





The oh long read opens us up to new ideas that have the power to change our lives for the better. Just set aside 20 uninterrupted minutes, curl up, and dive in.

First steps

illustrations *lone Rail*

Walking is the best medicine: a moving meditation. And when we begin each day by putting one foot in front of the other, good things just fall into place, says Do/Walk author Libby DeLana



It is 5:02am, a Tuesday morning in September 2020; the cool air is beginning to replace the slow, humid, heavy air of summer. It is noticeably darker at this time in the morning than it was a week ago. I must admit there is a lovely anticipation of the coming autumn months but also a hint of dread as the deep cold of a New England winter is just weeks away. These changing seasons make the world feel hopeful, familiar, promising and are a powerful reminder that change is the natural state of affairs. These inevitable changes can bring with it a beautiful feeling of newness and also the feeling that nothing is stable. Walking in these distinct and unique seasons has been a series of glorious and unyielding lessons. An ongoing lesson in change, in embracing all that is in the moment.

Every morning when I pull on my shoes and head out the door, I am inspired by how walking every damn day has fundamentally changed my life. There are the obvious shifts in fitness level, increased appetite, better sleep, more centred emotions, but the subtle shifts are perhaps where the magic resides. My sense of time has changed. My understanding of distance has forever been remodelled. Step by singular step, I have walked 25,000 miles, enough miles to circumnavigate the earth. This has taken me nine years. I no longer think of this as 'a morning walk', I call it 'my MorningWalk', a sacred act to start the day. However, this wasn't always the case.

When I first committed to going for a walk every day I had to get over my athletic ego. The circumstances of my life had shifted and it was time to adapt accordingly. I had spent much of my life defined as 'an athlete'. During my high-school years I played field hockey, basketball and lacrosse and, by my senior year, I was captain of all three. In college I started rowing, and did that for four years, including competing in the National Championships. For decades, my self-worth came from how well I played. So, when I started to walk, it took me, in truth, a year or two to not feel shame in the fact that I wasn't doing something more rigorous. I would come to understand that walking wasn't an athletic endeavour: it was something else.

Looking back, I can see that MorningWalk has been a serendipitous pilgrimage of sorts. A surprising journey, a daily adventure of discovery: cold, hot, sunny, rainy, boring, exciting, joyous, heavy, creative, innovative and loving. When I started, I didn't know the profound impact it would have on my life. In fact, at the time it felt like a small gesture, a simple dedication of some time to get outside and go for a walk. After nine years of walking every day it has become an essential practice that feels like devotion – perhaps even prayer.



The important thing is not the mileage or the time this took; in fact, I am very aware that many have run/walked/biked/hiked/rolled 25,000-plus miles in a much shorter time. If you are an avid runner then undoubtedly you have already covered these miles over the course of your life. I have friends and colleagues whom I think of as The Original Walkers; I think some of them have had a MorningWalk practice for several decades and likely have walked the distance to the moon and back. However, because the essence of this activity isn't about distance or speed, they have probably never actually accounted for that distance. No, it isn't about how many miles or how many years – although those are markers of a sort – instead it is about the loyalty and enthusiasm for each walk. It became a subtle practice that saved me. It saved my spirit. It saved my way of being. Ultimately, it reminded me who I was.

This isn't about walking as an act of redemption – it is about a slow, natural realisation that there is great joy that can come from a wildly simple change and commitment in your life. MorningWalk is a micro daily habit that has the potential of having a macro lifelong impact. It is a gentle, slow practice, and pace matters. There is no rushing, no urgency embedded into a step. It isn't a task to 'get over' so I can move on to the next thing on the list. Instead it is an opportunity to be aligned with the pace of the natural world. I had lost touch with that. My days had become 'to do' lists and looking at the clock to get to the next thing on time.

