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The Slow Art of the Saunter

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WE ARE ALWAYS GOING somewhere. The top of the peak, the end of the ride. The next meeting, the next assignment. We are constantly doing, achieving, striving. Always with some goal in mind—even if it is recreational.

We forget . . . to just . . . be.

There's a lot we miss in not just being.

I've formed a habit that contributes vastly to the tiny tendrils of sanity I cling to. Every morning I make my tea, don whatever gear the early temperatures demand, and go on a saunter. Most days it is exactly the same saunter, on a trail popular for walking dogs, chatting with friends, going on a jog, or that quick pre-work mountain bike ride.

I walk extremely slowly and admit to an amount of self-consciousness in doing so. I don't have a dog to blame it on or a child tottering after me, and so when hearing footsteps or tire treads approach, I nonchalantly pull off the trail and pretend to look at something—a yellow warbler flitting in the willows, the newly unfurled

banners of the cheer-drenched mule's ear sunflower.

It is amazing to notice what exists in the world when you're not moving so fast, not doing several things at once in the interest of efficiency and lack of time.

So often we whiz by—pedaling like the boogeyman is chasing us—and it is hard to notice the tiny bird's nest in the one pine tree in the otherwise aspen-drenched forest, or the tiny olive-colored bird with the red crest like a mohawk that frequents it, or that the nest somehow disappeared the following year.

It's hard to hear the heralds of spring—the red-winged blackbirds on first arrival, the buzzy trill of the first hummingbird, that heart-throbbing first robin's call—when on a cell phone making a string of appointments for later that day.

It's hard to catch the green glint of that first blade of grass when engrossed in a conversation inducing visions of the people you're mad at.

When we hurry so much we put our bodies in a constant state of stress. Evolutionarily, this stress charged our

adrenaline so we could run from the saber-toothed tiger and other threats. But then we outwitted the tiger and the chase was over. Tigers didn't chase us every waking hour. We rested afterwards.

In our modern world, we subject our bodies to the equivalent of constantly running from that saber-toothed tiger due to a barrage of irrelevant stresses and inconsequential worries that aren't life threatening, but our brain stem tells us they are because it has not evolved quickly enough to distinguish a tiger from a demanding text that really could be put on hold for another thirty minutes until we are done with our saunter. Our heart rate surges the same. As does our adrenaline and its companion, cortisol. And we're feeding the very thing we came to get away from. The physiology and chemistry of what's supposed to be a life-saving reaction has, in fact, become a source of our emotional and physical demise on a variety of levels.

