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'Invest in common things' -- in praise of walking (part 3)

Rich Heffern | May. 16, 2011 Eco Catholic

All of us who love to walk have our favorite outings. One of mine was an early summer evening exploration of an old pasture that I had visited a hundred times before. It was favorite haunt. A summer thunderstorm had just passed through. Shreds, layers, and towering Himalayas of dark clouds, flashing with lighting, receded into the hazy distances. Tatters and wisps of fog rose ghostlike out of the soft evening folds of the nearby valleys. As the twilight began to deepen, scarlet patches of open sky appeared brilliant in the West among the dark sooty clouds.

Suddenly out of this shaggy field around me, which was so overgrown and crowded with summer wildflowers that it had become an ornate patchwork bouquet stretching from fence to fence, common fireflies ? hundreds upon hundreds of them ? rose out of the wet grass and floated slowly over the colorful outbursts of daisies, sunflowers, and Queen Anne?s lace still splattered with raindrops

The firefly host looked like an immense fleet of tiny balloons made out of pearly light. They were like wandering, flickering galaxies of stars honoring the Earth with an unhurried visit. Hundreds of frogs joined their throaty trills with the loud praise-psalms of the whippoorwills. Mists veiled the far off hillsides. Finally the dusk dissolved into a velvet black. Only the numberless gliding and flashing lanterns of the fireflies were left to make a luminous darkness of the vast ocean of a midsummer night.

An evening?s walk had brought me to a spellbound moment wherein beauty had gifted me lavishly. There is greatness, sublimity, divinity everywhere in the world, and it is worthy of worship and praise. It was a moment overflowing with grace. And one I still keep within me, wrapped and tucked away like a jewel. I can rely on it, I think, to help sustain me through hard times. There are many other such moments locked away in the treasure house of memory, encounters with the common miracles of everyday: thunder in winter, moon-silvered shadows in a midnight forest, wild geese calling to one another as they fly northward overhead, sunrises in the mountains.

?If you would know the blessedness of a cheerful heart,? John Burroughs, one of America?s foremost nature writers, wrote more than a hundred years ago, ?then invest in common things and be content with a steady and moderate return.? To cultivate the habit of walking, I believe, it to make one of the very best investments possible. This modest practice can be a lifetime prescription for continued health and joyful living. And walking can be an invaluable aid in personal transformation, a discipline in learning to live a life of trust and simplicity, a help on the way to wholeness: that place where the love that moves the sun and stars makes its nest snugly in the palm of your hand.

Ultimately of course we are called by this love to community and commitment to others. We cannot spend all our time blithely walking across the fields and strolling through the woods. Beauty alone is not enough. But on the long and difficult road to the kinship and community of God I hope that I will always be among those who, once in a while, turn down the ride and go afoot.

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