

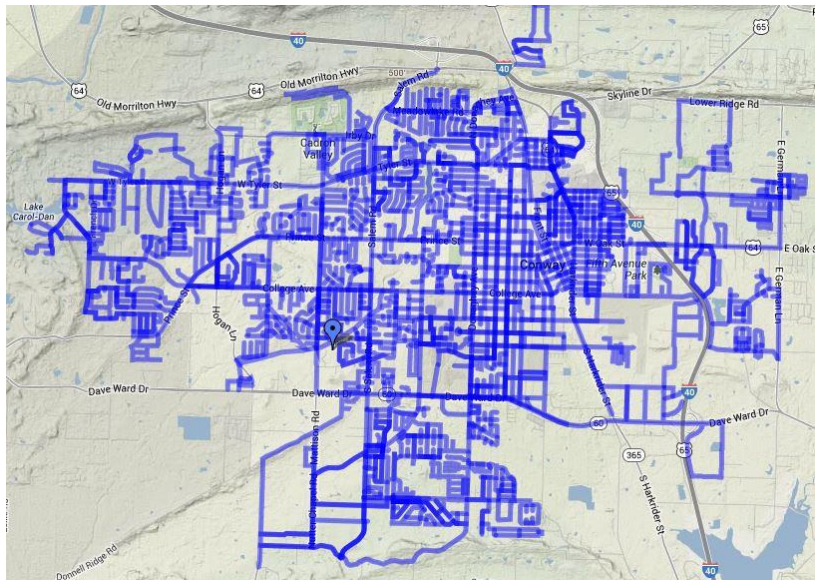
# All the Walks of (My) Life

By Philip Frana

Maybe you saw me out there, tromping around the city in my black pants and pale yellow t-shirts, with a broken pinky finger awkwardly splayed out in its splint? Or possibly you caught a glimpse of my long blond hair as it bounced through wells of light carved into the murky dark by the headlamps of your Chevy Tahoe? I walked the streets of Conway, Arkansas this spring – all of them – mostly at night.

I started my walk through the city in March. I was tired of doing the same circuit of my own neighborhood. I was also tired of running in circles in my own mind. I needed novelty; I needed change. Walking is a good metaphor for life -- you take both “one step at a time.” Life can be an “uphill battle” - -that’s true about exercising the calves too.

In April I got a job offer out of state. I needed to think hard about that. Thinking about that offer made me determined to observe everything that



I’d been overlooking during my decade in my current city, that I’d been too busy to really see. It was walking as decision-making, perambulatory practice as a calculatory act, movement as data gathering – all in service to some personal and professional goal. I never expected to finish my walk, but finish it I did – right around the middle of July. My nightly walks, some of them lasting two hours and more, became – in the end – something of a love letter to Arkansas.

Shakespeare's Macbeth famously notes that "Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the state, and then is heard no more." But I never felt that way. Life, like the walk, is substantial and significant. It is no mere tale. It is embodied. On my walks, I reminisced about all of those long hours spent in the office at the University of Central Arkansas. I realized that the greatest portion of my time was given over to sharing advice with students. *I asked you to follow your passions. I told you to reach high and not settle for the ordinary. I said that you had an obligation to be happy, and to seek out adventure. I reminded you to do your homework, think hard, and trust yourself. I encouraged you to relentlessly confront your fears, and minimize – so far as possible – harm to yourselves, others, and the earth. So often, to my infinite amazement, you mindfully and gratefully accepted this advice – and then bushwhacked far beyond what I could ever imagine.*

At first I started every walk at my own driveway, but after the fourth of what my daughter Kaia labeled Sunday Challenges ("Walk to the Old Walmart, Dad!" "Go to the interstate!" "My school!") which involved hiking an hour or more to pick up only a few untraveled roads, I realized that I needed a better system. So I created one rule: I can drive the car to a drop spot, but from there on out must *only* walk until the walk is over. My friend Vicki soon added another: You must follow the whole circumference of each cul-de-sac if you want it to count -- no cheating by dipping only to the base of each bulb.

