TAKE A WALK FOR ME PROJECT

RESEARCH TO DATE **LAURA GALLAGHER FEBRUARY 2021**

References;

***Walking one step at a time* by Erling Kagge**

***In praise of walking* by neuro scientist Shane O'Mara**

***Wanderlust, a history of walking* by Rebecca Solnit**

***Forest bathing* by Dr.Qing Lui**

***A Sligo miscellany* by John C McTernan**

Across different readings I have begun to look at walking in a different light- how it can lead into many different benefits and subjects such as protest, therapy, creative thinking and exercise.

SOCIAL EXPRESSION, WALKING IN MODERN DAY LIFE

Do we ever reflect on the act of walking and what it can mean? The act of walking can articulate political meaning and be one of the most radical things we can do. It demonstrates a power in movement. In her book *Wanderlust* Rebecca Solnit shares a range of interesting facts and histories relating to why we walk and what it means. She looks at walking together as a form of social expression, using it as a tool to bring about a more equal world and how collective public acts make a difference in shaping our futures. The author gives the example of a global walk on a huge scale, an incredible 30 million people took to the streets on February 13th 2003 in protest against the Iraq war.

Often the in between time of walking from one place to another is not appreciated to the full. Rebecca describes this as cluttered time filled with headphones, noise and radio. Technology can take part of the blame for filling the silence with clutter. It's easy to reach for and becomes a bad habit formed. However, I think during this Covid time, from watching people who pass me by in Rosses point, this is not the case. I myself have an interest in movement and landscape. I think it's vital to keep an open minded exploration of the world, a kind of mindful discovery of what surrounds us, always observing nature on our outings. My walk is my world at present. Many of us nowadays live our lives indoors in apartments, car, gym, office, shops. We have become disconnected from nature. When I'm out walking I feel like I'm in the world, part of it, you can see it, feel it, smell it, hear it. There is hope in the act of walking.

Rebecca comments on how in many ways walking culture was a reaction against the speed and alienation of the industrial revolution. Walking in resistance to the postmodern loss of space, time and embodiment. Walking gives us time to reflect on the history of the landscape that we are moving through. Meandering through the multiple layers of history that shape our experiences. There is the ancient history of pilgrimage and walking to reach spiritual goals. Rebecca goes on to say "*I like walking because it is slow and I suspect that like the mind, the feet, works at about 3 miles an*

hour. If this is so, modern life is moving faster that the speed of thought or thoughtfulness."

Some people use walking as a form of meditation. While out walking, the body and mind can work together, so that thinking becomes almost a physical, rhythmic act as well. The past and the present are brought together when you walk. Moving through space is a continuous experience. Walking becomes a ritual and then takes the form of meditation. She asks what kind of pleasure, freedom and meaning takes place at different times by different walks? I believe walking generates a sense of place. Well-trodden paths form in my mind. I often trace other pedestrian's footprints in the sand and this can add to a sense of place. I feel a place is sometimes even more special when it can only be gained access to by foot.

ALIGNMENT OF BODY, MIND & WORLD

Rebecca has an interesting take on the relationship between thinking and walking "*thinking is generally a sense of doing nothing in a production orientated culture and doing nothing is hard to do. It's best done by disguising it as doing something and the something closest to doing nothing is walking. Walking strikes a delicate balance of being and doing. It is a bodily labour that produces nothing but thoughts, experience and arrivals. Walking is a state in which the mind, the body and the world are aligned. Walking allows us to be in our bodies in the world without being made busy by them. Moving on foot seems to make it easier to move in time, the mind wanders from plans to recollections to observations."* As we move through our landscape there is a parallel landscape that we are moving through in our minds. She states that "*The rhythm of walking generates a kind of rhythm of thinking*." Mostly we are walking in an unconscious way. Our feet have in a way their own knowledge to tackle obstacles. This allows our senses to digest the surrounding scenes and for our minds to travel. And let's face it that's the only part of our bodies that can really travel at this time!

