**On Tending, Movement, and Making**

To what extent can we as educators conceptualize teaching as a practice of care? In what ways can or should we tend to the embodied lives of our students? My teaching life is anchored in Hendrix College, located in Conway, AR; we enroll approximately 1,200 students per year. I know many of my students and colleagues well, and I worry that we are forgetting how to live in our bodies. I fear that we are increasingly unable to keep ourselves well. I redesigned English 325: British Romanticism during the spring semester of 2018 because I wanted to explore alongside my students how walking can impact our approaches to writing and to being well. My own history as a learner informed my thinking about this course. For the first twenty-five years of my life, I set my body aside; I could barely admit I *had* a body in the first place. When I discovered in my late twenties that my physical self could be a source of gladness and calm, I received a crucial, animating gift. “I want us to be well in the midst of each other,” I often thought as I planned this course. “I want students to exist vibrantly in their bodies, and to recognize how our bodies can help us learn.” How, I wondered, could I use British Romantic literature to anchor a capacious model of writing in which we both choose to move and choose to be still?

Two ideas about care guided me as I reimagined this course. First, I wanted to care for my students indirectly, introducing texts and assignments that promote questioning, experimentation, and attentiveness. Yet I also wanted to care in a way that would make something happen, something I could recognize and name. I hoped that one of this course’s core assignments would impact students in legible ways. Towards the middle of the course, students selected a one-hour route and walked this route multiple times. They kept regular journals of their walks, guided by questions that linked these walks to those of the Romantic walkers we were studying. As they pondered connections between our readings and their own walking practices, I hoped that students would also develop a deeper sense of calm. I expected that they would become more patient and meditative, more aware of their bodies and the world through which they walked. I imagined, in brief, that students would recognize how walking regularly could keep them well. As is so often true of courses, this one ended untidily; in some sense, English 325 continues still. Throughout the semester, I remained aware of students’ energy and lethargy, their periods of focus and inattentiveness, and variations in their apparent physical and mental health. In the process of doing so, I became more humble in my approach to wellbeing and unwellness. Engaging ethically with the embodied lives of our students requires us to be gentle, even slightly distant, and to accept all we cannot know of them. We can practice this gentleness, in part, by understanding wellbeing as a temporary state, one that settles only to shift. English 325’s texts, conversations, and writing ultimately suggested to me how the bodies of learners who share the same room keep our own separate time.

In this fourteen-week course, we read varied accounts of walking in British Romantic poetry and prose. Walking also functioned for us as a mode of reading, and, more specifically, a mode of listening. The early weeks of the course prepared students to complete a close reading of ten to fifteen lines of a poem, using the embodied reading techniques I describe below. Students walked in order to hear more deeply the poems they read. They also pursued connections between the course material and their own walking lives by completing five entries in a walking journal of their own. During our second month together, we studied longer works of poetry and prose, including *Home at Grasmere*, the *Grasmere and Alfoxden Journals*, and *Frankenstein.* During this part of the semester, we concentrated on ethical questions, including how embodied differences shape the experiences of individual walkers, considering how a walk’s form, pace, and rhythm might shift for those who are living with disabilities. We also pondered the distinctions between walking for leisure and walking out of necessity, and the relationship between walking and home. Each of students’ five walking journals focused on a different aspect of the same one-hour walk to which they returned each week. In their final essay of the semester, students drew their walks into conversation with our course texts by choosing a single idea and describing the place that this idea occupied in their walks and in one or more of our readings.

My approach to close reading, in this course and elsewhere, locates reading in the body. If poems require close listening, we can hear them with our ears as well as our feet. Particularly when we encounter the syntactic intricacies of poems like “Tintern Abbey” and “Mont Blanc” for the first time, they sound ponderously cerebral. It is easy for new readers of poetry to miss the dynamism of poetic sentences, the ways that thinking, perception, and feeling unfold across lines. Many students came to British Romanticism with a noun-based approach to reading poetry; they were used to locating and naming a poem’s sounds, images, meter, and line breaks. As we studied a small group of poems whose speakers contemplate domestic and natural scenes, I encouraged students to shift their focus from naming different aspects of poetic form to describing how poems move. We concentrated particularly on the charged relationship between sentences and lines. The following sentence from James Longenbach’s *The Art of the Poetic Line* guided us in this work: “The line is no arbitrary unit, no ruler, but a dynamic force that works in conjunction with other elements of the poem: the syntax of the sentences, the rhythm of stressed and unstressed syllables, and the resonance of similar sounds” (43).

