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Cover Page Footnote

Jamie Hinrichs has a PhD in environmental history from the University of St Andrews (Scotland). Her dissertation examined the intersection of walking and preservation in England and Scotland, c. 1850-1950. This paper examines how walking has shaped wilderness ethic in the United States and how that ethic might be conveyed to a larger public. Jamie works for the U.S. Forest Service as a public affairs specialist.

Sauntering Spirituality: Walking through Environmental History in Audio

J.E. Hinrichs, PhD

Walking provides pathways into environmental history, and environmental history enriches our walking. *Sauntering Spirituality* is conceived as an audio documentary series that invites listeners into this intersection of perambulation and the past. Each episode would explore how walking – as “sauntering spirituality” – has shaped the American land ethic.

In the series, ‘sauntering spirituality’ would be the term used to encompass the ways in which walking facilitated a spiritual experience of land.¹ “Spiritual”, here, would be taken in the broadest sense of its possible meanings, including: a religious connection to God, an agnostic encounter with the supernatural, a profound feeling of inner wellness, an intimate tie to one’s culture, or a deep immersion (flow) with an activity.

“Land ethic” is a concept borrowed and adapted from Aldo Leopold, which he used to describe the intertwined relationship of land and people. Leopold held that the moral values governing the ways we engage with and treat the land are shaped by the degree to which we perceive the land as “a community to which we belong ... to use it with love and respect”. In this series, “land ethic” would be used similarly, to encompass how the values tied to land have changed, persisted, or been restored through time.

Sauntering Spirituality would encourage listeners to evaluate the enduring past and evolving future of land ethic. Episodes would explore the ways in which land ethic is rooted in the ideas, values, and relationships that Tribes, scientists, explorers, artists, writers, historians, and land managers cultivated as they walked. But land ethic is also something we each continue to develop in our own time, through our own walks.

Each episode of the series would include four figurative components:

1. A compass (a guiding question): how has walking, as “sauntering spirituality”, shaped land ethic?
2. A trailhead into the past: a narrated evaluation of one or more primary source passages of a historical walker. This would be the means of exploring the environmental history of land ethic.
3. A switchback to the present: a recorded outdoor interview with a present-day figure who has a tie to the episode’s historical walker. This would be a means of exploring land ethic in our own time to consider how or whether our connections with land and walking have changed over time. For example, if the episode reviewed primary source materials from a nineteenth-century botanist, the interview might be with a twenty-first-century botanist. The series would highlight and include interviews with many types of specialists and thinkers, including land managers, artists, Tribal members, historians, and a variety of “-ologists”. The interview would function as abbreviated oral history and would ask the interviewee to discuss both their own uses of “sauntering spirituality”, and their thoughts on the episode’s historical figure.
4. A rambling reflection: a question or suggested activity would invite listeners would be invited to engage further with the episode’s content and their own land ethic.

The episodes would be developed with educators, visitor centers, and life-long learners in mind. The hope is that they would inform and inspire future walks, but by using an immersive recording style that includes natural sounds, each episode would also function as an imagined walk, which could be enjoyed while commuting, cleaning, or cooking. A visitor center or educator could also take the episodes' transcripts to deliver their own in-person lessons or guided walks.

Below is a partial script of a pilot episode. Since this project is in a nascent, conceptual stage, the script is missing the interview for the third component, a recorded interview with the twenty-first-century figure. The script below would be produced with natural sounds (e.g., stream flowing over stones, wind blowing through pine trees) and other effects (e.g., unfolding paper, feet walking on gravel). Readers will need to imagine that the words are coming from a speaker or headphones for now.

Partial Script for Pilot Episode of *Sauntering Spirituality*

Prelude

It's 1898, and we're in the Sierra Nevada Mountains, scrambling on some scree. The gentle, clinking note of these sharp shards of stone under our boots is soothing, even as the anticipation of what appears to be a Sierra summer storm looms on the grey, clouded horizon. Wind shuffles our hair, and whispers in our ears. But we find we've got a line in our mind from a late-nineteenth century walker that is gaining some popularity in the papers:

*"I only went out for a walk and finally concluded to stay out till sundown, for going out, I found, was really going in."*²

The line is curious. Walking is, of course, a means of going out – outdoors, outside, out to the woods – but the author here is suggesting walking is also a means of going into something undefined. Perhaps even something supernatural, invisible or tied to sentiment?

We add some additional heft to our evolving interpretation of these words, when we recall that someone told us the author was particular about his pedestrian terminology. He reportedly preferred 'sauntering' over 'hiking', insisting, "now these mountains are our Holy Land, and we ought to saunter through them reverently, not 'hike' through them."'³ We know the practice and word origin of sauntering is tied to medieval pilgrimages to the Holy Land, and thus aligned with a spiritual approach to high-elevation landscapes.

