

WALKING FOR ME, YOU AND MILLIONS MORE

A Wake-Up Call



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1 THE 300 STEP LIFE

My first view of the world, and one that has fascinated me all my life, was through the large window of my parents' home. In the living room, three storeys high. When I was two years old, I discovered that standing on the tip of my toes, I could see outside.

Looking down I saw the road. Just to the left, was the intersection, with heavy traffic coming from all four sides: cyclists, cars, pedestrians. I spied a dog. For me these movements were significant. At every opportunity, I pressed my nose to the window. And, I badly wanted to be on the road, to experience it first hand, to see and feel it all.

But, watching was always also great fun.

For the first few years of my life, the late fifties, I grew up in the neighborhood of Blijdorp in Rotterdam. A great deal was available all around within a walk of 300 steps: there were shops for groceries, a tram stop and bicycle parking. There was the hairdresser and the family doctor, both in starched white jackets, who I was afraid of. A little further, but still within walking distance, the always attractive Blijdorp Zoo.

Later I realized that then, everything one needed to do daily, by and large, could be done on foot. Also, this was a form of exercise and good health, without much deliberation.

When I was three years old my parents decided we needed another house and we moved to a smaller town.

Nowadays, for a lot of people regular walking is no longer practical. With the introduction of automobiles and television, adults and children alike are settled into couches or strapped into car seats. Then there is the internet, the laptop. Much of life is spent in front of a screen. Walking is often too far, and sometimes too unsafe.

Wheels and screens are replacing our feet everywhere. For the rich and the poor, in America, Europe, China and India. Among men and women – although the latter often take more steps.

And the next ten years?

Will we walk less because we will even have more wheels and screens than we have now? How can we compensate?

How much space will there be for walkers behind buggy's, wheelchairs and activities for all stages of life in between?

Daily walkers don't count in governments' planning and in business models. Investing in walking will be an exception. Experts predict that globally, governments and investors will give preference to lifestyles that focus on driving, parking and sitting.

Some think tanks predict that within ten years almost 50 percent of the world population are obese. In many countries the number of traffic casualties increases rapidly. At the moment 30 percent among the deaths and seriously injured are pedestrians. This is not a happy scenario given that walking is just as much a part of life as eating and drinking. However, walkers rarely protest, they are not vocal.

Are there social leaders who care about space for our feet? As a writer I started searching for them. Where are these role models or motivated professionals? What do they teach us?

It strikes me that walking is increasingly important for so many aspects of our life. Our minds (See 2) and our bodies (See 3). I discover that going on foot saves consumers' money (4); and that many people profit from a Nearby Bonus, though they have no idea (5). Role models influence governments (6) and empower citizens' groups (7).

My research helps me to suggest what is needed in the future (8).

Do you want to know the ways people walk?

Then visit www.healthydailywalking.com Tips & Tools. For yourself. And to get others more often on their feet. Here you can also find many sources of my research.



2 EMPTY YOUR HEAD, CLEAR YOUR MIND

The first professional walker I encounter reading interviews is Ann Meskens. She is an entrepreneur and writer who lives in Belgium. I read her lively, spicy stories.

“The pleasure and freedom of walking helped me to discover what was really important to me. For years, I couldn’t figure out the meaning of my life. I worked as a horticultural technologist and insurance broker. Then, the more I walked, it became clear to me what I wanted to do. After years of practical work, I started a new study, philosophy”, she says.

Ann’s favorite walks are in the city. “Why do I enjoy this? It’s a different experience from driving a car or riding a bicycle. It is me that moves through the environment.” After her walks, Ann gets down to her reading, thinking and writing.

Just one foot in front of the other

Human beings process impressions at a speed of about five kilometers per hour, experts say. This is quite a brisk walking speed.

For those who walk every day and in a pleasant environment, it isn't a big effort. It's about putting one foot in front of the other, almost lazily.

Ann Meskens says that when she walks, she sheds off fatigue, is energized and inspired. In recent years, scientists have increasingly proved that regular walking is beneficial for mentally healthy and sick people, alike. Getting away from computers, laptops and mobile phone screens slows down memory loss. And dementia, Alzheimer's, and other old-age diseases and health challenges. Mental ailments are less likely to occur.

