

A photograph of a person walking away from the camera down a dirt path in a forest. The path is lined with trees and greenery, leading towards a bright, hazy light at the end. The person is wearing a dark jacket and pants.

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Creating the Path as We Go, or Wayfinding through the Feet

IT IS LATE SPRING AND I AM walking in one of our local nature preserves when I encounter a painted turtle slowly working her way uphill from the nearby pond and across the mowed path. It is nesting season, and I think she must be looking for a suitable spot to lay her eggs, a ritual developed through millions of years of reptile evolution and wayfinding and still with its degree of mystery to our scientific inquiry.

Two seasons later, in late autumn along the same trail, I come across a fuzzy caterpillar moving even more slowly across the path on her enigmatic journey to unknown ends. I pause and watch as she crosses one blade of grass at a time, a pace almost unimaginably slow to my mind yet also very beautiful in its complex rhythms. I wonder how long it takes her to cross this six-foot path, how she knows where to go, and at her remarkable sense of purpose. I think about what it would be like for humans to have a similar instinctual

sense of moving through the world, albeit somewhat faster.

Wayfinding in the contemporary built environment is an information systems-driven project relying heavily on visual cues, mirroring the privileging of that sense over our others in our modern world. I have been noticing how much I also rely on vision to find my way through both urban and natural environments. In response to this overreliance on vision, as part of my regular walks, I have been trying to more consciously engage my other senses. On one of my favorite paths in a local county park, I have noticed that at a certain point along the creek, I regularly disturb a small group of ducks who naturally sense I am coming long before I see them and noisily fly off. It alerts me that I am about halfway along the path. There are numerous large oaks and willows marking the way, more than a few of which have fallen into the creek, creating swirling eddies that add a gentle rapids and good structure

for fish but also catchments for the ubiquitous plastic trash that finds its way into the creek. I also am more attuned to the sound of the wind and the birdsong, the frozen crunch or soft muddiness of the path under my feet, and other sensory cues. The more I walk the path the more familiar it becomes to me and the more I am attuned to some of its mysteries and changing rhythms through the seasons. I become more aware of the path's textures, of a relational experience. I feel like I create my own path, an experiential as well as a psychogeographical one, as I traverse the physical landscape.

The anthropologist [Tim Ingold](#) calls this form of embodied practice “walking as a way of knowing”—the idea being that we create our way and our stories as we move through the paths of the world, generating knowledge through our movements, gestures, and perceptions. We develop an experiential understanding of the world and create approved routes

and no-go zones in an ongoing and fluid dialogue with the physical and psychological environment. Walking is a multisensorial experience, particularly engaging the haptic sense. As [Michel de Certeau](#) suggests, walking becomes a long poem (*The Practice of Everyday Life*).

This concept of knowledge and the poetics of movement also fits with the practice of walking meditation. Though I cognitively know the general contours of these local paths, each time I travel them I experience something new, the bend of a tree root, a particular eddy in the creek, an unexpected birdsong, a deer path into a willow thicket, the smell of a prairie flower, an insect making its way, or the sound of my footsteps in different seasons. I attempt to be in the present and allow the way to unfold how it will. In this way the paths remain fresh, and I attempt to attune myself to the rhythms of the land, each of us humans and non-humans finding our way through the world. ✕