Traversing Liminality through Walking: An Autoethnography

Abstract

Using a five-hour walk from Los Baños to San Pablo City, Laguna, as a springboard, this autoethnographic essay explores how I used the embodied, emplaced, and social act of walking as a means to traverse a psycho-socio-religious liminality. This essay reflects on my personal experience as an ex-ministerial servant (young pastor) of the Jehovah's Witnesses, who left the religion after a personal crisis in 2012 and have spent ten years in an almost unconscious liminal state, characterized by exploring different belief systems and shifting between the yearning for the structure of my Old Self and the anti-structure of my New Self Becoming. Walking was a symptom of liminality and a way to perform this unconscious liminal state, which was only made conscious after the physicality of the long walk from Los Baños to San Pablo City, provoked me to inquire about my motivations for walking. Through journal entries I wrote after the long walk and reflecting on photographs I have taken in recent years, I conclude that the knowledge generated through walking and ambulatory inquiry could open correspondence between my previous identity and the new identity I am forming, providing the possibility of leaving the *limen* or, perhaps, finding a new home within it.

My shoulders tightened as I sensed a slight pain in my sacrum. As I took another step, I grabbed both of my backpack's shoulder straps to pull them forward away from my chest. As I did this, I felt my bag's soft but warm cushion on my back, 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 did not expect this eight-mile stretch from Calauan to San Pablo City to be elevated—one of the many other things I miscalculated in this walk. This elevated artery, which reminded me of the Aspiras–Palispis Highway of Benguet, was the most challenging part of the walk, mainly because it had almost no shade and sidewalks. The sun was peaking, and it burned my legs and feet—feet that were in pain from blisters.

A shadow formed before me as I continued walking toward a sharp curve. A small tree cast the shadow. After laying my backpack on the ground under the shade, I rested the left side of my body on the tree and grabbed my phone from my right pocket. I looked at the time. It was already 10:37 in the morning. I cannot believe I have been walking for two and a half hours with a backpack that probably 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. Mt. Banahaw peered behind thick foliage as if watching, even mocking me for the fool I made myself become. 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—a surreal experience.

Days after the walk, I continued to revisit the questions that came to me while staring at Mt. Banahaw. Why was I walking? I have walked almost my entire life but never questioned my motivations until the long walk to San Pablo. At first, I struggled to piece together a coherent answer. I was surprised that thinking about my reason for walking directed me to supposedly unrelated existential issues concerning my past and current identities. After reviewing my journal entries, it became clear that walking has become my way to traverse the distance between identities—that liminal space between what I like to call my Old Self and my New Self and finally come face-to-face with my New Self Becoming.[1]

A Liminal Wilderness

The concept of liminality emerged during the 20th century through works written in three disciplines: ethnography, architecture, and cultural anthropology. In all these disciplines, liminality was defined as an in-between state. Arnold van Gennep first used the word in the book *Les Rites de Passage* (1909) to describe the second phase of a three-phased structure of rites: separation, transition, and reincorporation. For Gennep, the transition was always deliberate and voluntary. An individual launches themself into a disoriented state of liminality to transcend their former identity. In the 1950s, the concept entered architecture through the work of Aldo van Eyck, who expressed human transcience through the geometry of circles and rectangles. The architecture of liminal spaces sought to combine being in space and being in time as individuals interact with geometrical parameters (Al Shrbaji 75).

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[1] I chose the word "Becomings" per Deleuze and Guattari (1980).

The cultural anthropologist Victor Turner reintroduced liminality to anthropology in the 1960s, focusing on its psychosocial nature. For Turner, liminality is subjectively experienced and expressed by an individual. He likened it to death, being in utero, and the wilderness (Turner "Liminality and Communitas" 95). He described it as "a realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state" (Turner "Betwixt and Between" 47). Separation from one's old identity launches one into a vast existential expanse, the *limen*, where one's existential "thrownness" (Dahistrom 12) becomes even more pronounced. Such experiences of being "neither here nor there" (Turner "Liminality and Communitas" 94) slowly engulf us into an identity blackhole where we forget that we are inside one.

