Walking Hadrian's Wall

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An excerpt from *Walking Hadrian's Wall: A Memoir of a Father's Suicide* (Shanti Arts, 2021)
Photographs by Bob Royalty

We talk about freedom all the time, but we are never truly free, free of memories, pain, family entanglements, of burdens that we carry our entire life. For ten days I tasted freedom while walking the length of Hadrian's Wall in northern England, from the gritty old city of Newcastle upon Tyne on the east coast to the peaceful fields west of Carlisle and the Firth of Solway on the Scottish border. Even though we all carry many burdens, I felt free. This is the story of the walk, of me and my father, of burdens and freedom.

My father committed suicide at his Atlanta home—the center of our family life until that day, the 13th of May 1991, and where I lived from age eight to eighteen. This was twenty-five years before I left for England to walk the wall. It wasn't until after I had planned the walk that I realized it would happen on this anniversary.

Why was I walking Hadrian's Wall? Because I wanted to, is the simplest explanation. This started when I taught in England for a semester and visited the wall for a day with my wife, Anne, and my brother-in-law Brian while we were driving from Durham to Lindisfarne. I was fifty-three at the time and enjoying my second sabbatical from teaching at a small liberal arts college in Indiana where I had taught for fifteen years. Brian told me that people walked the length of the wall "as a thing to do," and I was immediately hooked on the idea.

I had visited Hadrian's Wall once before, but both visits in a car seemed inadequate; I didn't feel I had gotten the full experience. I wanted to wake up and go to sleep along the wall, not drop in and out like a tourist who just saw ruins of forts and car parks. A car trip felt confined, and I wanted the freedom of walking the length of the wall alone. It was a challenge, something to prove. I also knew that I had been invited to give the prestigious annual humanities lecture within a year or two after returning from sabbatical. As a professor of early Christianity—that is, Christians in the ancient Roman world—talking about a walk along the wall felt like a great way to present my research to a wide audience in a way that someone like my mother could understand. And the next year I would turn fifty-four, which meant in the due course of things I would turn fifty-five. Turning fifty was a blast—parties and celebrations for months, a special trip to Costa Rica to do a lot of birding. I found myself approaching fifty-five in a more pensive mood. Not depressed or sad, but thinking more about benchmarks and goals I want to accomplish next. I've never liked the phrase "bucket list," but I guess I thought the walk along the wall would be on my bucket list. It was a thing

to do, like a hundred-mile bike ride. But it turned out to be much more than that . . .

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During winter break that year, celebrating our first Christmas back at home after the sabbatical abroad, I realized that it had been twenty-five years since we learned how sick my father was in 1990. He died the following May. I would walk the wall on the twenty-fifth anniversary of his suicide. I began to think differently about the lecture and the experience of walking the wall. This wasn't just a "bucket list" walk anymore, a shallow physical challenge to prove myself at fifty-five, but a walk into a painful period in my own past of twenty-five years ago, a walk into my father's death and our life together. That's the story I am telling in this book, a story of a walk across England and a walk into my past. A walk into the unknown. I would have a guidebook and map, but I really didn't know where I was going.

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My first mile was slow and, well, just clunky as I started to feel the full weight of the pack, which had never been quite this full. The water reservoir in my pack, with its little tube attached to my strap for drinking on the go, was actually empty, so I realized tomorrow's pack would be a couple pounds heavier once I filled the reservoir. Rain came and went; I put on and took off my jacket; I got hot and then cold. Nothing seemed to work, not even the data on my phone. I was trying to post the "reveal" selfie for my family and friends; only Anne and Ginna knew what I was doing, which was driving my mother crazy. Even though I was getting increasingly nervous about the whole venture, I tried to look confident to my online friends. I finally stopped, restarted my phone, posted two shots of me with the Hadrian's Way signs, and wobbled on.

Stunning indeed is Hadrian's Wall Path across the wild crags and moors of Northumberland and farm fields of Cumbria—some of the most picturesque scenery in northern England. But it starts east of Newcastle upon Tyne where grimy bridges, warehouses, factories, and abandoned railway abutments greet you during the first few miles on the path. On the western side of Newcastle lie the huge Dunston Coal Staithes across the River Tyne on the south bank, memorials to the famous coals of Newcastle where men loaded the ships heading to London. Soon after that you head away from the river across busy roads and along sidewalks on motorways until finally reaching schoolyards and greener suburban parks.

