

## Walking: The Basics

For centuries philosophers, writers, poets, religious leaders, and others have described life as a journey, a path we all travel on our way through time. From the Canterbury Tales to The Wizard of Oz, from the Bible to the teachings of Buddha, from Star Trek to The Long and Winding Road, these same people have encouraged us to walk the path, teaching us about life and ourselves, showing us ways of looking at things, and sharing experiences that help us understand what life is all about.

Most people would agree that life is a process that evolves and unfolds. It is expansive, seeming to go on forever, at least at first. It at times appears wondrous and joyful, and at other times not worth living. It presents us with tasks that we universally encounter, and variations in environment and individual genetic structure that allow us to be unique and part of a group at the same time. For some of us life is a gift from God. For others it is the sum of experience. It may be eternal, or it may not. It has meant a lot of different things to a lot of different people at a lot of different points in time.

I think of life as a walk. It is a journey on a path that gives opportunities to grow and develop into the people we are and will be. Ideally, we move forever forward on the path, and walk in a direction determined by our needs and logic. The better we are at walking the path, the more we experience life as satisfying and enjoyable. And hopefully the better we are at living.

The purpose of this paper is to provide a conceptual framework within which can optimize the living that we do. I shall consider the terrain we travel, the obstacles we encounter, the weather we must manage, the tools and baggage we carry, and the importance of the relationships we develop as we walk.

The terrain of the path we travel varies as we move forward. It may be uphill, downhill, or flat. It has twists and turns, and high points and valleys. The surface is sometimes firm and solid, and at other times muddy or rocky or slick as ice. Some stretches of the path are wide and easily traversed. Other stretches are so narrow that we feel as though we are walking a tightrope. There are ruts and pitfalls, and stretches that bog us down. And there are sections that put a spring in our step.

Certain portions of the path may be flooded with light and others encased in darkness. The more light there is on the path, the easier it is to walk, at least up to a point. Seeing where we are going, and sometimes where we have come from, can make the walk more purposeful, more enjoyable, and less frightening.

Certain portions of the path are clear and others are encased in fog. When we walk in a fog, we are prone to misjudging the direction we need to go, the specific path we need to travel, and the degree of protection we need to keep us safe. Without a guiding light our view may become hazy or cloudy, and we may feel lost and confused. On the other side of the spectrum, the light may become so intense that we are blinded by it. At times the

past may color our view, and sometimes we experience blackouts and must feel our way along until the light returns or we find the “on” switch.

As we walk the path, we encounter obstacles that must be overcome if we are to continue moving forward. Obstacles come in every size and shape imaginable. There are big ones and little ones. Some we hop over and others we must spend hours or days or years figuring out how to get around them, or over them, or through them. Occasionally we run into obstacles that are rock hard, although obstacles may also be as soft as fog. At times obstacles seem to appear out of thin air, and we call them Our Destiny, Bad Karma, or Bad Luck.

Anything can become an obstacle. And I mean **anything!** Even good things can become obstacles. For example, abundance may be an obstacle when one needs to experience deprivation to grow. Or longevity can become an obstacle for someone who is seeking relief from the pain of a terminal illness.

There are some obstacles that are invisible. Invisible obstacles can be extremely difficult to overcome, particularly by oneself. Enlisting the help of a fellow traveler who has more experience overcoming obstacles is sometimes a great idea, particularly if that person is capable of seeing invisible obstacles when we cannot.

Sometimes invisible obstacles are inside of us such as preconceived ideas based on the past, such prejudices and other unrealistic biases that have little to do with the present. These are obstacles that we tend to put in the way without realizing what we have done.

Some obstacles appear enormous and intimidate us to the point that we stop in our tracks. Sometimes they seem greater than they are and require us to change perspective if we are to have the courage to climb over them or push them out of the way.

To give you an example, if we stand at the bottom of a mountain and think about walking up its surface, we tend to feel tired and apprehensive. From the bottom, a mountain looks imposing and a lot of work to climb. From the top it is exhilarating and awesome. Keeping in mind that a mountain can be conquered simply by putting one foot in front of the other can take away the fear that would otherwise keep us from moving forward on the path.

