

A Never-ending Walk

So Jehovah's anger blazed against Israel and he made them wander about in the wilderness for 40 years, until all the generation that was doing evil in the eyes of Jehovah came to its end.

~ Numbers 32:13, New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures

My shoulders tightened as I sensed a slight pain in my sacrum. On my next step, I pulled my backpack's shoulder straps away from my chest. My back felt my bag's soft and warm cushion, and the pain in my shoulders subsided.

On my left, two dump trucks moved like tortoises climbing a rock. Behind them, a long line of cars started to form. I didn't expect this eight-mile stretch from Calauan to San Pablo City to be elevated — one of the many other things I overlooked when preparing for this walk.

This elevated artery, which reminded me of the Aspiras-Palispis Highway of Benguet, was the most challenging part of the walk. It had almost no shade and sidewalks. The sun was peaking, and it burned my legs and feet — feet that were aching from blisters.

A shadow formed before me as I walked toward a sharp curve: a small tree cast the shadow. After laying my backpack under the shade, I leaned on the tree and grabbed my phone from my right pocket. I looked at the time: it was already 10:37. I couldn't

believe I had been walking for two and a half hours with a backpack that weighed more than ten kilos.

I turned to my right, and that was when I saw it — one of the three summits of Mt. Banahaw, the active complex volcano of Laguna, often associated with the supernatural. It peered behind thick foliage as if watching, even mocking me. It was there when the questions came to me: “Why am I doing this? Why am I walking?”

On June 9, 2022, I walked over 22 kilometers from my apartment at Los Baños to San Pablo City, Laguna. The walk that took 35,000 steps to complete in more than 5 hours started along the busy Lopez Avenue at Los Baños and traversed 5 kilometers of the Manila South Road, passing by the town of Bay, before turning right toward Calauan for another 5 kilometers. From Calauan, the walk turned into a 10-kilometer hike on a highway with a 630 feet elevation en route to San Pablo City.

The following morning, I walked an extra 22,000 steps around Sampaloc Lake and visited nearby Bunot Lake. I went home that afternoon by riding a jeep that covered what I had walked for five hours the day before in just around 30 minutes. Riding that jeep home was surreal.

Days after the walk, the questions that came to me while staring at Mt. Banahaw continued to revisit me. Why was I walking? I have walked almost my entire life but never questioned my motivations until the long walk to San Pablo City.

At first, I struggled to piece together a coherent answer. I was surprised that thinking about my reason for walking reminded me of supposedly unrelated existential issues concerning my past. My journals slowly revealed that walking had become my

way to traverse the distance between two identities — that liminal space between my Old Self and my New Self.

The *Limen*

I first learned about the concept of liminality from the book *Les Rites de Passage* (1909) by Arnold van Gennep. In that book, he introduced a three-phased structure of rites of passage followed by people from different cultures: separation, transition, and reincorporation. Liminality corresponds with the second phase: transition. For Gennep, the transition was always deliberate and voluntary.

When we launch ourselves into liminality, we transcend our former identities. Liminality is likened to death, being in utero, and the wilderness. When separated from our former identities, we enter a vast existential expanse, the *limen*, where our sense of being forsaken becomes even more pronounced. An identity blackhole engulfs us, but we are unaware of it.

I was raised in a family of devout Jehovah's Witnesses, where the Bible was the central authority from which all behaviors were measured. Everything, from big decisions like when to enter a romantic relationship, when and to whom could we have sex, or whether to go to college or not, to minor decisions like what clothes or hairstyles to wear, was dictated to us by a Governing Body made of nine American men located in Brooklyn, New York—all white except one—who delivered instructions on living through a sophisticated chain of command.

I didn't fully embrace the faith of my parents until I, despite the discouragement of members of our local congregation in San Jacinto, Pangasinan, and threats of my father's removal from his pastoral duties, went to college at Baguio City. There, I met other young Jehovah's Witnesses passionately pursuing religious responsibilities amid college life. They inspired me to look deeper at the faith of my parents and accept it as my own. In three years, I dedicated my life to the faith, ultimately becoming a ministerial servant of the Jehovah's Witnesses—a young pastor—at 19 while serving in a congregation that catered to the Deaf and Hard of Hearing through sign language.

