

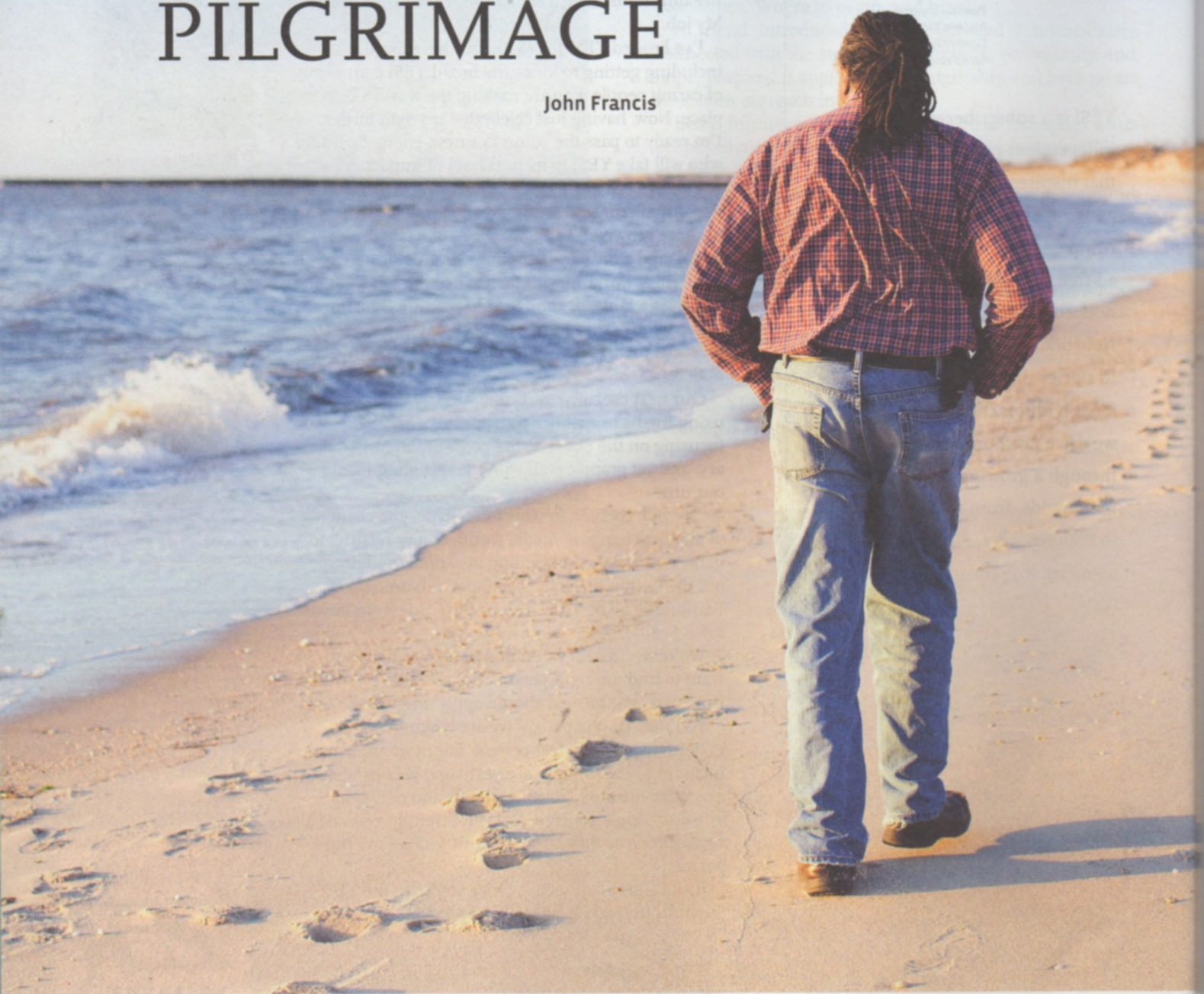
CULTURE SHIFT

BOOKS + FILM + MUSIC

How the simple act of walking can open us up to confront and heal our toughest problems

WALKING PILGRIMAGE

John Francis





After witnessing a catastrophic oil spill in San Francisco Bay in 1971, John Francis got out of his car, took a vow of silence, and walked for the next 22 years.

I clearly remember learning to walk. I remember falling and the frustration of trying to stand on my feet unsupported, without the help of parents. Finally, there was the euphoria of one day rising by myself. Like a young bird flying, my hands flapped, and my feet lifted to make the first wobbly steps to the other side of the playpen. No one was around, no aunties or uncles urging me to walk. I was alone in my joy, not knowing that this moment would color the life that stretched out before me. Not until I had grown and left my inner-city Philadelphia home for the hills of Marin County, California did my walking truly blossom. Living adjacent to the Point Reyes National Seashore, I was drawn to explore the nearly 150 miles of trails that led through bishop pines, firs, and redwoods to the ocean.