I was curious about how walking with our course texts might help students to feel the line’s dynamic force.During the second and third weeks of the semester, we began to walk around the track near our classroom as we read aloud. The class by this point had some experience in voicing poems like “Tintern Abbey” and “Frost at Midnight.” The sounds of Romantic poems, however haltingly, were beginning to inhabit their ears. We walked with these poems in several different ways. One student began by reading a brief section of a poem unnaturally. The class followed with our feet, stopping at the end of every line. Doing so allowed students to feel the friction between a poem’s enjambments and their own steps, to experience how a sentence continued while they stopped. We then returned to the same section of the poem, this time letting the sentence’s movement guide us to its natural conclusion. Following these experiments, students began to describe what these sentences did to them as they walked. Four templates anchored their responses: “This sentence [verb + adverb] us to the next line”; “The speaker [verb + adverb] us to the next line”; “[Author’s last name] [verb + adverb] us to the next line,” and “We are [passive verb + adverb] to the next line.” At the end of this exercise, we had compiled a list of verbs to which students returned in their close reading essays. As they brainstormed for these essays, I asked them to translate the work we did in the classroom to the lines on which they chose to focus.

Although students approached our first poem-walks with some skepticism, these exercises became more meaningful to them as we used them to sharpen the attention we gave to emotion in the poems at hand. As these thirteen students dipped their toes into Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, and Keats, they were both puzzled and amused by the particular intensities of Romantic feeling, the sheer largeness of emotion they encountered on the page. Our walking exercises encouraged the class to trace the feelings they heard in a speaker’s voice to a poet’s choices about form, and, in particular, how a poet distributes sentences across lines. Our capacity to be moved in an emotional sense, in other words, is closely linked to our capacity to be moved in a physical sense. For example, a sentence might lead us gently from one line to the next, or set us down at the end of a line. As a result, we might detect hesitation or certainty in a speaker’s voice. By concentrating on a poem’s movement, students experience the close relationship between hearing a poem and being touched by it. They shift their focus from what texts *are* to what texts *do*: invite, engage, unsettle, propel, question, and more. As a result, students’ syntax shifts: verbs, rather than nouns, ground their sentences.

The first essay in the course, then, asked students to understand close reading as a practice in which a writer attends to a text’s liveliness, its capacity to make something happen in the reader’s ear. By practicing this deep attentiveness in their first essay and throughout the semester, students prepared to render their own walks on the page. In upper-level courses like British Romanticism, I emphasize the close relationship between a detailed rendering of a text and a vivid articulation of one’s own perceptions or memories. Particularly because Hendrix English majors can choose from among three tracks—literary studies, film studies, and creative writing—I often design assignments that invite classes to understand both literary criticism and creative nonfiction writing as “[arts] of description,” a phrase I borrow from Mark Doty’s volume of the same title. As they built a small portfolio of five walking journals, students shifted their attention from printed texts to the natural and human world that they encountered during a one-hour walk. Each student returned to the same one-hour walk five times and composed 500 words in response to each walk. Following the same route resembles rereading; I hoped that the distinct paths students chose to follow would become continually new, would claim their attention in different ways.

Students began their walking journals by describing how they chose where to walk. Their second journals, inspired by our discussions about *The Grasmere and Alfoxden Journals*, encouraged students to use the particularity of Dorothy Wordsworth’s observations as a guide. I asked them to record small details, and to incorporate impressions provided by each of the five senses. As we discussed *Home at Grasmere*, students carried index cards with the word “home” on them during their walks. In these entries, they observed how this word informed the kinds of details they chose to record. A spring break journal prompt invited students to pursue a new route and to consider the differences between their familiar path and one they encountered for the first time. During their final walk, students selected one-third of a page of prose or ten to fifteen lines of poetry from one of our readings and carried this text with them as they walked. This last entry led into their final essay for the course, in which they traced a single topic or question through their walking path and through one or more of our course texts.