In fact, when I look to the natural world the only things that move quickly, with urgency and speed, are things that are often destructive: nor'easters, earthquakes, hurricanes, wildfires. Life was moving too quickly. There was too much untethered energy. Walking was a way back to a pace that was natural and recognisable, and also a way to being truly open, to see what each day was going to bring. Mama Nature has her own pace and the 21st-century world has a different energy and pace that felt out of alignment to me. The 'normal' societal pace meant that I had forgotten we are part of the natural world, with a need to slow down before we can really understand and know what we want.

MorningWalk has become a way of life. It is a subtle, cumulative, spiritual, physical, creative, healing, innovative, slow, essential practice that has required discipline, commitment and a splash of wild optimism. Walking is what makes us human. Walking can be healing.

To go for a walk is perhaps one of the most primal things. A dear friend, Eric, when asked how he was, would always answer: "I'm fine. I am walking the earth." Walking the earth has been for me a way to ground, to centre myself, to →





find the heartbeat both in myself and of a place, a road, a path, a walkway, a sidewalk, a field. This book is a thanksgiving for MorningWalk.

So what exactly is MorningWalk? Why does it matter? And why the morning rather than a lovely wind-down at the end of the day? Well, here's the thing: the most generous act we can make is to take time to focus on our own wellbeing as soon as we awaken (in most cases, that is the morning). There is something about a daily ritual that creates a sense of comfort, of joy, of hope, of contentment for the day.

The invitation is to place your attention on starting the day with the sensation of your foot touching the ground, with a thoughtfulness in each step, a practice to cultivate balance and energy. MorningWalk is a daily moving meditation much like yoga or qigong. It requires a slowing down of thought. Step by step. Breath by breath. Tenderly. Thoughtfully. Without an agenda. Without a goal. A way to start the day. The Greek physician Hippocrates (circa 460 to 370BC) famously claimed that "walking is the best medicine". I would have to agree.

Humans need to move. We are built for it. Our days in the 21st century are often filled to the brim with sitting indoors or in cars, stationary and unmoving. Walking stimulates not only the body but also the mind. Creativity, innovation, focus, wonder, these are our companions when we walk.

