

The wild walking podcast

You're listening to the Walk on the Wild Side podcast, a production of Studium Generale at Utrecht University.

My name is Norbert Peeters, botanical philosopher and wilderness theorist. I'll be taking you on a walking tour through Utrecht to get you acquainted with the city's wild side. Are you ready?

Walking is a great way to become acquainted with wild plants – even within the confines of the city. This may sound strange, as city and wilderness are traditionally seen as polar opposites. But are they? Before we dive into that question, let's take a closer look at the phenomenon of walking: why do we walk, and what is walking anyway?

People often say that walking is the antidote to a frenzied life. There's definitely some truth to that. Ever since the country went into lockdown, many of us have been walking a lot more than usual. A quick stroll around the block after that long Zoom meeting or wandering through the woods with friends and family. Being an avid walker myself, I take a daily stroll through the streets of my city, Leiden. While I usually walk alone, I'm in good company.

Since time immemorial, walking has been the philosopher's favorite mode of transportation. Aristotle's nickname was '*peripatekikos*': the walker. Together with his students, he would disseminate his teachings as he shuffled along the colonnade of his lyceum. Socrates, too, regularly wandered through Athens' agora to address people who had come to the market.

For philosophers, both the direction and the reason for a stroll are manifold. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, for instance, was a true solitary walker. In the last two years of his life, he worked on his book called *Les reveries du promeneur solitaire*, or 'Reveries of a Solitary Walker'. In this work, he turned his back on society and urban life and instead went in search of the freedom of nature.

The Prussian philosopher, Immanuel Kant, walked in the opposite direction. Avoiding the great outdoors, his daily stroll was limited to his hometown of Königsberg as he consciously breathed through his nose (because he felt this was healthier) while trying, at the same time, not to sweat (because he was repulsed by that). Reportedly, one could expect him to walk past a given window at exactly the same time every day. This earned Kant the nickname 'the clock of Königsberg'. Only twice did he break his daily walking routine: when Rousseau's book *Emile* was published, and at the outbreak of the French Revolution.

Another philosopher who loved to walk was Friedrich Nietzsche. When he was not bedridden due to illness, he went on long mountain hikes. He often retreated to the wild mountain ridges and valleys near the Alpine village of Sils Maria to write. Nietzsche shied away from books and libraries when he wrote. After all, anyone who reads books is merely roaming through another author's thoughts, according to Nietzsche. On top of that, he argued that the best thinking isn't done while sitting down. It's not something you do bent over in your chair, resting your chin on your fist like Rodin's sculpture 'The Thinker'. The mind works best when you're walking.

The name of Søren Kierkegaard should also be added to the list of philosophical walkers. This Danish philosopher once wrote, "I walk myself into a state of well-being and walk away from every illness; I have walked myself into my best thoughts."

Or take Walter Benjamin, who sauntered through the streets of Marseilles high as a kite, mistaking a hat store for a bakery thanks to the munchies. Smoking hashish put his wandering soul in a euphoric mood. He wrote: "You follow the same paths of thought as before. Only they appear strewn with roses."

Philosophers are not the only ones filled with wanderlust. The famous British biologist Charles Darwin couldn't get enough of it either. Every day, Darwin and his dog walked five times around his estate in Downe, while he quietly mused on his findings. After each lap, he kicked away a small rock that he'd lined up at the start of his 'think path', so as to not lose count. And his children sometimes played tricks on him by adding or removing rocks.

How do you like to walk, dear listener? Do you walk with a quick stride, or do you prefer a relaxed stroll? Do you always leave the house with some essentials, or do you prefer to wander around empty-handed? And, where do you like to walk to or from?

Act 1: Walking

As you just heard, philosophy has a long tradition of walking. Still, the first treatise on walking doesn't appear until the second half of the 19th century, written by the American philosopher Henry David Thoreau. Funny enough, he's not known as a walking pioneer per se. He's mainly known for building a small cabin on the shore of Walden Pond where he lived for two years, just outside his hometown of Concord, he is also known for his essay on civil disobedience that would later inspire Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., and other many champions of non-violent resistance.

Still, Thoreau is the ultimate walking hero. In his essay *Walking*, he tells us that he saunters 3 to 5 hours a day, which adds an unconventional and contrarian touch to his persona. During Thoreau's lifetime, new means of transportation emerged. While people increasingly traveled by steam train and boat, Thoreau went back to basics. Yet he didn't consider walking old-fashioned.