At the end of my first semester in the third year, the life ahead of me was crystal clear. I belonged to a tight-knit community. I didn't have to think much about what to believe because everything was spoon-fed. I knew who I was and what I wanted to become: a missionary who would bring the doctrines of the religion into distant places. I found my purpose.

But all of these began crumbling down on March 11, 2011.

The Long Cold

05:30 A.M.

The sound of my phone's alarm woke me up.

For a brief moment, I wanted to ignore it and go back to sleep, but I didn't. I was building a new habit and knew missing two days in a row was terrible. I couldn't do it yesterday because I slept at Kuya Al and Ate Sarah's place. She was there too.

I wanted to start caring more for my body, so I had to do this. But I regret not returning to sleep. I should've returned.

There was nothing unusual with this morning. I stood up and switched the lights on, illuminating the windowless room that was pitch dark a second ago. My notebook, the daily devotional, and the Bible all piled together gleamed on top of the Monobloc I used as a table whenever I sat on my bed.

I kept the pants I wore when I slept and just put on my blue sweater. It was one of those sweaters with a zipper that ran only from the neck to the chest. It had no pockets, and it was collared like a polo shirt.

I walked out of the room and closed the door. My sister was still sleeping in the room across the dining table and the vacant space that was supposed to be the living room.

Behind the curtains, tiny white and yellow lights flickered. They were from the fields that grew flowers over the hills of Ambiong, the only lights visible outside aside from the few street lights here and there. The sun won't show up until about another 30 minutes.

After putting on my rubber shoes, I unlocked the wooden door and the steel and screened door behind it. I didn't know it back then, but those two doors separated me from what will be an entirely different life.

Outside, I felt the air change as I walked the steep *eskinita* that led to the main road. From afar, I could hear that the main road was empty and silent, except for one or two jeepneys already starting their day. Upon reaching the street, the path began to go

downhill. I walked, crossed the road, and stood in front of the opened gate of the enclosed hill called Bayan Park.

I climbed the hill and started jogging. I was alone. The air was still cold. A few weeks from now, Baguio's temperature will start rising. But today, the cold that filled all our Decembers was still here: it was difficult to break a sweat.

After just a few minutes of jogging, I stopped.

I should feel good, but I didn't.

I started walking.

I can still hear her words. I can still hear my words. I can still feel the pain of realizing how young I was and how vulnerable to the weaknesses of the soul. I wasn't aware until then that I was in my head the entire time. I knew I should be sad, and I thought I was miserable. But I didn't know then that it wasn't sadness that I was starting to feel.

It was something more: something that would last for weeks, months, years.

The only thing I knew then was that it was unusually dark. The sun wasn't around. It won't come out until about 30 more minutes. And it was cold. Too cold. The beginning of a long, long cold.

Leaving the Jehovah's Witnesses

On March 11, 2011, a couple of weeks before the end of my sixth semester in college, I started developing symptoms of clinical depression. I was forced to file for a leave of absence at my university to rest for an entire year back home in Pangasinan.

Recovering from depression was the most challenging thing I ever went through. I saw a psychiatrist when the symptoms were already at their peak—severe insomnia, severe chronic fatigue, anxiety attacks almost every five minutes, and frequent suicidal ideations. Since I found help late, I also began medication late. Psychiatric meds don't immediately kick in, so I had to endure the symptoms for another month before finding relief.

What happens to a devoutly religious young man who suddenly finds himself in the bottomless pit of depression? First, he asks whether God has forsaken him. Then he turns toward the church he belongs to and questions whether what they tell him about God is even true in the first place.

Months after pharmacotherapy, my sleeping patterns became normal again. The anxiety attacks stopped, and the suicidal ideations lessened. I was still tired most of the time, and an unrelenting dark cloud followed me wherever I went. But I have found some equilibrium. This equilibrium allowed me to continue questioning the foundations of my religious upbringing, including whether there is a God and if the religion where I belonged was indeed his church. This questioning lasted for months culminating in my decision to leave the Jehovah's Witnesses in April 2012.

I still remember that afternoon when I made the decision. My father, mother, and sisters were preparing to attend the memorial of Christ's death, the only religious celebration the Jehovah's Witnesses observe every year.

