

## *Walking Meditation*



THE FIRST STEP WE TAKE UNAIDED is one of those epochal and extraordinary moments in a life when the individual's story seems suddenly to break through the surface of the mundane and tap into a reservoir of elemental happenings. From there come resonances which can re-ignite the sense of wonder so easily dulled by the routines of everyday existence. Walking shares with birth, our first smile, first word, first passionate kiss, with our mating and dying, a sense of communion with the ancient and totemic, a feeling of participation in something primal, which holds the promise of meaning beyond the horizons of our own lonely individual existences. The first unsteady moment of independent walking is, of course, an event that falls outside all but the most unusual of memories. Like conception, foetal existence, birth and babyhood, our first steps, for all their importance to us, happen beyond the territory of conscious recall. To find out about them we must ask or imagine, though there are a few fascinating cases where individuals claim direct knowledge of almost their entire lifespan. For the vast majority, though, these moments belong not to us but to our parents. We are nothing if not social creatures, dependent on others to hold safely in their memories crucial parts of our identity.

According to my mother, I took my first steps on the soft lush lawn of the secluded Irish garden that has seen three generations of our family come and go. My father's final crutch-assisted steps were taken by the roses which he planted, edging the lawn with exotic colours, and his unmet grandson first tottered upright here, as if gently mimicking old age's frailty. I sometimes imagine our footprints leaving trails like snails, and picture the garden glittering like glass or silver, its green obscured by a multitude of steps, our swirling tattoos

of movement finely dotted into the ground which bore us. Such marks would cluster deeply round the house and garden, marking out the territory of home. And, on the grand scale, mirroring this well-trodden place, the world seen from space would appear criss-crossed with steps, peppered with the spoor of our passing, bearing on it the multitude of tracks which our tribe has left in all its centuries of walking, marking out this shimmering blue-green planet as home.

The ability to walk upright is one of the key characteristics which separates us from our nearest evolutionary cousins. Looking at those charts which show how humans evolved from a chain of hunched and swarthy hominids — Australopithecus, Pithecanthropus, Neanderthal man and so on — our path follows a line of increasing uprightness, as if seeking out the posture of the walker. In the last frame, where *Homo sapiens* has finally emerged, naked, tall, unhairly, recognizable as us, it's as if we had stood up straight and walked away from hunched, uncertain beginnings, a long hatching from some unimaginable egg, slow progress from a string of crawling, crouching, scampering metamorphoses. What a weight of history has been carried forward on our steps! We may be clumsy beside the grace of a gazelle, slow when compared to the speed of a sabre-toothed tiger's spring, feeble if measured against the massive tread of dinosaurs or mammoths (or of elephants and rhinos), but our walking has out-paced them all. We have walked our way across the world and beyond it; our steps have led to civilisations, commerce, art, science, warfare.

Perhaps it is because of the burden of events which walking has borne that there is always something alluring about a footprint. Who has not been struck by a sense of curiosity and kinship — a desire to follow — when we stumble on a line of unknown footprints freshly made in the sand, snow or mud of some deserted place? Shod feet can stir our interest, but they lack something of the potency with which a barefoot trail seems so heavily imbued. In the naked footprint there is a symbol of our passing which holds within it the promise of a story. And have we not fed on stories since the beginning, clustering around campfires, passing books from hand to hand, watching

television? Our thirst for them is insatiable. Our storytellers' words pace through the incredible terrain of language, shadowing our actual walking, leaving tracks of our journeys, trivial and epic, as surely as our footprints mark our progress through the more tangible topography of the world. Reading is like following in someone else's steps, satisfying that deep-seated urge to follow, find, discover. Footprints are a kind of crude precursor of print, part of a natural, unrefined alphabet of symbols, childish pictograms through which we can leave our mark without resorting to the signature of letters. They have a magnetism that has the power to draw us. The fossilized footprints of our early ancestors, which have recently been discovered in Africa, prehistoric, indelible marks across a stretch of what, long ago, was lakeside mud, are like fragments of some proto-autobiography. In their shape and spacing they still hold something of the mystery and poignancy of a stranger's unseen passing. Walk beside them, match your own gait to theirs, and even the least imaginative of walkers will surely feel the ghost of a person and a sense of distant kinship. Who left these so familiar marks? We know nothing about them beyond the fact that their feet trod the same earth as we do and followed the paths we know so well: longing, wonder, fear, hurt, all the routes which humans follow however much their meanderings through the ages may seem to distance them from one another. Like hand imprints left on cave walls, footprints speak a universal sign language of human presence that we all can understand. They re-knot those sometimes forgotten blood-ties without which our story soon unravels into the cul-de-sac of mere self-centredness.

