



Footsteps

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THE BLAST OF THUNDER ricochets off the ridge and rattles the windows of our mountain cabin. It's early morning and I woke to hailstones pelting our metal roof. I watched those dark-bellied clouds, heavy with this summer storm, lumber over the nearby ridge last evening and settle above our valley. I feel the morning chill in our cabin, and a fire in the stone hearth would be nice right now—Kuma, my border collie, would love to curl up in front of it—but

that cozy fire will wait. I'm impatient, been waiting this storm out, eager to get outside to walk the dampened trail and hear the hush of the softened needles under my feet. The hail has stopped. I think the storm is moving on.

I look through the rain-streaked windows and catch a hint of bluish light, the blink of a flash, then hear a faint echoing clash of thunder, looking, sounding further to the west. This energy dance of the earth and sky will soon grace another part of the valley.

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Time to bundle up, get out there, feel the sizzle of energy left behind.

Boots, coat, and hat, a pocketful of tasty dog treats, water bottle, snack bar for me, and I follow my feet out the door. My dog feels something, too, nudges my hand with his nose and follows right behind.

We find ourselves, once again, at the edge of our forest. Trees have been thinned near our cabin to reduce fuel, to help mitigate the potential of drought-driven forest fires. But up ahead the stand is thicker, darker green. Clouds have followed their storm center toward the mountains to the west, leaving room for the sun to filter through the trees. Stepping stones of light beckon us deeper into the stand. How far will we walk today? Just the mile to Cold Creek? Or further, the two hours up to the meadow?

The mountain air is starting to warm. We head into the trees. I hear my footsteps, my dog's paws padding, soft on the cushiony ground. The sun begins to pull the sweet scent from the pines' bark. I walk right up to a Jeffrey pine, bury my nose in its trunk, and smell its familiar hint of vanilla that will get more lush and sweet with the warming sun. We enter the territory of the crows and jays, cawing and screaming at our intrusion. Douglas squirrels bark and chirp at us, asking our business. Good question.

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What is it that draws me to walk the untamed trails, to walk off the trails, to follow the deer paths, to step within the trees? Why am I drawn to clamber up a granite-bound mountain, the steeper the better? What do I extract through the soles of my boots from the dirt, the decomposed material, the alluvial layer, the creek crossing into the heart of my heart—or sinew or bone? I feel a settling when I walk, climb, hike. My legs may ache, I wipe sweat from my face, will need to catch my breath, but my feet on the ground centers me, satisfies me, answers the question.

At times, it's the impact. When driven, anxious, wanting to walk out of my skin, my feet remind me that I need to focus on them to navigate the unpaved trail, step around rocks, tread over branches. I attend to and feel only the contact, my steps, my heartbeat, the exertion, not the welling angst, the yearning, or rising unrest. My focus levels me, pulls me toward my center.

I'm not out for a stroll, rather a full-body hike! Maybe it's the endorphins.

And then there's the walk when relaxed—a meander, a wander, a stroll. A walk inspired by the joy of feeling immersed in nature. A trudge one day, boots in mud; a saunter another, my feet talking to the ground.

I wish to sink these feet as deep as the earth will allow, steps planted fully. I imagine roots sprouting from my toes,

pushing through the soles of my shoes, wriggling into the soil. My roots might absorb an electrical charge from within our earth, rout it to my fingertips, and galvanize my senses. Last night's lightning bolts ripped through the air with their negative charge to balance our earth's positive. Energized, maybe balanced, my walk becomes a communion with trees, rocks, clouds, creatures, with self.



Today, my walk feels like a bit of seeking. The storm rattled the windows and rattled my calm. I want the soothing I feel amidst these trees, the forest refreshed from its cloud bath. Kuma and I stop near a cluster of purple lupine. He settles down to crunch a dried twig between his paws.

I watch a small pollinator insect hover and dip and remember [David Attenborough's](#) talk about plants and bees communicating through their electrical charges; their electrical fields balance each other out. Plants, standing on their roots latched to the ground, have a negative electrical charge. He shares a device that measures that tiny electrical field. It hums. Bees have a positive charge, and with this they communicate: flower says nectar source is depleted, come back later; or flower says I have nectar again, come on in, so the bees indulge, and pollen actually leaps over to the positive-charged bee! So

this electrical energy coming through my toes sounds like a real thing! A bit of earthing—a new term I found perusing the internet. Much more to discover, understand, feel. I stop and consider removing my boots, remove all insulation! No, not yet; the needles are pokey, even if still damp.

Kuma and I start up again. I hear a woodpecker at work, my footsteps, and the comfortable sound of paws padding. I pay attention: I raise my knee, feel

my foot in the air, the start of forward movement; step down.

At times, it's just knowing that I can make progress. I may have no destination, know only an inkling of direction. I may not see a path. There may be no path, my way obscured by doubt, grief, or fear, or by logs, slash, and forest duff. But I will sense movement, and that can sustain me for the time being. I can walk from here to there.



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I did cover ground, here to there, for days when my son and I walked through the Andes in Peru, climbing and descending mountain passes in our leather boots, sleeping in tents outside small villages. We met women along the trail, walking in sandals, wearing bright colors that stood out against the brown of the foothills, and leading llamas that wore their own colored headpieces. That first day, I learned how to inhale and exhale in the thin air, how to check my feet for sore spots. We were led by Jose, our knowledgeable and enthusiastic Peruvian guide, our food was prepared by a cook, and our necessities carried by horses. My feet hold the treasured memory.

