Walking restores the world and humanity

Contributed by Bill Bunn
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There is only one way humans are made to move. They are basically made to walk. There are many other ways to get around. You can canoe, for instance. Or paraglide. Or jog or swim. But these modes of transportation are not the staple of human mobility. Walking is unavoidable, a necessity for those with two working legs.

The entire scheme of nature, and the human's place within it, is built around the understanding that humans use their legs to move. It's a great unspoken assumption. The earth expects humans to walk.

Wildlife expects humans to walk, and it has trouble with other forms of transport. North American drivers kill one million animals each day, nearly 12 animals per second. 400 million animals are killed by drivers in North America each year. Almost two million deer are killed on North American roads yearly.

According to National Institute for Urban Wildlife and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 50 to 100 million birds are killed each year by vehicles. Research reports that road kill is a significant factor in the decline of amphibians. Motorized transport dramatically reduces insect populations.

Though humans invented vehicles, we have trouble understanding them, too. The 210 million vehicles on North America's four and half million miles of roads cause 47 thousand human deaths a year. But, how many mammals, birds, amphibians and humans would be hurt or killed if humans only walked?

All creatures, including the human, understand walking. Walking is a primal transport, embedded in the human psyche, expected by the world's creatures, and the land itself, evidence of an ancient arrangement between humans and their world.

Walking serves as a bridge between other humans and other animals. Humans tend to walk between two and five miles per hour – an average of around three miles per hour. Dogs walk at speeds between two and four miles per hour. Camels walk an average speed of three miles per hour. Horses and mules, when walking, operate at speeds of three to four miles per hour. Elephant walk at four miles per hour. The old friendships between humans and some animals partly depend on a shared walking speed. A walking pace is the speed of community.

Though we don't walk with many other animals, we could. Many other animals share a similar pace: bears, mice, ants, snakes, cats, or aardvarks. The ordinary human can keep pace with a puma, a zebra, a rhinoceros, or an American President.

Yet, humans are obsessed with the top speeds of each living thing. Many sources announce, for example, that the elk has a top speed of 25 miles an hour. Very few note the walking speed: between three and five miles per hour.

As part of that obsession, humans find ways to travel faster every year. Usain Bolt’s recent Olympic sprint averaged 23 mph. When he sprints, he is unique, and alone. When he walks, any walking human can keep pace. Top speed emphasizes difference.

Mechanically assisted types of transport alienate humans from their planet, and from one another. The fastest humans, currently, ride in the space shuttle traveling at 18,685 mph in orbit. 18,685 miles an hour is an unearthly speed. Top speeds separate us from one another and alienate us from the earth. Lower speeds unify us and bind us to our planet.

For those who like speed, there is a price to pay. One cost is tension. The mind, when you drive, is consumed for the most part in the exercise of managing extra speed, paying attention, watching for potholes and pedestrians. Even jogging requires more attention than walking.

Researchers report that the faster you travel the more tension you experience. A number of studies report, for example, that when speed increases, negative emotions intensify. This factor alone plays a large role in what has been termed “road rage.”

Another cost is a diminished sense of context. When you walk, your field of vision is nearly 180 degrees, 140 degrees of which feeds your awareness. The Optometrists Association of Australia reports that human field of vision “is reduced with increasing speed.” For example, at 100 kilometers an hour, field of vision contracts to 40 degrees.

Higher speeds cause peripheral vision to “smudge” which hampers object recognition, and lowers response times. Motorists traveling 25 miles per hour or faster have more difficulty determining whether a pedestrian is ready to cross a street, and in consequence have more difficulty deciding whether they should slow down.

In other words, speed impedes thinking and decision-making. Thought depends on perception, but speed impairs it. Things “come out of nowhere.” collisions become inevitable.

But walking is a cure. When we walk we take our place in nature. We untie our minds and improve thought. We restore our humanity. So, walk. After all, it's what we were designed to do, and what our planet expects of us.

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