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an excerpt of

Walking Distance

I stand on a swath of grassy plain, the hum of Falls Road traffic fading. A haze of gold and purple shimmers in the afternoon sun. Nine students and I pause at the edge of what looks like a small prairie. Bare as a vacant lot, this patch collapses the words *field trip* to just that—a trip to a field.

For perhaps ten years, I have been walking in the autumn with my Loyola College nature writing classes and Bill Hilgartner, who teaches ecology at Friends School of Baltimore and Johns Hopkins University. The awestruck accounts my own young children had given at the dinner table of their outings with Dr. Hilgartner were akin to those recounted in the journals of early American writers like the Quaker William Bartram, who traveled in the southern United States and found crocodiles and wood rats and gnats and swamp algae “so great a curiosity to me.” Now, each September Bill and I and my young writers walk at Bare Hills nature preserve, just north of the Baltimore city line. From year to year, the land doesn’t much change, nor does Bill, who with just a few silver flecks in his golden hair is as dedicated as ever to the Bare Hills preserve—and to its preservation.

Walking with Bill, my students and I chart uncharted land, and I wonder about the literal linkage of walking to writing. To walk is to be grounded, to look down step by step at the earth as often as one looks out to the far horizons or up to the heavens. For my young writers, walking in wilderness seems a change of pace, but might we think of this walk not as sidebar or diversion but as actual pedagogy? If through some odd elision *paidos* (child) and *pedis*

(foot) collided, would the leading of the child that is pedagogy be best served by a leading of the child on foot?

Walking distance. I watch my students, single file, trudging behind Bill along the path that now runs westward through the woodland. Though few Americans walk as a way of life, and the term really should be archaic, “walking distance” is still widely used to measure space more precisely than “not very far” or “walkable” or even “an hour’s walk from here.” It is shorthand for shorter distances.

We rely now on other modes of transport for journeys of any substantial distance, but not because we are incapable of walking them. Our ancestors crossed the Bering Straits. Johnny Appleseed walked his way across Ohio. The Cherokee walked the Trail of Tears. John Muir walked one thousand miles to the sea.

Hikers still spend months on the Appalachian Trail, but mostly we don’t walk. We have linked distance to speed—and presumed that speed matters. For those who choose to walk, speed cannot be an issue: power-walking revs us up and dawdling slows us down, but walking has a natural pace that allows us to go for a long enough time to reach our destination without wearing down or out. Unless oceans intervene, we can, if need be, walk day after day after day. Any place on a continent can be within “walking distance.”

But it isn’t. More and more, the tensions of time rush us. Today, I want my students to let “within walking distance” throw them back to considerations of space, not pace. As we pass through the forest, I ponder why we should prefer walking. Solitude. Exercise. Economics. Egalitarianism, perhaps: everyone can walk.

But are there other advantages to traversing land by foot that travel by horse, by carriage, by car, or even by skis or snowshoes would not offer? Or, to put it another way, what have we lost by not walking anymore?