We use tools to overcome obstacles. We carry a bag of them with us at all times. Some we are born with, and others we make or borrow or pick up as we move through life. They include such things as imagination, intellect, versatility, creativity, empathy, insight, and intuition. Different obstacles require different tools and combinations of tools if they are to be overcome. As we gain from experience, our use of tools becomes virtually automatic. We add to our repertoire as we mature, letting go of tools as they outlive their usefulness, thereby making room for new ones.

As we walk, the weather (the series of feelings and moods that we experience) has a significant impact on our perspective of the journey at specific times and over time as a

whole. Stretches of the walk may seem cloudy and stormy, others sunny and calm, and still others snowy and chilled. Like feelings, the weather is constantly changing. One season leads to the next without any effort on our part.

Like the weather, it is impossible to control our feelings and moods, although we may have been taught to do so from the time we are children. When we try to control the weather, we become frustrated and feel inadequate because the weather cannot be controlled. It can only be experienced and managed.

Sometimes we bask in the sun and enjoy a cool breeze on our faces, and sometimes the weather can feel overwhelming. Knowing how to protect ourselves from the weather's intensity can help us move forward despite its unpleasant nature. Protective clothing, air conditioning, umbrellas, and temporarily seeking shelter are some of the tools that we use to get us through difficult patches of weather so that we may continue the journey and prevent the weather from becoming an obstacle.

Seeking shelter from the weather is a tool that must be handled carefully since it can become an obstacle if we hold onto it too long. Hiding out as a means of managing our feelings and moods provides a feeling of comfort and security. If we become too attached to these feelings, we may have difficulty allowing ourselves to get back on the path even when the weather has cleared, leaving us trapped in an emotional state that prevents us from experiencing life and moving forward.

Sometimes hiding out can actually intensify the weather that we are trying to manage. For example, fear is a form of weather that must be dealt with head-on because hiding from it allows fear to grow. To overcome our fears, we must reach in our tool bag and pull out courage, emotional strength, and self-confidence and then use these tools to face our fears and master them. When we face our fears, they become smaller. We gain self-esteem (as we do whenever we master something) and our fears become smaller. When they become small enough, we move past them and resume our journey having had a positive experience that reinforces within us the notion that we can live successfully.

Experiences based on mastery give us the confidence we need to move forward with greater peace of mind. They stick in our memories (or in our "back packs") and can be pulled out when managing another fearful stretch of the path. They play a very significant role in the process of maturation and the achievement of wisdom. We use past experience to anticipate what lies ahead. We use it as a tool to overcome obstacles. We talk about it with other people and so use it to gain different perspectives of reality. Repetitive positive experiences help us move forward in life with a positive attitude. Experience is truly the greatest teacher.

Not all experiences are positive, however. Some are traumatic and cause us to pick up excess baggage along the way. The force and weight of this baggage fatigues us whether we are walking uphill, downhill, or on flat terrain. It takes away from the energy we could otherwise invest in the more pleasurable parts of the walk or that we could use in

overcoming obstacles we encounter. When we become too loaded down, we travel at a snail's pace and sometimes stop walking altogether.

Traumatic experiences, for example, leave an indelible imprint on our memory that becomes activated when we encounter potentially traumatic experiences down the road. Traumatic experiences may also leave wounds that remain unhealed and drain energy from our systems, energy we could otherwise use to negotiate life. It is as though we carry these memories and unhealed wounds in a back pack in which we also carry our tools. They take up space and weight us down, making it more difficult to move forward along the path.

Just as a snake must shed its skin, we must let go of this burden to free ourselves from its weight. We must periodically take inventory to discern what we are carrying and determine what we should keep and what we should discard. Letting go of traumatic memories and healing our wounds are not easy tasks, particularly if they are attached to our core being.

Neutralizing traumatic memories, i.e. neutralizing the weather attached to them, requires healing. Healing is a natural process that occurs as long as nothing interferes and as long as we do not hide from the feelings that we need to experience, i.e. the weather, for healing to take place.

Grieving is one type of healing and probably the most important type when it comes to letting go of things that we carry in our back packs. It involves experiencing unpleasant weather (feelings of pain, anger and loss), but is what we must experience if we are to keep growing and moving forward without carrying dead weight. Grieving is the process that we must use to neutralize the weather associated with loss.

