

# Walking and writing as a spiritual practice

Judy Clinton



I've always loved writing. I've always loved walking, particularly in the countryside. And I've always loved to spend time alone to contemplate. I'd never considered combining all of these three things together.

One day, a few years ago, it occurred to me to take a notebook out on one of my walks in nature and to walk for a while, find somewhere to sit and then in response to my surroundings write about what came through my senses of the external world, and what then arose in my thoughts and feelings as a result.

This has now become a regular activity for me – not just on countryside walks but in other situations as well. I benefit from this enormously, and am coming to see that it has become a deep spiritual practice for me. I recognise that I go through what is a very similar process as I do when I'm in meeting for worship. The starting point usually finds me with much mental activity and strong emotional feelings of one sort or another connected to my immediate situation. Next, a deepening takes place within me, greatly helped by my observing acutely what is around and within me. And then gradually peace comes; and insights often arise which if I were in meeting for worship might well form ministry.

After I've written these pieces in my notebook I come home and type them up. I pick up the most glaring linguistic errors and then send them to my dear f(F)riend who, being very much in tune with who I am and what I want to communicate, proof-reads them and suggests ways in which I might change details of sentence construction and so on to make

things clearer, or to make a greater impact. This is where my experience becomes a shared one and with our specific talents we are able to create something that we hope may be of value for others.

The piece below is one such item.

## **Giving our souls chance to catch up**

Today I have time to go off out on the one of my walk-and-writes. It's soggy, depressing, dreary weather which hardly draws me to step outside with enthusiasm! But go I will, as I know that all conditions and circumstances are food for my observation and expression.

My breakfast done, bar the last cup of tea, I sit for a while looking out on my garden. There is no movement at all. The birdfeeders hang and drip in a perfectly static position. No birds to be seen. Raindrops hang from the twigs of the plum tree. The sky is uniformly grey: no sign of the hill line usually visible above the fence. A quiet Sunday morning shutdown prevails out there. Forgetting my desire for sunshine and warmth – or even sunshine and sparkling frost – I come to appreciate a different kind of beauty in this rather forlorn scene. There's a sense of waiting, which I wouldn't have noticed had I not taken the time to really observe, not just with my eyes but with my whole being.

My last drink savoured, I go and collect my things and am off to see what the world has to offer me, on this day in the gloom of early January. I see things quite differently when I go out intending to look, rather than to get solely from A to B. I see things which would normally not register with me. I had no idea there were so many manhole covers (every twenty metres or so) along the road which runs through the local housing estate; or that one of the iron lampposts stands at a sixty-degree angle, looking as though it is drunk; or that traffic-signal lights can be attached to such attractively curved pieces of metalwork.

Few Sunday-morning runners are to be seen today, the fair-weather ones having made other choices, it seems. Only the dedicated jog on through the fine drizzle and gloomy mist. Clearly their higher goal is to become, or stay, as fit as possible, so sacrifices of comfort and pleasure are made for that. I reflect that when something is of high value we are prepared to make sacrifices for it.

I'd intended to go and explore the Dowdeswell area, as my recently

purchased tree from the Woodland Trust is in that wood; but I've managed to go the wrong way and can't be bothered to turn back. Instead, I find myself on the A475 going toward Cirencester. The mist, which comes in swathes and then lifts, in addition to the drizzle, doesn't make for easy driving. I decide not to go as far as Cirencester. I take a side turning, posted to Hilcot.

'No Road Markings,' a sign says. There aren't any, but instead a line of moss runs along the narrow road. I pass between some modest houses on my left and to my right a row of large houses, which are contained within a sturdy wall with a security intercom at the gate.

This, it seems, is Hilcot. I follow the narrow lane for a while until it becomes apparent that I have indeed seen the village. I encounter a large four-by-four vehicle which requires some careful navigation to pass, and turn into a muddy field entrance.

Much to my surprise, I am afforded an open and lovely view: of a muddied ploughed field with a backdrop of a forested area, and a distant patch of a newly sprouting green crop. It's a soothing scene. I watch mist billowing up amongst the trees. Despite my inclination



to turn around and go back home I decide I will get out of the car and walk for a bit. There's a pathway skirting the field beside the beech trees, which are still holding onto some of their copper leaves. The pathway bends tantalisingly into the distance. I'll just see what's beyond that bend!

I watch a squirrel move onto the field, which is ploughed up into deep gullies and ridges of wet soil. The squirrel ripples in its movement, as squirrels do, and I'm intrigued to see how it adjusts the size of the ripples to accommodate the terrain. It soon gives up and returns to the smoother pathway but, interestingly, keeps up its bigger ripples beyond the time it is necessary. So it's not just humans who go on doing something in a more



difficult way after the need has gone!

As I'm putting on my boots a couple of young men come round the corner. I ask them if the few houses I've seen are the extent of the village of Hilcot. They look at me with the incomprehension of foreigners. "Lots of

hills." I nod and, pointing to where they have been, ask if there are any houses. "No. Nice roads." We smile, and they walk away.

It's squelchingly muddy underfoot, and my progress along the path is slow – I'm acutely aware of not wanting to fall. It is wonderfully quiet here, no mechanical noise at all: no cars, no aeroplanes and no farm machinery. The drizzle has virtually stopped. I stand still and listen to the raindrops falling off the trees and landing with muted thwacks as they hit the wet leaves on the ground below. For some reason I'm put in mind of the story I read about westerners travelling through the jungle, followed by their native luggage-carriers. They travel as quickly as they can. The westerners become aware that the natives are sitting down and are refusing to walk any further. Having a destination to reach, and irritated by this delay, the westerners ask why they won't move. A man replies, "We are giving our souls chance to catch up." I can feel just that happening for me now as I move slowly along the churned up path, feeling my mind slow down, and something within me (my soul perhaps) lets out a deep sigh of relief and pleasure.

The tree trunks are sodden, shining black with wetness. They look like so many freshly washed elephants' legs. There's a flurry of movement and twittering above my head: a whole collection of tiny tits are dotting about amongst the branches. Silence falls again. I become aware of the sound of my trouser legs rubbing together, the noise of my feet sliding in the mud, my walking-pole tip clicking on stone. My approach disturbs a mass of pheasants in the undergrowth. They rise up as one, flapping



their wings, making their strange scrawking kind of noise as they fly across the field and disappear into the mist. A few less frightened birds continue to strut amongst the trees.

As I make my way round the bend I had wanted to reach, I see another one further

ahead and I continue walking, enveloped now in the quietness and savouring the misty beauty of skeletal trees and wooded outlines of more distant hills. I come to a point where the path goes steeply downhill. Not fancying the thick shining mud, I turn round and make my way back. As I approach the car I catch glimpses of fluorescent lime-green cycling clothing as three bikers pass. Perhaps they too are giving their souls time to catch up?

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