My husband and I went on a wee walk, fifty-five miles, through the Scottish Highlands, staying in old country inns—my introduction to nutty single malts. We traipsed past farms, by flocks of sheep and ancient standing stones. We walked over springy moss, climbed stone walls, and waded through mud. We got off track—crossed the wrong bridge, walked along the wrong fork of the river, were caught in a downpour—memorable steps on unintentional new ground.

Sometimes I crave the exertion, a push, and my walking has led me to scale heights. My daughter and I trekked up Mount Kilimanjaro in

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2018—she to the top, me to 17,450 feet. This became a hike of exhaustion, debilitating elevation, freezing temperatures, otherworldly sights, wonderful people, and awe. Climbing Mount Whitney with my husband at age forty-nine was rewarding and tough—a physical challenge of altitude sickness, plodding, one foot in front of the other, gorgeous sights, the bluest of skies. Hiking to the cables on Half Dome and climbing to its peak twice—the goal, the blisters, the hours, the way granite holds my feet in place, being above and within so much beauty. And the numerous hikes to the Yosemite High Sierra Camps and to Sierra backpacking camps of our own making—wildflowers, high meadows, fording rivers, the sore back, sore legs, the push up the mountain to get somewhere before dark.

I seek the exertion. Sometimes the effort is the reward.



I sense, at times, that my walking, traipsing, and plodding—my drive—may be connected to more than the ground and granite beneath my feet. I catch a glimpse of ancestral connection through time, feel reverberations of movement a century old. My Italian relatives, my father's heritage, traversed their vineyards, olive orchards, and narrow cobblestone streets in their hilltop village of Castelvechio in Tuscany.

I walked those village streets when I was twenty-one and again when I was fifty-six—through alleys, under stone arches, to the overgrown family graveyard. I imagine my grandparents and great-grandparents as they walked to church, strolled to their neighbors to share a meal, and made their way to the low rock wall that overlooks the green fields below. I can see their purposeful walk to the same graveyard to pay respects and leave flowers. Their footsteps leave invisible imprints on stone, soil, and on me.

My other Italian ancestors lived further north in the foothills of the Apuan Alps, in the small commune of Pontremoli. They walked over the medieval stone bridge that crosses the Magra River, atop the path of pilgrims that traveled the Via Francigena, the Camino to Rome, from Canterbury, England, through France and Switzerland, crossing Italy to Rome. Thunderclouds climb toward the Alps and can hurl lightning bolts and release rain along their way. The rains fall and swell the Magra, and villagers hurry to huddle under awnings and archways. My ancestor was the cobbler in Pontremoli in a line of cobblers. He made the shoes that crossed the bridge, plodded the muddy paths hugging the river, sloshed through puddles, and hurried to find shelter from the rain.

Maybe I walk like them. Connected with stone, soil, and history.

Further to the east, Armenia feels exotic. Many footsteps crossed this ancient land, residing in the Caucasus Mountains. Traders walked the Silk Road through Armenia, carrying spices, silks, and ideas on the route linking China to Rome. And pilgrims walked miles along mountain paths to the Tatev Monastery, seeking spiritual renewal. My grandmother Abisag would walk with her mother, my great-grandmother, from their village to town, through worn hillsides in worn leather shoes. Our story is that in 1906, Abisag, at age twelve, betrothed to a man in her village, traveled with her new family by horseback, camel, and foot from Armenia to Marseille, France. They eventually boarded a ship to carry them to Ellis Island. I hear, through story, their footsteps that paced the weathered wooden deck of the ship that delivered them to America, feet that felt the current of the sea through their boots. A lightning strike flashed in the distance and illuminated the shore as they approached land. This story has filtered through two generations; their story continued when their feet touched their new home.

My grandmother traveled over two thousand miles from her village in Armenia to France in 1906, some of which, maybe most of which, was by foot. She'd left her home, seeking a new life. Eight years later in 1914, Armenians were forced to march

through the desert, away from their homeland, many to their death. A cultural, ethnic atrocity. What energy did their feet gather from the parched ground? I avoid the documented scenes and stories of those who walked, vacant eyes on hopeless faces. I cannot avoid hearing and feeling an innate memory of doomed footsteps.

Maybe I walk for them. For those who did not choose to walk, who walked until their feet stopped, could no longer lift, and ceased.

I hear and repeat their stories, distant and distinct, etched in memory. It may be that the echo of their steps as they walked on cobblestones, through desert, under archways, and through mud reverberate when I walk—like a conduit, leading my feet to connect with a charged current through ground and through time—fueling me, pulling me, carrying me.

Today, this brightening summer morning, I am walking through the trees of a forest that feels like home. I chose to lace up the boots that carry me down familiar paths or across untrodden places. I feel my motion, I feel the warming sun, my feet on damp ground. We reach Cold Creek. Its ripples sound like a welcome. Calming. My dog wades in up to his chest. I take off my boots, pull off my socks, and soak my feet in the chilled water. We'll stay awhile. Then head off further, to the meadow, or somewhere—not ready to stop walking. ✧

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