The final essay in the course asked students to use their own walks as a framework for their textual engagement. They experimented with an essay form appropriate to the digressions and errancies of both walking and thinking. Rebecca Solnit, whose *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*, framed our early conversations in the course, describes how walking can inform thinking: “Moving on foot makes it easier to move in time; the mind wanders from plans to recollections to observations. The rhythm of walking generates a kind of rhythm of thinking, and the passage through a landscape echoes or stimulates the passage through a series of thoughts” (6). Solnit suggests how writers who pursue questions about walking can craft essays whose form acknowledges the surprises, uncertainties, and associations one experiences during a walk. Rather than constructing a formal argument about our readings, students pursued a more meandering path in which the details of their walks occasioned a brief meditation on a piece of poetry or prose, and vice-versa. I invited them to consider how a single concept or question could lend coherence to their pieces. In Maggie Nelson’s *Bluets*, for example, the word “blue” anchors Nelson’s meditations about desire and loss. After students had completed their first three walking journals, I met with each member of the class individually to discuss the patterns I noticed in their work. My goal in these meetings was to suggest potential routes to pursue in their final essays, and to encourage class members to refine their topics as they continued to read, write, and walk. Final essays addressed topics that included home, a memorable peach orchard, disorientation, and holiness.

As I read these final essays, I felt an acute sense of loss. “I want to keep us together,” I thought after the class met for the last time. My impulse to continue a course after its ending arises, in part, from an awareness of work left undone. New ideas about a course’s readings, in-class exercises, and writing assignments often occur to me only after a semester’s official completion. After fourteen weeks of English 325, I was more familiar with the learners who shaped the course; I knew more about their questions and goals. So too did I have a clearer sense of how we could use class time to refine our ideas and shape more rigorous pieces of writing. The first incarnation of English 325 reinforced how slowly intellectual and creative work proceed, as well as how the lived experiences of individual learners, including the varied capacities of distinct bodies, impact thinking, walking, and writing alike. The next version of English 325 will take both this necessary slowness and the possibilities created by students’ embodied differences as guiding principles. Students will have more opportunities to practice describing both our course texts and their walks, with feedback from one another and from me. Essay prompts and in-class exercises will more fully acknowledge the various ways in which learners inhabit their bodies and offer a range of approaches for those who are living with chronic illnesses and disabilities. For example, students will have the option to prepare to write their close reading essays by walking with course texts or moving with them from seated positions, using their eyes, voices, hands, and feet to indicate the endings of sentences and lines. So too can writers who feel unable to complete hour-long walks approach journal prompts by immersing themselves in single locations, exploring variations on stillness, recording in-depth perceptions generated by one or more of their senses, and, as their bodies allow, cataloguing how their thoughts and perceptions change when they shift physical positions. The course will incorporate more writing workshops in which we both discuss and refine our textual analyses and descriptions of our walks, drawing inspiration from models of both kinds of work.

During the next iteration of this course, we will also study more experimental essays on which students can rely as they compose their final essays. My commitment to assigning essays like the final essay in this course comes from two places. Because I am a critic by training and a poet by nature, my own thinking on the page often proceeds lyrically. My essays meditate, describe, and question more readily than they argue. I ask students to write in this mode because I have been educated by doing so. Students, too, have often expressed to me a discomfort with the voice they adopt in argumentative essays; they describe a sense of remoteness from their work and from any particular audience. In many of my upper-level courses, students spend the semester building towards capacious and intricate final essays that dwell on the thresholds between distinct modes of expression, essays that engage critically with the texts at hand while also imagining broadly what it might mean to respond to those texts. In spite of my commitment to this kind of writing, I continue to be challenged by the work of locating essays in which writers demonstrate a sustained engagement with a text before shifting to a new line of thinking. Many pieces of the type I am describing feel to me insufficient in their slowness; I want my students to encounter writing, in other words, whose mode of attending to texts is as particular as Dorothy Wordsworth’s prolonged involvement with a nest of swallows.