I charted each foray on Google Maps. I know I missed a block here and there. I still regret overlooking that neighborhood on Wiggle Worm Road. Maybe I'll catch it on a return trip. Surely I'll be back in Conway someday? But in my own defense: in suburbia the walker inevitably sees the same tangle of streets more than once. In five months I walked all of the city, and half of it again. I burned through hundreds of thousands of calories and two pairs of sneakers. My pasty white skin is now sun-stained a deep chestnut up to my biceps and thighs. My hair is bleached nearly white. My scalp is seared ochre. My trusty fitbit says I took 2.2 million steps and walked 1,029 miles, which, if I'd walked in a straight line would have taken me to Washington, DC.

When I tired of the songs on my iPod shuffle, I listened to NPR or audiobooks. I finished half of *Bleak House* while out on walks. You should really trust the title on that one. It was pretty bleak.

While not Dickensian, my life had taken a bleak turn as well. I was getting fat and hypertensive. On the other side of 40, I couldn't believe how much my body was just falling apart. Nature was starting to catch up with me. I realize now that the hardest thing to do in life is to take your own advice. *Take care of yourself, be well, and get some exercise. That's my counsel to everyone. Breathe fresh air, eat lots of fruits and vegetables, get some sunshine on your skin. Take a break, maybe even a vacation. I haven't been doing any of those things since my wife left for graduate school three years ago. I have two young girls to raise. I can't take care of myself right now. I can barely take care of them. Just hold on. Hold on. Keep walking!*

Why walk rather than run or bike? Well, at first I just wasn't in good enough shape. But I also have this problem with my hip, and it is slowly but surely getting worse as the years pass. I hurt it more than a decade ago when I slipped and fell in a parking lot up north while shoveling yards of snow piled up around my car. When I fell I heard this cracking sound. They gave me a cortisone shot, but the pain never went away.

My problem has been diagnosed variously as snapping hip or piriformis syndrome, but nobody really knows what to do with me. Even the chiropractor won't touch it. Basically it hurts all the time now. So that's why I walk, though I do try to walk fast – and with purpose, so I don't look completely ridiculous.

My colleague Adam Frank in the UCA Honors College encouraged me to make field notes and eventually write about my walks. He's an anthropologist, so I guess I sort of expected that he'd have a natural interest in human walking – excuse me – “habitual bipedalism and hominid culture.” Every crazy project needs a supporter like him.

*Okay, Adam, here's what I think I learned.* The streets are not paved with gold, as our international students often assume, but they are peppered with

lots of copper and silver – especially the parking lots. I think it may be time to quit minting coins. I found loose change on many of my walks. One time I found seventeen dollars wadded up in a bank envelope that had been mangled by a passing lawn mower. That night the streets were paved with green. The locals like to say there's money in this town, and they sure aren't kidding. Don't ask for any of it back, though -- I've already spent it all on ice-cold Coke Zeros.

It took about a month to realize that random walks are fun, but leave lots of orphan blocks that you'll need to pick up on other nights, when you end up covering most of the same territory. That's a bummer for a man with a goal. The right way to traverse a city, any regular delivery driver will surely explain, is to work around 'superblocks,' which are about a mile square. The superblocks are often, but not always, bounded by well-traveled parallel and perpendicular roads. Identify a superblock and follow its perimeter, following in clockwise or counterclockwise order the roads that penetrate each block like stress fractures. It's not romantic, but it works.

*My feet took a pounding, but so did my heart. Those carefully honed survival mechanisms that I'd developed in grad school and my first postdoc, which work so well among college students, seem more and more threadbare when applied to my own life. What had become of the confidence I wished to instill in others, but did not share? I was so mature back when I began college, and yet so immature now. How did that happen? I'm not preparing for adulthood like most of the people I come into contact with on a daily basis. I'm already an adult. What a disappointment! A dragon lives forever it seems, but not so little boys. Keep walking!*

My favorite neighborhood is a leafy place full of resplendent but unostentatious homes of many varieties. There are a few federal-style two-story homes, some half-timbered *fachwerk* bungalows, a couple of Texas twenty-minute homes like mine, and some ranchers. But there's something about the way they all come together on the human scale that's so special. The whole is truly greater than the sum of its parts. Homes aren't palatial, but they

are lovingly maintained by friendly people along a slowly undulating thoroughfare. What more could anyone want?

