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“What Is Saving Your Life Right Now?”

Hygge, Walking, Nature

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I want to begin with a question—a question sometimes asked in spiritual direction circles without any one simple unchanging answer, but rather answers that shift over time and in different seasons of our lives. One way of working skillfully with such open-ended questions is to periodically ask them of yourself with genuine curiosity, allowing enough silence and space to listen for an answer. You may be surprised by what emerges.

Here’s the question: **“What is saving your life right now?”** Not what is saving your life for a “next world,” but rather, What is giving you life right now, in real-time, in this world? What people, places, or practices regularly make you feel grateful, connected, energized—more fully alive? (You can also flip the question over, to consider what people, places, and practices are regularly making you feel ungrateful, alienated, and drained of the energy you need to discern what you might want to let go of.)

During this pandemic, one simple practice that has been saving my life is getting outside of the house at some point every day, to either walk or run. Brief outdoor exercise can seem like a small thing, but science has shown how big a difference it can make. And I would also like to invite us to spend a little time reflecting on the spiritual practice of walking.

But here at the beginning, let me offer a caveat. It is important to acknowledge that not all people are able to walk. Although we’re going to be exploring some

significant historical examples of walking, allow me to underscore that the heart of this matter does not require bipedal locomotion; it's all about moving through the world in a contemplative, open-minded, open-hearted way. And moving can be done by *rolling*, walking, or in whatever way it is easiest for you to move through the world.

In addition, I should add that I intentionally scheduled this sermon—about the importance of getting outside—near the time of the Winter Solstice. Tomorrow is the longest, darkest night, at the end of an extraordinarily challenging year. As the days grow colder and darker, many of us need a reminder about how lifesaving—or at least how life-enhancing—a simple trip outdoors can be.

I'd also like to give a quick shoutout to a wintertime spiritual practice that might be saving your life right now, especially during these increasingly dark cold days. It's a spiritual practice many of you may have heard of, called *hygge* (pronounced “huh-guh”) which originates from Denmark and Norway. *Hygge* means the intentional cultivation of coziness, comfort, and contentment. The word's etymology derives from the same root word that gives us the English word “hug.” So, practicing *hygge* often involves surrounding yourself with whatever feels to you like a warm embrace, such as, perhaps:

- wearing an oversized sweater, thick socks, and a giant blanket,
- curling up with a good book in front of glowing candles, or a fire, and
- sipping your hot beverage of choice out of your favorite mug,

So if walking is not your jam, there's always *hygge*. (Or try some walking, followed by some *hygge*!]

Now since we've been talking about *hygge*, a word associated most strongly with Denmark, let me offer a quote from the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard about the lifesaving power of walking. As Shane O'Mara highlights in his book, *In Praise of Walking: A New Scientific Exploration* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2020): “Every day I walk myself into a state of well-being and walk away from every illness. I have walked myself into my best thoughts, and I know of no thought so burdensome that one cannot walk away from it” (146). There's a lot of truth and experience packed in that quote, and I have often found it helpful to take a problem for a walk, even if for just around the block. Getting up and moving creates time, space, and flow for free

association, increasing the possibility for previously unconsidered possibilities to emerge.

And as the saying goes, **“Movement is medicine.”** Numerous scientific studies correlate walking with:

improved creativity, improved mood, and the general sharpening of our thinking. Periods of aerobic exercise after learning can enhance and improve recall.... Reliable, regular, aerobic exercise can produce new cells in the hippocampus, the part of the brain that supports learning and memory. Regular exercise also stimulates production of an important molecule that assists in brain plasticity. (O’Mara 11-12)

Even knowing all the positive benefits of movement, sometimes getting out the front door can be easier said than done. I will readily admit, as many of you know, that winter is not my favorite season. I’m happy for those of you who love the cold, but my favorite season is summer—which I know some of you hate! Fair enough. My point is that even if cold or rain or snow are not your favorites, I’ve found that, for me, it really makes a difference if I take at least a twenty minute walk each day. I set a ten minute timer, head out the door in whichever direction, then turn around when the alarm sounds. Even that small amount of outdoor activity can make a huge difference to my heart, mind, body, and spirit. And that (insight is not limited to my personal experience: multiple scientific studies have shown that **twenty minutes of exercise improves metabolism and boosts your mood for as long as 12 hours afterward** ([Tom Rath 62](#))).

At the other end of the spectrum (from twenty minutes of daily walking being the “sweet spot” for deriving significant benefit from relatively little exertion, the most famous walker in our Unitarian Universalist tradition is our Transcendentalist forebear, Henry David Thoreau, who wrote in his essay titled “Walking” 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 woods and over the hills and fields, absolutely free from all worldly engagement** ([Thoreau 245](#))). Thoreau’s level of commitment to walking rivals that of beloved poet Mary Oliver—whose life and legacy

we explored in April; Oliver was famous for whole days spent wandering in the woods of Provincetown, Massachusetts.

Along these lines, Thoreau wrote in his journal in 1851 that:

the moment my legs begin to move, my thoughts begin to flow, as if I had given vent to the stream at the lower end and consequently new fountains flowed into it at the upper. A thousand rills [flow in a small stream] which have their rise in the sources of thought burst forth and fertilize my brain.... Only when we are in action is the circulation perfect. The writing which consists with habitual sitting is mechanical, wooden, dull to read.