That walking provides a rich source of symbolism should not be surprising; meaning is bound to inhere in abundance in so fundamental and ancient a part of us. Although we are as adept at shaping metaphors out of our experience as we are at forging tools out of the raw material of nature, it is a more or less automatic process that tends to happen unconsciously. We form metaphors as unthinkingly as we put one foot before the other. Metaphors are the bones of language which give it the strength to carry so much flesh of meaning. Yet they solidify and fuse in secret, we are simply left with the

finished product. Like girders of sense holding up every habitation of meaning that we weave with our ceaseless babble, they are as integral a part of us as our vertebrae. Without the ability to compare that they afford, how could we withstand the endless hurricane of things, of happenings, which time ceaselessly bombards us with? Metaphors provide us with a kind of magical carapace, strong and flexible enough to cover almost any eventuality. Without them we would soon be overwhelmed by the sheer unknowability of everything around us. They play as important a part in our story as flint arrowheads, fire-drills and animal domestication.

George Steiner, whose writings offer so many insights into the operation of language, has suggested that metaphors are “new mappings of the world” which “reorganise our habitation of reality.” Yet, despite their revolutionary, innovative nature, they seem to come to us unbidden. Reach out the mind’s hand and they are there, ready-made, waiting at the core of consciousness. Who sees where they come from? Autumn in an old woman’s face, a life which seems as directionless as a twig caught in the little tugs and eddies of a puddle, ideas which pollinate the mind and bring thoughts to full fruition. Such mappings of the world seem simply to be there, waiting for us to lift them from the crammed shelves of possible comparison. Not surprisingly, given their normally secretive genesis, those rare occasions when we actually witness the birth of metaphor can make a deep impression on the mind. Witnessing their beginning is like watching an egg hatch, seeing the smooth bounds of known containment fracture and new unsuspected possibilities emerge.

No doubt the clutch of metaphors whose hatching I saw at first hand, and which gave rise to this nocturne, had lain in my mind for years in unnoticed incubation. I can’t claim to have been privy to their moment of conception or secret process of gestation. But their moment of birth happened in the full light of consciousness, suddenly, dramatically, triggered (or so at least it seemed) by three shouted words of command: “Keep in step!”

Henri-Frédéric Amiel, that most honest and meticulous of self-observers, has plotted the psyche’s shifting tides and seasons with a

cartographer's exactitude. In his *Journal Intime*, Amiel describes the practical psychology at which he is so expert as the attempt "to become a witness to one's own fugitive phenomena," to catch sight of and record all the fleeting nuances of inner being, the unseen processes of self. The extent of Amiel's quite astonishing act of witness is belied by the meagre published versions of his journal. The original manuscript runs to some seventeen thousand folio pages. I can lay no claim to offering evidence on such a scale. Instead, by looking at the birth of metaphor, let me turn practical psychologist in miniature and attempt a modest witnessing to one of the most fugitive of all our "fugitive phenomena." The task is made more difficult by the fact that the externally visible circumstances surrounding this event were loud, colourful and striking. Such externals cannot be ignored; but they must not be mistaken for anything more than context, background, milieu, the camouflage against which a private revelation happened.

On July 12, 1980 (or 1979, or 1981 — the exact year doesn't really matter) I was on my way to meet a cousin and some friends in the small County Down town of Ballynahinch. From there we had arranged to go to the Mourne Mountains, Ulster's pocket-sized range of Alps, which rise so dramatically from the sea at Newcastle, making the town one of the most picturesque in Europe. (The astonishing beauty of the Province is one of the many unnoticed victims of its long terrorist war, now hopefully abated. Across the world, Northern Ireland has been seen for years through the scar tissue of a few ravaged acres of its capital city. As a result, the whole place is often perceived as a kind of extended Belfast, an urban hell on earth, pock-marked with burnt-out buildings and peopled with fanatics and gunmen.) My friends and I planned to spend the day walking around Lough Shanagh and the Silent Valley, one of the most lovely parts of the whole Mourne range. July 12<sup>th</sup> is Ulster's major public holiday, the traditional date for the Orange Order's largest procession of the year. As Robert Harbinson, himself a sometime Orangeman, points out in his autobiography, *No Surrender*, July 12<sup>th</sup> is as important to loyalists as the Fourth of July is to Americans. It's the day when