I stayed inside my room and refused to come out. When my family had left, I took my pen and notebook, placed them inside my backpack, and rode my bike to a nearby abandoned street. There, I saw a mango tree behind a small *kubo*. I sat under the tree and wrote my heart out in the pages of my journal. I wrote until the sun set. That evening, I rode my bike home on an empty road illuminated by a full moon.

At that time, I was following what felt right. Little did I know that leaving a religion and a way of life I spent the first 20 years of my life in would be like wandering in an existential wilderness. Abandoning my faith was abandoning myself, and this launched me right into a messy liminal state, where identities are never yet final, and I was always becoming someone I didn't yet know.

A Religious Wilderness

After leaving the Jehovah's Witnesses in 2012, I went through a two-year exploration of atheism and humanism. Although I never really connected with the atheist community, I explored its most radical forms. I started by reading books like *Bondage of the Mind* (2008) by R. D. Gold and *The Bible as History* (2008) by Werner Keller. These books convinced me to reject that the Bible is the inspired word of God. After this, I began questioning the very existence of a God.

Convinced that the existence of a personal God wasn't necessary, I continued living my life and discovered that it was possible to be happy and find meaning despite being "godless." Around this time, I encountered Eastern philosophy. I read the *Bhagavad Gita*, the *Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, and the *Tao Te Ching*. I listened to New Age gurus, learned yoga, and practiced meditation.

Immersing in Eastern philosophy helped me realize that although the nonexistence of a God appeals to me, I didn't resonate with the hatred that radical atheists felt towards religion. I understood it wasn't necessary or possible to eradicate such an ingrained element of human culture. Despite not identifying with organized religion or spiritual groups, I realized I was still profoundly "spiritual." I sought to answer the deep questions of existence and reality.

In search of answers, I went around different spiritual traditions. I sat down with a sangha of Zen Buddhists in Baguio City, I meditated with Theravada Buddhists in Marikina, I listened to the talks of an Advaita Vedanta teacher on Facebook, and I spent an entire day with a Dada of Ananda Marga.

I tried hard to find something, anything, that would stick but soon discovered that while I appreciated the experimental nature of Eastern philosophy and spirituality, where I am allowed to be in other groups simultaneously, I was not too fond of the intellectual animosity among many of them and sometimes a complete rejection of the rational.

After two years of moving around Eastern spiritual circles, I fell in love with philosophy, which reconnected me to my rational, intellectual self. I read heavily on

metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics, walking every afternoon to reflect on the things I was learning. The main question I asked in my philosophical studies was, "How should I live?" I resolved that if I couldn't find a new religion to belong to, I would build my worldview from the ground up and set my own rules for living.

Today, I accept that I am in a psycho-socio-religious liminal state. Here, I go back and forth between the structure of my Old Self and the anti-structure of my New Self Becoming – that unrefined current identity that hasn't fully reached reincorporation for it to be called my New Self.

I am not inclined to associate with any organized religion. I still don't think a personal God is necessary, even if his or her existence won't surprise me. I may have ceased to care too much about metaphysics altogether. But I am still profoundly spiritual and deeply religious, and my intellectual self counterbalances that. I resonate with the progressive and liberal Free Religion concept of Shin'ichirō Imaoka (1881–1988).

Despite my religious identity (and my identity in general) being in flux for ten years since leaving my childhood religion, I never articulated this clearly. I knew I tended not to commit and was uncertain about many things since leaving the church, but I was unaware that my separation from my Old Self caused this uncertainty. I was in an interstitial identity blackhole but unaware of it.

To make matters worse, I avoided thinking about my life as a Jehovah's Witness. I avoided it even in the safe pages of my journals. It was a dark past that needed to be completely buried.

By enacting my liminality through daily walking, culminating in the long walk from Los Baños to San Pablo City, things began to change.

Walking Liminality

My desire to walk is a physical expression—a symptom—of being liminal. Walking is performed liminality. After leaving the Jehovah's Witnesses, I noticed I was growing an affinity with nature, landscapes, and physical spaces. It was as if my subconscious told me, "Since society has forsaken you, perhaps it is in the animate outdoors where you shall find a home." For a long time, I believed that.

Walking in nature became a way to recuperate from losing friends and family members who will no longer associate with someone who has "grown cold in faith." I walked because I was largely unsure of where I was going and who I was. And this uncertainty calls for it to be performed, embodied, and enacted. My appreciation for long walks, or short daily walks, reflected this need to perform uncertainty through my body while at the same time hoping that perhaps through it, I could recreate myself.