Yet my wish to keep the class together was also anchored in my wish to care for them, to walk beside them in their writing lives, to keep watch over the vulnerabilities they shared with me when we spoke one-on-one. These thirteen students delighted and intrigued me, frustrated and saddened me. Rarely were all fourteen of us present in the same room, at the same time. Towards the middle of the semester, I expressed to the class my concerns about their sporadic attendance. Yet I did so with a lump in my throat. The particular focus of this course has prompted me to consider how our bodies both frame our access to classroom space, and influence how we inhabit that space. When chronic illness, depression, and anxiety prevented students from attending class, I struggled to balance compassion with fairness. The porousness of my role as an educator struck me once more. What does it mean to treat students with care when I am neither a diagnostician nor a therapist? How could I establish meaningful common expectations for class attendance while also acknowledging the wide variations in students’ day-to-day wellbeing, particularly given the close relationship between wellbeing and socioeconomic status? According to the Hendrix community contract, “all Hendrix students are expected to attend class in accordance with the catalog and individual course syllabi.” The contract also holds students responsible for their own mental and physical health:

Hendrix students are expected to tend to their own mental and physical health. Campus resources are available for short-term conditions. Persistent or chronic health problems may require care beyond the campus resources. Students should discuss academic options with their advisor, professors, or Academic Success office if persistent health problems impact a student’s ability to complete educational tasks.

These general guidelines offer little clarity for instructors about how to support students who are experiencing prolonged or chronic illnesses, and even less clarity about how to work alongside students whose depression, anxiety, or other mental health challenges impact class attendance. Students navigate health challenges with limited resources: one registered nurse and two full-time therapists work tirelessly to support our students. Such guidelines also fail to consider how access to off-campus physicians, therapists, emergency rooms, and urgent care centers depends on students’ ability to pay for these resources.

To approach care in terms of ongoing vigilance, however, risks devaluing the necessary solitude, even loneliness, of both learning and embodied life. If I had semi-regular contact with students over the course of fourteen weeks, they remained, and remain, largely unknown to me. The exigencies of our bodies, our varied states of wellness and illness, kept us alone. So too did we read, write, and walk one by one. Even as I hoped for more consistent attendance, the writers I discussed with my students encouraged me to consider how fourteen individuals could be variously present to course texts, and to each other, in a common room. The present tense of our classroom differed for each of us, all of the time. On any given day, this present tense might include a lingering cough, several sentences of “The Old Cumberland Beggar,” harsh fluorescent lights, a description of Frankenstein wandering through the Alps, the repeated twisting of a piece of hair, a student’s meditations about trash in the Hendrix Creek Preserve, our audible and inaudible breaths. In other words, if it is true that conversations among a common group create a sense of safety and regularity, it is much more difficult to identify “what happens” to and for us, bodily, mentally, and emotionally during a single class and beyond it. A more generously exacting question might take this form: what happens, and for whom, and how, and with what consequences? Prompted by our course texts, I began to think of the word “course” as a verb rather than a noun, an experience shaped by individual and collaborative reading, perceiving, walking, thinking, conversing, and writing. In texts ranging from *Home at Grasmere* to *Frankenstein*, the writers we studied contemplate being alone and being together, both while walking and while still. As students read our course texts and described their own walks, their descriptions of solitude and companionship became increasingly specific and strange. These singular conditions branched and multiplied, assumed different textures and qualities. A common classroom space makes room for shared learning and intellectual community, but community, too, emerges unrecognizably in time. Like the writers we studied, we were and are variously alone and together, new every minute. Our sentences emerged at different paces; our realizations and distractions occurred at different times. Our bodies shifted in crucial and imperceptible ways.