He says that taking the train isn't a faster way to travel from A to B than walking. That sounds implausible, but Thoreau said that the time it takes to earn money to buy a train ticket is never included in the calculation. Suppose a train ticket from Concord to Boston is a day's pay. In that case, traveling by train isn't faster at all! The train ride itself may only take an hour, but you should add to that the hours you worked to *get on* the train. So, Thoreau was asking – which way is really faster? Still, this isn't to say that Thoreau aimed for efficiency during his walks. Quite the contrary, he avoided it at all costs.

Act 2: Walking and Sountering

In the city you see countless passers-by. Just look around you: some are carrying packages or shopping bags, others are eating or drinking. People walk to the supermarket, to restaurants,

to visit friends or as part of a commute between work and home. But are they really *walking*? Not according to Thoreau. He would argue that only a few understand the art of walking. That seems like a strange claim. Since the emergence of our ancestor *Homo erectus* some two million years ago, humans have walked on two legs, right?

Here the Dutch language comes to the rescue. The English word “walking” can be translated in at least two ways, as *lopen* or *wandelen* – the first is similar to the English *lope*: to walk or run with a long, bounding stride, and the second is closer to *wander*: to walk or move in an aimless or leisurely way. In his book *De Eerste Wandelaar* (2017) author Flip van Doorn argues that *lopen* is very different from *wandelen*. He writes: “According to the dictionary, *lopen* is first and foremost 'moving quickly on one's legs'. *Wandelen*, on the other hand, is functional, purposeful – the shortest route from A to B, the straight line. *Lopen* is the kind of walking we do when we want to get somewhere, when we want to achieve something.” *Wandelen*, on the other hand, is not a means to get anywhere, but an end in itself. Well, Thoreau also wanders for the sake of wandering. According to him, this type of walking is the best way to break free from the shackles of society, which permeate our daily activities.

In his essay *Walking* he laments how industrialization and bureaucratization seem to diminish our ability to walk. Unbridled capitalism cuffs clerks to their office cubicles and forces artisans to spend days with their legs crossed. Thoreau claims he can't stay in a room for a day without starting to rust. Then he jokes dryly how these workers deserve our praise for not having ended their lives yet.

Still, Thoreau doesn't define walking as aimless drifting – aspiring walkers should meet high standards. He says, and I quote: “If you are ready to leave father and mother, and brother and sister, and wife and child and friends, and never see them again, if you have paid your debts, and made your will, and settled all your affairs, and are a free man, then you are ready for a walk.” Whether Thoreau himself met this set of requirements remains to be seen. He wasn't you're run of the mill cosmopolitan wandering the world with his knapsack. Quite the contrary. He crossed the national border into Canada only once in his life, and all the trips he made beyond his hometown of Concord can be counted on one hand. That's why he called

himself a cowardly wanderer: no matter how far Thoreau walked – after some time, he was always homeward-bound.

As a walker, Thoreau described himself as a boundary-stepper. Walking allowed him to meander between culture and nature, between city and hinterland. In the Netherlands of today, this would be particularly difficult. In Thoreau's day, you could still escape the juggernaut of civilization somewhat. After a walk of 10, 20, or 30 kilometers, he noticed the smallness of human society, and I cite: "Man and his affairs, church, state, and school, trade and commerce, and manufacturers and agriculture, even politics, the most alarming of them all – I am pleased to see how little space they occupy in the landscape."

Looking back over his shoulder, the city, telegraph poles and railroads seemed like mere colorful splashes of paint on a grand landscape painting. At the same time, Thoreau feared that these splashes of paint would one day bleed out and stain the landscape. He imagined a future in which nature surrounding us would be divided into parks and gardens, which only the privileged can enjoy. Thoreau even foresaw the surge of fences and other barricades that would condemn us to the public roads and walking through nature would be perceived as trespassing. "What would become of us," Thoreau asked in an ominous tone, "if we walked only in the garden or a mall?"

In today's world, Thoreau's vision of the future has largely become a reality. Community lands have been parceled out to a great extent. Look around you and notice the rows of houses, the fences and the walls of the street plan. In the city, every patch of land is minutely divided. And, for every part of it, someone's liable. For the walker, it's almost impossible to avoid the far-reaching influence of man on the landscape. This can also be detected in our choice of walking destinations. We invariably turn our footsteps away from our urban existence and seek its opposite: nature.

Act 3: The park

Finding "wilderness" in the city seems like an impossible task. That's why we'll have to settle for some artificial nature today: the city park. In the 19th century, the Netherlands rapidly

developed into a more industrial and urbanized nation. For many parts of the city, the consequences were predictable: litter, canals filled with feces, packed homes, and cramped basement dwellings. As a result, an increasingly loud call for public greenery grew among city dwellers.

