

The road is your footsteps

Peter Reason experiences the transience of time on a morning walk

In the first days of April, as the sun rises earlier and the dark of winter recedes, I resume my early-morning walks around the fields close to my house.

I am mainly concerned with shaking off my winter sloth, so I dress in light clothes and take my hiking poles: I will be chilled stepping outside and I want to encourage myself to walk briskly.

I take the lane that runs between the hedge and the stone garden walls. It is a track of compressed earth, firm in parts, a bit muddy in others. I pass patches of overturned soil where badgers have been digging for roots and worms, and look out for their footprints in the soft mud. I disturb a muntjac deer, watch it slither through the hedge like a dog, so different from roe deer that leap away urgently, flashing white from their tails.

At the end of the lane, a gate leads out onto the playing field, high above the city, with views to the west across Bristol and the river Severn to the Black Mountains of south Wales. I close the gate behind me and start purposefully across, passing the rough-and-ready goal posts and the newer children's playground along the way.

The grass is sopping wet with early-morning dew. With each stride, a little fountain of clear water kicks up from the toe of my boot and falls back to the grass

ahead of each footfall. Soon the leather is shiny with wet, and dark damp is rising up the bottom of my trousers. As I reach the far side of the field, something prompts me to stop and look back: my footsteps have created a line across the dew-soaked field, straight from one corner to the other, rather like land artist Richard Long's 'A Line Made by Walking'.

The phrase 'laying down a path in walking' leaps into my mind, borrowed from a poem by Antonio Machado by the biologist Francisco Varela for the title of an article on epistemology – by which he means the way all living beings establish the world in which they live and act. Varela argues that, for humans in particular, the ways we think, the things we know, are crucial: "The chance of surviving with dignity on this planet hinges on the acquisition of a new mind."

For Varela, there is no objective 'real world'. All we can know is patterned by our sense organs, cognitive process and perspective. But this doesn't mean that all is subjective, that the world is a cultural construction, as some postmodernists hold. Rather, all living beings are autonomous actors structurally coupled with their world, both shaping and being shaped. The world we inhabit is not a mirror of a 'real reality', or a solipsistic construction, but the 'laying down' of a world through participation and relationship.

This sense of laying down is so evident in the dark line across the field, where my footsteps have broken the dewdrops and flattened the grass. As the poem says, this is a road I will never step on again. And while the lane between the gardens and the hedge is a couple of hundred years old and looks permanent, it too is transient, laid down over time by the footsteps of humans, as well as by the badgers and deer. And each time I walk it, I lay down a new path. R

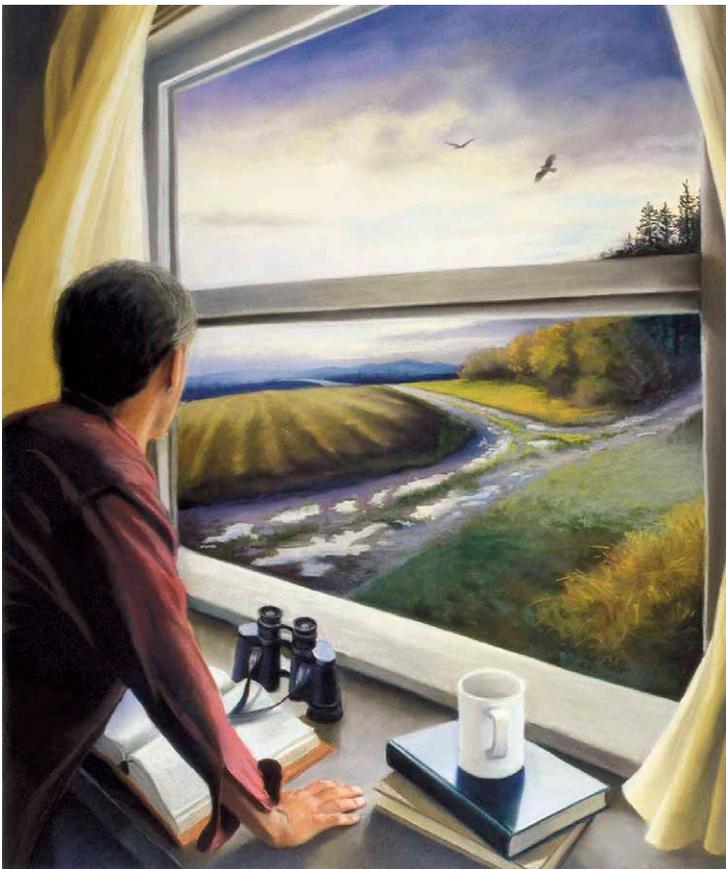
Wanderer, the road is your
footsteps, nothing else;
wanderer, there is no path,
you lay down a path in walking.

In walking, you lay down a path
and when turning around
you see the road you'll
never step on again.

Wanderer, path there is none,
only tracks in the ocean foam.

– Antonio Machado
(translated by Francisco Valera)

Peter Reason's latest book, *In Search of Grace: An Ecological Pilgrimage*, is published by Earth Books. www.peterreason.eu



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