Louis Ebarb - The Cliffs of Moher

skeptic

BILL VERNON

A FEW WEEKS AGO ALONG CAME THIS Australian woman trainer (looking like a teenager) who insisted that I walked wrong. I watched her just enough to shake my head, smile, even chuckle, then turn off her YouTube video. Walking is God's, evolution's, and my parents' free gift, which I've been doing for decades. I knew what I was doing!

Ever since my childhood, for some reason, people love to give me advice, almost all of it unsolicited. Early on, I learned that I prefer to make my own mistakes. And I don't need any help doing it, thank you. At this relatively advanced stage of my life now, the way I am (I like to think) is a product of my own choices. Obviously, that's an exaggeration. Nature, society, biology, concerns inside and out force me into unavoidable decisions and actions. If all this so far seems confused, it, admittedly, might be.

The point is—I'm responsible for what I do whether your ideas or my own lead me astray. I'm a skeptic, okay? I ignore most things I consider advice almost out of hand, the same way I imagine some (hopefully just a few) editors reject my writing submissions. What I know and believe is derived from my experiences, such as they are.

However, this trainer's idea lurked while my walk later that day turned into a slippery slog in mud. Plodding along, trying to avoid a fall, resembled the way I'd gone slowly in that very same place a decade before, searching under leaves, by rotted logs, around stumps, hunting morel mushrooms. The possibility of finding the fungi made them resemble pieces of gold. (The morels were in fact worth $40 a pound at a local grocery store.) I'd walked eagerly and positively then, in the spring of three years, until the morels died out. Hunting mushrooms had vitalized those walks because I'd expected / known that something worthwhile could reveal itself at any moment.

In contrast, my daily walks now are robotic, slower, shorter, less enthused. Crossing busy streets, dodging wild Broncos and Mustangs is the only time I achieve what the nearsighted

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might think is speed. Am I not pushing myself to walk through painful stresses, paying for youthful sins and adult maladjustments?

Alright already! I could be walking incorrectly.

I carefully watched the video's version of how to walk: keeping my head up and shoulders back, my feet parallel pointing straight ahead while coming down near the front of the heel, rolling my weight straight forward, pushing off with the balls of the feet and toes.

The trainer's explanation seemed exactly as I'd done years before, ignoring my mother's advice to ride with a neighbor, walking home alone the two-mile northeast to southwest span of Lebanon, Ohio, after third- and fourth-grade classes ended. My walking had once been natural and fun.

Corroboration of this trainer's ideas came from remembering a study that showed how the Tarahumara Indians, with a similar step pattern, ran "100-mile races in sandals" in the mountainous "Copper Canyons region of northwestern Mexico."

I blame America. It had made me this way—gun-shy. Message after message, greeting after greeting, people were trying to sell me something for their benefit, not my own. That's why I stumbled around scrutinizing before adopting this expert trainer's advice. I report to you now that it does work for me.

What had gone wrong? My walking style's corruption began during my three years of USMC infantry rifleman duty. At seventeen years old, in the state of adolescent *naïveté*, I'd adopted the drill instructors' advice: if we sissies didn't shed our soft civilian ways, we would endure more suffering from them than we were already absorbing. Their how-to-walk strategy was to do more than we thought possible; help colleagues who have a hard time; and never stop because that's giving up. Forget the mechanics of a good walking style.

Of course Marines weren't preparing us to stroll across a deserted street into an ice cream parlor. They were talking forced marches. Theirs was a simple psychological game: do what you have to do until it's done. Ignore your pain or weariness. Take an aspirin if you have to.

Hearing this description, a friend who is a poet said, "That's Neanderthal thinking."

True, the Marine Corps attitude is ancient: survival of the fittest. In this regard, a spokesman for a generation before mine, Clint Eastwood as Dirty Harry, said that a person's "got to know his limitations." Neanderthals learned their limits by necessity, and that helped them live among saber-toothed tigers and mammoths. The Marine Corps similarly tested our physical and mental limits, mainly by walking, and most of us learned we could do a lot more than we'd thought possible.

How could this training corrupt a walking style? Thinking the USMC way developed a machismo attitude. In full gear I took pride keeping pace with seemingly sadistic leaders who pushed us to extremes. Our lines of troops accordioned, hurrying up and slowing down, running and walking, so our times were much faster than the USMC's two-and-a-half miles per hour for average troop movements. We did marches of 50 miles per day, even 150 miles in five days.

After my YouTube trainer's prompting insight, I realized that just as golf supposedly spoiled good walks for Mark Twain, Marine Corps-forced marches had spoiled mine. My mental marriage of marching and walking deserved a divorce.

Each form of hoofing-it disrupts the other. Marches changed my natural (healthier) walking style by focusing on stamina, speed, and a tough-guy image.

The attitudes developed from readopting a more natural walking style would of course be unthinkable on a Marine march. Grizzled Sergeant Okeefe, a Korean War vet, occasionally revisits me even now, appearing long enough when I "lollygag" to bark that he'll bury his combat boot in my "keister" if I don't get my ass in gear, both euphemistically and crudely mixing his metaphors, urging more intense participation with my helmeted brethren. (There were no sistren in the infantry ranks then.) The best walks, I've found, avoid rushing.

Being sure to walk "correctly," I've discovered, doesn't take much attention after it becomes habit. Without distractions, my senses reach outward and tell me what's going on, what I'm going through: the environment, the natural world, whatever else is there. I concentrate on the moment. A good walk for me is like skinny-dipping in a deep, cool lake on a hot day. In a time that threatens oblivion, a good walk connects me to fundamentals.

You might call that grounding: knowing where you are and where you came from. Recently a Brittany spaniel taught me a lesson. She was leashed to a man who was himself leashed to a phone, discussing something so loudly his voice reached me on a different forest path thirty yards away. He allowed the dog twenty feet of freedom, and though the man impatiently tugged and yelled at her, his pet excitedly ignored him—sniffing, digging among roots, zigzagging behind his master, yipping and yawping, discovering new possibilities, existences, and delights. Meanwhile, his master moved on, talking with someone not there.

That dog had presence. He was fully where he was. That man was multitasking, which is sometimes necessary, but often evadable. I'd rather be like the dog, open to what is around me. A good walk, I relearned, is escape from routine and distractions like TV, earbuds, and cell phones.

On a good walk, which by definition means outside, Nature tells me we are all living here, and we includes you. We are all related, interconnected, energy dancing together, and dancing, don't forget, is walking made into artful celebration. This is not advice; just the facts.

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