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 to engage in sexual activities, or whether to go to college or not, to more 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 did not 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 elder duties—went to college at Baguio City, where I met other Jehovah's Witnesses who were passionately pursuing religious responsibilities amid college life. In three years, I dedicated almost every waking hour of my life to the faith, ultimately becoming a ministerial servant—a young pastor—at 19 while serving in a congregation that catered to the Deaf and Hard of Hearing through sign language. I remember being at the end of my first semester in the third year, feeling intensely that the life ahead of me was so clear. I belonged to a tight-knit community. I did not have to think much about what to believe because everything was spoon-fed to me, and I knew who I was and what I wanted to become: a missionary, bringing the doctrines of the religion into distant places.

All of these began crumbling down on March 11, 2011, when I started developing symptoms of clinical depression. I was forced to file for a leave of absence at my university to spend an entire year back home recovering. Recovering from depression was the most challenging thing I ever went through. I saw a psychiatrist when the symptoms were already at their peak—insomnia, severe chronic fatigue, anxiety attacks almost every five minutes, and suicidal ideations—so I began medication late. To make matters worse, the meds did not immediately kick in. I had to endure the symptoms for over a month before finding relief. What happens to a devoutly religious young man in such circumstances is that he starts to question whether God has forsaken him. Then this thought leads to questioning whether what the community he belongs to tells him about God is correct.

After finding equilibrium, I began questioning the foundations of my upbringing, including whether there is a God and if the religion where I belonged was indeed his church. This questioning culminated in my decision to leave my childhood religion in April 2012. 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 was like death or being in an existential wilderness. Abandoning my religion was abandoning my Old Self, which launched me right into a messy psycho-socio-religious liminal state, where identities are never yet final, and I was always becoming someone I did not yet know who.

The state of liminality is characterized by flux, a state where identity shapeshifts, and nothing is final (Turner "Liminality and Communitas" 94–95). Individuals in a state of liminality tend to be more open to multiple ideas and meanings as they attempt to recreate themselves (Stenner 209). A period of liminality is filled with uncertainty (Stenner 239) and, in my experience, difficulty committing to almost anything. After leaving the Jehovah's Witnesses in 2012, I went through a two-year exploration of atheism. 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, which convinced me to

reject that the Bible is the inspired word of God. Then I started questioning the very existence of a God.

However, after a few years of reading about atheism and humanism, 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. At this time, I realized that I did not resonate well with angry radical atheists who wanted to eradicate religion. Despite not identifying with organized religion or spiritual groups, I realized I was still profoundly "spiritual." I went around different spiritual circles: Zen Buddhism, Theravada Buddhism, Advaita Vedanta, and Hinduism, finding something, anything, that would stick. While I appreciate the experimental nature of being in these spiritual circles, where I am allowed to be in other groups simultaneously, I also encountered intellectual animosity among many of them and sometimes a complete rejection of the rational. After two years around spiritual circles, I fell in love with philosophy, which reconnected me to my rational, intellectual self. Today, I accept that I am in some 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 (Stenner 266). I do not desire to associate with any organized religion or beliefs. I still do not think a personal God is necessary, even if his or her existence will not surprise me. I may have ceased to care too much about metaphysics altogether. However, I am still profoundly spiritual and deeply religious, and my intellectual self counterbalances that. Currently, 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 this uncertainty was caused by separating myself from my Old Self. I was in an interstitial identity blackhole but did not know I was in one. To make matters worse, I avoided thinking about my life as a Jehovah's Witness. I avoided it even when writing in the safe blank pages of my journals. It was a dark past

that needed to be completely buried. By enacting my psycho-socio-religious liminality through daily walking, culminating in the long walk from Los Baños to San Pablo, things began to change.

