

## Shaking Off the Village

One summer I reread much of Henry David Thoreau's writings. Like me, Thoreau enjoyed taking long walks to clear his mind and renew his spirit. Thoreau preferred walking in the woods. I like walking on a path. He walked in a parabola—I walk in a straight line. Thoreau liked evening "saunters"—I prefer brisk morning exercise. However, Thoreau and I do share one thing in our walking habits. Like Thoreau, I try to focus on the moment when I walk, on what I'm seeing and hearing and smelling on the journey. I really do make an effort. Thoreau called it "shaking off the village."

From Thoreau: "I am alarmed when it happens that I have walked a mile into the woods bodily, without getting there in spirit. In my afternoon walk, I would fain forget all my morning occupations, and my obligations to society. However, it sometimes happens that I cannot easily shake off the village. The thought of some work will run in my head, and I am not where my body is; I am out of my senses. In my walks I would fain return to my senses. What business have I in the woods, if I am thinking of something out of the woods? I suspect myself, and cannot help a shudder, when I find myself so implicated even in what are called good works — for this may sometimes happen."

I like to use a walking stick when I go into the woods. My friend Ed carved my favorite walking stick from a tree taken from our property on the lake. It is about five feet tall and an inch and a half in diameter. The top is carved into a bearded face, a wood sprite who scowls at me during our walks. The handgrip is wrapped in soft deerskin, laced on with a thin strip of rawhide. I take it into the woods in the event that some wild animal might try to attack the dog or me. Of course, that has never happened.

Once not long ago, I got disoriented while on a walk in the woods behind my camp. I was on a quest to find the old Prince family farmhouse that I was told was at the end of a path that led away from the lake. When I realized that I was lost, silence descended and I felt swallowed by the trees. My heart pounded in my panic. My fear heightened all my senses, and I looked around for something familiar, something I might recognize in the landscape that would set me on track once again. It was the lake that saved me. Suddenly I could hear a boat or maybe a jet ski on the lake in the distance. I followed the sound. When I got home, I felt ridiculous. But I vowed never again to venture into the woods alone. For a while, fear kept me from that which I once enjoyed.

Then one day I left the dirt road and once again walked into the woods. Every day after that, I walked deeper into the woods until I was no longer afraid. Each day I went a bit farther, using the lake sounds as my guide. I never got lost again. All women need to go bravely into the woods. Getting lost can sometimes help you find yourself, and being lost is not the same as not knowing where you are.

From my reading:

"There is nothing to be afraid of in the woods, except yourself. If you've got sense, you can keep out of trouble. If you haven't got sense, you'll get into trouble, here or anywhere else." —Louise Dickenson Rich