

## Lonely as a Cloud

Frank Soos

I once had a job as a night watchman. My two favorite parts of the job were getting to sit behind a desk in the middle of the night and read a book, and walking my round with a time clock on a leather strap slung around my neck, walking from key box to key box inside the much bigger box of a nuclear reactor under construction. The intricate routes of pipes and wires, the reactor cores, up and ready to run, but empty of nuclear material, the dozens of feral cats all held endless fascination for me. So did the characters and the ideas from the book I'd just set down to take my walk. Walking and thinking went side by side.

What more could a person want?

I didn't mind walking the mile to the high school if I had the time (admittedly there were plenty of days when I didn't). A little paved path ran above the road to keep us safe. Few kids walked if they could help it; I was almost always alone. Usually I had an armful of books I'd not bother to open the night before. Whatever homework was to be done would have to be done on the sneak in the back of class. It was on these walks I made a discovery I didn't know was a discovery. As I thought through the school day ahead, I planned how to do my homework in the back of my early classes. I found I could plan any writing I had to do and carry a good bit of it in my head. *New Yorker* writer Adam Gopnik calls this pulling together of ideas into sentences as a person walks "night writing," and it's a useful quality for any writer to cultivate.

William Wordsworth and his sister Dorothy were famous walkers. That Wordsworth groupie, stoner Thomas De Quincey, guestimated Wordsworth walked between 175,000 and 180,000 miles in his life, mostly around the Lake District of England. And as he walked, he both took in the landscape and cast lines for his poems. He probably wasn't good company for his sister since he mostly walked in silence unless he was muttering, trying out different versions of lines for the poem forming in his head.

I did a lot of walking as a boy, much of it behind a lawn mower to earn pocket money. I bought my first fly rod and my first car out of my lawn mowing money, both demonstrations of my life-long frugality. My best payday was a two dollar yard, probably two acres plus raking the clipping and trimming around the walk. I never considered whether it was fair; it was what the lady offered and I took it.

I liked mowing those yards, plodding steadily behind my ancient and heavy gasoline push mower enveloped in a cloud of noise where I could think my kid thoughts, dream my dreams of pretty girls and basketball glory. And where I could create fresh geometric patterns as I mowed.

Let's admit walking is good for you. Driving our cars is slothful and wastes non-renewable energy, no argument there. But does it make you a better person? The Thoreau we meet in his essay "Walking" certainly thought it made him a better person and was happy to tell us so. He comes off as annoying as hell with boasts of his all around moral superiority. But truly, does walking make a person better? The Wordsworth we meet on the page seems to be a much better person than we'd most likely have met in person.

I have to say, though, that putting myself in motion tends to drive bad thoughts out of my head. It happens when I walk or ski or ride my bike or even go fishing. Movement seems to settle the mind, to ease away resentments and grudges and even self-doubt. And it seems to welcome useful, fresh thoughts as well.

I wish I could explain the how of walking as it pertains to our creative selves. When we get out of the cocoons of our cars, when we walk unencumbered by ear buds or any other self-inflicted mechanical distractions, things do happen to our brains. Whether the act of walking jogs our synapses into making surprising connections, or whether the larger world intrudes on us in unexpected ways, ideas happen. Think of Wordsworth, of how much of his imagery seems to be uploaded directly from the world he's walking in: "A violet by a mossy stone," a solitary reaper, the wide expanse of the English Channel, "The dewy ground...dark and cold." Just things big and small he sees on his many walks—but they become the building blocks for many of his poems. We are in the world and of the world, and we come to know this connection better when we walk out into it.

I admit, I can't explain how our brains work when we're walking, but it seems to be something every writer ought to do. You can mutter if you want, or you can carry a pen and a small notebook. Walking—easy and affordable and with proven results for the writer's mind.