Then there was the New Urbanist development behind a Baptist church. At a glance it looks a little scruffy, like the developer ran out of money before getting proper landscaping, but potential for community oozes out of every block. It's a poor man's urban village – surely less pretentious and certainly more affordable.

Walking in the industrial parts of the city isn't really so bad either. It's actually quieter than you might expect. (Though, perhaps this says something about the current state of the local economy?) And the truck drivers are friendly, waving and honking and generally trying not to run over me.

*For the past three years I've been flying solo as a parent. Three years. I'm walking so late at night. I have to. Gotta get the kids tucked away in bed and my course prep complete first. Should I really be pounding the pavement after midnight – sometimes one o'clock in the morning? Am I going mad? People are asking me if I'm afraid to be out so late, or out in such-and-such part of town. Maybe I should be. I'm at my limit. I don't have time for this, but it's the only way I know anymore how to cope with nervous breakdown. I appreciate your concern for my well-being. Keep walking!*

The walker properly attired, even in the middle of the night, is generally ignored. I walked "Cowtown," the ward northeast of downtown, without any trouble at all. It was the only place, though, where a local asked me if they "could help me with something." I'm going to chalk that up as an instance of Southern hospitality rather than as an invitation to participate in wickedness. You would have questioned the extent of Cowtown's reputation too had you strolled by Union Baptist Church on a Sunday morning, as handsome parishioners in their finery entered for services. And the cemetery there – weirdly walled off on two sides by construction warehouses – is from another world. Go there, go there right now, and feel the strength and beauty of the city's most cavernous tree canopy.

I was mainly scared about getting nailed by an inattentive or speeding driver. Maybe I just got lucky walking all those miles on darkened roadways, but I took the normal precaution of wearing a reflective vest, and I always got way off the road when a car came my way. Sometimes, if I got nervous enough, I'd shine the bright screen of my smart phone at the driver. That always worked.

Occasionally, I crossed over to the other side of the road. It felt good to build up as much cushion as possible between me and all those careening hunks of automotive metal. Let's face it, most cities don't have as many sidewalks as they should. Mine was much more walkable than I ever imagined, (or I'd have quit pretty quickly), but pedestrians are forced onto the streets most of the time. But often, as in the old part of downtown, it's more dangerous to be on the broken -- no *pulverized* -- sidewalks than it is to be out on the road.

The most dangerous places are the roadways where there is no margin for error, where building up that cushion is virtually impossible. After watching a logging truck negotiate a narrow passage across a river bridge, I chickened out. Then there was the block that felt like bumper bowling. There's a blind hill, cavernous gutters (ahem, ditches) on both sides, and posted speeds that are universally ignored. There's no place to go for the walker but right at the pins.

*The second most difficult thing to do (for me at least, a rather typical faculty misanthrope), is to put emotional needs for new sensations and experiences on the same footing with reasoning and risk aversion. I may be accused of liberal thinking, but in the conduct of my personal and professional life I'm nothing of the sort. Why else would tenure – a well-worn ladder and “job for life” – be worth the climb? Only a reactionary could want that, right? Give me the life of Sisyphus, not Odysseus! Keep walking!*

What I expected to be the greatest threat to my safety -- street-basking snakes -- turned out to be imaginary. Or at least invisible. I expected to see or step on a snake at some point, and steeled myself for the occasion. But it just never happened. In July I stepped over an enormous skin that some cold-

blooded creature shed on the shoulder of the highway, but that's been it. I've heard that amphibians are disappearing in Central Arkansas. Maybe we should be worried about our local reptilian friends as well.

On the other hand, I've crossed paths with plenty of mating cockroa—er, *waterbugs*. And skunks; I gave them a wide berth. There's nothing you can do about the waterbugs. One night near the high school a swarm was on the move and I had them on my clothes, in my hair, all over my face. I tread on so many of them; it was like crunching peanut shells underfoot at the local steakhouse. Once, I watched a whole family of raccoons – a mother and four kits – scurry apprehensively in tandem from one drain to another as oblivious drivers hurried by.