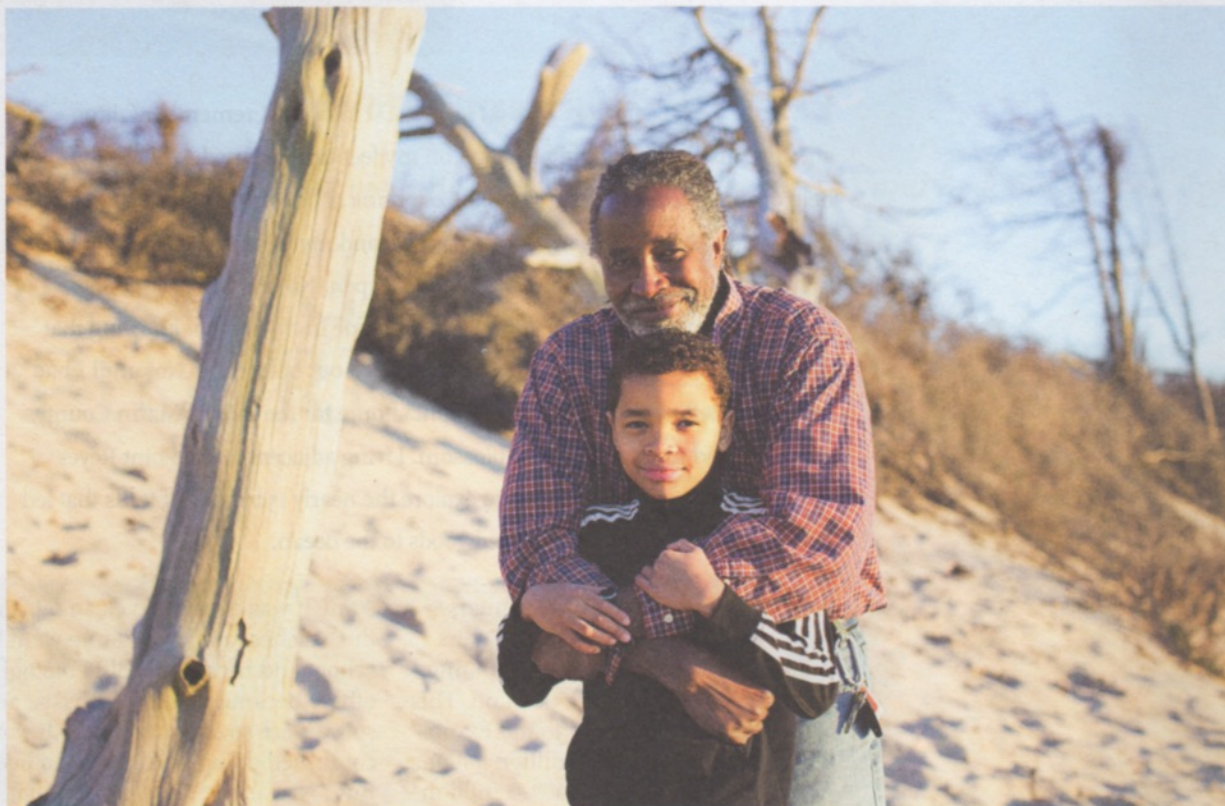
It was an idyllic life until January 1971, when two Standard Oil tankers collided in San Francisco Bay, spilling more than 800,000 gallons of oil. This is paltry when compared to the Exxon Valdez, which spilled 11 million gallons in 1989, or the more than 100 million gallons that spewed into the Gulf of Mexico from the Deepwater Horizon in 2010. But the Standard Oil spill happened during a cultural revolution, my failed attempts at higher education, and after my consuming enough alcohol and other substances to earn the designation of being lost.

When the oil washed up onto the Northern California shore, I reached back as far as I could remember, to the freedom and joy of taking my first steps. I got out of my car and walked away. I vowed in protest not to ride in any motorized vehicles again. I did so half expecting that I would be joined by throngs of people who had, along with me, cried salty tears at the dying fish and birds, and the oil washing ashore. I thought it would be the beginning of a movement of walkers, masses of people giving up their gas-powered vehicles to save the environment. I was more than a little disappointed when it seemed the movement consisted of only me.

Later I found out that the spill had affected people in different ways: For

some it was enough to clean oil from the beaches and birds; some went to school and became wildlife biologists; others became political activists; and some were so frustrated that they just continued doing what they had been. But I was angry, and I carried that anger with me. Then I realized that if I was going to continue walking it was going to have to be for something and not against something. So I dedicated my walk as a pilgrimage, and I became a pilgrim, to walk as part of my education, in the spirit and hope that I could be of benefit to us all. I had no idea what that meant, but I figured I would learn along the way.