The author is also a devoted champion of protecting forests. He has written often and at length for the need to keep these lands from the damaging effects of commercialization and unchecked extraction. It is with this sauntering forest advocate that we'll start a series of explorations of how walking – as sauntering spirituality – has shaped the American land ethic.

Series Overview

*This is Episode 1 of *Sauntering Spirituality*. This series explores the environmental history of walking, spirituality, and land ethic in America.*

In these audio documentaries, the term ‘sauntering spirituality’ will be used to encompass the ways in which walking facilitated and continues to facilitate a spiritual experience of land.

“Spiritual”, here, will be taken in the broadest sense of its possible meanings, including: a religious connection to God, an agnostic encounter with the supernatural, a profound feeling of inner wellness, an intimate tie to one’s culture, or a deep immersion (or flow) with an activity.

“Land ethic” is a concept borrowed and adapted from Aldo Leopold, which he used to capture the intertwined relationship of land and people. Leopold held that moral values governing the ways we engage with and treat the land are shaped by the degree to which we perceive the land as, “a community to which we belong ... to use it with love and respect”. In this series, “land ethic” will be used similarly, to encompass how the values tied to land have changed, persisted, or been revived through time.

In each episode, a historical walker will be paired with a twenty-first-century walker by exploring the writings of the former and an interview with the latter. In so doing, we’ll learn from the perspectives of a variety of past and present specialists – environmental historians, botanists, artists, biologists, authors, Tribal members and more. Each will provide us with pathways to meaningful connections with land.

With each episode, we will also be prompted to take a walk. We’ll be given a question that will help us to reflect on how walking, spirituality, and land ethic intersect in our own lives. Through our walks, environmental history can become part of our own biography.

Trailhead into the Past

But back to our scree-covered slope in 1898, where we’re walking just above tree line on a forest in the southern Sierra Nevada Mountains.

The United States is shifting increasingly to an urban-industrial lifestyle and public awareness of conserving forests is growing as well. The contemporary, growing fear of a timber famine and over exploitation of natural resources by commercial interests led to the recent passing of the 1891 Forest Reserve Act. This legislation enables the president of the United States to create forest reserves from federal land. In a few years, 1907 to be exact, these reserves will be renamed “national forests”.

One of those reserves in our present year, is the 4-million-acre Sierra Forest Reserve, where we are now standing. President Benjamin Harrison designated this reserve five years ago, in 1893. It includes most forested areas in the Sierra Nevada south of the recently created Yosemite National Park. In the future, portions of this reserve will become part of the Sierra, Sequoia, Stanislaus and Inyo national forests.

But we are getting ahead of ourselves again. Here on the edge of the twentieth century, we have paused in our walk to do some deep thinking about this forest reserve. We pull from our tweed jacket pocket a slightly wrinkled essay entitled “Wild Parks and Forests Reservations of the

West”, just published by the Atlantic Monthly. The author is naturalist and keen protector of undeveloped land, John Muir – the same man who wrote the line about walking as a means of going out and going in, which we are still pondering.

We keep hearing his name bandied about. Apparently, he hails from Scotland, and he has given some thought to writing a biography about his boyhood there. We have cause to believe that Scotland is where he discovered a love for wilderness and walking. Or as he has will put it:

When I was a boy in Scotland, I was fond of everything that was wild, and all my life I've been growing fonder and fonder of wild places and wild creatures. Fortunately, around my native town of Dunbar, by the stormy North Sea, there was no lack of wildness ... My earliest recollections of the country were gained on short walks with my grandfather when I was perhaps not over three years old.⁴

His Scottish upbringing drew him into nature walks, but also conditioned his spirituality. Muir's Presbyterian father enforced the memorization of scripture, at the threat of a whipping. Muir recalled, 'by the time I was eleven years of age I had about three fourths of the Old Testament and all of the New by heart and by sore flesh'.⁵ But, when independent of his father's religious tyranny, Muir did not abandon Christianity. Instead, he adapted the orthodoxy of his childhood and created a spiritual adoration of the natural beauty he encountered when wandering afoot among forests and mountains. In other words, he embraced a sort of sauntering spirituality.⁶