Back packs contain more than loss and bad memories. They contain tools, good memories, experience, and ways of coping that we have picked up along the way as well. Most of these are worth carrying. Certain ways of coping are little more than dead weight, however, and need to be put down because they have outlived their usefulness.

For example, if you are two years old and are at the grocery store with your mother and you want a candy bar, you might get one by throwing a temper tantrum. If you are 32 years old and are in your boss's office wanting a raise, having a temper tantrum is more likely to get you fired. Success farther down the path is more likely achieved if you have given up childish methods of getting your needs met and have adopted more mature ways.

Those are the basics of walking. Before ending this paper, I would like to leave the reader with a few more things to think about. I have convictions about walking that I would like to share with you based on my experiences thus far.

I believe that all we need to know in order to get where we need to go is to learn how to walk, and that as long as we walk in a forward direction, we will get where we need to

go. I believe that we need to share the walk with other people for it to be fulfilling and that there are stretches that we must travel alone. I believe that no one can do our walking for us and that to expect another human being to assume responsibility for our walk is unfair, just as unfair as expecting someone to control the weather for our benefit.

I believe that it is a parent's responsibility to teach children to walk, and to teach them well. The same holds true for teachers and doctors and attorneys and anyone else a child might choose as a person to copy. I believe that the shirking of this responsibility creates an enormous burden on us all.

It is my view that walking well is the basis of self-esteem. I do not believe that just thinking positively and brainwashing ourselves with affirmations of how wonderful we are leads to any lasting improvement in the way we feel about ourselves. What does seem to make a difference is taking a good, honest look at who we are and how we lead our lives and then making real changes.

As we walk, we should face our fears and develop a sense of mastery over them. When we do not, we know deep down inside that we are cowardly no matter how many "reasonable" excuses we can come up with. When we run from fears, they get bigger and we get smaller. And we do not like who we are. When we face our fears, they get smaller, and we get bigger and feel proud. Walking freely means facing truth without having to run no matter how unpleasant the truth might be.

We all have the ability to learn how to walk well no matter how crippling our past experiences have been. I have been repeatedly impressed with the degree of strength that even the weakest of us possesses. Unfortunately, there are many of us who keep the focus on the feeling of weakness (the weather at that time) instead of changing the perspective in a way that allows the focus to remain on walking well. This is a complicated concept that requires elaboration. Suffice it to say at this point that feeling weak and being weak are simply not the same, and that we can feel weak while being strong. Walking well means not being what we feel, but rather finding ways to tolerate the weather so that it provides us experience and information without becoming an obstacle itself.

It is important to keep in mind as we walk that reality does exist despite what we might imagine. Reality is what it is. What we call "reality" is our perception of it. The more flexible we are when it comes to changing perspectives, the better we are able to perceive what is real. The easier it is to let go of a point of view, the more valid our point of view becomes. The more rigidly we hold onto what we think is true, the less we are able to see truth for what it is. None of us is ever so flexible and perceptive as to be able to see reality in its pure form. We also do not need to in order to walk well. At the same time, the better we are at seeing reality, the better we are at walking.

There is a corollary to this. I believe that winners are those people who are best at losing. Let me explain. As we walk through life, changes occur. It is change that lets us know that we are moving. When the scenery stays the same, we are usually at a standstill.

Whenever there is a change, there is a gain and a loss. Gaining usually feels good, whereas losing does not.

Gaining means picking things up, and losing means setting them down. Since we are only human and can carry only so much at any given time, we must set some things down to pick others up. The better we are at setting things down, the less we have to carry and the more room there is for new things. That's why excess baggage can be such a problem. It interferes with our ability to gain. And it weighs us down and takes away from the strength we need to carry more useful things.

There is a drive within all people to move forward. It is as though we have a built-in engine that propels us up the path. Sometimes this engine gets clogged up and doesn't run efficiently. It sputters and coughs and affects our walking. It might be hard to start moving forward or it might shut the walk down completely. We must perform maintenance on this engine if we are to walk well. We do this by emoting, expressing our feelings instead of plugging up the system with them. We must also have appropriate nutrients to keep the engine healthy. It is a living entity.