For both Thoreau and Oliver, long meandering walks were not merely about exercise (247). Walking was also about connecting with nature—what our UU Seventh Principle calls the “interdependent web of all existence”—giving one’s heart, mind, and spirit the time and space to free-associate, open to inspiration, creativity, and new ideas.

Our focus on walking also gives me occasion to share the story of another of history’s greatest—but lesser-known—walkers, Emma Gatewood. To tell you more, Torbjorn Ekelund’s book, *In Praise of Paths: Walking Through Time and Nature* (Greystone Books, 2020) takes us back sixty-five years to 1955, when Emma was already sixty-seven years old. She had never previously lived anywhere other than her hometown of Gallia County, Ohio. One fateful day, she hitchhiked sixty-five miles to Charleston, West Virginia; caught a flight to Atlanta, Georgia; bought a ticket for an hour-long bus ride to the small town of Jasper, Georgia; and finally went by taxi for another thirty minutes to Mount Oglethorpe, Georgia, where she walked to the southern starting point of the Appalachian trail (AT). Her goal was to walk the 2,190 miles to Mount Katahdin in Maine (Ekelund 145-146).

Now, if I were attempting a “through hike” of the Appalachian trail today, I would do some serious shopping at REI before heading out of town! But that’s not what Emma Gatewood did almost seven decades ago:

She threw her denim slip bag over her shoulder and started to hike. She had neither a tent, nor a map, nor a sleeping bag. She was not prepared for the trek and had never done any basic training. For food she took only canned Vienna sausages, raisins, and peanuts.

There were a lot of things that women didn't usually do in the 1950s in the U.S., and walking alone through the wilderness was one of them. (146)

By no means do I recommend taking her approach to hiking the AT, but I bring up her story because she offers us such a clear example of someone who had a powerful sense—in a way far more extreme than most of us will ever experience—that what could "save her life right now" was *walking*.

To give you just a brief sketch of her back story—what motivated her decision—Gatewood was in an abusive marriage for thirty years—until her husband was killed in a bar fight. She then waited until the final few of her eleven children were old enough to allow her to move out of the house. Then she started walking in early May in Georgia (146). Four months later, in September, she summited Mount Katahdin in Maine:

She had achieved what no one had believed possible for a woman her age.... She also wore out six pairs of cotton shoes. When her hike was over, she decide to do it again, and once she had finished it a second time, she decided to hike the Appalachian Trail a third time, which no one before had ever done.... [That final hike was in 1963 when she was 75.]

Emma Gatewood died [ten years later in 1973 at the age of 85]. Her daughter later said that her mother had learned about the Appalachian Trail from a magazine article...and said: **"If those men can do it, I can do it too"** (147-148)

Emma Gatewood is an absolute legend. And if you are curious to learn more, a good book about her is [Grandma Gatewood's Walk: The Inspiring Story of the Woman Who Saved the Appalachian Trail](#) by Ben Montgomery (2016).

I will also emphasize again that you definitely don't have to be anything like that extreme in your walking goals. Remember that twenty-minutes of movement a day is the "sweet spot" that can make a significant difference to your enjoyment and your health. And even just spending a little time outside is better than nothing—perhaps just journeying around the block.

If it might help to have some company for your journey, remember that we have our regular First Friday Hikes here at UUCF which started up recently. More details are available in our weekly e-newsletter. (The next hike will be at midday on Friday, January 1—one way to start the new year right. Details will be in next week’s e-newsletter.)

As I begin to move to my conclusion, I will say that reflecting on the topic of walking this past week reminded me of one of my favorite quotes from Ram Dass: **“We’re all just walking each other home.”** There’s something deep and simple and true about that statement. And I am grateful to be this journey with all of you.

As each of us continues to discern how we feel led to walk, roll, or otherwise move through the world in this season of our lives, I will close for now by inviting you to hear one of my favorite poems titled “Walking Toward Morning” by my colleague The Rev. Victoria Safford, minister of White Bear UU in Minnesota. As you listen, I invite you to open yourselves—mind, heart, body, and spirit—to the people, places, and practices that can save your life right now. Notice if there is a word or phrase from this poem that particularly resonates with you during this season of your life:

“You know we do it every day.
Every morning we go out blinking
 into the glare of our freedom,
 into the wilderness of work and the world,
 making maps as we go,
 looking for some signs that we’re on the right path.
And on some good days
 we walk right out of our oppressions,
 those things that press us down from the outside
 or (as often) from the inside;
we shake off the shackles of
 fear,
 prejudice,
 timidity,
 closed-mindedness,
 selfishness,

self-righteousness and
claim our freedom outright,
terrifying as it is –
our freedom to be human and humane.

Every morning, every day we leave our houses,
not knowing if it will be for the last time, and
we decide

what we'll take with us,
what we'll carry;
how much integrity,
how much truth telling,
how much compassion
(in case we meet someone along the way who may need

some)

how much arrogance,
how much anger,
how much humor,
how much willingness
to change or to be changed,
to grow and to be grown.
How much faith and hope,
how much love and gratitude –

you pack these with
your lunch and medications,
your date book and your papers.

Every day, we
gather what we think we'll need,
pick up what we love and all that we so far believe,
put on our history,
shoulder our experience and memory,
take inventory of our blessings, and

we start walking toward morning.