

For a Walk : Experientially Learning a Lost Way of Life

Scott Watson

“When you put your body in the mother nature, you sure feel the greatness of the god creation. It embrace you tenderly and wash your agony you picked up in yourself off by the grand view and the connoted wisdom.”

[The above passage appears on the back face of an inexpensive backpack Morie bought at *Daiei*, which is like a K-Mart in America.]

Athletes, models, those socially self-conscious of their appearance, and still others, for health reasons, are already body conscious, but their concerns are areas already mapped out by others inside our heads and have as their impetus always something in a world, something professional, financial, something social and cultural.

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Walking is not mentioned on any tourist pamphlet I read. But for a few chopped phrases in small print informing a reader that someplace is a five-minute walk from a train station or a bus stop, there is no information for a person on foot. A journey by foot is pretty much a lost art, a lost way of life, a lost experience, a forgotten subject.

These days the few there are who live on foot a while are out to prove something, to make a journey for the record, as a feat. For example there was the fellow who walked from the northernmost tip of Hokkaido to the southernmost tip of Kyushuu. There’s nothing wrong with that person’s need for demonstration, but there is more, much more, beyond.

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My mother, when I am seventeen and newly a licensed automobile driver, holds out her car keys when she asks me to go on an errand for her to a nearby convenience store. To buy milk. “Here ; take the car,” she says. She means it in a congratulatory way, like now that I’m old enough I don’t have to walk. The little store is only about ten minutes away on foot. It

makes me feel privileged, and it is as if I'd moved up in rank in our world's social hierarchy. Now I don't have to walk. Though I don't notice it walking is quietly being socially degraded to an undesirable activity.

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Gone is a sense of things arrived at on foot, of things come across only by walking, and gone is a dimension of spirit-heart that can grow only around a people who transport themselves by their own legs. We can't tell how life is by walking unless we walk. Walking makes things new.

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Rikuzen Takada. A grandma proprietress of an inn, which I walked some hours to get to, recommends a spot for me to visit that is only another twenty minutes up the road, she says. It is well before check-in time, so I follow her advice and continue on into the settling northeaster that had brought enough flooding along the coast to bring rail service to a halt. After twenty minutes the site is nowhere to be seen. Thirty minutes, still nothing. After an hour I stop at a farmhouse to ask : "it's still farther along this road." Two-and-a-half hours it takes to reach the mountain's peak. Michinoku's Hakone.

The city-run, folk-heritage site the inn's *obaa-san* [grandma] sent me off to see is closed today.

to see the earth through feet is
altogether
a different scene than pretty
ugly and
beautiful
get bodyful [*sic*]

raindrops on a road
everywhere is
everywhere.

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Close to a sea, waves inhale, exhale. Close to a body.

Keeping myself company. I read somewhere that those who've lost an arm or a leg still sense its presence. A phantom limb. I go on as if there's still a someone in a world that's me.

Another, more vivid me, a walking me in a walking life emerges. From where? It's a life that is filling and emptying with each step. A presence with an absence. Two for one.

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From a bus the postcard scenery calls, calls. On foot it is us; the land holds us, we are nameless entities with no destinations, no purpose. We are there, here, it; we are the territory.

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The town of Sanriku. The things kids find to do on a beach. For me this time it's an afternoon nap, repairing a house. It needs it. Red leaf clover growing next to evening primrose.

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Where's a place to eat? A stray cat come to a door unable to hunt on its own. What's it want but a meal, and to be left alone, and then be off.

Human society, like a menu opened: here again are the confrontations. Again it's a world of propositions we confront ourselves with. That's what happens when we stop. One big stop sign world. The tribes settled, come to a halt, things subsiding, a sediment, sedimentary, a world to work in, live in a past. Left with nothing to do but proposition ourselves. *buku-buku*, bubbling like something stewing.

Not that there is anything disgraceful or disdainful in sediment. These little farmhouses that have been with earth a while, faded, softly, soulfully, nestle into and are held near by the surrounding forested hills, bit by bit crumbling, inside weeping into soil—so much clay dried and cracking, wood pitted, rotting, changing, moving as stillness: who we are.