TIME/SPEED

Norwegian writer Erling Kagge in his book *Walking one step at a time,* believes that walking and silence belong together. Silence accompanies many of our walks. When walking, we become the centre of our lives, leaving behind the other demands in life. We notice our changing environment, the wind, the smell, the changing light. Speed and time accelerate parallel. When we travel faster, time appears to speed up which leaves us noticing less. Memory depends on time and spatial awareness, so in high speed we remember very little. Walking seems to slow time down, enabling your mind space to think and wander and problem solve. When travelling by car, there's a passivity to it, your sense of space feels smaller and a sense of distance becomes disjointed. When your feet touch the ground and hear your own breath, you are more in touch with your body. Erling goes on to suggest that walking expands time rather than collapsing it. Time grows smaller as your pace increases, your surroundings become larger. If you leave your phone behind, it increases the likelihood of being present, looking around you, your world becomes larger. At this present moment with the current pandemic, time has lost its meaning.

He gives us surprising facts such as ¾ of children in England spend less time outdoors than prisoners, 1 in 5 children are indoors every day and 1 in 9 children have not been in a park or forest or beach in the course of the year. Being outdoors we can witness the striking change in seasons and animal life. Walking sometimes means taking an inner voyage of discovery. We are shaped by architecture, people, weather and atmosphere. Erling describes walking as a mixture of movement humility, balance curiosity, smell, light and longing. I find this combination of descriptions very intriguing. Walking has the capacity to relieve the chaos in our mind as we wake. Returning back from our walk, our minds feel more orderly and easy to manage. We're able to plan and take on our tasks for the day.

Slowness is directionally proportional to memory. The pace we choose to walk can be decisive in how we think. Intelligence is being able to apply earlier experience to new situations and having the ability to think abstractly. Erling shares the fact that when he walks at a slow pace it feels to him that his emotions are held at a distance when he slows down, the emotions return. It's important to travel at the same speed as your soul.

MOVEMENT AND CREATIVE THINKING

Personally I believe walks are critical to gathering thoughts and material for creative people, such as myself. I very much relate to and agree with Erling in that we are often on auto pilot. We see without seeing and hear without really listening. The head can sometimes loose contact with the feet. I'm surprised to learn how complex the structure of the foot is with 26 bones, 33 joints and more than 100 tendons, muscles and ligaments. We are built for movement. Apparently the way you walk can reflect the way you feel. According to professor Rory Wilson in Swansea there are recognisable differences in movements according to mood. Studies revealed people moved differently after watching a film that was either sad or happy. You in fact think with your whole body. Individuals that have been out walking have a healthy kind of tiredness, a sparkle in their eye, a more relaxed and freer smile. One of the reasons Polar bears choose their partners is by the way they walk. The way you walk is partly genetic but also an expression of your values and social norms. Your steps convey who you are and generally stay the same and may only be altered by at traumatic event in your life. The philosopher Malaponete stated that we understand our experience through the information already stored inside of our bodies. The information that is archived within us may take over from the surrounding sound of waves or birdsong. Philosophers and great thinkers believed that things can be solved by walking and that you can walk yourself into your best creative thoughts. If we take a walk through history - Socrates walked around Athens conversing with others. Henry David Thoreau a naturalist and philosopher spoke of how when his *"legs begin to move his thoughts begin to flow".* Charles Darwin walked around twice a day on his own thinking path. Steve Jobs walked with colleagues when he was looking to expand his ideas. Walking can affect our creativity, mood and health. At Stanford university in 2014, researchers found creativity increased by up to 60% for those who walk between 6-15mins compared with those who sit for the same length of time.

HEALTH BENEFITS OF BEING IMMERESD IN NATURE

Walking can be a simple pleasure to enjoy. In 1982, Japan made *shinrin-yoku*, or as it's called forest bathing, a part of its national health program. The health secrets of spending time surrounded by trees seem to lie in the higher concentration of oxygen that exists in a forest, as compared to town or city. But also importantly the presence of plant chemicals called phytoncides. These are natural oils that are part of a plant's defence system against bacteria, insects, and fungi. Exposure to these substances can have measurable health benefits for humans. Physiological stress is reduced and both blood pressure and heart rate are lowered. Even a little as 20 minutes is beneficial but staying up to four hours is preferable. According to Dr. Qing Lui and his book *forest bathing*, people who aren't close to a forest, or can't go outdoors, simply infusing essential tree oils in your home can also have an impact. During Dr. Qing Lui's research he looked at whether forest bathing could improve sleep patterns among middle-aged Tokyo office workers who suffered sleep deficiency due to high levels of stress. During the study, participants walked the same amount of time in a forest instead of their usual walk in a non-forest setting. This study revealed participants were far less anxious and had better sleep patterns. Researchers also reported that afternoon walks surprisingly were even more beneficial than morning walks. Time spent with trees can strengthen the immune system lower cholesteryl levels and act as preventive medicine. I always feel uplifted around trees and now I know why.