Walking Liminality

My desire to walk is a physical expression—a symptom—of liminality. Walking is performed liminality (Stenner 257). One notices this in the works of walking writers like Craig Mod, who has connected his desire to walk Japan with his background as an adopted child and a foreigner in a country far from home. In issue 55 of his popular newsletter *Ridgeline*, Mod wrote, "I am adopted. The sensation of unbelonging—the tenuousness of connection without blood—permeates the life of an adopted person, and so perhaps having lived that allows me to feel a kind of comfort in the distance of life here" ("The Rigor of Process"). In issue 86, Mod continued, "Adopted, Japan based some twenty+ years, torn from a blue-collar shell east of Hartford. Drunkenly walked Tokyo at night in my teens and twenties, and now soberly walk the countryside of Japan in my thirties. Walks have come to define my days and years, are now a durable "platform." Using them to deconstruct the human geography and history of Japan..." ("Summer Walks").

Mod's attraction to mobility also coincides with his attraction to material culture, specifically architecture, photography, and food ("Kissa by Kissa" 20). As if abandoned by society, people in liminal states cling to the material world for refuge. After leaving the Jehovah's Witnesses, I have always felt called by nature, landscapes, and physical spaces. It was as if my subconscious was telling me, "You do not belong to any social circle. Perhaps it is in the animate outdoors where you truly belong." For a long time, I actually may have 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. Moreover, 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 (Yi'En 212) while at the same time hoping that perhaps through it, I could recreate myself.

If documentation through field notes and photography could capture our experience of liminality when looking at dereliction in geographic space, say, in abandoned urban spaces (Al Shrbaji 74), then perhaps, documentation too can be used to capture liminality as expressed through the field notes and photos we take during a walk. Photography and written or audio notes capture the memory of that specific moment in the threshold. I go back to the photographs I took during all the walks I have undertaken since leaving my childhood religion, and I now see glimpses of what it means to be in limen. I did not 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 evoke uncertainty and limbo.

