

One Island, 32 Miles, a Million Emotions

The author relied on strolls to clear her head. But would the Great Saunter, a 12-hour tour on the edge of Manhattan, be overwhelming?

By Caroline H. Dworin

May 3, 2019

Not a car horn or a siren, only the Hudson River lapping against the bank, and that bright, briny, fishy smell of ocean. Sea gulls wheeled above in silence, and every moment between Walt Whitman and today contracted into that lapping of waves.

On a crisp Saturday last May, I set out to walk the 32-mile perimeter of Manhattan. On [the Great Saunter](#), along with about 1,500 others, I would circumnavigate a lesser-known city: a network of greenways, parkland and woods. It seemed the perfect escape. A marathon-plus-six, a half-day on foot.

This year's saunter, on Saturday, will be the first since [the death of Cy Adler](#), who founded the annual event in 1982. Walkers will gather at Fraunces Tavern in Lower Manhattan at 7 a.m. to walk clockwise up the West Side, around the top of the island and back down, to end at the same spot 12 hours or so later.

I hadn't walked like this in years — taken a day to think and walk and write, activities so entwined with my identity that without them I'd lost myself. Over the past few years, I had given birth to three children, who hung about me all hours of the day, beloved and needy.

To walk the streets of New York is to walk a symphony by Gershwin — a tumbling, clattering, harmonic joy. To find its edges, those leafy enclaves and rocky riverbanks, the dense overhang of branches in the woods, is an unexpected lullaby amid chaos.

A trickle of walkers made their way quietly, each at their own pace. Wind carried the smell of daffodils across Battery Park toward the Statue of Liberty, and a flagpole creaked. Police officers stood together laughing and drinking coffee.

And so, I walked. I walked, I walked. I walked to hear the rhythm of my feet and of my heartbeat. I walked to hear wind beside my ears. My three small children were home with their father, the baby just 5 months old.

Yet I had reason to worry. I checked my phone. My 4-year-old, a severe asthmatic, had caught a cold, and every four hours, day and night, needed breathing treatments. The night before, I'd woken to attach him to the nebulizer, check his oxygen, place the stethoscope against his little

chest, and to hold him close, riddled with fear and guilt over leaving him the next day for something so utterly self-centered.

A text came from my husband: our son's respiratory rate. "He is breathing well, at 22." And now I could breathe again, too.

We moved up the West Side. Geese honked and slipped over algae-covered rocks. Small boys warmed up on a baseball diamond, blue uniforms on a bright green field. The child at the plate tapped his cleats with his bat.

Some walkers chatted, in pairs or trios. But many remained alone, occasionally conversing with a stranger whose pace happened to match.

Sea gulls, cyclists, the blustering wind. When you hit your stride, your steps become involuntary, like a heartbeat or the mechanics of a car. That is when you begin to float: to notice, think, to wonder at every blade of grass. It is the sort of movement that allows for the play of time and memory — lonely, then fulfilling, then desperately, profoundly sad.

And then you are blindsided by emotion, by joy. City walking represents a mental and spiritual freedom, a church for those not good at sitting still. It is a compulsive, romantic act. You can travel for miles and every moment encounter something new: weeping willow beside the river, cherry blossom and so much fresh, lush grass; those heartbreaking remnants of abandoned piers struggling to rise above the water's surface, history decaying in plain sight.

I grew up in London and lived there until I was 13. My river was the Thames. As children, we hunted around in the muck for treasure: sea glass, Roman coins, which we never found. The sun rose into a sky as gray as paper, and I walked that city as I walk this one now. I was a child in scuffed shoes, and my mother, often in the hospital, was dying of cancer.

I could never be at peace with stillness, sleeping with the lights on, the radio tuned to the news. I would walk from my house in the London borough of Lewisham in the direction of the city, through Blackheath Village, past All Saints Church, across the heath and through Greenwich Park.

Trafalgar Square pigeons perched on my shoulder and feasted from the palm of my hand. I wandered up Charing Cross Road, through the crowds on Shaftesbury Avenue, gazing at the windows on Regent Street.

There was safety in movement, in the traffic crawl of dusk, the swarming tourists, the streetlights, the taillights, the rain, Piccadilly Circus neon reflected in the evening puddles. All of this life, this tumbling movement — it kept me engaged and distracted, kept me from the shadow of the wheelchair in the hall, pill bottles lined up like gravestones, the stump at her shoulder from her amputated arm. How thin she had become.

I walked then because I was afraid of the phone ringing late at night, and a voice telling me she was dead.

The only way to still the chatter in my mind was to drown it out with the chatter of the streets. With solitude came darker thoughts. But with the city came thoughts about systems, communities, life together rather than death alone. Movement, car horns, ice cream trucks, children and dogs, strangers' conversations and arguments — it meant that life was present.

As we passed Washington Heights in Upper Manhattan, I realized: There was the pediatric hospital where my son almost died.

He lay in intensive care, my fat, gentle baby, too weak to move or breathe without help. Doctors were grim. I looked at his infant car seat alone in the corner of the room. Should he die tonight, I promised myself, I would not bring it home.

He survived, though we were back in the hospital often. We made trips on foot, through the woods in Central Park, down the avenues. He became an audience for street musicians, a chaser of pigeons. During rainstorms, we ran for shelter in the immense, gothic beauty of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. He grew to be a lover of walking.

I checked my phone. All seemed to be well.

The George Washington Bridge from below is a Sistine Chapel of industry. This is a reason to walk, to find such perspective, to find oneself looking at a thing from another side.

Young men lit a kettle grill beside the river, and as the path became dirt, the city gave way to sunlight-infused woods. Fishermen crouched by the water's edge, speaking Spanish, laughing.

We stopped for a break, and a wave of panic came over me. A child's health could turn so quickly. If his blood oxygen dropped, or his respiratory rate rose, I would take a taxi home in an instant. "All O.K.?" I wrote. "Yes!" my husband replied. "Doing great!" But I was tired. Thirty-two miles is hard.

And there was city again, its gum-speckled sidewalks, men gathered outside a bodega for a smoke. Back on the streets, I limped through Harlem toward the East River, many miles left to go. It was early evening. Exhausted, I watched a train crawl across the Williamsburg Bridge. There, again, the Statue of Liberty. A beacon that meant I was nearly done; a reminder that, for some, walking great distances is not a choice.

At the end of the route, people tended their blisters and celebrated with a beer. We'd made this journey together; we'd made it entirely alone. My feet and back hurt, and the bar was hot and crowded. But I'd found what I came for, that cinema of movement and emotion, sidewalk vanishing into woods, and then gorgeously reappearing, the solitude of nature within a city of millions. I was needed at home.