members of Orange Lodges up and down the Province don their ceremonial regalia and take to the streets in their thousands, their banners and sashes celebrating those key occasions of the last three centuries when Protestant ascendancy triumphed: King Billy (William of Orange) and his victory at the Boyne, battles at Enniskillen and Aughrim, closing the gates of Derry against an approaching Catholic army. Banners, sashes, flags and temporary triumphal arches erected in the towns through which the marchers pass, all contribute to this annual public recitation of the catechism of Irish history as seen through Protestant eyes.

The Orangemen, somberly resplendent in dark suits, bowler hats and orange sashes, sometimes carrying swords, Bibles or other symbols of their Lodges, march to the music of scores of loyalist bands, whose rehearsals for “The Twelfth” can be heard in towns all over Ulster in the warm summer evenings of May and June. There are pipe bands, flute bands, brass bands, accordion bands, visiting bands from Lodges in Scotland, America, Australia, Canada. And, a more sinister development of recent years, drum bands: young men in paramilitary attire, most wearing dark glasses, marching four-abreast in a phalanx of twenty or more, beating out some synchronised aboriginal rhythm of hatred and defiance, with no other instrument in attendance and each drum painted with the brutal insignia of current sectarianism.

Elsewhere, safely neutered by history, such marches would be rendered into pageant, little more than a chance for holiday and celebration (and what a draw it could be for tourists — it is an incredible spectacle). But memories are long in Ulster, religious differences run so deep that the place is criss-crossed with a maze of warring territories, invisible to the outsider, but as real — and as dangerous — to those who live there as terrible ravines. The massive demonstrations each Twelfth of July are deadly serious affairs, not light-hearted carnivals. It is then that Ulster’s Protestant majority, feeling ever more besieged, displays its presence, identity and determination to remain. Much is felt to be at stake amidst all the noise and colour.

On reaching the outskirts of Ballynahinch, I found it was the epicentre of a massive Orange procession. A small market town, its kerbstones painted red, white and blue, its streets aflutter with flags and bunting, Ballynahinch was swollen by the occasion, inflamed like an angry sting by the sudden influx of colour. The roads leading to it were clogged with traffic and with the rows of empty buses which had brought the marchers from Lodges all over Northern Ireland. I had to leave my car in a field converted for the day into a car park, and continue the last mile to my cousin's house on foot. I hoped that from there we would be able to take a different route out of the town and make our way to Newcastle and the Mournes. The marchers would only be parading for a few miles, then congregating in what they called "The Field," to listen to speeches and sermons before returning home.

The road to my cousin's house turned out to be the route that the march was following. It was thronged with slow-moving bands and marching Orangemen and lined on each side by spectators. The only way to reach my destination was to join the parade, to let myself be carried by its flow. My dismay at this prospect was tempered by the thought that at least it wasn't coming from the opposite direction and I didn't have to try to walk against the current. I slipped as unobtrusively as possible through the front rank of spectators and into the human stream that they were watching. Dressed for hill-walking, not for marching, I felt as conspicuous and out of place as someone at a formal dinner wearing shorts and tee-shirt. Still, all sorts of hangers-on did follow behind the marchers, an untidy straggle of camp followers, tagging on at the rear of a Lodge in which a father or brother might be walking, or behind a band in which they had friends playing.

Like many of my generation (to the media we are as invisible as the Province's natural beauty) I wanted no truck with the tribalism which seemed intent on keeping Northern Ireland mummified within a stifling mix of violence and retribution. I am Protestant by birth and upbringing — my grandfather had, like thousands of others, signed Sir Edward Carson's Solemn League and Covenant in 1912,

pledging himself to keep Ulster British, and later joining Carson's Ulster Volunteer Force. My father and uncles served in the British army during the Second World War, and held the Queen and Royal Family in great respect, verging on reverence. As a child, I enjoyed watching the bands and marchers every Twelfth. Although I understood the marchers and felt on one level some sort of vestigial loyalty to their cause, as I grew up I had become more and more impatient with what I saw as Ulster's dismal failure of imagination, the seemingly self-willed entrapment of both communities in a stagnant mire of history. No doubt leaving Ireland to go to university in Edinburgh did much to erode the shackles of time, place and religion, which might otherwise have held me much more firmly rooted to the spot. Under only a slightly different set of circumstances, I would have been wearing a sash instead of walking boots and marching in the Twelfth parade instead of finding it an obstacle.