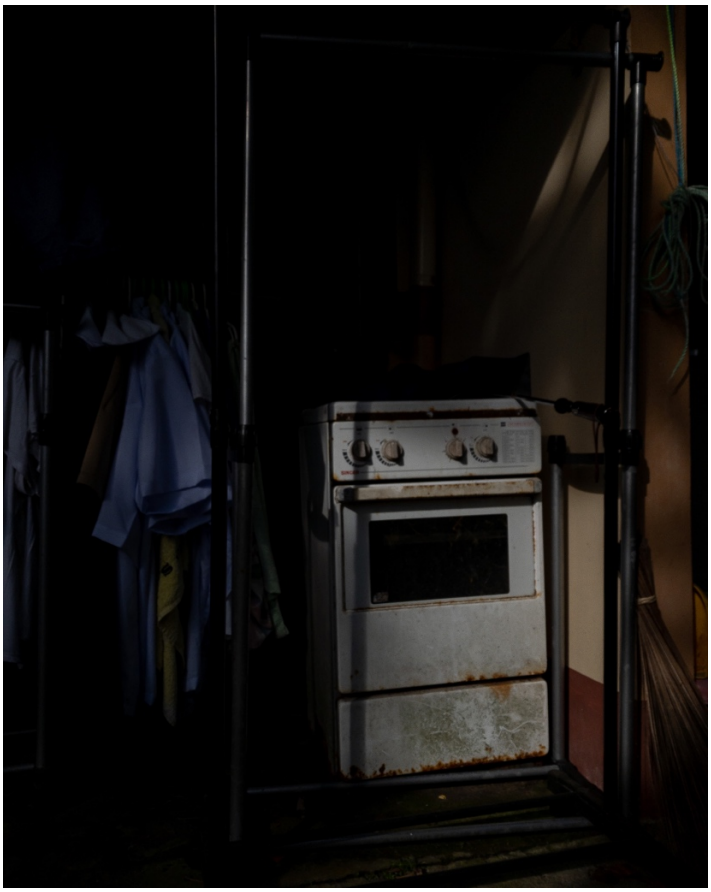

Figure 1. Broken cooking range, Los Baños, Laguna, 2022

Figure 2. Closed Old San Pablo Ice Plant, San Pablo City, Laguna, 2022

Figure 3. Abandoned Store, Sta. Barbara, Pangasinan, 2022

Figure 4. Graffitied Abandoned House, Sta. Barbara, Pangasinan, 2022

Figure 5. Abandoned House, UPLB, Laguna, 2023

"Walking carries with it the possibility for the exploration of the liminal" (Hickey et al. 41). There is something with this simple tool of mobility that helps one traverse liminality. Two of the most critical features of walking are encounter and relationality. If we adopt Hickey et al.'s proposal that ethnographies should be "deeply relational encounters" (37), walking must be a quintessential ethnographic method. A model for how walking can be applied in ethnography may be extracted from the book *Street Corner Society* (1943), where the ethnographer William Foot-Whyte walked with his participants. Foot-Whyte, a pioneer of participant observation, noticed how the geographic space of the slum area he and his participants walked through, along with the meanings and cultural behaviors attached to specific parts of the area, dictated his research progress, i.e., the questions he could ask, the behaviors he could act out, and the identities he could or could not take hold.

When walking, an ethnographer encounters two entities: the Other and the place where they are walking (Ingold and Vergunst 5). Before the walk, the ethnographer may have little commonality with the Other. However, as the walk happens and the ethnographer joins the Other in traversing place and experience, i.e., liminality, a commonality emerges between the researcher and the researched. This commonality lays the foundation for deeper connection and, therefore, more honest revelations. Through walking, ethnography becomes what it should always be: a "shared knowing, generated in place, together" (Hickey et al. 40). The knowledge that emerges out of this shared liminality facilitated by walking is characterized by ethnographers who have used walking methodologies as genuine, honest, new, and deeply relational—knowledge that is "necessarily peripatetic" (Hickey et al. 40).

We could point to several characteristics of walking that make it a perfect ethnographic method. First, walking opens the space for informality and candor between the researcher and the researched. While walking, the researcher and the researched are allowed to be "messy, uncertain, and multivoiced" (Denzin and Lincoln 26), which is not always the case in formal armchair

interviews. Second, because walks are informal, they allow moments of "experimental encounter" (Hickey et al. 42). Freed from strict rules of research, both researcher and participant experience parrhesia (speaking freely). Last, and perhaps most importantly, the freedom that walking provides facilitates the negotiation of identities between the researcher and the researched as they traverse the inherently liminal nature of ethnographic research together (Hickey et al. 50). Walking, therefore, is both a tool and metaphor for ethnographic inquiry.

Walking as Autoethnography

If walking not only figuratively explains the liminal nature of ethnographic research but also helps an ethnographer traverse this interstitial space, then the benefits of walking are easily transferrable to autoethnography. When applied to an autoethnographic encounter of someone in a psycho-socio-religious liminal state, as I am, walking generates a moment from within that liminal state through a "physiologically mediated propulsion of the body and socially performed action" (Hickey et al. 48) and transforms it into a shared encounter between the Old Self and the New Self Becoming. The idea that the Old Self and the New Self Becoming are sharing this moment in the threshold becomes the very foundation from where more honest reflection could emerge.

In autoethnography, the researcher is also the participant. You (the ethnographer) research yourself (the participant) whose experiences and entire life reflect your identity, anchored on a social group (Ellis et al.). Autoethnography proposes that by digging into your autobiography, you induce conclusions that could represent what occurs within your social group (Ellis et al.). However, what if, like I am, you are in a psycho-socio-religious liminal state, where your identity and social group is undefined and in flux? In this circumstance, walking, through its very nature as a physiological, social, and emplaced act, unveils the liminal space and the distance between the former identity (the Old Self) and the new identity (the New Self Becoming).

This happened to me on that elevated stretch after leaving Calauan—a geographic threshold between Los Baños and San Pablo. Of the many perplexing questions that walk provoked, one that stood out was what triggered me to inquire about my motivations for walking. In hindsight, it was the very nature of walking—the informality, the freedom, the physicality, and the embodied and "deeply reflexive" nature of the experience (Hickey et al. 37)—that opened the gates and made me finally confront my Old Self. The cognitive and sensorial nature of walking makes it a powerful ethnographic method (Ingold 17). Through this embodied form of mobility (Hickey et al. 37), a correspondence between two entities, the researcher and the researched, within me was opened.