Wherever the land is not under cultivation things are being overrun by kudzu and many forms of mostly green out-of-the-ground renewal so it makes me wonder if there's such a thing as stoppage or if it's our wanting to bring things to a halt, a permanence, to make a recognizable surface, something to understand, that makes us see things as we do. Culturally predisposed.

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From Narugo head towards Yamagata.

Up into mountains towards another village. A place to stay is so important ; until moving on of course. Seasons come, seasons go. Receding scene, approaching scene. A forested upheaval that makes me aware of skin. Mountains breathe too, just as the sea does, only breathing here is so slow and deep it will not translate into something sensible to us, not unless we are attuned to such a slow, slow movement such as something going on ever so deeply within us, such a slow pulse.

Stripping into a stream's coolness, or even just sit naked alongside, eyeing the flow, feeling breeze on my skin .

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He turns out, this man I ask directions from in Japanese, to have a disability in English, which, the English, he doesn't need with me—just to answer my question how far to somewhere—but which he mispronounces just the same, distorts in many ways, which makes him incomprehensible, and gradually he moves into mixing English with his local mountain Japanese. A good man I guess, trying to be helpful. Sent into a dither by a world of reasons. Trying to play gracious host maybe and speak my language while it would be much simpler and more helpful to tell me in Japanese. He ends up driving me there in his van, a couple hundred yards down the road. “Japan is safe !” he calls out to me finally in Japanese as I'm leaving. “Not like America !” Is he afraid of me ?

Into the hills again. *Abu*, horseflies, swarm around me, stirred by my presence as well. As the trail descends towards a stream they are not there and as it goes up into the hills again there they are. Into their territory and out. In and out. They didn't bite me though. Because of my movement ? Along fields up in the hills, down to a ravine, along and crossing streams, then up again. Lost my way by misreading a sign. How long did it take along a path into a mountain that became unintelligible as it went deeper into that mountain ? Dangerous—earth underfoot unstable from the heavy rains, and a place to get footing narrowing into nowhere. Well, this can't be the trail, so have to go back to find the last marker. How can we figure out which way some of these signs are pointing ? Walk.

Come to an opening, take a breather, sweat dripping onto a rock (it's August and, though comparatively cool this year and overcast often, humidity is still high). Here newly again as

always with earth and sky. Is this love's ? Here there is no hierarchy. What's to compare but in and of the human made world left behind that is always in a past ? Here is beyond that, here is real. Is there a territory to it or even a possessive ? Or how could there even be a question in a mind, a quest, or a desire ?

Sweat, sweat, this forest air is putrid sweet.

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This part of the journey is along a highway. Now in the world it is the Obon holidays when Buddhists welcome the return of their ancestors from the land of the dead. This particular stretch of asphalt right now is only lightly traveled. It's late afternoon ; the sun is just on the mountains to the West. This is Yamagata land. Mountains and mountains. Green, green.

Along the road are dead worms, dead bees, dead dragonflies, dead cicada, dead grasses. Festive, it's *Obon* !

Tires on asphalt : how they howl. Engines roar. Can't hear myself listen. Grasshoppers don't seem to mind. They keep hopping. It's surprising what we learn to live with as we compliment ourselves about how wonderful is our quality of life. We can't hear. Which is why our pediatrician advised my parents to play a radio near where I slept : to get me used to unnatural noise. Did mom follow the doctor's advice ?

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Haguro. This particular mountain is sacred to a religion and there is a shamanist sect that still conducts rituals here. The religion owns the mountain ? Someone told me once that Shinto is the only religion through which you can speak to god directly in such a thing as a tree or a rock. Never do I wonder about such things as speaking to god, directly or indirectly. Not ever.

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This is an inn which lies within this Shinto shrine's compound. Returning from a hot bath to sprawl out on this floor, the way my skin wants to cling to the thick reed mat *tatami* flooring holds my attention for a while. Thoughts of "naked" festivals I've seen or heard of come to a joyfully tired mind. The place I live, Sendai, has one, but no one goes totally naked. There's one up in an Aomori village where the male participants are said to be fully in the buff. They walk or run in their nudity through a deeply snowed town's streets. In each case the partial or

total nakedness is legitimized by the fact that it is part of a religious observance.