When I imagined that I could care for my students by asking them to walk, I assumed that I would be able to read the effects that our walks would have on us. When I anticipated that walking would lead to wellbeing, I thought of wellbeing in terms inadequate to its complexity. Before I met the individual learners who created this course alongside me, I thought I could know when my students were well, that they would demonstrate wellbeing and illness in familiar, legible ways. Yet from the course’s beginning, my students took their walks seriously and carried their struggles into these walks. They demonstrated, perhaps without fully realizing it, a determination to be well on their own terms and in their own time. If we often describe wellness in terms of the habits and experiences that are inextricable from having both the money and the time to engage in these habits and experiences, it is more difficult to identify as well or unwell those bodyminds whose ways of engaging with the world differ from our own, particularly because the normative mythology of wellness suggests that we reveal wellness through our quietude, restraint, and self-composure. Georges Canguillhem, in fact, recalls Henri Michaux’s description of health in terms of “the silence of the organs”:

As Henri Michaux has put it, “the body (its organs and its functions) has become known not through the prowess of the strong, but through the troubles of the weak, the ill, the infirm, the wounded (for health is silent, the source of that enormously mistaken impression that *tout va de soi*”). (20)

Particularly if we adhere to a narrower sense of wellness that excludes more varied possibilities for wellbeing, as I admit that I did when I first envisioned this course, we sense that we and others are well when our bodyminds are as inconspicuous as possible, when they fail to attract notice, when they are appropriately self-contained. Identifying wellbeing in others becomes even more difficult when we consider the porous boundaries between our bodies, our minds, and our environments. In *Volatile Bodies*, Elizabeth Grosz reminds us of the perils of separating the body from the mind. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty articulates in *Phenomenology of Perception*, to speak of “the body” is to speak of something other than an object, something unstill; the word “body” gestures towards “our means of communication with [the world]” (106). Rather than being separate from the world, Merleau-Ponty writes, the body is deeply involved with it, and vice-versa: “Insofar as it sees and touches the world, my body can therefore be neither seen nor touched…It is neither tangible nor visible insofar as it is that which sees and touches” (105). For all of its small revelations, my own body, however I mark its contours and its boundaries, remains a secret to me; it continues to educate me in its possibilities and its needs. How can I know, then, what any one of my students knows of his, her, or their physical self, or how best to go about caring for the bodyminds none of us can place?

I began this essay with a question about care, a curiosity about how we as educators might tend to the embodied lives of our students. I continue to pose this question as a liberal arts college professor whose charged awareness of individual students often overwhelms me as I work to identify common learning goals. In what ways can we acknowledge and respond to the intellectual and embodied particularities of the students in our courses, both within and beyond the classroom? How can we tend to these particularities while also upholding the value of a single *group*, a collection of individual lives juxtaposed for a given, unrepeatable period of time? The particular group of students with whom I worked during Spring 2018 often seemed to require thirteen different courses, and I found myself continually adjusting class plans and assignments in response to each of them. The course included three seniors, one majoring in creative writing, one majoring in chemistry, and a third majoring in international relations; four juniors, two majoring in creative writing, one majoring in literary studies, and one majoring in biology; two sophomores, one majoring in film studies and the other majoring in psychology; two first-year students, one majoring in chemistry and the other majoring in theater; and one student who was visiting Hendrix from a university in Austria. Throughout the semester, I wondered whether I had attempted to stretch the course beyond what it could reasonably contain, whether this walking-centered course was insufficiently still. English 325, in its spring 2018 form, often shifted gears. Students encountered the challenging poetry and prose of early nineteenth-century Britain for the first time and approached close reading in an unfamiliar way. Class members walked regularly and sharpened their descriptions of the world they encountered as they walked. The course’s final essay invited students to write associatively, to allow their thinking to proceed slowly, and to achieve coherence through alternatives to traditional argumentation. Any one of these tasks could easily occupy a full fourteen weeks.