Thoreau shared this wish for public parks. In his posthumously published essay *Huckleberries* (1970), he wrote: "I think each town should have a park, or rather a primitive forest, of five-hundred or a thousand acres, either in one body or several, where a stick should never be cut for fuel, nor for the navy, nor to make wagons, but stand and decay for higher uses—a common possession forever, for instruction and recreation." In the 19th century, public city parks began to spring up like mushrooms. Many European and American cities had one or more. And the city of Utrecht was no exception.

The so-called Zocherpark, named after the renowned family of architects and garden designers from Haarlem, is a typical English landscape garden. How do you recognize this? Well, we should first remember that the English style is a counterpoint to the French style. If you've ever visited a palace garden in France, you'll be familiar with this. Formal French gardens can be recognized by their flat, geometric and symmetrical layout with straight paths, fountains, statues and vases. The hedges and trees on these estates are carefully trimmed to size and sometimes even pruned into shapes.

With this in mind, the Zocherpark embodies the opposite of a French garden. This can already be seen in the shapes of the trees and shrubs. The English style has always made space for plants to grow freely and choose their own form. Aside from some flowerbeds, geometry and symmetry are hard to find in this park. The area is also far from flat. By cleverly using the old city walls, the Zochers were able to create variation in height to give the impression of a rolling, hilly landscape. Another striking feature is that the paths are not straight. The winding paths reflect the casual way in which people move through a natural landscape.

The English landscape style, as seen in the Zocherpark, takes its inspiration from nature. The polarity between the English and French styles can be explained, in part, by a difference in

vision. According to English style, the hand of the artist must always remain hidden, while the French style wants to see the hand of the artist everywhere. This difference stems from a difference in the conception of nature, I offer the following aphorism: "Show me your garden, and I'll tell you what nature means to you." As a result of the Enlightenment, French garden art idealizes human dominion over nature. Only when humans assert their power through cosmetic interventions, does nature show its alluring side. The art of English gardening presents us with an opposite aesthetic view of nature, which is connected to Romanticism. Its ideal image is free, rural, rustic nature. This illusion is created by the construction of meandering waterways, natural planting schemes promoting unrestrained growth, and some pastoral elements like a small temple or castle ruins.

The Zocherpark was inspired by the English style, and thus has various Romantic elements. Still, it deviates from this in one important respect. English gardens, like the French ones, were created for the glory of the aristocracy and wealthy bourgeoisie. The Zocherpark, on the other hand, has always fulfilled a public purpose. For example, the Zochers' design included a bandstand for public concerts and the park offers space for leisurely activities.

Act 4: Botanical garden

I'd like to talk to you about another type of garden in the center of Utrecht: the old botanical garden. This garden started out as a medicinal plant nursery for medical students. For a long time, the plant kingdom was our medicine cabinet, and so botanical knowledge was indispensable for future physicians and apothecaries. Later, this herbal garden slowly transformed into a cabinet of curiosities. Through trading companies and colonies, more and more exotic plants were brought to the Netherlands. The botanical garden became a gathering place for these unusual and extraordinary plants. Botanists also started to taxonomically classify the plant kingdom, which is why all of the plants in the garden today have a label stating both their popular and their scientific names. Over time botanical gardens became technologically advanced enough to build greenhouses and other tools to ensure that even tropical plants could thrive in this temperate climate. This technology has enabled the botanical garden to act as a kind of Ark, where plants from all over the world can be grown and studied.

From this perspective, the botanical garden has a strong connection to the wilderness. Unlike flower gardens such as the Dutch Keukenhof, the botanical garden showcases a collection of mostly wild plants – plants that weren't merely cultivated for ornamental purposes, like tulips and daffodils. However, you don't necessarily need to visit the Hortus to admire and enjoy some wild flora.

I'm curious about your garden, dear listener, if you have one of course. Does your garden, or that of your neighbors, say anything about your relationship with nature? Is it overgrown, neatly raked, or perhaps completely paved over? Think about that.

Act 5: City flora

Let's walk on dear listener, and try to take notice of the wild flora this city has to offer. As you walk along the canals, you'll notice numerous plants growing on the sidewalks and walls. Look for some steps leading to the canal below and walk along the water for a while. Be on the lookout for drains where water regularly drips down, usually there's lots of green to be seen here. Water is a source of life that allows plants to cover the stones with a green film. These trickles of water expose the secrets of terrestrial plant history. The green layer you see on the stones are green algae. These are the living descendants of the green algae that first conquered the land some 500 million years ago.