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I woke up early with the sun on that second day in the Keelman, a downside of the long May days in England when the sun rises before 5:00 a.m. But I snoozed on and off until 8:00 or so and, after a shower to ease some of the stiffness from my first day's walk across the cityscape of Newcastle, wandered over to the restaurant sunroom for a huge English breakfast on a fine morning. I was wearing sandals; my feet were already sore, and I felt early pains that would grow significantly over the next eight days. But I was happy, contented even, in the fine English sunshine. I had finished day 1! It was a lot harder than expected, but today would be easier, with an earlier start and not too long a hike. Or so I thought.

I got in a brief discussion at breakfast with an American couple heading the other direction. We chatted about their day ahead. I warned them: "Watch out in River Park! There's a diversion in the path." But they exhibited the confidence of people with long days already behind them and no fear of the hike on tarmac ahead. They did ask me if I was hiking in those sandals, however, which does suggest something about either their air of superiority or how inept I must have looked to them as a walker. I assured them I had left my boots in the room and turned to conversation, after they left, with a much politer English gentleman about his many rambles along the wall path.

It took a while to get packed up, and I had to pay for my room and meal in the bar of the Big Lantern Pub, where I waited for what seemed like an hour behind three English women ordering enormously complicated cold drinks from the one man working there. I strolled off mid-morning in suburban parkland along the River Tyne, passing grannies with prams and passed by morning runners. I felt great listening to the birds in the reeds by the river.

Soon I was in the woodlands, where Hadrian's Wall Way becomes Hadrian's Wall Path, the name that lasts to the end of the trail in Bowness-on-Solway. The path leaves the River Tyne for good at Close House Golf Course, where the route shows signs of an uneasy truce between National Trail planners and golf resort executives. The path winds through the grounds in an obvious attempt to keep hikers completely hidden from golfers by cutting through woods and behind sheds and hedgerows as if the sight of backpacks and walking sticks would precipitate triple-putts. Perhaps, like the farmers and the cowboys in Oklahoma, golfers and walkers are not friends, but no one took notice of me—I was well-hidden, of course. Soon I

was walking up a steep hill out of the river valley with sumptuous views of bright yellow rapeseed fields to the village of Heddon-on-Wall, where indeed I saw my first piece of actual wall since Segendunum.

There's not much wall left along the walk, maybe 15 out of the 84 miles of trail. It took me the long Sunday and almost two hours that morning—an hour and forty-eight minutes and 2.26 miles to be precise, thanks to the phone app I carried on the route—to find this long bit of wall. What is excavated only suggests the ancient wall. The original plan of Hadrian's Wall was very regular, although there's a lot of evidence that the Romans made some things up as they went along or had to change the plan. Heddon-on-Wall has the longest stretch of broad wall—wall the size of its broad foundations—still around today. But by the middle of the wall, the Roman legions had abandoned this breadth and started building narrow wall on top of the broad foundations. Signs of changes along the way include Turret 29A, which would have been the first turret, moving east to west, between Roman miles 29 and 30 of the wall. The Roman legions built the turret before the wall caught up with them, it appears, because they built two pieces of pre-wall, which sticks out like small wings on either side of the turret, to connect to the broad wall when it arrived from the east. But what came along and passed on to the west was narrow wall, so the plans had changed by the time they got to Black Carts, the northernmost stretch of wall. Farther west, walkers can see excavated narrow wall with the original, broader foundations near the village of Gilsland, right at the border of the two English counties of Northumberland and Cumbria.

The wall ran from large fort to large fort across the narrowest part of what was then Britannia, starting at the River Tyne in the east and finishing at the Firth of Solway in the west (in the U.S., we might call it Solway Bay). The western half was originally built out of turf rather than stone, and there are still hilly remnants of the turf wall west of Birdoswald Roman Fort, the last excavated fort on the western side of Cumbria. Every Roman mile there was a milecastle, a small fort or "fortlet" in wall parlance, and in between each milecastle were two turrets. But that's hard to see today. Rather than a fortlet every mile and two towers between, there are ruins of the milecastles and turrets here and there, or sometimes just the shape of one outlined in the crops. Even the great Roman forts are often just big lumpy squares in a field, unexcavated or excavated and filled again.