In Dan Rubinstein's book, *Born to Walk*, the author lays out his personal tribute to the transformative power of walking. From the rambles of Wordsworth and Thoreau to the on-the-job beat walks of Philadelphia police, Rubinstein interweaves his walk experiences with interesting statistics, theories, studies, and anecdotes. I enjoyed *Born to Walk*, though it is an almost impossible task to include every peripatetic hue and color and satisfy everyone. However, what Rubinstein does tell us is that more and more people are leaving their jobs and the security of their homes and taking off on long journeys of thousands of miles. For some, it is the spiritual



John Francis with his 9-year-old son, Luke, in Cape May, New Jersey.

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I LEARNED THIS VISCERALLY DURING MY WALKING PILGRIMAGE.

quest of a pilgrimage, or it is attached to some cause, or both.

Rubinstein uses headings in his book that include both "Mind" and "Spirit," delving into what the real world crisis looks like and how the simple act of walking can address even some of our gnarliest problems. Under his heading of "Society," homicide in Philadelphia skyrockets until the city takes its police officers out of their patrol cars where they are isolated from what's really going on and puts them on the street, making them walk a beat. With the officers on a first-name basis with the neighborhood, the number of murders plummets.

There are, of course, transformations

that result from introspection. As I began my pilgrimage decades ago, I turned to Thomas Merton, a Trappist monk and contemplative who wrote *Seeds of Contemplation*. Merton saw pilgrimage as transformative, a metaphor for life's journey. He wrote, "The geographical pilgrimage is the symbolic acting out of an inner journey. The inner journey is the interpolation of the meanings and signs of the outer pilgrimage. One can have one without the other. It is best to have both." I devoured Merton and the writings of Colin Fletcher, author of *The Man Who Walked Through Time*, a memoir of his solo trek through Grand Canyon National Park. Along with Fletcher's

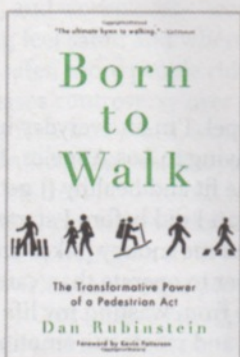
The Complete Walker, I was inspired. Both books gave me some idea as to what the "geographical pilgrimage," with its camping and walking long distances, might physically entail.

In recent years, I have offered a class on Planetwalking, for graduates and undergrads at the Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies, modeled after my walking experience. Specifically, Planetwalking is meant to be a sensuous experience of our environment that embraces journey and serendipitous community service. Each year the class joins me and other Planetwalkers on a five-day trip across the United States, following my original route. We pick up the journey where we left off the

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year before. What I have learned from my students is that for many young people, Planetwalking is a way to find out who they are and how they fit in the world while sharing their journeys through blogs and social media.

When I began walking, there were no smartphones or social media platforms, and the “environment” was about pollution and loss of habitat and endangered species. During my journey I discovered that “environment” is much more. People are a part of the environment, and how we treat each other is fundamental in approaching sustainability. I learned this viscerally during my walking pilgrimage. The environment, actually, is about human rights, civil rights, economic equity, gender equality, and all the ways that humans interact with not only the physical environment but also with one another. This was what Lynton K. Caldwell shared with Merton and others when he wrote about the “crisis of mind and spirit.”



Born to Walk:
The Transformative Power of
a Pedestrian Act
DAN RUBINSTEIN
ECW Press, 316 pages

It was 22 years before I rode in motorized vehicles again, but during the years and miles of walking I experienced the most unexpected transformations and discoveries: I had taken a 17-year vow of silence while walking across the United States, and earned three degrees, including a doctorate in environmental studies from the Nelson Institute. After reaching the East Coast, I served as a federal environmental analyst and project manager to help write oil transportation and cleanup regulations following the Exxon Valdez oil spill. But perhaps even more important than the formal education and professional positions were the informal moments that came from walking in the natural environment that I was a part of, and the thousands of people that I met who became a part of me. Such moments provided many opportunities for learning, comprised of chance roadside meetings, being welcomed into the homes of strangers, being treated as a family friend, listening fully to different music and different points of view, and being on the receiving end of unanticipated kindness. There may be no better way to engage the environment than to walk in it and be among ourselves, letting nature shape us, to be fully human, in a more than human world.

In the end, if you don't know this truth, if you don't feel it in your bones, in the soles of your feet, *Born to Walk*, or any other book that I know of, might not convince you. The transformative power of walking is in the act, moving from where we are to where we want to be. ❶

John Francis is an environmental educator and the founder of Planetwalk. He lives in Cape May, New Jersey.