I was already late and the procession was moving slowly. As unobtrusively as I could manage, I started to press ahead, a faster individual current within the sluggish flow of the march. It felt strange to be following my own personal tempo, ignoring the heavy beat of the bands and the pace of the men around me. I must have overtaken twenty or thirty marchers before my progress was challenged. As I moved to overtake another row of plodding Orangemen, the music of their bands pounding in my ears, a stentorian command bellowed out: "Keep in step!" The voice belonged to a stern looking Orangeman, about sixty years old, bedecked with sash and wartime medals. In his hand was a silver ceremonial sword held precisely, unbendingly erect in his white-gloved hand. Already made conspicuous by my attire, it seemed politic not to draw any further attention to myself, so I fell in beside him. For a quarter of a mile or so until the procession passed the gateway of my cousin's house, where I could detach myself from it and become a free agent again, I was carried along at a speed and rhythm not of my making, the giant Lambeg drums (an Ulster specialty: gigantic bass drums beaten with flexible canes) seeming to reverberate their indescribable sound right through me.

It was in the ten or so strange minutes that it took to cover the distance to my cousin's house, minutes spent immersed in a medium at once familiar and alien, that walking crystallized into a series of metaphors which drew me and the marchers into new alignments of meaning. Indeed those few unexpected minutes in the midst of an Orange march were so freighted with symbolic weight that they have left impressions on the fabric of my memory as clear and durable as any line of fossil footprints. My thoughts keep returning to the incident, years after it happened, trying to unravel more fully the thread of its significance.

Even going no further than the instruction to keep in step, all sorts of issues about solidarity, uniformity and dissension were suddenly flagged up. Marching together we have raised and felled empires, safeguarded freedoms, abused the innocent. The discipline and cooperation involved in the act of marching together, in becoming one of a group, has been a potent agent in human affairs, whether seen in terms of Irish or world history. Society prefers us to keep in step, to march according to the music of a particular religion, political ideal, race. Tragedy is born when societies perceive each other as being threateningly out of step and take their own tunes and rhythms to be those which should command universal assent. It's so much easier to walk along just guided by some automatic pilot of *left-right, left-right, left-right*, letting our steps be led by unreflective drumbeat values, rather than thinking about where we want to go and where our steps are leading us. We are all attuned to the contours of our particular situations, our lives aligned according to whatever marching songs our class, race, culture and religion favour. But how important it is to establish that fine balance between necessary belonging, the acceptable imperatives of community, and preserving the freedom to strike out on our own as individuals, to walk at our own pace, to choose our own path, to refuse any direction that we think might lead to no good destination. It is, alas, quite easy to be borne along on loyalties to which, if they were examined, we would be loath to give our allegiance. Keeping unthinkingly in step is surely at the root not just of modern Ulster's crisis but of that global indifference which

allows so much to happen which should not. We march past the hungry and the homeless, the persecuted and the helpless, deaf to their cries, our ears filled with other more insistent music. How often, no matter how well disguised, is greed our drum major?

As my mind was trying to deal with all the ramifications of keeping in step, a second metaphorical shock wave was set off by another terse command. A little way before my cousin's house there is a small stone bridge spanning a river. Here the road narrows and there is no pavement. Spectators were reduced to a few foolhardy boys standing on the bridge's low parapets with nothing behind them but a drop of thirty feet into the river. As we approached it, someone at the front of our group shouted out: "Break Step!" Again, the comment seemed to encapsulate so much of Northern Ireland's tragic plight (which offers in its turbulent microcosm a symbol for much that ails the world). It must be clear to any reasonably humane and impartial observer that for the killing to stop and for the political process to move beyond stalemate, all sorts of bridges will have to be negotiated, by all sides: bridges between Protestants and Catholics, loyalists and republicans, British and Irish, the embittered and the generous, the violent and the peaceful, old and young, rich and poor. To cross them, all the marshaled steps of tradition must be broken. We need to cross them gently, each at our own individual pace. But although we can break step to safeguard an insignificant country bridge from the dangerous vibrations of marching feet, it requires far greater vision and effort to see in time, and to break step before, those fragile links that are starting to be built between all our old divisions. Blessed indeed are the bridge-makers. Alas, their skill is something all too rare. Look at any country in the world where war is raging and their absence is made horribly tangible. Why is it that in our schooling we give so little thought to such a crucial endeavour?