Thus, walking not only unveils the liminal space between the Old Self and the New Self but also provides a means to traverse it. Amid a psycho-socio-religious liminal state, an autoethnographer allows the New Self Becoming to confront the Old Self and talk. 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 should not become. However, after the 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 life now and my life before 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. Back then, I worked hands-on with a historically marginalized community (the Deaf). I immediately saw that my work made a difference in other people's lives. I do not 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 writings 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 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, I wrote:

> 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 daily is a religious thing. Moreover, the great walkers I read, namely Henry David Thoreau and Henry Bugbee, all have works that can be described as religious (Marcel 31). I use religion in its generous, liberal sense, which is a commitment to a way of living based on principles regardless of where those principles come from. In my Old Self, I heavily relied on an organization to dictate those principles; in my New Self Becoming, I rely on myself to set my own principles. However, 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.

However, 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? Ingold said that walking creates a space for correspondence for everyone participating in the research ("Life of Lines" 15). In my case, my Old Self and my New Self Becoming. Walking does this by "opening an opportunity for more irreverent, open and experimental dialogue" (Hickey et al. 50). Under a scorching sun, with only an umbrella to protect myself, forgetting to put on sunscreen or bring sunglasses, and burdened by the excessive luggage behind my back, what room is there for reverent dialogue? 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 research subject but unconsciously or consciously avoided: my Old Self.

While walking, my New Self Becoming dropped from the tower it always occupied to join my Old Self below as both researcher and participant. By doing so, my New Self Becoming understood my Old Self better, finally confronting it as a worthy subject of study. And what a productive move this was because my Old Self held knowledge of the terrain that my New Self Becoming did not have (Hickey et al. 50). However, it was frightening to realize that perhaps my New Self Becoming has not yet moved that far away from my Old Self, that this new identity that thought it was novel was actually, still ancient, that what I was trying to walk through metaphorically was not an expanse but, in fact, an interstice.

This is what walking does to the autoethnographer on the threshold of identities. It reveals commonalities between past and present identities. It works as a form of transportation to help the autoethnographer traverse the "in-between realm, which forms a third place, or threshold, that links as it separates two previously opposed conditions" (Coleman 202). Walking allows one to relax and trust. Conversation with oneself is more natural than journaling at a desk, natural breaks are allowed, 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 to see that the flowers grow 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 open 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 was lost after I left. I have tried hard, even until now, to find community and accept that being in a liminal space such as where I am right now means coming at peace with the fact that I will not be connected to people I share similar beliefs with as easily as before and that differences and learning to navigate differences shall now be 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 points me toward reincorporation.

Perpetual Liminality or A Never-ending Walk

Derrida (1967) said that "deconstruction implies the possibility of rebuilding" (p. xlix). The rebuilding process starts with recognizing that one is in control of one's destiny. Per Sartre (1946), existentialism and abandonment are related. Whatever its cause, abandonment involves detachment, a liminal condition that could be interpreted as an "autonomy of existence" (Al Shrbaji 76). 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 community and a sense of identity, must eventually 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.

Indeed, I have seen recent signs of reincorporation in my life. While walking on Session Road in Baguio City during my first visit in two years after the COVID-19 pandemic began in 2020, 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 bag hanging on my shoulder. 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. Perhaps, it is 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 have not fully articulated.

Why should it be articulated, though? Liminality is not a single flavor. It could be either transitional or perpetual—a social position that persists in ambiguity and expansive in loyalty (Ybema et al. 24). In peripatetic language, a perpetual psycho-socio-religious state is a never-ending walk. Regarding my religious identity, I like how the Unitarian minister Andrew James Brown put it: perpetual liminars desire "the freedom to be tomorrow what we are not today," which is precisely what walking signifies. 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.

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