The people we walk with can be very helpful in this regard provided we do not contaminate their air. Contaminating their air means getting them clogged up or overburdening their engines. Keeping your engine cleaned out is a critical part of walking well. So does making sure that we do not contaminate the environment.

Sometimes we feel that we are sliding backward. We experience ourselves moving back in time, covering ground that has already been covered. We experience disappointment, believing that we have lost ground. We want progression, not regression. Regression is frustrating. Frustration is not exactly the kind of weather we seek. In fact, we try to avoid as much of it as possible. So walking through stretches of regression takes a good deal of strength, determination, and optimism.

These stretches are great opportunities to learn about ourselves. They are flashbacks to another time and place. If we are able to tolerate the weather associated with the flashback, we have an opportunity to learn how we became who we are.

As I alluded to before, our past experiences have a significant impact on the ways we experience the present. We look at current realities through the lens of the past, which significantly alters our perception of the present. This is one of the reasons that we all experience reality differently. Past experiences color our perception of what we see on the path in front of us. It is as though we carry a light in our back packs based on past experience.

Let me explain more about this by telling you a popular joke within my profession. The joke involves a man coming to see a psychiatrist because of problems in his relationships with other people. After a relatively short time it became clear to the psychiatrist that the root of his patient's difficulties stemmed from a rotten relationship with his mother (yes,

this is a psychiatric joke) who was said to have been extremely neglectful and degrading, and to have told the man that she wished he had never been born.

As the man's psychotherapy advanced in time, he began to transfer his previous attitudes about his mother onto the psychiatrist, seeing the therapist as being just like her. This got to be a real problem, the same kind of problem that the man had been experiencing in his relationships with other people.

The psychiatrist, realizing that they were going to get nowhere until this got straightened out, informed the patient of what the psychiatrist perceived him doing, i.e., transferring his feelings about his mother onto the person who was trying to help. The patient could not hear a word of what the psychiatrist said about this. He had stopped listening to his mother a long time ago.

Things got even worse between them, and the psychiatrist became frustrated. He became so frustrated that one day he wrote out a sign on a piece of paper and stuck it to his forehead. The sign said, "I am not your mother."

The man and the psychiatrist talked for twenty minutes, and the patient said nothing about the sign. In fact, he was seemingly oblivious to it. This frustrated the psychiatrist even more. He finally could stand it no longer and asked the patient if he had noticed the sign. The patient acknowledged that he had and added, "That's just like something my mother would do!"

Transference can be a very powerful force. It can have a tremendous effect on how we experience the walk and the weather because the experiences of the past are added to the experience of the present which makes the whole experience more intense than it would have otherwise been. If we are transferring from something positive it heightens our pleasure. If we are transferring from something negative it heightens our pain. In the latter situation, transference can take something that would have otherwise been pleasurable and turn it into something just as painful. It is no fun to take a walk in the sun when we are sunburned.

Most of us would like to have painful experiences not be so painful, and we would like to get as much pleasure out of life as we can. This goal is hard to accomplish when we are transferring from previously painful stretches of the path. So what do we do about this?

My advice would be to walk through stretches of intensity and to learn as much as possible about why we perceive the present as we do while trying to understand what the past might have to do with it. Realizing that we are holding onto something from before is the first step in being able to let go of it. You cannot overcome a self-imposed obstacle unless you know that it exists and where it comes from.

Each time we pass through a stretch of regression, we have an opportunity to make our load lighter by letting go of feelings and thoughts and beliefs that have outlived their usefulness. Lightening the load, in turn, helps us to better focus on the walk we are

taking in the present. Not only do we become more realistic (remember, it takes letting go of one's point of view to be able to look at reality from a clearer point of view), but we also have more room in our knapsacks for gains. And we find that we are stronger.

This is emotional exercise and it takes a lot of time if we are to get the most out of it. It means having to make a considerable commitment to oneself and following through with that commitment. It requires a willingness to tolerate the weather no matter how bad it gets and an ability to involve others in the walk when we cannot remove obstacles on our own. It means having to make sacrifices for the sake of growth and an acceptance of the possibility that we may grow in ways not initially anticipated. And it means relinquishing control enough to allow our internal engines to push us along the path that we must walk.

May you walk well and enjoy the journey.