

## TO CARE FOR A NEIGHBORHOOD, TRY WALKING IT

BY DANNY HEITMAN, *FORUM* EDITOR



Thanks to Robert Michael Pyle, I learned a few years ago about a new way of taking stock. Pyle, a naturalist who

lives in America's rural Northwest, mentions it in *Sky Time in Gray's River*, a 2007 memoir about, as he puts it in his subtitle, "living for keeps in a forgotten place."

As Pyle tells readers, some villages in England "still adhere to the ancient practice of 'walking the bounds,' whereby the people, on the first day of the year, saunter all the way around the parish boundary, usually a distance of a few miles, checking walls and fences and noting what's going on as a fresh year gets underway."

In seeing a place so intimately, the locals get a clear sense of what remains good and true, what has fallen into disrepair and needs attention. Pyle has tried to adapt the ritual for his own part of the world, although he hasn't made it a strict New Year's habit.

I smiled when I first read about walking the bounds, charmed by what

*Sometimes, stewardship for the world around you is best done on foot.*

sounded like yet another quaint British tradition. What came to mind felt conjured from a Jane Austen novel, its characters and traditions often compelling precisely because they feel so distant from our own. While I enjoyed learning about walking the bounds, I didn't see how it might apply to my city neighborhood. I'd driven the streets in and around my house for three decades, presumably knowing them well.

But life changed for me in 2020 when I switched jobs and began reporting to an office just a few blocks from home. The distance was short enough to walk when the weather was good, so I started commuting on foot.

Seeing my home turf as a pedestrian has been an eye-opener. I now talk to neighbors who, in my previous life of commuting by car, were just friendly faces spotted through a windshield. On foot, I realized that a corner sidewalk was too overgrown with wild shrubbery to offer safe passage. It had probably been a mess for years, though a problem not evident to me at cruising speed. I noticed, too, a distressing amount of litter in what was supposed to be a great neighborhood.

Since then, I've joined with others to successfully petition the city to clear the sidewalk. I've also teamed up with neighbors to pick up litter, and we're exploring other ideas to keep things clean.

I've gotten a much better sense of where I live – both its perils and possibilities – by seeing it on foot. Walking the bounds, it turns out, remains an idea with legs.

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**DANNY HEITMAN** (Southeastern Louisiana University) is editor of *Forum*. He frequently writes about literature and culture for other national publications, including *The Wall Street Journal* and *Humanities* magazine.