The earliest evidence of humans in Northern Ireland dates from around 7000 BCE. Archaeologists have unearthed a Mesolithic camp at Mount Sandel on the River Bann, just south of Coleraine. They surmise that these first inhabitants of Ulster walked across the Irish Sea by a land bridge long since washed away. Even in that ancient

beginning were there not resonances of a future plight? Routes change, bridges appear and vanish. It's easy to walk into a situation and become marooned there. To try to march endlessly to the same tune and in the same direction means, surely, going round in circles. And of late such circles seem unerringly to turn into a cycle of violence and funeral marches. Why do we persist along such endlessly dead-end routes? Is there really nowhere else to go?

In his book *A Guide to Walking Meditation*, the Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh suggests that "only when confronted by death do we know the precious value of our steps on this green planet." There has been slaughter enough in Ulster to have provided such confrontations in grim abundance. Yet the place still seems to be gripped by a dreadful failure of imagination. Tradition drills the mind to dullness. The sound of marching, obedient, passive, stubborn, unthinking, fills the air from every quarter: politics, religion, education, terrorism. Every day the grotesque treadmill seems to spin round another few revolutions. People have become so used to its dizzying orbits that they sometimes seem to take their sense of gravity from this dismal artificial world, rather than from more natural sources. With the new, much longed for, ceasefire now in place, there are more grounds for optimism than there have been for many years. Even so, it will be a long and testing walk to permanent, established peace.

Thich Nhat Hanh prescribes the encounter with death as part of his elegiac prescription for walking with love and compassion through the world, but this must be paired with an awareness of the fleeting beauty and precariousness of life, the precious transience of our breath and being. Perhaps this is what is missing in Ulster (as elsewhere, if less obviously), a sense of reverence for nature, and for each other as part of it. Perhaps politicians, instead of sitting endlessly in rooms, facing each other across tables, should take long walks together through the countryside. How much is the politics of intransigence a creature of posture as well as of tradition? Perhaps the most effective peace initiative would be to get the children of each community

to walk together in the mountains, by the seashore, barefoot and with no marching bands.

A monk whose experience gelled amidst the violence of Vietnam, has much to say to those caught up in Northern Ireland's tragedy. Even if the idea of walking together harmoniously seems quite unrealizable in practice, there is no reason not to make a beginning, or not to believe that such beginnings may already be in place, however tentatively. It isn't always possible to tell when a great journey has started. Many in Vietnam received injuries that make walking meditation an impossibility. In Ulster too, there are many who are paralyzed — physically, emotionally, politically, religiously — and who are unable to move beyond the cruel circumscription imposed by their various confinements. But we can walk for our fellow beings, says Thich Nhat Hanh. Perhaps, even now, there are some *bodhisattva* walkers gently pacing the bloodied streets and fields of the province. May their steps never falter.

Sometimes I imagine Ulster transformed, a society that has painted over all its sectarian slogans and replaced them with epigraphs of true wisdom. In such an unlikely place, the banners, flags and gable-end graffiti which mark out each side's territory and aspirations, like poisonous spines on the back of two fearsome warring porcupines, would be replaced with peaceful exhortations, informed by the gentle wisdom of walking. Everyone will have their own ideas about what epigraphs to paint on their banners. Mine would include some sentences from Thich Nhat Hanh; the Native American maxim which warns us never to judge someone till we've walked a mile in their moccasins; and Bruce Chatwin's marvelous reply to an aggressive inquiry about his religious allegiance: "My God is the God of walkers. If you walk hard enough you probably don't need any other God." There is much to commend such a theology of walking.

Where will the steps of our restlessly walking species lead over the next few centuries? To extinction? To the stars? To ever greater violence and suffering? To peace and harmony? Will we become more or less mindful of the fact that every step we take leaves its mark, however infinitesimal, which others may choose to follow? For

my own part, I often speculate about what path my life will follow and where my last steps will be taken. Will I return full circle and live my last moments in that quiet Irish garden where I took my first unaided steps? Or will I, like so many of my compatriots, stumble to a final halt somewhere far from home? Such questions are unanswerable. I only hope that, as the years go by, I can make my walking — wherever it takes me — less like marching, more like meditation.