After completing her studies in philosophy, Ann works as a philosopher consultant. She has built a successful business. She writes, gives lectures and is a radio commentator. Her hero is Jacques Tati, the French filmmaker and comedian. "Among other things, I like his light-footedness and his eternal and cheerful loitering", says Ann.

Walking alone

Walking can be a solitary exercise. Many people prefer to walk alone, either to do an errand or a chore. For those who like the idea of a walk as a time that 'flows', it is just that. It brings a sense of freedom, independence, and self-confidence. They can listen to music or stop to take a photograph, things that could be potentially dangerous in a car or on a bicycle. Dogs are an important incentive for many people to step out. They are like a daily coach for them.

Companionship, no talking can be wonderful

Walking with others offers companionship. It can be a quiet walk or while talking. People get together for hikes and have various experiences. Some say, "We talk to each other, but sometimes we stroll a bit by ourselves". Others say, "No talking can be wonderful". And still others say, "Sometimes you can tell half your life story, walking along!".

Here is the story of Theo Wismans, teacher at the Charlemagne College in Landgraaf, Netherlands. While mentoring a group of challenging teenagers, he came across a book by hockey coach Marc Lammers, who had won gold with the Dutch women's team at the Olympic Games in Beijing.

“The idea was to propose to the group: let us go for gold together. That meant, we are going to walk for a long time. It was incredible. They all came along. And, somewhere in the hills we sat down together in a circle and had a conversation. We repeated this experience again. In the end, even the most problematic of the pupils said he had enjoyed himself.”

Walking coaches

In workplaces, colleagues walk during their lunch break. They plan an activity together, or they just enjoy a healthy break. A walk can be helpful when two people need to have a difficult conversation.

There are now, in many countries, professional walking coaches. This is based on the idea that walking is a refreshing, healing and spiritual activity. It can also be good for people with mental health challenges. Some coaches walk with groups to talk about the purpose of their work. Others are a therapist, where the session is on foot. Walking paying attention to your steps and to the environment, helps you to enjoy and realize the importance of the moment.

As one coach says, “A pleasant cadence of, for example, doing three steps as you inhale and four as you exhale”.

Creating conducive spaces

Roads, streets and walking paths are designed by professionals who often work in isolation, behind their drawing boards. They determine how we use these public spaces. But, not all designers are unaware.

Allan Jacobs and Elizabeth Macdonald are renowned architects and urban designers, known for their work on cities and urban spaces. They visit building sites and ask the question, which I also ask myself: Do I like it here or not? And why? They believe that, unconsciously, we experience what we see, smell or hear around us, and this affects us positively or negatively.

When designing walking routes, they recommend variety. There must be space and shelter, with attention to trees and greenery. Sidewalks must be wide with benches at intervals, so people could rest or just watch the world go by.

The architects endorse investing in playgrounds where children and grandparents can enjoy each other's company in a playful and imaginative way.

Musical compositions

In walking, the first impression influences a choice. Psychologist Kevin Lynch said that if you want to direct people, you have to be aware of the 'orientation'. Not only in cities but also in the countryside. He suggests building towers, striking corner buildings and exciting rows of trees. People should experience attractive surroundings opening their front door.

The Danish architect and urban designer Jan Gehl has focused on improving the quality of urban life by re-orienting city design towards the pedestrian and cyclist. His designs are like musical compositions. He gathers people at one spot and juxtaposes them on another. Here, a crowd. There, a space for individuals. With the result, the walking and hanging out experience is a pleasant and diverse one.

A look into the future

I described situations of regularly walking to empty your head for a while. But a lot of those who could benefit, do not know. They don't think about it, or forget, consider it uncomfortable, creepy. They ignore already available walking paradises. Will there be sufficient awareness in the changing world?

Walking is getting more and more important to help preserve our natural skills. Computers and robots are moving into our areas of thought and physical activities. That is why it is important to be aware that we have legs and feet and so we create our own footprints. People could enjoy massively all kinds of walks: from just small trips around the house to long holidays as life changing experiences. Media should not give the upper hand to messages scaring people. These make them insecure and afraid of getting out in the street or meeting others.