Back in my William and Mary days one fine May evening many of us get in our heads to try “streaking” (running around naked in public) for the seemingly ungodly purpose of having been born. The mayor calls out the state police. The mayor had been telephoned by the university president who had been called by a campus security guard. We run all over the campus grounds, across its sunken gardens, into and out of the Christopher Wren building, stark naked board a campus shuttle bus, run through the halls of girls’ dormitories, circle the president’s house three times, whooping as we’d been taught Indians did (the university’s sports teams were formally called “The Indians” but are now “The Tribe”) and calling for the president and his wife to join us. They do not. We enter the college radio station and are interviewed in the flesh.

State police surround the campus to make sure our streaking doesn’t spill out onto the Duke of Gloucester Street and disturb the tourist-shoppers and diners being waited on by college kids wearing colonial period dress. Troopers in a phalanx await us, nightsticks braced across their bellies. We retreat, though a few among us are for trying to break through.

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The following morning the Haguro innkeeper surprises me. She has arranged for me to go along with two middle-aged women, also guests at the inn, by bus to a place where we would begin our ascent of the two remaining of the Three Sacred Mountains of Dewa. She no doubt is trying to be helpful, though I should be firm in saying I want to go it alone. It is my mistake, my weakness. Just say no. If I am truly firm, though, what is there in the world I would do for any long stretch? Maybe nothing. Write when I feel like it, wander when I feel like. No “profession” to make of it. Well, anyway, try to be flexible, try to make the best of my disability, my inability to be firm.

Gassan, Moon Mountain. As it turns out these two women have a schedule to keep, a bus to board late that afternoon and train to catch that evening. Not that we press or hurry. We stop for necessary breaks. Have a leisurely hot lunch—it’s cold up there, still snow in places even in mid summer and people skiing on those patches. The two women talk throughout most of the climb—“look at this, look at that . . . let’s take a picture here . . . Mr. Watson, could you stand here please.” Comes with the territory. Towards the end talk winds down. Grace comes with exhaustion.

longed for that lullaby nap
soothed in crags high smoothly worn
valley below stretching green soft inhaling
a bone-warmed mountainous to lie in,
live, but no,
half-baked human I am too
a bus to catch
what it is I guess to *sleep*.

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Yudono. This night's inn is in another shrine's compound. A family across the hall from my room has an infant that wails and wails. That crying won't bother me, won't keep me awake, I hope ; not after this day's trek.

The room attendant tells me we have to keep our windows closed to keep insects out, since there are no screens. Nor is there air-conditioning. There is only something that looks like an air-conditioner sitting on the floor, set into a wall, but it's only a fan, and more than anything cool it is heat from the machine's motor that blows into my room. Not even heat will keep me from sleep. That is the hope.

Overly tired, need to calm myself. Try various relaxation techniques. Deep breathing is one ; solar plexus massage another. It feels as if I am still moving. In my mind there is nothing going on but motion, empty, purposeless motion, as I imagine this earth's movement through space might be. It is like being on this planet, being here where we really are.

On my stomach upon this small, thin futon bedding, arms, legs stretching out over its sides onto a *tatami* floor trying to absorb some coolness, from what's under me try to suck coolness through my pores. Hugging the floor like this, it occurs to me—I don't know why—that this planet is taking me for a ride and it came to me too that there is a connection between our bodies moving around on this planet, a motion our bodies themselves create from no consciously worked up will of our own, and the planet's movement. To wander. It occurs to me how everything is moving, is flowing, even mountains. Flowing with an inevitable destruction. It's as if these feelings, these flowings, are running through my body instead of existing in my head. Hmm. If I hadn't walked, if I hadn't had that experience, if I hadn't lived even for a short period a life on foot, if I hadn't done what I did would any of this have come to me ? I'll never fully know what all I do. I don't know. Sleep on it.