Water sources also give life to beds of moss, as you can clearly see, with green, downy hairs, between which some spore capsules often protrude on long stems with their heads bent down. You can probably also find liverworts with their distinct leaf-like lobes, that are commonly called umbrella liverwort. These plants represents the next step in the evolution of terrestrial plants: multicellular plants that are still quite rudimentary in their development. You can clearly see that these are primitive plant forms. Liverworts have neither roots nor a vascular system, and the 'leaf' consists of only one layer of cells. They grow as flat, green membranes often bearing characteristic umbrellas that come in two forms: those with ridges that carry the egg cells, and disk-shaped ones that carry sperm cells. You can also see that these mosses are not adapted to survive on dry land. They can only thrive in the proximity to water.

Look around, against the walls of the canal you'll undoubtedly see some ferns, such as the hart's-tongue fern or wall-rue with its wavy green leaves. In the evolution of terrestrial plants, ferns appear after mosses. They're more resistant to dry conditions, they develop a root-system and they have a vascular system that pumps water to different plant parts. Because their spores germinate only on moist soil, they still depend on water for reproduction. You may even spot some descendants of the last plant group to emerge: the flowering plants. Perhaps you'll come across some ivy-leaved toadflax, with its dainty, purple-colored flowers with a bright yellow spot that entices pollinators to visit the plant.

Nowadays, it's easier to identify these urban plants with the help of all kinds of plant guides. If you have a smartphone, you can download the PlantNet app that easily identifies city plants. Simply take a picture of the plant, and the app will tell you more about it. Make sure to take a sharp picture of the flower or leaf. See how many different plants you can look up!

Act 6: City wilderness

We're almost back to where we started our walk. I started off this journey by saying that walking is a good way to develop an eye for wilderness. Still, I don't mean wilderness in the sense of pristine nature. You might even say that such wilderness no longer exists. As American author Emma Marris tells us in her book *Rambunctious Garden*, every ecosystem on Earth has been influenced by humans to a greater or lesser degree. Think of the growing garbage pile on top of Mount Everest deposited by negligent mountaineers, or the plastic bags at the bottom of the Mariana Trench. But what does that mean: the end of wilderness?

I don't think so. While studying the Thoreau's work, I was first introduced to a broader idea of wilderness. It turned out that he didn't just apply the term to refer to pristine nature far beyond the civilized world – he showed the reader how wilderness stirred everywhere. For example, Thoreau once wrote about a young pitch pine that sprouted on a sandy railroad embankment some 300 meters from the nearest adult tree. He regularly found pine seedlings in the gardens and along the roads of his hometown Concord, and worded his observation as follows: "This tree would soon spread out into all our gardens if they were neglected." Only

man, with his plows, spades, and scythes, stands in the way of this pine tree's freedom to grow.

Thoreau even discerned wilderness tendencies in plants and animals that are the product of artificial selection. In his essay titled *Wild Apples* (1862), he dedicated his words to feral apple trees that escaped from the orchards of fruit growers. He also once witnessed the attempted escape of a cow from a neighbor's pasture. The way in which this tame grazer broke free from the pasture and waded through the river reminded Thoreau of the wild bison crossing the Mississippi River. Despite domestication, the domestic animal has never lost its wild, natural instincts, and I cite: "The seeds of instinct are preserved under the thick hides of cattle and horses." Thoreau observed the same in humans. Although civilization binds us to the same restraints as the cow, we too still exhibit wild instincts. Thoreau characterized wildness as the incalculable, the unpredictable, the uncontrollable. In short, it's everything that goes against or escapes the human need for control.

Now, doesn't this definition also apply to the small plants you've seen growing on the sidewalks and walls? Between the cracks and crevices in the city's streets, wildness is ever alive. Up close, the weedy margins look innocently green, but they're unruly nonetheless. Of course they are – they must be. After all, they must give way to shoe soles, brine, brushes from sweepers, car and bicycle tires, and the strict weeding and mowing policies of the city gardeners. Wedged between the pavement, they take root and often invisibly spread their leaves, flowers and spores. City plants also liberally cover canal walls, roofs and other structures. To realise the expansionist nature of this urban flora, one simply needs to leave the area. If all the citizens of Utrecht were to pack up their bags tomorrow and leave, then the city would be overgrown in no time.

Dear listener, I sincerely hope you'll continue to enjoy wandering with all your heart. Hopefully, in doing so, you'll learn to slow down and develop an eye and a reverence for the wealth that wild flora and fauna have to offer in your city. As Walt Whitman wrote in his poem, *Song of the open road*:

“Afoot and light-hearted I take to the open road,
Healthy, free, the world before me,
The long brown path before me leading wherever I choose.”

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