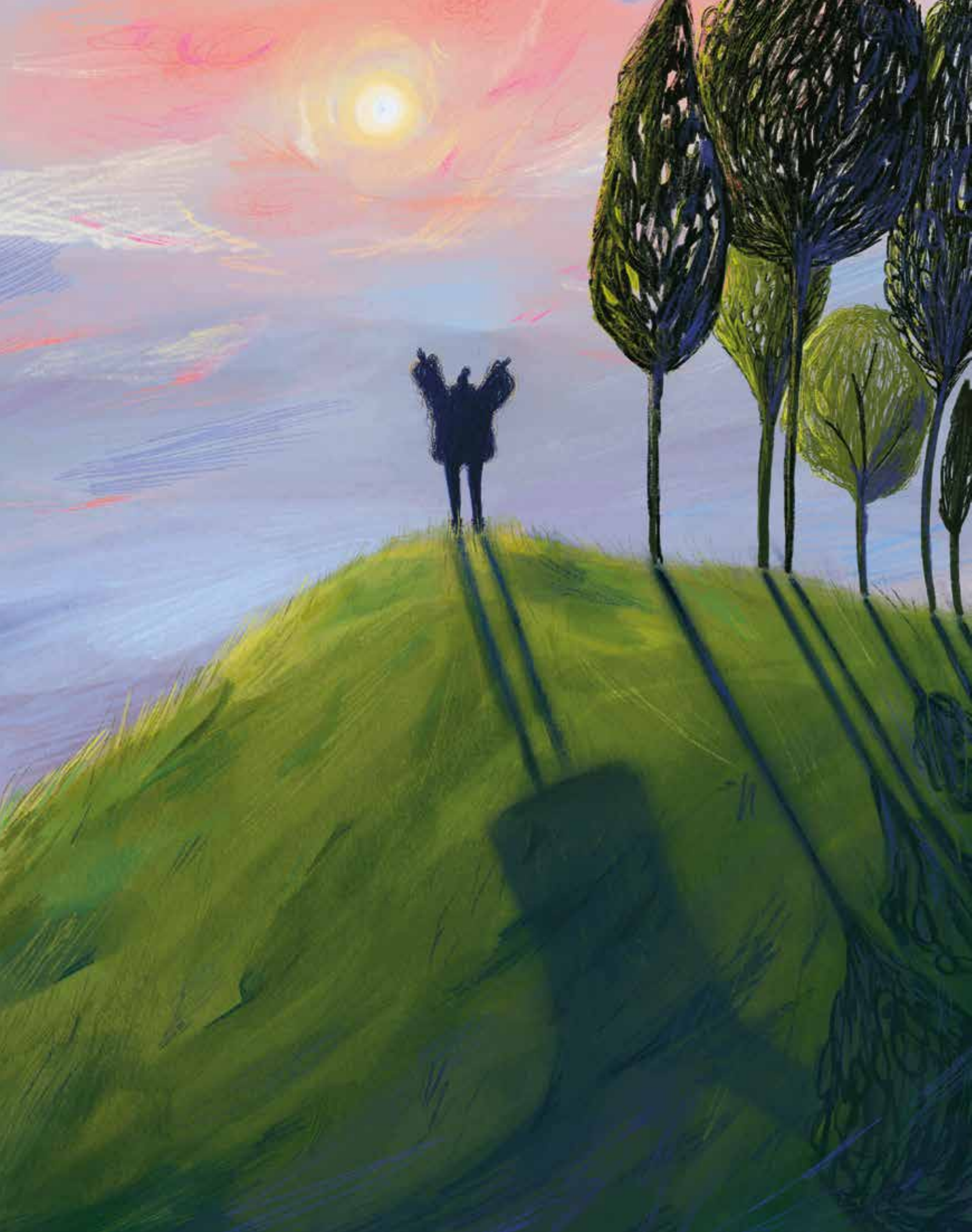
But why the morning? To kick off your day on the right foot. Once you commit that time to yourself there is a certain private satisfaction and fulfilment that comes from starting the day with a focus on your wellbeing. There is scientific evidence indicating that early risers tend to be more proactive and happier. As Laura Garnett points out in a 2020 article for *Inc.* magazine: "... increased productivity isn't the only bonus to getting up early, you'll also be happier. According to a University of Toronto study, morning people reported higher levels of happiness."

First let me say that I have never regretted going for a walk, even though there are certainly some walks that have been unpleasant. It could be the weather. It could be a state of mind. It could be what happened the day before. It could be remembering that thing I said that I wish I hadn't. All the things that are prickly or troublesome have to have their time. I have found that the best way to manage or navigate those emotions is by adding a bit of motion. Movement prevents the challenging times from getting stuck in my body.

Sometimes a walk can be challenging. This morning, for instance, I went for a walk in a gale-force wind with local flooding and a temperature of 6°C. I wore the wrong clothes by mistake, my ski pants not waterproof trousers. About 20 →









minutes into the walk I was completely wet from head to toe, so wet that I found myself wringing out my mittens every 15 minutes because they were waterlogged. While, yes, there was a certain element of this MorningWalk that was terribly uncomfortable, verging on almost too cold, I was with two friends who found the whole situation wonderfully entertaining. We were warm 'enough' and also knew that we'd be home within an hour or so where hot tea and warm, dry clothes awaited. Life lesson learned: I can do hard stuff and hard stuff is temporary.

I do not recommend or want to suggest that going on a MorningWalk without the proper gear, precautions, nourishment and safety measures is a viable way to 'learn lessons'. We need to start with safety. Please be sure that someone – a friend, family member, neighbour, housemate or colleague – knows where you will be. I put in my coat pockets a little laminated card with emergency contacts and make sure that is all updated on my phone. Be sure to have the proper gear: shoes, hat, warmth, water, snack, sunscreen, headlamp, reflective gear etc. And lastly, please carry with you some type of safety device. I have my phone and I now carry a whistle with me. There are also some handy little devices that can fit into your pocket that will flash a strobe light and sound an alarm. Consider something like that. Fortunately, I've never had to use any of these things. OK, safety briefing over. Who's ready to venture out?

