Ambling towards Nirvana

I recently spent 3 days in Florence with 20 other gerontologists in an attempt to define frailty. One of the cardinal signs of frailty, we all agreed, is slow walking speed—the patient who takes forever to get from the waiting room to your office. We advocated prospective trials of brisk walking in frailty prevention. All this left me vaguely unsettled, because I am a great lover of the art of walking slowly.

One theory of language holds that the number of words available to describe a phenomenon reflects the subtlety with which we can think about it. Eskimos have eleven or thirteen or some other large uneven number of words for snow, while the Trobriand Islanders have none. Thus, the Trobrianders cannot even think about snow, much less talk about it.

In that case, at some point in our history walking slowly must have been very important indeed. Amble, mosey, stroll, saunter, shuffle, lumber, ramble, shamble, sidle, meander, wend, sashay—and more. In earlier times perhaps we needed all these words. But not any more. We might amble in our dreams, but not on the freeway. One strides in the corridors of power; saunterers are not welcome. People rush to their massages, their yoga classes. Slow walking is on the verge of extinction, at risk of relegation to ritual, to surface only at weddings and funerals to evoke vestigial emotions from a more placid era. It need not be so.

My daughter knows how to mosey. Thumbs in jeans, hips abducted 15 degrees, this gait is accomplished by synchronised flexion of the hip and knee, such that the foot is lifted with the lower part of the leg still perpendicular to the ground. Then the knee is extended to 180°, and the weight shifts forward to that leg, which is planted on the ground about 12 inches in front of where it started.

The mosey is a magnificent walk, more like a dance. It fairly screams with the revels of the journey, the sheer joy of motion. Had the Wright brothers known how to mosey, they would not have needed an aeroplane.

Henry David Thoreau devoted a long essay to sauntering, which he thought was derived from "Sainte Terre"; a saunterer was a holy lander, a walker of sacred ground. I have spent some effort in life teaching others to saunter. It is important to me. The saunterer lives in the present. What is important is where you are, not where you are going. Sauntering is a simple but all-consuming act. Hustling, hurrying, rushing—this is all about the future, ignoring the present to get to the future. But is the future worth the rush, worth the sacrifice of the present?

The amble, of course, uniquely American, embedded in our Constitution. Our founding fathers composed the preamble, then ambled to clear their minds, then wrote the rest of the document. It is always easier to teach people how to do something rather than feel something or be something. Rather than attending classes to learn to reduce stress and resolve conflict, maybe we could all learn how to amble. The amble is the ambulatory equivalent of a deep breathing exercise. It is impossible to simultaneously fight and amble. When we reach Nirvana, we will not be permitted to dash or scoot. We will be expected to know how to amble.

So here I am, a conflicted geriatrician. How do I integrate my personal love of sauntering with my professional beliefs in the benefits of rapid walking? Life is complex. Perhaps we will evolve to a set of recommendations that acknowledge this complexity. Power walking, running, jogging—those we will recommend as helpful for the body. But moseying, ambling and sauntering are necessary exercises for the soul.

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