*Muir conveyed his use of sauntering spirituality in his book, *My First Summer in the Sierra*, which contains journal entries he wrote in 1869 while working with a shepherd in the Sierra Nevada Mountains of California. On 11 July, he 'sauntered up the meadow about sundown' where he found 'everything glowing with Heaven's unquenchable enthusiasm'.⁷ On 26 July – after a 'ramble to the summit of Mt. Hoffman', and gazing upon the mountain range – he expressed his eagerness to discern 'the meaning of these divine symbols crowded together'.⁸ The next day, he celebrated the 'wondrous breadth of shining granite pavement to walk over', which led him to proclaim with his pen, 'everything is perfectly clean and pure and full of divine lessons ... the hand of God becomes visible'.⁹ Walking was plainly Muir's *modus operandi* for encountering the divine in the mountains.*

He also bolstered his campaign for American national parks and forest reserves by depicting walking as a spiritual remedy for anxiety. We return now to the article in hand. Straightening out the pages, we see that Muir opened his article, "Wild Parks and Forests Reservations of the West", with a passage that depicted wandering as spiritual rejuvenation from the worries that stemmed from modern life. He wrote:

The tendency nowadays to wander in wildernesses is delightful to see. Thousands of tired, nerve-shaken, over-civilized people are beginning to find out that ... mountain parks and reservations are useful not only as fountains of timber and irrigating rivers, but as fountains of life ... Awakening from the stupefying effects of the vice of over-industry and the deadly apathy of luxury, they are trying as best they can to mix and enrich their own little ongoings with those of Nature, and to get rid of rust and disease. Briskly venturing and roaming, some are washing off sins and cobweb cares of the devil's spinning in all-day storms on mountains; sauntering in

*rosiny pinewoods ... panting in whole-souled exercise ... This is fine and natural and full of promise. And so also is the growing interest in the care and preservation of forests and wild places in general.*¹⁰

*Muir found 'sauntering' in mountains and forest reservations to be 'whole-souled exercise', an activity for the spirit that entailed bodily movement. He believed this spiritual wandering could combat the shaken nerves stemming from aspects of modern life, specifically: "the vice of over-industry" and "deadly apathy of luxury". Walking in forests could be spiritually cleansing for the walker as a means of "washing off sins and cobweb cares of the devil's spinning". This led to his printed proclamation that mountains parks and forest reserves had value beyond their utility for timber and water resources: they were spaces where the public could practice sauntering spirituality, which made the protection of such lands spiritually important.*¹¹

Most often, Muir is associated with a preservation land ethic, rather than conservation land ethic. Preservation is generally understood as the protection of nature from use, while conservation is the protection of nature for sustained, proper use. Throughout the decades to come, national parks will be lands largely managed by the preservation land ethic, and forest serves – what will become national forests by 1907 – will be managed by the conservation land ethic.

Muir hints at the conservation land ethic a bit in his portrait of the Sierra Forest Reserve as "beautiful and useful" and when he spotlights certain unchecked uses as an improper for federal forests. In his words:

*"The Sierra of California ... embraces over four million acres of the grandest scenery and grandest trees on the continent, and its forests are planted just where they do the most good, not only for beauty, but for farming in the great San Joaquin Valley beneath them. The Sierra Reserve... is worth the most thoughtful care of the government ... Yet ... lumbermen are allowed to spoil it at their will and sheep in uncountable ravenous hordes to trample it and devour every green leaf within reach."*¹²

With these threats outlined, what solutions can we seek to protect this forest reserve? Muir, who linked the "whole-souled exercise" of walking with the need to protect forests earlier in the essay, later brings walking to the fore again, as a means of discovering the beauty of forests and the desire to care for them. In his words:

"Wandering at random through these friendly, approachable woods, one comes here and there to the loveliest lily gardens ... If every citizen could take one walk through this reserve, there would be no more trouble about its care; for only in darkness does vandalism flourish."

For Muir, walking not only immersed walkers in the loveliness of forests, walking could also raise awareness of the overexploitation causing damage to said loveliness.

After reading the article in full, we fold up the article and return to our woodland wandering. Muir's words have nudged us to see the seemingly mundane act of walking in a new light. If Muir is right, a ramble in a forest reserve is whole-souled renewal from anxiousness and exhaustion.

This effect of walking both justifies the need to protect forested lands and cultivates the desire to do so. It seems, then, that when walking is practiced as sauntering spirituality, it may hold sway on our individual and collective land ethic.

Switchback to the Present

With that idea in mind, we have arrived at a switchback to the twenty-first century.

While some historical figures are easy to label, this is not the case for John Muir. Was he a writer, a naturalist, and geologist, an explorer? He was all these things, and others besides, but his deep affection for botany was undeniable.

Indeed, the article we have been perusing is stuffed with listings and details about specific trees and flowers. The few paragraphs on the Sierra Forest Reserve alone made mention of Sequoia gigantea, sugar pine, yellow pine, mountain pine, Douglas spruce, silver fir, Patton's hemlock, oaks, maples, alders, poplars, flowering dogwood, manzanita, ceanothus, wild rose, cherry, chestnut, and rhododendron. To name a few.