We're not even sure how high the wall was or whether there was a walk and parapet along the top, although most scholars think there was. Arguing about the height and parapet seems to be the chief pastime of wall archaeologists; I have one scholarly book summarizing just about every theory and fact about the wall and its history. I don't recommend this book unless you like a nice nap in the afternoon. Anyway, a parapet and walk certainly fits with my imagination of the original wall. I get this from the movies, where Roman soldiers with large, curved shields and spears pace along the wall behind these had-to-be-there parapets, looking for barbarians while mumbling to each other in lower-class British accents. Luckily for my imagination, there's evidence engraved on the Rudge Cup, a ceremonial dish that might have functioned as an ancient Roman version of the gold watch given to a retiree. It's inscribed with the names of five forts at the western end of Hadrian's Wall and a picture that suggests a regular wall with large rectangular panes. The schematic drawing shows towers, perhaps the forts, with parapets where my East London Roman soldiers could pace. The British Museum has a replica of the cup, but the real one is the property of the Duke of Northumberland and resides in Alnwick Castle, whose noble courtyard appears in both the Harry Potter films and the final season of *Downton Abbey*.

Where there is no wall, there are often magnificent earthworks. As stunning as the remains of the wall itself are today in the fields and farmlands of northern England, the ditch on its north side and vallum along the south side are almost equally impressive today. The ditch is just that—a steep "V" along the north of the wall, still visible along many miles of the path. You can imagine it would have been very hard to charge a wall, however high it might have been, with this ditch in the way. In the middle of England and hence the middle of the wall, there are steep crags along a ridge called the Whin Sill. Staring over these steep cliffs to the north, it's very clear why the Romans didn't need a ditch along here. (Later we'll fantasize about pushing someone off the crags). And at the wall's northernmost point, Limestone Corner near Black Carts Farm, the Roman engineers

gave up trying to dig the northern ditch in the basalt whinstone, which we can see in huge blocks of the stone still lying on the ground north of the wall.

The purpose of the vallum on the south side is less clear. It was a huge, flat ditch, twenty feet wide and ten feet deep, with two large berms on either side. Since it follows the lines of some later forts on the south side of the wall, it was probably built later than the wall and might have marked a military zone. The Romans cut roads into the vallum later, however, and built forts on top of it. To think that these massive Roman earthworks have survived almost two thousand years of farming, grazing, and even quarrying is nothing short of impressive. Walking in and along the ditch and vallum, you get a sense of the size and scope of the construction since the wall itself comes and goes in short bits.

Hadrian became Emperor of Rome in 117 CE under somewhat dicey circumstances when the Emperor Trajan died. Trajan was Hadrian's guardian and apparently planned to make Hadrian emperor, but never got around to publicly declaring the succession. Perhaps he was ambivalent; his final years were marked by heavy drinking and failed campaigns against Parthia, an ancient part of Mesopotamia that today is roughly northern Iraq and Iran. Hadrian and Trajan's wife, Plotina, a supporter of Hadrian's his entire life, had to scramble to make his accession look legitimate in Rome, even though he had the support of the army all along. This could be why the often forward-thinking Hadrian made sure both his successor, Antoninus Pius, and his successor's successor, Marcus Aurelius (the one who shows up in the film *Gladiator*), were chosen before he died.

Hadrian reigned from 117–138, after Trajan, and before Antoninus Pius and Marcus Aurelius. These are four of the five traditional "good emperors." These four, along with Nerva, ruled during the height of peace and prosperity in the Roman Empire, the *Pax Romana*, from the end of the first to the end of the second century. They chose their successors by adoption rather than birth, although they were all senatorial families. But, as anyone who has studied history knows, "good" is quite a relative term, depending on who's doing the labeling. Hadrian is known for his love of Greek culture and magnificent buildings, such as the Pantheon in Rome and the Temple of Zeus Olympios in Athens. He was the first emperor to sport a beard, which set a fashion for a century. But at the end of his life, he fought a bitter war against the Jews, destroying Jerusalem and renaming it Aelia Capitolina after his family and the chief Roman gods of the capitol. It was in fact Machiavelli who coined the term "good emperors" in 1503.