"The world is not as it appears, the world is as you are" - a very interesting statement by Erling Kagge. The important thing is our experience of the world and being aware of this experience. When I walk at Rosses Point it feels like time ceases. He makes the point that time and eternity can be experienced at once in this way. When we are open to what surrounds us it can have a transformative effect. Erling states the longer he walks the less he differentiates between his body and the environment, his internal and external worlds meet. This correlates with what I mentioned earlier that Rebecca Solnit believes that our bodies and minds become aligned with our world when out walking.

Kagge refers to the belief in Buddhism that the three time zones do not exist. The present is the boundary between past & future, both of which do not in reality exist. We create these to help us order our thoughts. In Sanskrit walking is a metaphor for time. I find this concept intriguing. Standing along the Sligo coast as I observe the sea, I'm unconsciously observing time passing and feeling part of something greater. On the moon time stands still in a way. Erling reminds us that since there is no wind on the moon so Neil Armstrong's foot print is most likely still there.

HISTORY

Shane O'Mara reveals a fascinating fact. The genes that evolved for walking evolved under water. Tetrapod's were the first four legged vertebrates in existence. Something I have never heard of is a tetrapod track, which is a trace fossil pathway. One of which was discovered on Valentia island in Kerry in 1992. These are very rare and so was a very exciting discovery. These footprints are the oldest and most extensive anywhere in the world and connect us with our evolutionary journey. Footprints give use a sense of connectedness, something I enjoy tracing on Rosses Point beach. A group of walkers left a trail 19,000 years ago, patterns of footprints of women and children were discovered in Tanzania. Their unique footprints had been preserved by volcanic ash leaving us evidence of social walking.

Bipedalism is standing upright and putting one foot in front of another. This is what has made us as a species. If homo sapiens had not been a walking species man would have died out many years ago. It is not fully known when bipedalism emerged in our evolutionary history. Approx 300,000 years ago homo sapiens, roamed the earth. Our feet have adapted and changed shape over thousands of years. O'Mara shares recent scientific research that shows our foot changed from hand like properties with a large toe in a similar position as the thumb. Eventually having a large toe at the front allowed for longer distance walking and running an arch to allow for elastic forward movement. This development increased our range, provided greater possibilities leaving surplus energy for other things such as an extension to childhood and development of a bigger brain.

MOVEMENT IS THE BASIS OF EXPLORATION

We are knowledge seekers and born explorers. The neurologist Edvard Moser the Nobel prize winner for medicine concluded movement is the basis of exploration and exploration is the basis of our intellect. Walk in Sanskrit also means to know. It allowed us to develop into who we are.

In order to learn to walk we keep trying to take thousands of steps, resulting in falls multiple times. This is how we learn. Fail, and fail better. I have to keep reminding myself of this sometimes when faced with challenging situations and to keep going as an artist. It isn't always obvious where to start and what might be the transition from one point to another in order to progress. Movement changes our experience of the world because the mechanisms of brain and mind are fully engaged by movement.

RHYTHM AND CONTRACTION FLOW

Stable rhythm movement is the core to walking. *Contraction flow* is the feeling of the world slipping in front you as you walk backwards. The horizon shrinks as you walk away

from it and expands as you walk towards it. I love how your sense of perspective changes as we move through the landscape. This reminds me of when I carried out an exercise during an intensive week long workshop called *Body Landscape* with Frank van de Ven in both Leitrim and Czech Republic. He showed us how to become more aware of how our body moves and makes contact with the earth He asked us to walk extremely slowly backwards in a forest path. It was a very strange surreal experience that stayed with me for many years. Through this particular exercise of moving backwards looking straight ahead but taking note and concentrating on my peripheral vision, the sensation gave me a very different experience of moving through the landscape. This is what I have now learned is called *contraction flow*.

COGNITIVE MAPS/ AFFECTS ON THE BRAIN

Shane O'Mara believe we are silently making memories of where we have been and in doing so create maps in our brains of the world we've experienced. Walking increases blood flow to the brain, mobilises neural resources which is interpreted as a call to action. This slows the aging of our brain and acts as a break and can actually reverse some of this aging. Regular aerobic exercise can produce new ells in the hippocampus part of the brain that stimulates memory and learning proving that movement is in fact medicine.

