns in my own game, into a different kind of relationship so I could have him to myself.

It was quite a shock when I woke up to this fact, one day, while out walking on the road in the National Elk Refuge near Jackson. All of a sudden I realized that I was completely oblivious to my surroundings. I hadn’t noticed the earth, the air, the ravens, the muddy potholes, the elk in the distance. I was marching like a soldier, fast, furious, the whole time seeing the figures I had projected out in front of me. They were the objects of my wrath, and I was moving them this way and that, like marionettes. Instead of walking to clear my brain, I was obsessing every step of the way.

That Thanksgiving, as usual, I spent alone, filled with dark visions of him contentedly eating turkey with his “ex-“ (?) and family. Feeling particularly sorry for myself, I decided to walk a greater distance that day. I would go to a place I had never walked, in hopes of changing my mood.

The plan worked. I found myself going up a small mountain I had never climbed before, following the scat and tracks of mountain sheep. The Tetons shimmered in the distance, and the higher I climbed, the more the scales seemed to fall from my eyes. I was feeling light and strong and free. It was as if I had broken a spell. The years of continuous rejection had made me feel as if I had no value as a human being. Now, walking up the mountain, I said to myself, “He should be grateful to have me in his life!” And then, realizing he did not, turned the tables: “My God then he doesn’t deserve me. I’m worth more than that!”

That was the beginning of a shift. At first it seemed to come and go, and there were times I would backtrack. My challenge was to integrate the insights of the peak with the dailiness of the valley. The following week, walking in town, I again found myself obsessing. This time I was self-remembering so successfully that I actually saw my obsessing in much closer, more analytic terms. I realized that by continuously *thinking* about these two people, I was ignoring the way I was *feeling*. Furthermore, I realized that in order to let go of the obsession about them, I would have to allow this feeling — and honor it, embrace it. That I would have to “take back the projection” and move the charge that it carried down into my body, to the place where the pain was located. I knew where it would be located even before I could feel it, in my solar-plexus and heart area. As usual.

From that day on, I used my walks to practice breaking the addiction to my obsession with this man and his ex-wife. As soon as I noticed myself thinking about them, I would remember myself and stop, and take back the thought, and move the charge that it carried down into my body, directly into the pain. This was an extraordinarily difficult thing to do. My entire body/mind system was so accustomed to dealing with pain by rushing from the body into the mind, which generated certain thoughts that would then get immediately projected into what I thought was the outside world, that I never realized that *the origin of the thought was the pain*.

I had hit upon an aspect of how my body/mind had been hard-wired. I was now probing the foundation of how my entire way of life was set up to work.

Only slightly less difficult was moving that strong, slippery charge down into my body, into the pain, the hard stony mass that I felt in my solar-plexus area. On the one hand, I had to keep the charge from immediately cathecting back out into “the world” in the form of judgments against this man and his ex-wife, and on the other hand I had to move it down into my body, and keep it there.

If I succeeded in that, then, while still walking, I would breathe in and out, deeply into the solar plexus. At first, it was as if the stony mass would not accept the breath, so dense was the pain, so concentrated. And at first, I could only focus on the pain momentarily, without the charge shooting back up into the mind, its projections.

Gradually, as the days went by, I found myself able to let go of the thought and move into the feeling more and more easily. The hard stone in my chest and stomach began to accept the breath, the carrier of light energy, and to expand and become less dense.

The finale to this drama of letting go was a dream, which I will tell in the chapter on dreams. What I want to emphasize here was just how difficult, how subtle, and how profound this change was, this task that I set for myself on my daily walks. Who would have known, seeing a woman striding down the road, that she was engaged in alchemy?

Walking on the Earth

One day in early summer, I hiked to the top of Shadow Mountain — directly across from the Tetons — and lay down in a luxurious green meadow splashed with the bloom of yellow dock. A long rainy spring had brought the earth to life and made me hungry for the sun. After a while I removed my clothes. Lying there naked in the sun’s warmth, I

felt drowsy, sensuous, tickled by the breeze, by little sprigs of sage and grass. Closing my eyes, I drifted to the murmuring of ravens courting in the trees. Slowly, languorously, I opened to a sensation of love and gratitude so overwhelming that I turned on my stomach and made love to the Earth.

It feels as if I now have a contract with the natural world: Earth will give me her beauty, and I will give her my love. Like many others, I feel the Earth's sorrow at Her abandonment by the human race, and wish to return to her something of what She so constantly and faithfully gives me. My conscious breathing of before has been joined with conscious seeing. As I gaze out over the extraordinary land which I am so fortunate to live within, I consciously express love for what peace activist physician Helen Caldicott first called "This Beautiful Earth." I allow my eyes to go soft, consciously filling them with love, caressing the river to my left, the sage and prairie grasses underfoot, the clump of shimmering aspens to my right, the wheeling hawk, the clouds and sun and wind overhead.

As often as possible I walk by rivers, and this year, especially, I have been fascinated by the changes a river undergoes as it rises and falls with spring runoff. The Gros Ventre river near my home moved its channel entirely this year, gouging out its western banks to bedrock. There are now huge new gravel islands in the middle of the river. Uprooted trees from the torrents a few months ago lie on their sides, havens for birds and other small life. I walk and I walk, and I walk again. Noticing my breath. Noticing my vision. Walking, thanking my lover, Earth.

May we all walk in such beauty.