



# A Walk in the Woods

*Broaden your mind while you narrow your waistline.*

**By Mark Mathew Braunstein**

**Y**ou may be reading this while seated in your favorite armchair. Or perhaps while reclining in bed until reading yourself to sleep. Or perhaps while perched on a porcelain throne. Or perhaps while standing in an overcrowded bus during your morning commute. Or perhaps even while walking, spellbound by your cellphone. But, if reading this, you surely are not running.

## Walk, Don't Run

While sitting gets you nowhere, walking can get you nearly everywhere. The very word *walk* lends positive meanings to most words that we pin to it. When proud, we walk tall. When happy, we are walking on air. When empathetic, we walk in someone else's shoes. When sincere, we walk our talk. When we make new friends, we walk into their lives. When we are learned, we are



walking encyclopedias. In baseball, when we walk we make it to first base. It may be unsettling to walk a fine line, unnerving to be a walking target, and unlucky to be among the walking wounded, but all who survive at least are still walking.

Unlike walking, phrases coupled with the word *run* more often run the risk of negativity. To walk away from something shows strength or courage. But to run away from it admits to cowardice or defeat. Run out of money, and you will run up debts. Run out of steam, and your project will have run its course. When running late, drivers run red lights. Unanchored boats run aground. Supplies run low when sources run dry. Some bureaucrats give you the runaround. Some speakers run off at the mouth. And, worst of all, some writers scrawl run-on sentences or rambling paragraphs that seem to run on and on and on.

So among our lexicon of idioms, running gets painted with a dark tint, while walking mostly shines in a bright light. Yet, similes and metaphors aside, the two modes of bipedal locomotion differ only in speed and agility. Whether we lazily stroll a mile, or powerwalk it, or jog it, we still have covered the same ground. Walking is just a slow and steady mode of running.

Most old folks tend to slow down and, as their longevity clocks run down, some folks' aging is more evident than others'. Our technological lifestyle hastens this aging by having reduced our need to move our butts. In our nation of car cripples, the longest expanse that some people ever walk is the parking lot. Walking has become a voluntary act. In our machine age, walking has even become an act of defiance.

## A Step In The Right Direction

Office workers sit on their rumps for more than half of their waking hours. After just half an hour of sitting, metabolism throughout the body slows to a crawl. Within two hours, blood flow slackens in the lower legs. Called edema, lymphatic fluids gather there, too. Repeated daily, a long litany of illnesses develop, too ominous to list here and too daunting for your doctor to diagnose in a single physical exam, ironically conducted while you are sitting. The perils of prolonged sitting have been equated with that of overeating, chain smoking, and binge drinking. The health risks of the office chair and the armchair have recently garnered so much news media attention that you probably already know this from all the reading you've been doing while sitting on your buns.

Unlike sitting, walking offers many health benefits and, unless walking in a war zone or a natural disaster such as a hurricane, no health risks. Those health benefits have long been well documented. Walking on a daily basis at a moderate pace for merely half an hour nonstop can boost your energy and stimulate your metabolism and circulation for the next half of your day, and can lower your blood pressure and reduce the risk of diabetes and osteoporosis for the rest of your life. Regularly going for a walk even guards against stress and depression. Just thinking about not walking should be enough to make anyone feel depressed.

Sit happens. After walking, health happens. While walking, something else happens, something quite magical, called thinking. Running demands undivided attention to maintaining poise and solid footing, while walking is less of a balancing act. You can walk almost with your eyes closed. So rather than to develop agility of body, the walker can develop agility of mind. While runners feel the bliss of a runner's high same as dancers do a dancer's frenzy, those are sensations, not thoughts.

We are not *Homo erectus*, upright humans. We are *Homo sapiens*, thinking humans. It has been said in jest that the brain is a gland that secretes thoughts. If so, walking stimulates more secretion than does running or any other form of physical exercise. Quite possibly, the slower the gait, the deeper the thought. By letting your feet wander, your mind, too, can wander. And wonder.