Neuro geneses occurs as a result of exercise. This is where new brain cells are created, this fact alone is enough to encourage us to get up and out. 4,961 are the steps of the average person in the world per day. At least 5.5km for 30min 4 – 5 times per week is recommended. This not only supports your lungs and heart but importantly walking is a very effective way to boost brain function. If we remain sedentary there is a loss of muscle mass. As muscle mass deteriorates, the brain deteriorates alongside it in both mood and personality.

Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard *wrote 'Every day I walk myself into a state of well-being and walk away from every illness..."* Studies show that people who walk a lot are less prone to depressive bouts. Walking can enhance your memory and older people who walk more are less lonely. The Irish times have reported that people are twice as good at coming up with new ideas if they have walked beforehand. According to *a Sligo Miscellany*, Rosses point had some fame as a health restoring place in the 1800's. People from all classes would look to spend a few weeks here. And was thought of as being absolutely necessary to keep them in good health.

SOCIAL WALKING / HEALTH BENEFITS

Shane O'Mara contends that humans are essentially social walkers and we unconsciously synchronise our walking with others. We develop cognitive maps which help orientate ourselves in space. Walking is healing our bodies as we move. It repairs

our brains, lowers our blood pressure, helps food through our intestines reduces inflammation and allows us to be creative and better at problem solving.

Walking has evolved in a social context in a family or other social groups. Our sense of space comes from our experience of walking about in the world. Cognitive maps come out of this experience but is something which O'Mara tells us we are not aware of only when they fail us. Cognitive maps work best when they are regularly activated. The largest study on record is of 33,908 people over eleven years by epidemiologist Samuel Harvey at University New South Wales shows 12.5% of future cases of depression could be prevented from just doing 1 hour of exercise a week. This gives great encouragement to those of us who may not be at all sporty that even a modest change in activity levels leads to a bigger positive effect. O'Mara also refers to Gregory Simon public health physician who gets behind this theory that exercise is a safe and moderately effective anti-depressant prescription across the spectrum.

The advantage of walking in company is that it gives you the opportunity to share information and experiences. Social walking helps maintain social cohesion at an intimate level but also for wider society. Walking offers a chance for conversation to evolve in ways that wouldn't develop if you simply were sitting together. Walking can be central to our sense of connection to other people and the world around us. One recent survey of a group of elderly concluded that 150mins per week being socially active results in a better sense of overall wellbeing than those who are less active. This has been backed up by a huge range of studies. Walking together creates a shared world and, the synchronisation of our movements and breaths generates a feeling of connectedness. Those that enjoy high levels of connectedness have better life outcomes.

O'Mara refers to memory and spatial navigation which flicker between mental states. This he believes lies at the core of creativity. *"In order to create something new you must combine ideas in novel association. Mind wandering allows for the collision of ideas while mind focusing allows you to test whether its nonsensical, or interesting or new. Mind wanderings form divergent thinking where you muse beyond its constraint to possible solutions. The hippocampus facilitates this cross pollination in the brain."* When flickering between modes of activity and task positive activity occurs creativity is ignited. He gives the example of seeing both the trees and the forest at the same time. Seeing the details while also being able to see the bigger picture.

For creative problem solving a well-stocked brain is required. O'Mara describes how half formed ideas and random thoughts sitting below consciousness can rise and come together in new combinations. When there's activity spreading across different brain regions this increases the likely effect of cross sections of neuro anatomy. In this way walking increases creativity and problem solving in a variety of unexpected routes. Even our posture as well as movement may have an effect on creativity, mood and cognition. Positive mood makes us more open to experience. Pleasure affects perception. A state known as '*flow*' is a subjective experience of deep concentration and enjoyment in things like work, sport or activities such as walking. Feelings of complete emersion and

control are characteristics. Walking is a great means to experience this state of flow. Walking can facilitate the flickering between different states and it is this that makes creative cognition possible because we are able to walk with ease in a mindlessness state. It is in a way on the edge of dreaming. The free association between different memory and thoughts with the loss of meaning of time are similar characteristics of both walking and dreaming. O'Mara has a lovely way of putting it - "*when we walk, we are meeting ourselves*".