

## Walking on the Earth as a Spiritual Practice



First, a brief note about spiritual practices.

“Spiritual practices are not like other practices we may have in our lives like exercise or nutrition. Those practices tend to have a set of instructions or rules which if you follow produces particular results. Spiritual practices are not like this. The only promise spiritual practices make is to teach those who engage in them what those practitioners need to know – about being human, about being human with other people, about being human in creation, about being human before God.” ~ Barbara Brown Taylor

### Walking on the Earth

“Not everyone is able to walk, but most people can, which makes walking one of the most easily available spiritual practices of all. All it takes is a decision to walk with some awareness, both of who you are and what you are doing. Where you are going is not as important, however counterintuitive that may seem. To detach the walking from the destination is in fact one of the best ways to recognize the altars you are passing right by all the time. Most of us spend so much time thinking about where we have been or where we are supposed to be going that we have a hard time recognizing where we actually are. . . .

“The spiritual practice of walking has a long history in the world’s great wisdom traditions. One of the Five Pillars of Islam is the hajj, or pilgrimage to Mecca, undertaken during the twelfth month of the lunar year. Jews and Christians pilgrimage to and through the Old City in Jerusalem visiting their respective holy places. Buddhist pilgrims perform full prostrations as they make their sacred journeys to Bodhi Gaya in India or Mount Kailash in Tibet.”

For Christians, there are many stories in the Bible of Jesus walking. He walked a lot. This gave him time to see and experience things and people that he wouldn’t have if he had been traveling more quickly on a horse or donkey. He took his time.

We don’t have to go on some great pilgrimage to benefit spiritually from walking. We can simply walk with some intention and attention.

Pick any location outside. If you can get to a park, a forest, the beach, great. But you can simply walk in your yard or down a tree-lined street or beside your garden. Sometimes I simply walk around my wood deck or garden, moving slowly, paying attention to every sound – birds, insects, humans – and noticing all the small things. If you revisit the same place over and over, you can discover something new every day – what’s different from yesterday or last week? What signs do you see showing the change of season - new growth, wilting plants, falling leaves? Maybe you stop and simply breathe or say a simple prayer.

## **Going barefoot**

“This practice requires no props. You do not even have to be religious to do it, but if you are, then here is the scriptural warrant for it: ‘Remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.’ That is what the Almighty said to Moses after Moses turned aside from tending sheep to investigate a blazing bush that was not burned up.

All this practice requires is for you to choose a place outdoors that you are willing to encounter in the flesh, without your customary cushion and protection – a mossy knoll, if you are a beginner, or a rocky streambed, if you are not. Take off your shoes and feel the earth under your feet, as if the ground on which you are standing really is holy ground. Let it please you. Let it hurt you a little. Feel how the world really feels when you do not strap little tanks on your feet to shield you from the way things really are.

It will help you if you do not expect God to speak to you. Just give your full attention to where you are, for once. Walk as if your life depended on it, placing your heel before your toes and getting a sense of just how much pressure you put on the grass, the clover – watch out for the honeybee! – the slick river stones, the silted streambed, the red clay, the pine bark on the woodland path, the black earth of the vegetable garden. As you press down on these things, can you feel them pressing back? They have been around so much longer than you have, most of them. You are the new kid on the block.

You might even walk in a small circle, so that you have a chance to see the same things over and over again, seeing something different in them each time. The last time you walked by the day lily, a drop of dew was hanging from one orange petal, shining like a small sun. This time it is gone, thanks to a small breeze. “Consider the lilies of the field,” Jesus said, but you do not consider them, not usually, or at least not like this. What else have you missed in your rush from here to there? . . .

Done properly, the spiritual practice of going barefoot can take you halfway around the world and wake you up to your own place in the world all at the same time. It can lead you to love God with your whole self, and your neighbor as yourself, without leaving your backyard.

Just do it, and the doing will teach you what you need to live. Or keep your shoes on, if you wish. As long as you are on the earth and you know it, you are where you’re supposed to be. You have everything you need to ground yourself in God.”

Adapted from An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith by Barbara Brown Taylor, Chapter 4: The Practice of Walking on the Earth