

What is ultimately worthwhile?

A good, contemplative walk begins and ends the day on just the right note.

BY CHARLIE HELBLING '84

I believe in a good walk. Each day I walk from home to work — roundtrip, three miles. The walk is a time for reflection, relaxation, fitness, and it helps me avoid the stress of parking at a landlocked university. It is time well spent. No wasting of gas, no wasting of time, although some would argue it is a waste of time, since I could be at work in five minutes by car rather than in 30 minutes on foot. That argument relies on the false assumption those 25 minutes at work is better than 30 minutes of contemplative peace.

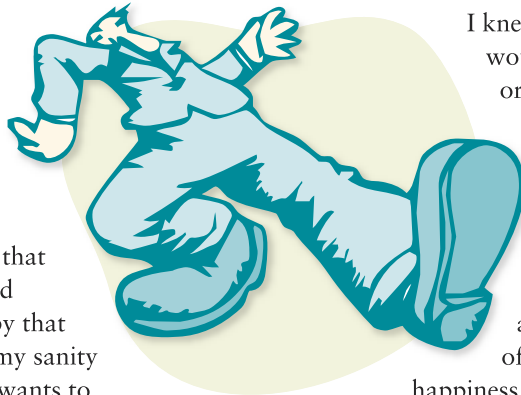
I pass a track where I see college runners going through their paces, and I am instantly transported to my athletic days at St. Olaf.

Memories of cross-country and track practice lead my thoughts back to some of my academic experiences. St. Olaf was a tremendous training ground to develop an ideal that I hold dear: a sound mind in a sound body. I continue to attempt to live by that ideal; though as the years progress my sanity seems to shrink while my waistline wants to do the opposite. But nonetheless, it still is an ideal worth pursuing.

I am enjoying my walk, and I have been thinking. My thoughts are not earth-shattering; my walk has no big financial payoff, but it supports what I believe in and gives me time to reflect on what is ultimately worthwhile.

My walk allows me time to think about what I believe in. Why am I fortunate enough to possess a sense of wonder, an abundance of energy, a belief that anything is possible?

In his essay *Self-Reliance*, Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, “A man should learn to detect and watch that gleam of light which flashes across his mind from within.” The walk provides an opportunity to grasp that “gleam.” Walking, I feel emotionally awake to my surroundings. With the wind blowing, rain or snowflakes falling, or sun shining, my thoughts are clear.



It is a sense of clarity I felt as a 12-year old when I traveled to Minnesota’s North Woods for the first time and there discovered water, sky, ancient rock, soft moss, big trees and secluded bays. We live by the day, not by the hour in these timeless places, and connect with the primordial rhythms of the past. At times nature passively touches us; other times we viscerally embrace nature.

Henry David Thoreau wrote in *Walden*, “To be awake is to be alive.” As a boy I knew that the North Woods was a special place; I felt “awake” there, and, in retrospect,

I understand this was a life-defining moment.

I knew that my connection to this place would need always to be a part of my life or there would be a void. Today, I live there seasonally and continue to explore the northern Minnesota and Canadian wilderness by canoe.

Like Emerson, I say it is important to not only trust yourself but also to know your passions and create a life and vocation accordingly. Too often we live in the future putting our

happiness at a distance when we say “once this

happens” or “once I obtain that” happiness will ensue.

I believe it’s not about knowing exactly what we want to do with our lives, but rather being open and alert to opportunities as they present themselves. What might seem to some to be acting on a whim may, for you, be grounded in a passion demanding an alternative course. The choices can be overwhelming when you have many passions, but I have always thought it better to be abundant in good options than to have little choice at all.

This is what I have taken away from my days at St. Olaf: If we mold our passions into a vocation, we will be passionate about our purpose. To merely focus on the material benefits (money, job, status) of an education affords a narrow perspective and undermines the liberal arts tradition.

And so I am enjoying my walk, and I have been thinking. My thoughts are not earth-shattering; my walk has no big financial payoff, but it supports what I believe in and gives me time to reflect on what is ultimately worthwhile. That’s not a bad way to start or end the day. 🦋

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EDITOR’S NOTE: Last year, St. Olaf alumni, parents and friends were invited to participate in the first Ole essay contest and were asked the question “What do you believe?” Charlie Helbling was one of three winning essayists. [Learn more at stolaf.edu/alumni/events/ultimatelyworthwhile.html](http://stolaf.edu/alumni/events/ultimatelyworthwhile.html)