Walking with Thoreau in Mind and Dogs on Leash

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Abstract This essay takes as its starting point the challenge posed by Henry David Thoreau's 1861 essay "Walking," which suggests that even the shortest walk around the neighborhood should be approached as a quest for wildness, a quest that must be taken up in such a "spirit of undying adventure" that the walker must be prepared "never to return." The author draws on her personal experiences to explore the ways that such a Thoreauvian walk might take shape in the suburban and urban environments where most people live in the contemporary United States. She proposes that bringing a dog as a companion may enhance the wildness of a walk, despite the ways that dogs can work against many of Thoreau's values by functioning as distractions and added responsibilities. In this essay, she explains the literary tradition that treats dogs as guides to wildness and the more-than-human world in order to argue that, if we pay proper attention, dogs' sensory capabilities in particular can point us toward the invisible wild dimensions of the natural world.

Key words dogs; Henry David Thoreau; walking; wildness

Though Henry David Thoreau is best known for his retreat to the cabin on Walden Pond, where he stripped his life down to the most basic physical necessities in order to pursue higher spiritual truths, it is the act of walking that best characterizes his work. As Henrik Otterberg points out, the walk, ramble, and excursion are fundamental to Thoreau's writing and thinking, both as the methods by which he gathered information and developed ideas and as the narrative structure for many of his talks, essays, and books. By the time Thoreau completed the essay "Walking" in 1861, near the end of his life, he was able to represent walking as a practice that brought mind and body into alignment: the best way to leave the distractions of everyday life behind and seek out the wild wisdom of the more-than-human world.

Thoreau's essay "Walking" was the culmination of a lifetime spent exploring the woods and fields around his home, thinking deeply in response to what he saw, heard, and otherwise experienced, and pondering its significance further in many of his lectures and published works. I can't say the same for this essay, even though I have now lived more years than Thoreau ever did. I have moved too often to develop the intimacy with a place that Thoreau achieved with the area around Concord, Massachusetts, and I have filled my life with too many commitments to employers, students, family, and companion animals to spend the kind of time he did exploring. When I first read "Walking," though, I was dismayed to realize I was one of the many he describes as never having taken a real walk, since I inevitably "come round again at evening to the old hearth-side from which [I] set out" (244). The true capital-W walker, or saunterer, is equally at home everywhere, he tells us, and the idea of joining this select company captured my imagination. In my attempts to become a Thoreauvian walker, I have faced many impediments, but I have also had time to wonder if there might not be ways to achieve Thoreau's goal by methods other than those he used — to reach the same destination by a different path, to use a walking metaphor. Specifically, since so many of my best walks have occurred in the company of dogs, I would like to ask the question, "How might a dog detract from — but also contribute to — the quest to achieve a Thoreauvian walk?"

I did not always aspire to artful walking. In 1981, I was a freshman at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York. When I arrived on campus, I was overwhelmed by many things: the fact that I was eleven hours away from home without one familiar face to ground me; the fact that the sun was behind the clouds and — as I would discover — would not come out for the next thirty days; the rugged beauty of the campus with its waterfalls and steep hills; and the fact that I was expected to walk everywhere I needed to go, even when those steep hills were covered with ice. I had grown up in a semi-rural area, and like most people who live in such places, I was used to driving almost everywhere. The idea that my only form of transportation to class, to stores, to the library, to the movies was my own two feet — even if it was raining! — made me a little indignant. And then there was the pace. From the moment I set off walking, I would be marking time, asking myself "Are we there yet?" and resenting every step, fuming that I didn't have a *Star Trek*-style transporter that would just beam me from my dorm room to my destination in an instant. So I walked, but I walked fast, impatiently, unhappily, with only my destination, and my distance from it, in mind.

It wasn't always that way — as a child, I ran all over the neighborhood, often in bare feet, on roads, in the woods, through my neighbors' backyards. But that was different. I wasn't trying to get anywhere by any particular point in time. I was wandering, looking for familiar sights, like the spring beauties and wild Sweet William that appeared on the edges of the woods in early spring, or occasional visitors, like the black snake eating a baby squirrel that transfixed all the neighborhood children one afternoon, or the unexpected, like the stand of pine trees I found one day after climbing over the barbed wire fence and entering the forbidden territory of Bruton's Woods — a breathtakingly silent and serene expanse of needle-carpeted ground filled with shafts of sunlight and gently waving branches. Without a destination, I didn't think of myself as condemned to an inferior means of getting there. Walking was the only way to be in the landscape, to move across fences and creeks, and it went hand-in-hand with being open to whatever the place had to offer.