Walk curiously

I had no idea of the impact that a simple, gentle walk would have on my life. The impact comes not only from the actual physical walking but also from the discipline, the practice, the commitment. This MorningWalk has ignited my sense of curiosity, satiated my everlasting wanderlust and been the most powerful tool for inspiration in my life.

I walk roughly the same loop most days. Out the front door at 5am, 8.2 miles, 17,740 steps. I walk past the same barn. On the same path. Along the same river. With the same headwind around that last turn. This conscious repetition is a form of meditation, designed with intentional familiarity. It's almost as if I could do this route blindfolded, I have travelled it so often. Some days, on the backstretch, I close my eyes while walking for 10, 20, 30, 40 steps. This creates a powerful silence. In this silence, I can hear what my body – my gut, my heart – is telling me in this moment. The mindlessness of the route itself brings mindfulness to the moment.

It seems so obvious now but my initial intention was simple: to be outside more. Every day. To create space. To find space for creativity. To dedicate an →





hour of my day to something satisfying. My days had become more and more about the 'to do' list. It became increasingly obvious that I needed to get outdoors and move. This is not a story about mileage or pace. In fact, it is the opposite. This is a story about listening, seeing, hearing, feeling and understanding. It is also a story of radical self-care. At the start, I wouldn't have been able to identify it that way, but as time has passed the discipline of doing something nourishing every day is the most profound outcome of this daily practice.

Redefining success

While in the midst of a pandemic I think about life pre-Covid. When it felt as if the world defined success as someone who was busy. The cult of busy was overwhelming. MorningWalk became an act of rebellion that challenged the cultural norm. Success became more about going out even when it was minus 2°C, when it was pouring with rain, when I 'didn't have time' or when I just plain didn't want to go. Success was going because I promised myself I would, not because anyone else noticed or cared. It was a wildly selfish pursuit. I was able to redefine success in terms that were profoundly simple: to have walked every day and to recognise that there wasn't one walk where I didn't feel better. And what do I mean by 'feel better'? Well, everything. As it turns out, persistence, focus and determination can stretch limits and push boundaries. And that left me feeling alive and loved. Commitment is intoxicating. There is nothing more generous than sticking to a promise you have made to yourself.

Libby DeLana is an award-winning executive creative director, designer/art director by trade, who has spent her career in the advertising world. She was the director of design at MullenLowe for 15 years, then went on to co-found the agency Mechanica. She is very committed to purpose-driven organisations and is currently on the board of directors for BlinkNow (an American non-profit organisation that runs a school, children's home, health clinic and women's clinic in Nepal), the Jeanne Geiger Crisis Center (an American domestic violence charity) and is an advisor to August (a menstruation education organisation). She is an advocate for female leadership, an aspiring pilot, rookie fly fisher, tea drinker and mum to two tall, smart, kind men. *Do/Walk* is her first published book. You can connect with Libby on Instagram [@parkhere](#) [#thismorningwalk](#).





*“I only went out for a walk and finally concluded to stay out till sundown, for going out, I found, was really going in”
John Muir*

I dare say that is why pilgrims, protestors, monks, hikers, wanderers, activists, explorers, adventurers and poets often walk. There is a freedom when we walk. We strip away all the unnecessary noise and details in our mind and in the world and step into a place of profound quiet and focused attention. This is my experience with the ritual of a MorningWalk. Silence, and celebration. Quiet, intimate, daily celebrations of strength, persistence, commitment and resiliency. This is why I feel better after a walk. It is a personal celebration.

There are many benefits of a good walk beyond getting from one place to another. Walking is said to provide health benefits, such as:

- improving your circulation
- strengthening your bones
- improving your sleep
- making you feel energised
- improving your mood
- strengthening your heart
- boosting immune function
- helping to lower blood sugar
- supporting your joints
- lowering your Alzheimer’s risk. ♦

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