I return to the photographs I took during all the walks I have undertaken since leaving the Jehovah's Witnesses, and I now see glimpses of what it means to be in limen. I didn't know it then when I took the photos, but there was a reason why I was attracted to abandoned buildings, decaying objects, and landscapes that evoked uncertainty and limbo.

I read that ethnographers find themselves in a similar liminal state when conducting fieldwork in a foreign culture for the first time. As they attempt to temporarily abandon their own culture and immerse themselves into the culture of their study, ethnographers discover that their participants don't immediately trust them. Moreover, being stuck with their participants in geographic space heightens the ethnographers' sense of unbelonging. Some ethnographers report breaking free from this liminal state by walking with their participants.

There is something with walking, this simple tool of mobility, that helps humans traverse liminality. Two of walking's most critical features are encounter and relationality. When walking, an ethnographer encounters two entities: the participant and the place where they are walking. Before the walk, the ethnographer may have very little in common with the participant. However, as the ethnographer joins the participant in traversing place and experience, a commonality emerges between them. This commonality lays the foundation for deeper connection and, therefore, more honest revelations.

Walking opens the space for informality and honesty between the researcher and the researched. Because walks are informal, they allow moments of experimental encounter. Freed from strict rules of research, both ethnographer and participant speak freely to each other. The freedom walking provides facilitates the negotiation of identities between two contrasting people.

I wonder whether this could explain my unquenchable desire to walk throughout all those years after leaving the Jehovah's Witnesses.

Meeting My Old Self on the Road

Whenever I walk alone, I walk with two people: my Old Self and my New Self Becoming. Walking generates a moment from within the identity threshold where these two meet face-to-face, no matter how short. What often comes from this encounter is honest reflection.

Like an ethnographer, I could use walking to find my Old Self waiting for me on the proverbial road and invite him to walk with me, hoping to build trust with each other enough to unveil the distance that has separated us for years and find ways to walk that distance together.

This encounter with my Old Self happened on that elevated stretch after leaving Calauan—a geographic threshold between Los Baños and San Pablo City. Of the many questions that walking on that threshold provoked, one that stood out was about my motivations for walking. In hindsight, the very nature of walking—the informality, the freedom, the physicality, and the embodied and deeply reflexive nature of the experience—opened the gates and made me finally confront my Old Self.

Before the long walk to San Pablo, I avoided revisiting my past as a Jehovah's Witness. I used to think of those first 20 years of my life as a dark, wasted time, with nothing to contribute to where I am now other than as a reference point to whom I shouldn't become. However, after the long walk, my journal entries suggested that I was interested in inquiring about how my past could inform my current work.

In my journal, I began comparing my current life with my past life and was surprised to realize that several elements of my old religious life were better than what I have now. Back then, I was embedded in a community. I worked hands-on with a historically marginalized group (the Deaf) and immediately saw that my work made a difference in other people's lives. I don't have these things now, but I want them again. Although I will never achieve the clarity I had about who I was and what I wanted to do, I now see that there are elements in my former life that I want to reintegrate into my current life.

Interestingly, my journal entries began discussing how my Old Self as a religious person still manifests in what I currently do. I started entertaining the idea that my work as a philosophically-inclined writer who walks may still have religious elements even if I categorize myself as an agnostic.

In my journal entry on August 29, 2022, more than two months after the long walk to San Pablo City, I wrote the following:

Today, I will be trying to understand whether what I am doing is indeed religious. Obviously, it is philosophical, and like Bugbee, I don't have to articulate it and call it "religion" or even associate myself with the field of religion or religious studies. All I need to know is whether I could find inspiration from this field that I have been practically avoiding since 2012.

Walking is a religious thing. The great walkers I read, namely Henry David Thoreau and Henry Bugbee, all have works that can be described as religious. I use

religion in its generous, liberal sense, a commitment to a way of life based on principles, regardless of where those principles come from. In the past, I heavily relied on an organization to dictate those principles. Today, I rely primarily on myself. But both new and old identities share a common desire to be religious, and I would never have realized this had I not walked from Los Baños to San Pablo City.