I met more than a few dogs on my journeys, some on the leash and others without tags or collars. Almost all were protective but friendly. One barking dog leading a ragtag pack actually tapped me rather aggressively. Somehow I was fortunate enough to never need the pepper spray I never remembered to buy.

Nobody threw half-full beer cans or trash at my head from their car windows. There were a few blood-curdling yells hurled my way. A couple of young women wolf-whistled at me from their golf cart one particularly warm evening – which was incentive enough to keep me moving ahead long after my glucose-starved legs thought reasonable. Twice while walking with Kaia we encountered teenagers who rolled down their windows and lustily sang snippets of love songs at her.

Spring and summer were glorious this year. I had mild, dry weather on so many more days than rightfully should have been mine. I got rained on – really rained on – only once, during a popcorn storm that blew up, which lowered and lifted its wet curtain on only a couple of blocks. If I had made this my personal project last year, the blistering heat of summer would surely have roasted this native Iowan alive. I tip my hat to the hardworking folks in our bustling apartment communities who spill into the streets on even the hottest summer nights. Your shouts of encouragement really buoyed me, kept me going.

*People favor screen time over everything else, even on beautiful nights.  
Through windows I see the dark shadows of your limbs pressed against  
armrests, thousands them, bathed in electric blue light as I pass by in the night.  
Keep walking!*

Walking Conway was entertaining and more memorable than a season of *Parks & Rec* or just about any other show. You see thing on foot that never register from the insulated compartment of a motor vehicle. You probably don't know where the County Coroner's office is over by the new Boys and Girls Club. Likewise, I missed the full title of the organization across the street from the high school identified in full, black caps as IDMR. It's the Institute of Divine Metaphysical Research, where the founder believes we must know the known to know the unknown.

You learn proximity, too. Places that seem far apart when experienced by the circuitous path of the automobile can become "right there" on foot. For example, there's a whole *neighborhood* right behind the garden center at Home Depot, invisible to the shopper buying mulch and potting soil. There are secret passageways, too, between neighborhoods, some of them even maintained by the city. Also, while I personally violated no private property boundaries, I feel compelled to say that our gated communities are astoundingly porous to the man on foot.

I found our hidden habitus. The fabric of our community is bound together by parking lots. That's where we loiter, talk to each other, shake hands or give hugs. We're out there in the lots. Sharing a snowcone. Talking to the cops. Running our kids from store to store. Practicing driving. Exercising a pet. Even on the hottest days of summer. We should socialize in the sprinklers more often. Also, if you're missing one of your teenagers after curfew, consider looking for them in the parking lot tucked behind the elementary school.

Other habitats: A lot of out elderly citizens sit out, at all hours of the day, as well as in the evenings, just under the eaves of their garages. I'm not saying they are lonely, but they sure don't mind if you stop and chat. You should do



this as much as possible, even if you are trying to walk the whole city on deadline. Some things are simply more important.

*Fortunately, several who knew my struggles helped me get over the hump. It slowly dawned on me that they wanted me to have the same meaningful life that I wanted for all of them! The university, they reminded me, is an idea, not a place. Like Johnny Appleseed, we each carry the seed of this place (whether it eventually grows into a clinic, a garden, a classroom, or a courtroom) with us wherever we go. We can't help it. Broaden your horizons and stretch yourself, they told me. Cultivate a diverse life, they said. You can be deep and wide, they argued. It's as if they had really been listening to each other in those course seminars. I can chase the dream anywhere, everywhere. Keep walking!*

We love Christmas! Or, we can't bear the thought of cleaning up all of those decorations after the holidays. Even in July one in ten of us still has something festive displayed. A forgotten wreath here, a red bow dangling from a bush, handcrafted reindeer in the side yard. Some are defiant, displaying an artificial tree in the front window, ornaments still dangling; plugged in lights hanging off the trees.