Without realizing it, I was taking what you might recognize as a Thoreauvian walk. Or was I? After all, I always knew where I was and wound up safe in bed at the end of the day. Although Thoreau starts his essay by warning us that he will be making an extreme statement, his description of a true walk is still a daunting one. He tells us that even "the shortest walk" around the neighborhood should be approached as a quest that we take up "in the spirit of undying adventure, never to return" (244). He adds, "If you are ready to leave father and mother, and brother and sister, and wife and child and friends, and never see them again; if you have paid your debts, and made your will, and settled all your affairs, and are a free man; then you are ready for a walk" (244).

I actually paraphrased this statement when starting off on a walk of my own about four years ago, at the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment conference in Victoria, British Columbia. It was supposed to be a simple conference field trip to the East Sooke Wilderness Park, planned to take about three hours. As someone who grew up watching the American television show *Gilligan's Island*, I should have known to be wary of a "three-hour tour," but it seemed pretty tame at the beginning: about 50 of us filed onto a bus and ate our box lunches along the way. When we learned there would be no guide, I was a little surprised, but we were each given a map, and the directions seemed simple enough. But the friend I was walking with and I fell behind the rest of the group, the trail grew hard to follow once we reached the rocky coast, and eventually we found ourselves trapped in a sort of peninsula surrounded by ravines filled with salal, a dense evergreen shrub that can grow up to ten feet high.

We could feel the chill coming on as afternoon bled into evening, and we moved up a little incline to get into the sunlight. As the light dimmed and the cold crept up the hill, I was overcome with the realization of my physical vulnerability, of how cushioned my daily life was by human technology and infrastructure like central heat, electric lights, and even simple blankets and jackets ... all things I didn't have right then. Facing the strong possibility of spending the night out there, I didn't really think I was going to die ... but I realized how limited my innate capabilities were, that the world is not inherently accommodating of the needs and whims of humans, and how much of it is dangerous, confusing, or at least uncomfortable when confronted by a person equipped with only a bottle of water and a travel toothbrush and toothpaste.

Without at all meaning to, I had gone on a Thoreauvian walk: I left the path, I got lost, and I was at least temporarily overwhelmed by my insignificance and physical limits and thus came to a new understanding of my place in the universe. If nature is, as Thoreau described in "Walking," our "vast, savage, hovering Mother ..., lying all around, with such beauty, and such affection for her children, as the leopard" (271), it was the vastness and potential savagery that hovered over me that evening rather than the affection. The beauty was, I discovered, easier to appreciate after we were found, as we hiked out along the coast by moonlight.

If a trip to the wilderness and the intervention of Search and Rescue is what it takes to go on a Thoreauvian walk and return to tell the story, though, most of us won't get that opportunity. But I don't think literally getting lost is the only way. Thoreau did most of his walking close to home, and in the end, his quest was a spiritual one more dependent on attitude and perception than on physical location. He was in search of wildness, a quality that he associates with areas uncultivated or unvisited by other humans; with the swamps maligned by civilized society; with a general urge for freedom; and even with the "wild habits and vigor" that still wells up in domesticated animals, "as when [his] neighbor's cow breaks out of her pasture early in the spring and boldly swims the river, a cold, gray tide, twenty-five or thirty rods wide, swollen by the melted snow" (268).

How can we best walk in search of wildness today? Walking to get to a particular location won't do, since it's far too focused on a specific, practical goal. Neither will walking for exercise, which Thoreau compares to the sick taking medicine at appointed hours. Instead, he insists, walking must "itself [be] the enterprise and adventure of the day" (247). Given the potential for domesticated animals to exhibit wildness that Thoreau identifies, though, I propose that walking with a dog might be one way to achieve the type of walking he advocates. In fact, when I went on my semi-Thoreauvian rambles as a girl, more often than not I was accompanied by a dog, or was in pursuit of one. I didn't walk them on a leash much, as I do today, since dogs in that place and time often ran loose. But I did inhabit their universe, run next to them, follow them, or even bump into them as we each went about the small adventures of our day. The sound of my beagle mix Cory desperately baying in the woods, presumably chasing a rabbit, was common background music to my own activities.

Thoreau did not have a regular canine companion on his walks, though his friend Ellery Channing's dog Bose often accompanied the two of them when they went roaming together. In fact, Wesley Mott, editor of *Bonds of Affection: Thoreau on Dogs and Cats*, tells us that Thoreau was actually more of a cat person whose last detailed journal entries before his death focused on the habits of his family's kittens. And he certainly didn't have a dog or any other domesticated animal with him during his time on the shores of Walden Pond. If you think of his emphasis in *Walden* on paring down one's obligations and possessions in order to create time to read, observe nature, and pursue spiritual awakening, it's easy to understand why. Dogs can demand significant commitments of money, time, and attention — and besides, they might have chewed his books, dug up his beanfield, or chased away the groundhog he contemplated eating raw. On a walk, they can be very distracting. Right now, I walk with my three dogs, and though they have learned to walk together in a certain order — Allister on the right, Mr. Miggy in the middle, and Belle on the left — if one veers across our path to sniff something intriguing, leashes get tangled. I'm constantly scoping out the horizon for situations that might cause barking or pulling, such as other dogs, rabbits, or softball games (since Allister, my big German Shepherd mix, has an inexplicable phobia about organized sports involving balls). My mind is not free to contemplate the details and meaning of my surroundings, and as Thoreau writes, "What business have I in the woods, if I am thinking of something out of the woods?" (248).