The wall was part of a larger plan for Hadrian. One of his early policies was to stop Trajan's military expansions in Parthia, beyond the Tigris River, and Dacia (roughly Romania today), site of bloody campaigns and one of Trajan's greatest military triumphs. The empire erupted, from Britain to Egypt to Mesopotamia, at the death of Trajan. Hadrian had to act quickly to staunch the flow of blood while also securing his own shaky succession. He made strategic retreats, negotiated treaties, and bribed kings on the borders. In other words, he began his reign by shrinking the borders of the Roman Empire, which was not popular. There was a possible assassination attempt on Hadrian during his first year as emperor, followed by

the assassination of four ex-consuls by senate vote, carried out by Hadrian's man in Rome. He also spent lavishly during his first year in Rome to bribe the city back to his side. He was by no means a peaceful emperor—and he was devoted to the army—but he did not start new campaigns of expansion. A revolt against Rome in the north of Britain, which occurred during almost every new emperor's reign, probably drew his attention and perhaps started him thinking about fortified boundaries, since Britannia was on his first tour as emperor.

Before he left Rome for the first time as emperor, three years into his reign, Hadrian redrew the sacred boundary of Rome during the annual foundation ceremony of the city. Trajan had extended the empire into Dacia and Parthia but not the city's sacred boundaries; Hadrian emphatically re-drew the boundaries after giving up these very territories. This was in a sense his first wall, and the boundaries of the city were set with new boundary stones. He proceeded north to the German provinces and ordered the construction of a wooden palisade along the frontier. This palisade was clearly more a symbolic boundary than a military fortification, and it kept the soldiers busy as well. Hadrian wanted to mark the borders clearly for both the Romans and the German barbarians. His policy to not expand the empire led him to form symbolic boundaries as well as physical lines in Germania, North Africa, and Britannia.

Hadrian arrived in Britain from Germany in 122—hence the bus that runs along the wall during the summer is called the AD122. Hadrian likely surveyed a good part of the wall as well, perhaps to the high peaks of

the Pennines in the center of England today where the Pennine Way crosses Hadrian's Wall Path. Hadrian was famously attracted to climbing peaks. Three legions, comprised of Roman citizens and including many engineers and skilled workers, built the wall and then returned to bases and forts in the south of Britannia. Auxiliaries, non-citizen troops from conquered provinces, manned the wall. This meant soldiers from all over, even Syria, ended up in northern England with the worst weather of the empire. I wanted to walk the wall in May when I would experience some of that weather, but I'd rather spend the winter in southern Italy, France, or Spain—the Roman heartlands.

Hadrian deserves the credit for building what we call today Hadrian's Wall, although it was called the Severan Wall until 1839 when a local clergyman, the Rev. John Hodgson, proved it had been built originally by Hadrian. Emperor Septimius Severus made significant repairs and changes to Hadrian's Wall in the third century. But it is Hadrian's Wall or the Wall of Aelius in Roman times, after Hadrian's family name. One irony is that Severus was the first "bad" emperor after the five good emperors I mentioned earlier, and his reign presaged the crises of the third century in Rome . . .

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A few years ago, I traveled to Rome to learn more about Hadrian. It was my first trip in over seven years and the city, the monuments, and the food were glorious. I spent a lot of time at two of Hadrian's most famous buildings—the Pantheon in the historical center of Rome and his villa in Tivoli, an hour or so east of the city by local bus.

My growing obsession with the wall made me think it was important to him as well. If walking it was this important to me, it must have been important to him! I was feeling a bond with Hadrian, a kinship. I had read Marguerite Yourcenar's ***Memoirs of Hadrian***, a beautiful piece of historical fiction published in 1951. The novel is a long letter to Marcus Aurelius from the dying Hadrian narrating the dying emperor's entire life. Yourcenar has given us Hadrian's voice, and anyone who reads this book will always hear her Hadrian.