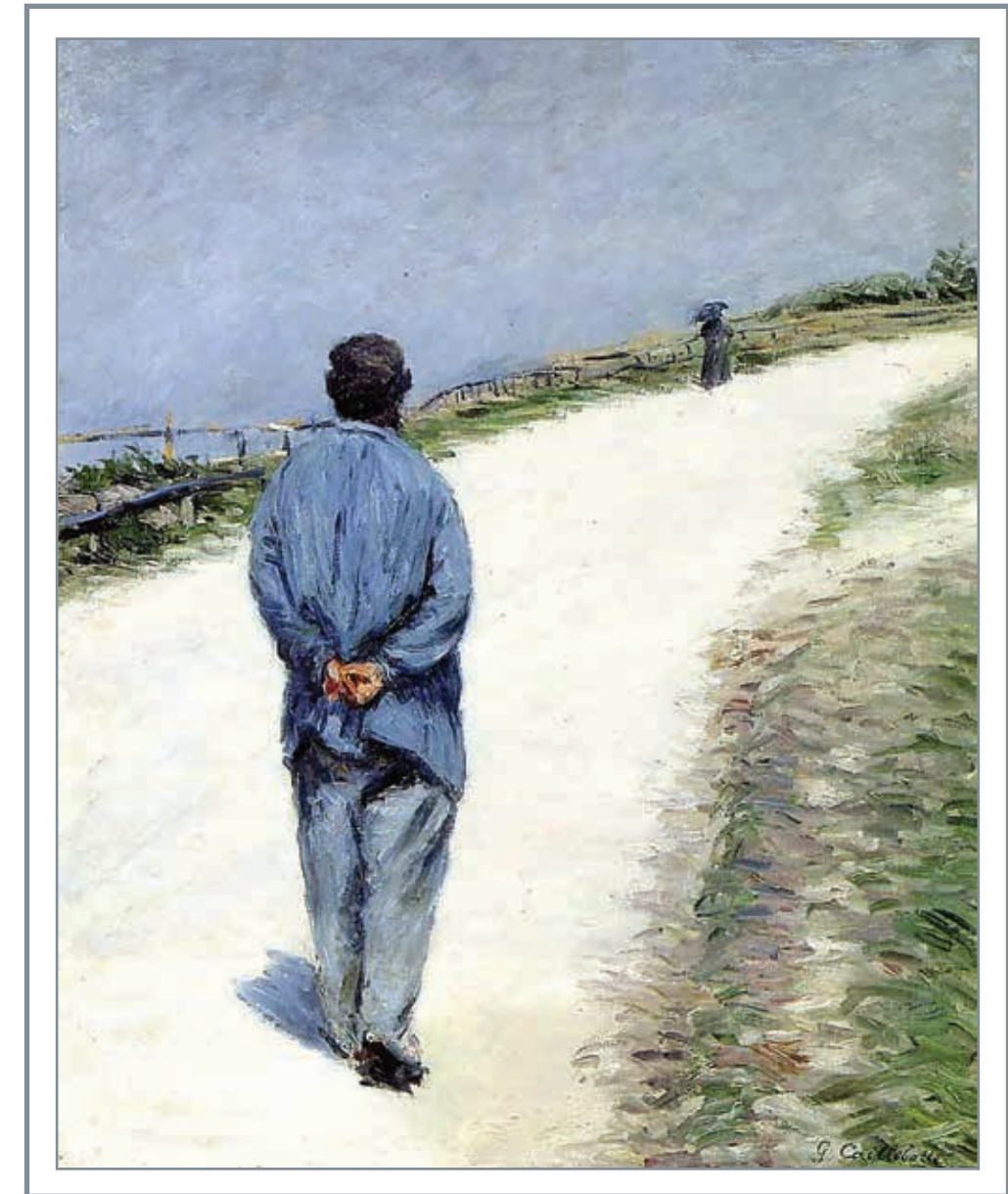
In the scenario at hand, the one of being on a walk in the woods when we are constantly on our cell phones, constantly talking, constantly trying to get the ride or the run or the walk over with so we can move on to the next thing, we are missing the point of being out there in the first place. We are missing the golden opportunity to be in the present—that present with the air sweetly perfumed with the newly bloomed wild peas, that present with the way the sun glowingly filters

through the aspen leaves creating intricate patterns of shadow and light, that present with the great blue heron on her morning ritual fly to that high alpine lake abundant with fish.

I am one who believes that nature serves as a great tonic for our busy, overworked lives, but only if we intentionally create the time and space to listen and notice, to let the effervescent green of a new aspen leaf sink into our pores, to evaporate the hardened surface of our own skin until it dissipates into sunlight. To become one with where we are.

When we put everything else down and engage in just the simple act of noticing, we gain the perspective of what's actually important. We orient toward something larger than ourselves. The microbes in the soil, the electromagnetic pulses of the earth, and the vitamin D of the sunshine contribute to our health, making us calmer, happier. We stop the constant shots of cortisol into our overtaxed bloodstream and allow our bodies to reset. In this state we are better to the people around us—friends, children, spouse, ourselves, even the person taking too much time in the grocery store line.

We find, through the joy of discovering the squawks of the great blue heron babies as they receive newly caught fish from their parents, that it really doesn't take so much to make us happy. Why all this running and fretting and worrying? We gain self-



Gustave Caillebotte, *Father Magloire on the Road between Saint-Clair and Etretat*, 1884

awareness, realizing we had hunched our shoulders up around our earlobes in response to the constant stimulus. We notice how utterly manic and ridiculous we have become, so addicted we are to our gadgets and screens and the never-ending search to get somewhere else.

There is a magic and a beauty that comes from the “just being” of a slow saunter. All that we have to do, all those angers and frustrations and stresses fall away until all we are left with is the absolute absorption into simply what is. ✱