On the other hand, dogs do get you to walk. That's how I came back to walking, even before I read Thoreau's essay. When I started graduate school, I took with me a dog that had shown up at my parents' house over the summer, a little beagle-terrier mix that I named Annie. In the next eleven years, I would live in five different cities and towns, moving into a new apartment or rental house almost every year. And each time, it became increasingly important to me to find all the good walking places nearby, a quest that many people who live with dogs will identify with. The closest we came to wildness in our walks was probably when we lived in Colorado, where we walked with my partner and his big Dalmatian Caval almost every day on the Coal Creek Trail, a nice path along the creek that ran through a pasture containing a small herd of mules and horses. In two years, I never saw anyone feed them, ride them, or otherwise care for them — they were a self-sufficient unit, almost wild in a way Thoreau would have appreciated. But there were also coyotes, whom we heard howling at night but almost never saw. One afternoon, though, I had both dogs on the trail off leash, and another dog came bounding up. Well ... not a dog, I suddenly realized — a coyote! The coyote approached Caval, seeming to invite him to play. I had heard rumors that coyotes would do this in order to lure dogs into an ambush, and so I called Caval back and chased the coyote away, shouting and waving my arms.

In the recent outpouring of memoirs written about life with dogs, this idea — that dogs can help attune you to aspects of the natural world that you might not otherwise encounter or notice — surfaces regularly; perhaps, as our societies grow increasingly urban and isolated from many wild animal species, it is exactly this promise of a connection to nature and even wildness that makes these books so popular, given that many of them, such as the best-selling *Marley and Me: Life and Love with the World's Worst Dog*, are preoccupied with the dog's unruly behavior. More thrillingly, as in my experience with the coyote, dogs sometimes enable an encounter with a wild animal that would otherwise have remained hidden. In Ted Kerasote's *Merle's Door: Lessons from a Freethinking Dog*, the dog Merle draws the author's attention to a grizzly bear off to the side of the path they're hiking together, with an expression that Kerasote compares to the patient look that a parent gives a child: "See, you almost missed that" (251). In this way, you might say dogs can serve as the kind of guide Thoreau was looking for when he wrote, "Unto a life which I call natural I would gladly follow even a will-o'-the-wisp through bogs and sloughs unimaginable, but no moon nor firefly has shown me the causeway to it" (275).

Some of the things I've encountered walking with dogs that I would never have found on my own are not as thrilling and beautiful — or potentially dangerous — as a coyote or a grizzly bear: there was the stiff-as-a-board dead groundhog, the various rotting corpses, and of course a smorgasbord of excrement, starting with goose and deer and moving into varieties more exotic and difficult to identify. Thoreau was not one to be put off by the disgusting, representing epiphanies about immortality with such inelegant symbols as the rotting corpse of a horse and an insect burrowing out of a wooden table in *Walden*. He identifies the wild as that which can overwhelm civilization, which in many ways opposes or works against it, and the dog's obsession with everything that rots and stinks must qualify as an affinity for wildness when it's viewed in those terms. And sometimes dogs just break the rules, albeit culturally constructed rules they may not know about: for example, once Annie followed a cat she was chasing right into the house where the cat lived, since the door had been left open, and on another occasion I barely stopped her from dashing into a chapel where a wedding was taking place. But for Thoreau, wildness is also "the raw material of life" (262), a source of revitalization for those overcome with the demands of culture — and dogs can certainly model that kind of revitalization for us. Allister cannot resist the puddles that always form after it rains in the low-lying park where I often walk; despite her gray muzzle and mild arthritis, she bounces from one small pool to the next, rolling in them, emerging not only dripping with muddy water but reinvigorated, with a spark that I can only call wild joy in her eyes. And puddles are just the start of the list: whether chasing a squirrel, darting from one scent to the next in a landscape freshly washed by rain, or rooting in the trash, dogs are masters of drawing vitality from the forbidden, invisible, and even seemingly unattainable elements that lurk in the wild corners of the world.