We know, from many historical sources and actions he took, that the project of creating boundaries around the empire was important to him. It was part of Hadrian's project of redefining what it meant to be Roman. But his heart was not in northern Britannia. His heart was in the east, where he met a teenage boy who became the love of his life, as we shall see in the next chapter, and at the end of his life, his heart was at his **villa in Tivoli**, where he recreated the empire with himself at the center. This was the largest Roman villa ever constructed, with thousands and thousands of slaves who worked in underground kitchens and traveled in hidden corridors so Hadrian didn't have to see the people who served him. The villa was his life's work. He designed many buildings, most notably the masterpiece of the Pantheon, and worked on his villa for over twenty years. The wall was but a peripheral boundary for Hadrian, a short walk in Britain before moving on to greater things while his legions carried out his vision in the farthest corner of his empire. He was the emperor of Rome, the most powerful and richest man in the history of the world. He was a God. All the emperors were deified, but Hadrian lived like a God in his villa.

We are all divine in our aspirations if not our deeds. And my deed was God-like, walking across England, solving the problem of my father's suicide after twenty-five years. Making the world whole again, as God promises in the Bible. This is called *tikkum olam* in Hebrew: "repairing the world." This is something we all try, we all should try. And then I hit a dead end because I took a wrong turn, and I'm no God at all, just Bob, who can't get anything right at work no matter how hard he tries.

Today, Hadrian's villa is in ruins.

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I felt like I had to keep going. As I thought about this during the walk, sort of "meta-thinking" about what was happening, I thought about how we live this way every day. It sounds trite, I'm sure, to say that we have to keep going, and perhaps it is trite. But think about how hard that can be. We all have lived in the past, dwelling on successes or failures or resentments, rather than moving ahead. And we have all known someone who couldn't move forward. We say they are paralyzed—by grief, fear, indecision, depression. They can't "get on with their lives." They can't move. The metaphor of movement, of progress along our life's journey or pilgrimage is fundamental to how we think about ourselves and our lives. There are many paths, yes, but only one direction—forward.

Hadrian could not move forward after Antinous's death. We know about Antinous because of Hadrian's public, powerful grief

that obsessed him for the rest of his life. There are at least 100 marble images of Antinous discovered so far, more than any other ancient Roman besides Augustus and Hadrian himself. Hadrian immediately deified Antinous—against convention, since this was still reserved for the senate—and built a temple-tomb to his dead lover in a new city across the Nile. His magnificent villa outside Rome included a temple to Antinous and multiple statues and images of his beloved. I visited this villa the December after the walk. The Antinoeion, as the temple was called, is only a ruin now, but huge—a football-field-sized temple complex. The cult begun by Hadrian in 132 continued long enough to be critiqued by Christians in the fourth century, for whom Antinous was seen as a rival savior to Christ. If Hadrian loved Antinous during his life as fiercely as he grieved and memorialized him after his death, then it was a powerful infatuation indeed.

Maybe it gets harder to move on. I am not sure we look back more as we grow older, but there is more to look back on: regrets, resentments, joys, successes. We carry the past with us, just as I carried my pack forward every day. Sometimes that feels very heavy indeed, sometimes lighter, but we carry who we are. The pack gets heavier as we get older, as dreams fade or become realities, as we lose loved ones. This burden, the things he carried, must have been very heavy for my father. And he could not keep going.

I won't ever know exactly what was going on the year or so before he killed himself. Something went wrong in my father's world, in his head, and he couldn't get over it. He couldn't move on. He couldn't bend. I think about the camping trip in Wisconsin, the times he yelled at us for not getting dressed on the weekend until late in the morning, the way he stuck to a rigorous routine in exercise and diet. He was very disciplined and never very flexible. When the blow of the lawsuit fell, he was not able to bend. It stayed in his head and surely contributed to a disease that might have taken its toll regardless, but might not have led to suicide. We all carry burdens in our heads. I'll never know what other burdens he was carrying along his path . . .

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A few months after the walk across Hadrian's Wall, as twenty-five years became twenty-five years and three months, I realized while walking the dog by the creek that I would never have a conversation with my father. That seems obvious, of course, hardly unique to me. Indeed, that acute realization is one of the most painful parts of grief when a loved one dies. But memories fade, one year becomes five, ten, and now twenty-five. Experience fades and becomes memory. Memory becomes narrative.