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Town Walking

By Thomas V. Lerczak

“He who sits still in a house all the time may be the greatest vagrant of all; but the saunterer, in a good sense, is no more vagrant than a meandering river, which is all the while sedulously seeking the shortest course to the sea.”— from *Walking*, by Henry David Thoreau, 1862

As I stepped off our driveway for a walk around town, I instantly felt conspicuous. Within any one of the closely packed homes on our street, someone, without a doubt, must have been watching out the window, much as I myself have done occasionally. It was a feeling that I had not yet been able to shake, ever since moving from the country ten months before. I continued down the street at a brisk pace and a constant cadence, as if being timed with a metronome, as if I had serious business to attend to, keeping my eyes forward.

My business, such as it might be called, was connecting with the natural world in whatever small way I could. After nearly thirty years of living in the country, amid farmlands and wild areas, finding and observing wildlife was now a different kind of experience from what I had been used to, and I was still adjusting my expectations. At the end of our block, four-acre Compton Park came into view, with Killjordan Creek meandering through its mowed and manicured landscape. I kept up my pace, listening for bird sounds. I left My binoculars at home, as my gut feeling was that using binoculars to view birds in someone’s yard or even in trees along the street would be looked upon as eccentric, maybe worthy of calling the police. How different from being in a remote natural area, where I could stop and examine birds or plants at my leisure, even choosing a

convenient tree leaning at just the right angle for a short afternoon nap. But doing this at Compton Park would surely draw the attention of residents whose homes face the park, and then probably the authorities; best to do all of my napping at home from now on.

At the park, there were other folks walking for exercise and people with dogs, both of which legitimized my activity, as long as I kept moving. So I marched along, one foot after the other, no nonsense, attempting to blend into the landscape. My wife Julie claims that at nearly six feet four inches in height, it is impossible for me to keep a low profile, which recalls an incident where I failed to remain under the radar even on a crowded downtown Chicago avenue. A friend and I were having a few beers at a sidewalk café and tavern when a man nervously came up to our table and asked us about popcorn. I innocently replied that there was free popcorn at the bar inside, but you probably had to buy a drink to get it. The man looked at me as if I were deranged, his eyes darting back and forth, and then he quickly walked away.

Later, we were walking along, looking for a place to eat, another nervous man walked to us and said, “Popcorn. You want popcorn?” “No,” we replied, shaking our heads. We eventually deduced that “popcorn” is a type of illegal street drug and were surprised at the boldness of these peddlers. In the city, it may be possible to melt into the crowd, but people are still watching. The watchers were somewhere, predators secretly observing the street scene.

On hikes around Compton Park, I’m just one of many walkers. But when I hiked the roads near our former country home, I stood out even more than I apparently do in town, because, from my observations, folks living

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in the rural countryside rarely, if ever, hike for pleasure, for exercise, or to view wildlife. A lone hiker on a country road is a curiosity, probably assumed to have a vehicle breakdown, a DUI, or to be a vagrant generally up to no good. I was out on a remote country road one day when an old farmer in a pickup truck stopped to ask if I needed a lift somewhere.

“No, just out for a walk,” I said.

“Really,” he replied with not a little skepticism. “Well I never heard of such a thing.” He slowly drove away, shaking his head with disbelief and probably thinking I was a strange individual. I have noticed that walking with a small child removes all suspicion. As at Compton Park, when hiking with my nine-year-old granddaughter, we can linger anywhere for any length of time to look at plants, dirt, fish in the creek, and even stare into the clouds; people simply smile and probably think, *What a nice old guy, teaching his grandchild about nature*. I could probably get away with robbing a bank if I had a little kid...well maybe not.

Sometimes on my walks around the neighborhood, I’ll try to imagine what the area looked like before the 1800s, when prairie, savanna, and forests occupied the land. Killjordan Creek was there, as well as the gently sloping hillsides bordering the creek corridor, but not much else of the present scene. There may have been many trees bordering the creek, as there are today, but most of the level land upon which our town was built was likely grassland. Prairie fires would have swept across the land, pushed by high winds, mostly unhindered by deep ravine systems; those fires would have kept trees from expanding very far from the creek. Some of the birds that I hear and see along the modern-day creek would have

been part of that original Illinois landscape, but those requiring large grasslands have long been gone and will never return. White-tailed deer still follow the creek through town from the surrounding countryside. Sometimes they stray from the creek and we find them lounging in our backyard, munching on our flower and vegetable gardens. It’s the price we pay for the gift of wildness remaining.

Without the town, I would use Killjordan Creek and its connecting streams to navigate the land, following the easiest slopes into and out of ravines systems, crossing the flat uplands perhaps with a distant large bur oak in sight as a landmark, using a compass in combination with the sun and time of day to fix my position and determine the route. That is what I might have done in a former time, and what I still sometimes do when hiking through a trackless natural area. But these days, I mostly follow neighborhood streets oriented on north-south or east-west lines along rectangular city blocks. I turn corners at 90 degree angles and look both ways before crossing a street.

Though I walk at an unwavering pace through town, my senses are heightened and I am keenly aware of my surroundings. I notice details I miss when driving the same routes: a crumbling curb; cracks in the sidewalk and streets; the identities and unique shapes of trees; pieces of sidewalk uplifted by tree roots; manhole covers made a century ago by the Neenah Foundry Company of Neenah, Wisconsin. So many different styles of homes, front yards and their fixtures, the miscellany of numerous lives laid open to the outside world.

So let the barking dogs from living room windows and calling crows announce

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my presence as they are wont to do. They may think to drive me away, but I will return on another day, for walking is a key to staying grounded and maintaining some aspect of an elusive balance during these turbulent times.



Another walker from another time: Cermak Road and 57th Avenue, Cicero, Illinois 1971 (Photo by Thomas V. Lerczak).