## Does a Bear Sit in the Woods?

Distinct from taking short walks to break up prolonged sitting, after a long walk you well deserve taking a break by taking a seat. The good news is that even after walking, the creative boost from walking is a gift that keeps on giving. If that long walk is pursued amid nature, then all the better if that long break is taken in nature, too. Sitting in nature offers glimpses of serenity, but not necessarily flashes of insight. Walking in the woods followed by sitting in the woods merges creativity with serenity.

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Here in New England, trees are our megafauna and forests their homes. Despite our urban and suburban sprawl, we New Englanders still enjoy an ample spread of forests with their several layers of habitats ranging from treetops, down to branches and limbs, down to brush and understory, and downward to rootlets and rhizomes. Trees in a forest have been proven to communicate with each other through their rootlets and by the fungi growing on and among their rootlets. Their network of interconnection is called the Wood Wide Web.

By sitting long enough on a log or a stump, we might attempt to hack into it. And not with an ax. Successful or not, simply trying to tune in offers some rewards. In a forest, we are guests in a world ruled by the trees. Most trees far outlive us, and take as long to die as we humans take to live. To a botanist, every tree tells its own story. To a tree hugger, it holds its own wisdom. To learn all that we may hope from trees, we need not tap into them as when harvesting maple sap. We need not even hug them. We need only sit or walk among them.

When we walk in the woods, we still drag along all the petty concerns of our personal lives and of our human world. All our Woulds and Shoulds and Coulds. Worker bees buzz inside our heads, pestering us that there's places to go, people to meet, things to do, money to make, empires to build. So many Shoulds reeling in our minds like tires spinning in snow! And yet, I'm frittering away my time by taking a walk in the woods? Actually, there's no better place I'd prefer to be.

While my home is two miles from an organic farm stand and five miles from a vegan café, my most prized of all plant-based worlds is the mile-deep woodland that abuts my backyard. Not wilderness, but nature nonetheless. A trail from my backyard explores a land trust of forest that lines a hillside whose incline is steep and rocky. In addition to perpetually walking the path of my life, I walk that trail almost daily. I have hiked to the tops of several of the White Mountains, trekked across the deserts of Death Valley, and backpacked the Grand Canyon from rim to river to rim. But my fondest memory is of my walk just yesterday on my backyard backwoods trail. As reward for reaching the end of my trail, an imported stump awaits me. I sit on that stump like a bump on a log. In quiet contemplation, my long spells while seated are never long enough. Some call that prayer or meditation. I call it sitting.

The trail's end is beyond the range of the groans of my human neighbors' lawnmowers and snow blowers and, except when sometimes downwind, beyond the motorized pulse of the interstate. There, I can delude myself into believing that I am far from civilization. I sit there among the flutelike songs of wood thrush, the drumbeats of woodpeckers, the clucking of crows, the shrills of overhead hawks, the chorus of tree frogs, and the inescapable summertime buzz of mosquitoes. Sometimes, even when winter denudes most trees of their leaves, the forest whispers no sounds at all. Sometimes, just silence, live silence. So quiet, I can almost hear myself think.

Experienced birders know that the way to view the most birds is not to chase after them but to just sit still. With less aesthetic aims, hunters in tree stands do the same when on the lookout for deer. Sitting still in daylight, waiting only for my thoughts to crystallize, I have spied coyote, bobcats, and owls, all creatures of the night. Add to my watch list pileated woodpeckers, a signature species of deep forests. As yet, no sightings of bears or mountain lions. Family and friends beseech me to pack my cellphone when I hike my trail. Are they nuts? More likely they are merely civilized humans who fail to realize that, by pocketing civilization on my woodland walks, I would defeat my purpose in being there. They fear that if I were injured and unable to summon help, I might die down there. I can think of no more serene place to die. Better there than while rotting in a hospital room. Better even than while writing at my desk.

I often am tempted to lay down my pen or to set aside my keyboard and instead to heed the beckoning call of the trail. Surely whatever thoughts that occur to me while walking in the woods will hold more truths than any idea I might conjure while seated at my desk. So excuse me. I now must punctuate this sentence with a period. Because nature calls.

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