I also know our habitus by our detritus. Roadside trash is as plentiful as natural gas in these parts, and I've seen most of it – up close and personal. Yes, there are tons of aluminum cans, plastic bags, and cigarette butts. Judging by the quantity of 5-hour liquid energy shot bottles lying on our roadsides, I questioned whether anyone in this town is in an unaltered chemical state. This is a dry county? The distribution pattern appears purely random -- their numbers do not rise as you get closer to our three college campuses.

There are huge quantities of worn out earbuds and computer cables lying in our gutters. You can recycle that stuff at Best Buy (look for the blue box in the entryway), but my pet theory is that we've already thrown so many cables and wires on the streets now that we've created a self-sustaining breeding population. There is no stopping that stuff now! Uglier yet are the multifarious half-eaten sacks of fast food, as if drive-thru customers abruptly realized how terrible the stuff was, and chucked it out the door. A cornucopia

of auto parts, especially lug nuts, left in our streets is particularly baffling. Don't you need those to, um, drive around? Apparently not.

*If I were putting my money into a socially irresponsible mutual fund based solely on observations made during my walks, I'd aggressively invest in diabetic supply, auto and electronics repair, and the hypersomnia -insomnia drug market. Those sound like pretty good picks, don't they? Keep walking!*

There are way more walkers and runners and bikers and skateboarders out there than non-walkers think. One time I was out in the inky darkness of-- in a spot still undeveloped -- kicking myself for taking dumb chances with my life -- when, lo and behold, two joggers and a dog walker hazarded by. We are never quite alone. Nature abhors a vacuum.

Some of us do it for the solitude, like me. Others for the society. Many do it for the exercise. There are some super gifted runners out there. There's a young man (I don't know his name, because there's no way to keep up) who is just incredible to watch. He's muscled, husky, and tall. When he turns on the afterburners your jaw just drops. Someone needs to call the scouts to see this kid, or sell tickets to his performances.

Walking is practical too. Who knew that it takes only twenty minutes at a reasonable pace to walk from the UCA campus to downtown? Or that another thirty gets you to the bookstore. Conway is a fairly compact city, caught by good fortune between two ridges north and south and the river to the west. City leaders should strive to keep it that way.

Historians of technology, and I count myself among their number, will tell you that the mode of transportation alters our perceptions, our aesthetics, and our social ethic. Railroad passenger service helped us think in terms of straight-line efficiencies, punctuality, and unbridled progress. The automobile stressed sight lines ("glimpse and go"), plasticity, and self-sufficiency. Still, I'm convinced that you don't really know a city and its people until you've seen it from the vantage point of the ground. We crisscross the planet in jet planes on quests for new exotic experiences, but hold at arm's length the diversity under our toes.

*I opened a new document file and typed, “As you may have heard through the grapevine, I am leaving the Norbert O. Schedler Honors College this summer after almost a decade of service as a faculty member, administrator, friend, and colleague. The extremely capable Ms. Cindy Lea will be taking my place in the courses you signed up for this coming year. Treat her well and learn from her; she’s authentic and dedicated. ...” Keep walking!*

It isn’t easy walking away from things you love. All I can say is: let your shoes and mind and heart come into contact with the places and people lying betwixt and between your ordinary destinations. Inhabit your surroundings, don’t just park there. And look: impoverished people want exercise and enjoy community too. They need better routes to work than the muddy cowpaths winding along the highway and radiating from our trailer courts. We need to build sidewalks out to their neighborhoods. There are so many young children who live out there, isolated from the world. Let us not exacerbate it by neglecting such pedestrian infrastructure.

*“You all know what Andy Dufresne said in Shawshank Redemption. Well, I’m going to get busy living ... in Virginia as it happens. I’ll be carrying what I’ve learned at UCA to JMU. So look me up when you get there. I’ve got my map of the city. I’ll be waiting for you.” Keep walking!*

Let’s get going then. Follow in my footsteps for a walk around your city? The end of one walk marks only the beginning of another.

**Philip Frana** is a past Associate Professor in the Honors College at the University of Central Arkansas. He is now Associate Professor in the Honors Program at James Madison University.