

The Spirited Walker

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The Spirited Walker *Fitness Walking for Clarity, Balance and Spiritual Connection*

Excerpt from Chapter I - In Step: Fitness for Body, Mind, and Spirit

A steady rain had thinned the usual crowd of lunch-hour athletes at the track. Only three diehards circled the loop on a gray April day, splashing through puddles on the curves. Why on earth was one of them me? Water soaked my shoes and socks. Rain slid off my hair and rolled down my face and neck.

"We'll do eight laps today," Bob had said. "Long strides on the west stretch. Short, fast ones on the east. Don't slow down on the turns."

Now I churned past him, arms pumping hard and eyes straight ahead, gripping the track with determination. "Strong and steady," my mind chanted rhythmically. "I am strong and steady." I measured out the syllables, pacing the words like a mantra in time with the splash of each foot.



"You're looking good," he said. "That's five laps down. You're almost done. Only three to go."

"It's six," I gasped. "You missed a lap."

"Five," he repeated. "Keep moving. Don't slow down."

"Six," I insisted, my voice rising in protest. "It's six laps." Suddenly, a wall of fatigue and frustration blocked my path. Black sweat pants clung to my thighs. Tendrils of hair drooped over my eyes as I slammed to a halt on the track. I slumped over, struggling for breath and self control.

"Don't stop," Bob commanded. "You're not done."

Was that an order? Exhaustion turned to indignation. I had paid for coaching, not torture. A grown woman, I decided, ought to know enough to come in from the rain. Tired and bedraggled, I turned to leave the track. In the distance I saw a head lift. A runner across the field had heard tense voices and paused to look at me. Our eyes met for an awkward moment and my anger melted. I felt alone in a foreign country. Exposed as a loud and foolish tourist who didn't know the language or customs of this athletic culture.

Embarrassment stifled my protests. Admonitions flooded my mind. Only a fool rejects the counsel of a guide

when crossing unfamiliar frontiers. I straightened my shoulders and circled three more laps along a route that already had carried me far beyond my comfort zone.

Until recently, my comfort zone had been limited to the sidelines at athletic events. During the years when I was growing up, girls learned early in life to guard against physical exertion. In PE classes, no one spurred us to explore the range of our bodies. No one encouraged us to sweat. We stumbled through volleyball and calisthenics, convinced we weren't meant to be athletic.

Walking showed me I'd been wrong. It pulled me onto a path of exploration and revealed unmapped corners of myself. Internal boundaries shifted. The tight lines that had confined me inside the image of an athletic "klutz" began to loosen. Instead of a klutz, I found a woman who loved testing her physical limits. She

liked feeling active and strong. I hadn't known that about myself. For years, I'd had been looking at my body from the outside, as something to control with discipline and diet. When I stepped inside, I connected with a new self-image and a deeper knowledge of myself.

"...we are each, inside us, a country with our own mountains and plateaus and chasms and storms and seas of tranquility, but like a Third World country we remain largely unexplored, and sometimes even impoverished, for want of a little investment," writer Dorothy Gilman observed in a memoir. Walking presented me with unexpected opportunities to make an investment in myself. It offered an exploration of internal mountains, plateaus, chasms and storms that I'd never glimpsed. It changed my perspective and revealed a wholeness I hadn't known before. A part of me that delights in movement had been hidden from my view.

For most of my life, a picture of awkwardness dominated my mind whenever I approached a physical challenge. In it, I gripped the handlebars of my first bicycle in frozen terror as I teetered precariously along a gravel alley. The memory kept me off balance and made me wary of physical risks. As an adult, I hid my discomfort behind disclaimers and self-deprecating humor. "I've never been athletic," I'd shrug as I grappled with golf clubs and ski poles. Clumsiness seemed my destiny, as natural and non-negotiable as the genetic code that produced my brown hair.

In the 1970s, I sampled jogging. "It'll get better after the first mile," enthusiastic friends promised. It didn't and I quit. I took aerobics classes like vitamin pills--because they were good for me. Then, in 1980s, I caught the curl of the fitness walking wave and discovered for the first time in my life an athletic pursuit that I was good at. I became a dedicated fitness walker and set off on a journey that brought me much more than the physical workout I'd hoped for.

"Walking will give me physical challenges, instead of mental ones," I told myself early in my explorations when I screwed up my courage and joined a handful of speed walkers at a track for workouts with a trainer. Athletic training sounded as exotic to me as a trek in the Andes. It seemed like an adventure that would give my mind a rest--a change of pace from the rest of my life. How was I to know that the biggest challenge I'd find on a track would be the hurdles in my head?

Physical fitness was only one component of the training program I stepped into at the track. These workouts demanded a singleness of focus that I had never experienced before. They introduced me to a level of trust that bridged the gap between muscles and mind--trust in the body as well as the brain. "I am here and I am strong," I chanted mentally, in rhythm with my feet as I willed my body through athletic workouts. "I am here and I can do this." The steps and the words forged an alliance. They emerged in an integration of muscles, mind and spirit that sizzled with the fascination of a fresh relationship. For a time, curiosity carried me into an exhilarating world of stop watches and competition. At an age when most athletes have retired, I entered my first track meet.

Then, the journey brought me home again, a fitness walker traveling the familiar sidewalks of my neighborhood. But like a Third World traveler whose life is changed by the sights and impressions encountered on an unforgettable adventure, I came home a different person. Phrases and customs of a different culture accompanied my steps now. Affirmation, visualization, and mental focus transformed my walks and shifted my destination.

In the words of Henry David Thoreau, I had become a "saunterer." Thoreau credits the religious pilgrims of the Middle Ages for giving rise to the word. Walkers who undertook pilgrimages to the Holy Land, la Sainte Terre, came to be known as Sainte-Terrers. Not every walker reaches holy lands, Thoreau cautioned. Those who do are saunterers--not idle wanderers, as the modern word suggests, but purposeful travelers with a clear goal in mind.

Surely, any expedition that leads to a greater sense of wholeness must be a pilgrimage to holy lands. Anyone who journeys toward spiritual and physical well-being earns the name of Sainte-Terrer. The pilgrimage I embarked on ten years ago urged me forward at a brisk, aerobic pace. It pushed me past fears I'd adopted long ago about getting hurt, getting dirty or getting in trouble by letting myself "run wild." It prodded me with challenges that demanded the full involvement of both mental and physical resources. Ultimately, it led me across internal boundaries that isolated body, mind and spirit into separate cells and specialized functions. As the movement and rhythm of walking teamed up with awareness and intention, my workouts achieved a unity that embraced all of me. They drew me into active meditation. I became a "spirited walker."

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