As the spring 2018 semester concluded, I wondered whether the sheer multiplicity of English 325 had fragmented our common time. When I thought about the course, I felt disoriented and uncentered, aware of the divergent paths we had walked and described, the texts we had discussed, the essays we had crafted, the conversations we had held one-on-one and as a group. Given the amount of time we devoted to discussing our own walks and walking journals during class discussion, I wondered whether our walks had crowded out more “serious” reading and writing. When a course like this one asks students to walk more, both inside and outside of the classroom, it also allows them to read and to write in ways less recognizable as work. Rebecca Solnit reminds us how walking is “the something closest to doing nothing…Walking itself is the intentional act closest to the unwilled rhythms of the body, to breathing and the beating of the heart. It strikes a delicate balance between working and idling, being and doing. It is a bodily labor that produces nothing but thoughts, experiences, arrivals” (5). In a series of reflections that they completed throughout the semester, students shared with me that their walks calmed them, that they came to recognize their paths as homes, and that they learned to incorporate their bodies into their written work. At the same time, these walks, both in our class conversations and on the pages of students’ final essays, seemed to occupy their own time, adjacent to the course without being part of it.

Yet the more time I spend in the classroom, the more I orient myself towards the writing lives students will shape beyond their college years. We as writers work in the charged space made by tending to our own bodyminds, and engaging with the bodyminds of those who surround us. In this space, it is often difficult to trace how our finished pieces come to be, to identify the texts and walks and other lives and breaths that have informed them. Dorothy Wordsworth’s *Grasmere and Alfoxden Journals*, one of the texts that centers this course, bears witness to the varied activities of an individual writing life; these activities sit breathlessly together on the page, shaping an ongoing present tense. Rachel Mayer Brownstein, Lucy Newlyn, Sarah Zimmerman, and other careful readers of Dorothy Wordsworth’s writing observe that these journals record domestic tasks completed alongside toothaches suffered alongside observations about the weather, that they are metonymic or associative in their organization, and that they refrain from sequencing the moments of a day according to the progression of hours. By gathering rather than chronicling a day’s moments, in other words, Dorothy disrupts the boundaries between discrete events and observations; her regular omission of the pronouns “I” and “we” also thwarts any attempt to classify her walks as definitively solitary or resolutely companionate. Because Dorothy Wordsworth often nests the word “walk” within descriptions of broccoli planted, laundry hung, beggars met, poems transcribed, and books read, it is difficult to mark when a walk begins and when it ends. The journals thus ask us to imagine how walks might linger in Dorothy Wordsworth’s rarely noted body, how one might write while walking, while quiet, while talking, while at rest. In the context of this course, the *Grasmere and Alfoxden Journals* thus suggest the tender ephemerality of writing and walking alike. The journals allow us to imagine the ways in which both writing and walking are situated within the rhythms of our days, and introduce the possibility that both essays and walks might continue in our individual and collective bodyminds beyond the times in which they take place.

For all the restlessness I feel in response to this fledgling course, one particular class period allowed me to feel temporarily still, convinced that we were continuing to make something, together. The fourteen of us facilitated a public conversation on walking and writing as part of the Literature and Language Over Lunch series, part of the Hendrix-Murphy programs in Literature and Language. Students’ voices threaded through one another as they read selections from our course texts alongside excerpts from their walking journals, and described to a gathering of peers, staff, and faculty the questions we were pursuing as a group. This hour reminded me of a co-authored ephemeral essay, a living document made by our shared and separate time. When my students and I bring our bodies with us into the classroom, when we work and walk with and in and through our physical selves, we become differently vulnerable to one another, in new, strange, and often unlocatable relationship to British Romantic writing, to our own work as readers and writers, walkers and makers. The embodied reading practices we apply to our course texts alter us, make us imperceptibly new. The accidents, discomforts, and surprises of the walking classroom, framed by Romanticism’s own vital inquiry into the purposes and possibilities of walking, left both my students and me with a repertoire of questions about, and approaches to, the practices of reading, writing, and walking, and a renewed commitment to keep those questions in mind as we pursue our work. Perhaps it is the restless and continuous engagement with these questions that will continue to make of English 325 a place at once palpable and precarious, a location made by solitary walks and collaborative conversations, a nexus of bodyminds in a room and in the world beyond the room, reading together, writing alone, walking on.

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