Plants also featured prominently in the drawings and written details of his journals. And prior to his arrival in California, he took a 1,000 mile walk from Kentucky to Florida's Gulf coast to "botanize". He even proclaimed in a letter to a friend, "I'm in the woods, woods, woods, and they are in me-ee-ee. [...] and I've taken sacrament with Douglas squirrel, drunk Sequoia wine, Sequoia blood, and with its rosy purple drops I am writing this woody gospel letter".¹³ It seems that walking in the woods was a form of literal and imagined holy communion, inspiring him to put his own revelations to paper.

It is only fitting then that we now take a walk with present botanizer on the Sierra National Forest, which was previously part of the Sierra Forest Reserve. With them, we will explore the intersections of botany, sauntering spirituality, and land ethic in the twenty-first century.

Rambling Reflection

As we come to the close of this first exploration of sauntering spirituality, we will use a question as invitation to take a real or imagined walk for additional contemplation. Muir's notion that many people in the late nineteenth century were "tired" and "nerve-shaken" by the "vice of over-industry" and "deadly apathy of luxury" resonates in our present time. We live in a culture of instantaneity and constant connection, which brings a mixture of benefits and burdens. We often find we feel we have too little time, despite all our time-saving technology, and too distracted by all the conveniences at our fingertips. But Muir reminds us that we can find a reprieve, if not renewal, by "sauntering ... in pinewoods" to experience "whole-souled exercise".

As we now turn off our listening devices and remove our ear buds to take our own walk in the woods, or even a walk about the room, let's think about these questions: What is making me feel anxious or exhausted? Too many commitments or distractions? What activity or hobby helps me to reclaim some peace of mind and inner renewal?

*When John Muir wrote “I only went out for a walk and finally concluded to stay out till sundown, for going out, I found, was really going in,” perhaps the “in” implied was **Invitation to Introspection**.*

Until next time, happy sauntering.

¹ The neologism ‘gestural spirituality’ is an adaptation of the concept of a ‘haptic sublime’: Alan McNee, *The New Mountaineer in Late Victorian Britain: Materiality, Modernity, and the Haptic Sublime* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 115. The ‘sublime’ encompassed the sense of, and emotional response to the might, mystery, immensity, and awe of nature: Francis Spufford, *I May Be Some Time: Ice and the English Imagination* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997), 18–20; Ernest Tuveson, ‘Space, Deity, and the “Natural Sublime”’, *Modern Language Quarterly* 12, no. 1 (1951): 32; Samuel Monk, *The Sublime: A Study of Critical Theories in XVIII-Century England* (1935; Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1962), 8–9; Frederick Staver, “‘Sublime’ as Applied to Nature”, *Modern Language Notes* 70, no. 7 (November 1995), 485–86.

² John Muir, *John of the Mountains: The Unpublished Journals of John Muir*, edited by Linnie Marsh Wolfe, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1938, republished 1979), 439.

³ Muir reportedly preferred ‘sauntering’ over ‘hiking’ because practice and etymology of the former term – tied to medieval pilgrimages to the Holy Land – was aligned with a spiritual approach to mountains. As Muir put it, “now these mountains are our Holy Land, and we ought to saunter through them reverently, not ‘hike’ through them”: Albert Palmer, *The Mountain Trail and Its Message* (Boston: The Pilgrim Press, 1911), 27–28.

⁴ John Muir, *The Story of My Boyhood and Youth* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1913), 1–2.

⁵ Muir, *The Story of My Boyhood and Youth*, 1–2.

⁶ Donald Worster, *A Passion for Nature: The Life of John Muir* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 8–36; Rupert Sheldrake, *Rebirth of Nature: The Greening of Science and God* (London: Rider, 1993), 52–53.

⁷ John Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1911), 137.

⁸ Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra*, 199–200.

⁹ Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra*, 210–11.

¹⁰ John Muir, *Our National Parks* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1901), 1–2.

¹¹ Muir’s approach to mountains may have been influenced by the writings of Leslie Stephen. Muir owned Stephen’s *The Playgrounds of Europe*, which included the passage about creating an ‘idolatry’ around mountains: John Muir, ‘John Muir to George Nicholson’, 2 November 1904, John Muir Papers, Holt-Atherton Special Collections and Archives, University of the Pacific Library. © 1984 Muir-Hanna Trust.

¹² Muir, *Our National Parks*, 31-33.

¹³ John Muir to Mrs. Carr, dated “Nut Time”, in *The life and letters of John Muir*, ed. William Frederic Bade, (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1924), 270-273.