What Walking Does to Us

What happened there on the walk? What made me talk to my Old Self that I have resisted, ignored, and intentionally distanced from for years? Under a scorching sun, with only an umbrella to protect me, forgetting to put on sunscreen or bring sunglasses, and burdened by the excessive luggage behind my back, an opportunity for irreverent dialogue with my Old Self was opened.

The physicality of walking prompted my New Self Becoming to loosen its guard, shatter the walls it built around itself, and finally confront what was always its subject of concern but unconsciously or consciously avoided: my Old Self. And what a productive move this was because my Old Self held knowledge of the terrain that my New Self Becoming doesn't have.

Going through this process took work. I was frightened to realize that perhaps my New Self Becoming hadn't yet moved that far away from my Old Self, that this new identity that I thought was new was still ancient, and that what I was trying to walk through metaphorically wasn't an expanse but, in fact, an interstice.

But this is what walking does to the Self on the threshold of identities. It reveals commonalities between the past and present. It works as a form of transportation to help the Self traverse the liminal realm that links and separates two opposed identities. Walking allows one to relax and trust. Conversation with oneself is more natural than journaling at a desk, natural breaks are permitted, and visual cues in the environment become prompts for reflection.

While walking one afternoon, I noticed a long line of flowers in two colors. At first, I thought they grew from different plants: one flower being a variant of the other. Upon closer inspection, I was surprised that the flowers grew from the same plant, although different in color. I would later learn that these were Umbrella Worts or more commonly known as Four O'clocks, because they opened around that time, coinciding with my afternoon walks.

This visual drama triggered thoughts on community – one of the things I lost after leaving my childhood religion. As a Jehovah's Witness, I interacted with individuals who believed the same things I believed in almost daily. This sense of belonging was lost after I left. I have tried hard to find community, but I now accept that being in a liminal space means coming to peace with not being connected to people I share similar beliefs with as easily as before and that differences and learning to navigate them are now my norm.

Walking and noticing Umbrella Worts and how two flowers of different colors could grow from the same plant made me ask whether growing a community despite differences is possible. This insight points me toward reincorporation.

Perpetual Liminality or A Never-ending Walk

Leaving the Jehovah's Witnesses was painful. I abandoned a familiar life that gave me a sense of stability for a long time. I abandoned many friends, good people who have done many good things for me and treated me as their real brother. I abandoned my parents, who I know are still hopeful that one day I will return.

I will return. I know I will but in a different way.

I found that the possibility of return, of rebuilding myself, only begins when I recognize that I am in control of my destiny. Abandonment is painful, but it is also the autonomy of existence. Because no one is telling me what I need to do with my life, I have complete freedom to shape who I want to be and how I want to exist. From here lies the key to ending liminality and reaching the third phase of Van Gennep's rite of passage: reincorporation.

Implicit to the idea of liminality is that it has to end. I, who have lost my community and identity, must find a new community and identity. The correspondence between my Old Self and my New Self Becoming facilitated by the ambulatory inquiry that happens through walking, must now point me towards arriving at that ever-elusive ideal: my New Self.

I have seen recent signs of reincorporation in my life. I walked on Session Road in Baguio City during my first visit in two years after the COVID-19 pandemic began in 2020, and I remembered how I used to walk the same pavement holding an umbrella under drizzles while wearing a polo shirt, slacks, leather shoes, and a shoulder bag.

I intuit that perhaps my unquenchable desire to walk and study walking came from all those years of walking as a minister of the Jehovah's Witnesses visiting Deaf after Deaf scattered around the hills of Baguio City and La Trinidad. It may be a subconscious compromise to an activity I could no longer do as part of the religious community I left. Walking reincorporated itself into my new life, my new identity, which until now, I haven't fully articulated.

But why should it be articulated? Liminality is not a single flavor. It could be either transitional or perpetual—a social position that persists in ambiguity and expansive in loyalty. In peripatetic language, a perpetual liminal state is a never-ending walk.

The Unitarian minister Andrew James Brown provided a phrase that allows me to describe what I need now as I traverse the road ahead: "the freedom to be tomorrow what we are not today." This is walking at its very essence.

As a metaphor for traversing liminality, walking reminds us that every day is a new walk. What only ends this daily recurring walk is the eventual perishing of the body. As long as it is here, the body, through movement, shall remind us of this perpetual liminality, this constant becoming, and helps us embrace it, traverse it, and perhaps even find ourselves at home en route to nowhere.