But the fact that a dog can get you out walking and draw your attention to wild, messy, even unpleasant aspects of nature is not the real key to why a dog can be your guide to a Thoreauvian walk. The journey for Thoreau was always metaphysical as well as physical, and while dogs are famously creatures of their bodies and desires, living in the moment, they also have a unique capacity to help us tune into the unseen, to recognize the existence of an entire world that is literally beyond our senses and wild in the ways it exceeds our capacities to grasp or express it. In "Walking" Thoreau writes that

> the highest that we can attain to is not Knowledge, but Sympathy with Intelligence. I do not know that this higher knowledge amounts to anything more definite than a novel and grand surprise on a sudden revelation of the insufficiency of all that we called Knowledge before — a discovery that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in our philosophy. (273)

And what if it is the dog whose intelligence we sympathize with? We all know that dogs experience aspects of the world that we don't: specifically, the high-frequency noises and the multitude of scents. In 1933, Virginia Woolf captured the latter beautifully in *Flush: A Biography*, her imaginative re-creation of the life of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's spaniel, writing,

> There are no more than two words and perhaps one-half for what we smell. The human nose is practically non-existent. The greatest poets in the world have smelt nothing but roses on the one hand, and dung on the other. The infinite gradations that lie between are unrecorded. Yet it was in the world of smell that Flush mostly lived. (129-30)

In her recent book *Inside of a Dog: What Dogs See, Smell, and Know*, Alexandra Horowitz quantifies Woolf's idea of the "practically non-existent" human nose when she tells us that human noses have about six million sensory receptor sites, compared to over two hundred million for sheepdogs and over three hundred million for beagles. The difference in smell experience is exponential, she concludes (71). So what is the dog's world of smell like, this network of intelligence that exceeds our sensory capacities? Horowitz conjures the experience through an extended comparison:

> Imagine if each detail of our visual world were matched by a corresponding smell. Each petal on a rose may be distinct, having been visited by insects

> leaving pollen footprints from far away flowers. What is to us just a single stem actually holds a record of who held it, and when. A burst of chemicals marks where a leaf was torn. The flesh of the petals, plump with moisture compared to that of the leaf, holds a different odor besides. The fold of a leaf has a smell; so does a dewdrop on a thorn. And *time* is in those details: while we can see one of the petals drying and browning, the dog can smell this process of decay and aging. Imagine smelling every minute visual detail. That might be the experience of a rose to a dog. (72)

And your dog lives in a much richer (and perhaps more distressing) world of sounds than you do, too: he or she can hear the non-stop high frequency pulses emitted by the crystal resonator in your digital alarm clock and the bodily vibrations of termites (if you have them) in your walls. Though we can't experience these detailed worlds of scent and sound directly, if we pay attention as we walk with them, dogs offer us a wealth of signs that show us they are there, just as a sheet thrown over someone rendered invisible might reveal the person's outlines: the focused sniffing when the dog stands immobile as a rock as you tug on the leash, the ears suddenly pricking up even though you don't hear a thing, the nose to the ground, snuffling along a trail that zig-zags into the undergrowth. To borrow the words of New Zealander Ian Wedde, who writes about his Rhodesian ridgeback Vincent in an essay called "Walking the Dog," attending to the needs and abilities that differentiate dogs from humans "extends the range of what's mysterious in the world," ultimately "enrich[ing our] ignorance" (358). A dedicated cultivation of this type of ignorance, an enriched sense of the vast networks of life conducting themselves outside the limits of our insufficient senses, is a practice in which our dogs can be our guides — a practice that could bring us closer to finding what Thoreau sought on his walks: a wildness that exceeds our capacity to know.

Based on Thoreau's journals and published works, one of the most common ways dogs entered his consciousness was when he heard them barking and baying in the night, either from their yards or while hunting on their own in the woods. Surprisingly, he rarely complains about these sounds ruining the silence or disrupting his thoughts, instead characterizing them as refreshing or heroic and speculating that the "sweet and melodious" voice of the hound may have been the inspiration for the hunting horn (qtd. in Mott 4). At times, he finds in their persistent noise a reassurance of the sound and tenacious state of nature. In one of his later journal entries, he comments more specifically on the experience of listening to this potentially annoying noise, one of the "commonest and cheapest": in his view, it tests the "appetite for sound," striking fresh and healthy ears as the rarest music would, "just as a crust is sweeter to a healthy appetite than confectionary to a pampered or diseased one" (qtd. in Mott 32). Like the barking of the dogs in nineteenth-century Concord, Massachusetts, wildness is all around us, even in the most common corners of our lives, if only we can learn to apprehend it. We don't need to venture into the wilderness. We don't need to stalk wild animals. We don't need to scale mountains. Just as our most basic form of travel, walking, can transport us into elevated intellectual and spiritual realms, our most taken-for-granted, common companion — the dog — can help us open ourselves to the wild richness of the world, not only by enriching our sense of how limited our experience of that world really is, but also by leading us off the path, both literally and figuratively, breaking us out of our accustomed modes of perception and challenging us to see (and smell and hear) the everyday, even the disgusting and annoying, in new ways.

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