



◂THINKING OUT LOUD
The walker-philosophers assemble in the Golden Lion, where community philosopher Graeme Tiffany starts asking some big questions.

SOLVITUR AMBULANDO*

(*It is solved by walking)

Why does walking make us happy? *Country Walking* joined a philosophical meander through the North York Moors to find out...

WORDS: NICK HALLISSEY PHOTOS: RICHARD FAULKS

"IF WE GO OFF track, I'll be giving you a bit of a clip," says the philosopher.

"Like steps or housebricks, every idea has to connect to the one that came before. It's a dialogue. Not a chat."

As a bit of a waffler, I'm suddenly a little scared. I quite like tangents, on a walk and in a conversation. Thankfully the rest of the group – all nine philosopher-walkers, readying themselves on a misty morning in Osmotherley – seem to be delighted by this focus on rigour and precision. That, after all, is why they are here.

Graeme Tiffany is a 'community philosopher'. Formerly a youth and community worker in inner-city areas, he now uses philosophy as a tool to help people tackle a huge range of complex social and personal issues. He talks to people young and old, and those who work with them, such as social workers and housing officers. And also, thanks to his passion for the outdoors, to walkers.

Walking and philosophy have been linked ever since Socrates wandered the streets of Athens. A few years back, Yorkshire-based walking guide Mark Reid thought about that link and invited Graeme to lead a philosophical hike at a walking festival. It was so successful that the pair have run them ever since. Mark brings the real-world knowledge – wildlife, navigation, woodlore, history, culture – while Graeme is there to exercise the group's collective mind. And it works beautifully.

"A walk is a journey, and so is a philosophical dialogue," Graeme tells the group.

"In fact there was a whole school of philosophy – Guy Debord and the situationists – who believed the environment, and ourselves, could be better understood through the *dérive*: the unplanned journey. Their thoughts would be drawn by the terrain of a random walk and the encounters they had on it. And that's what we're up to. Although thanks to Mark, this one is actually planned."

Mark's plan today is to head out into Oak Dale, on the fringe of the Cleveland Hills. But first, we have coffee in the cosy confines of the Golden Lion Inn, on Osmotherley's pretty market square, where Graeme introduces himself and asks the group what they are looking for from the day. ▶

▸LOGIC AND LORE
Walking guide Mark Reid (left) talks of route-finding and wildlife, while Graeme (right) leads the mental gymnastics.

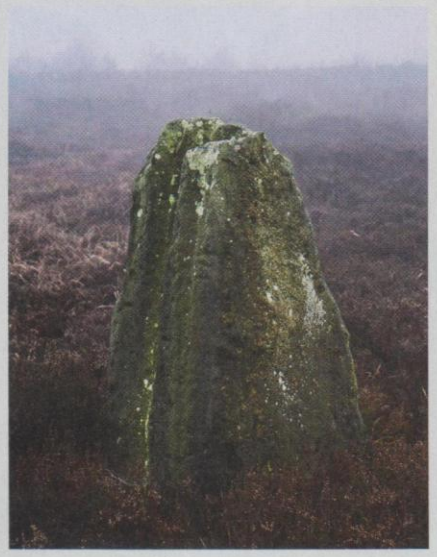


"Philosophy tries to answer the kind of questions that **science can't help** us with. They may have **no definitive answers.** But there are poor answers, good answers and **better answers.**"

GRAEME TIFFANY







▲ TAKING A MOMENT
Pausing to get close to nature – in this case, some dewy sphagnum moss – helps to clear the clutter and focus the group's mind.

◀ MENHIR OF MYSTERY
One of the Ninestones, a remote stone circle which became the group's objective, physically and intellectually.



FORENSIC DETAIL
As a philosopher focuses on the details of an argument, so a walking guide finds joy in the tiny things of the earth.

The answers are myriad. Sid wants to "not walk in a tunnel", and get better at appreciating his surroundings. Psychotherapist Claire would like to conduct some of her therapy sessions in the outdoors but wants to conquer her fear of getting lost first. John wants to "accept things less" and ask why people believe the things they believe. Peter just wants to get away from "the noise and the clutter", and Mark talks about walking as an "escape" from everyday life.

And then comes our first debate. George – a teenager who has come along with mum Kay – says 'escape' is the wrong word.

"I like family walks because they get me away from college life, but I like that life too," he says.

"I don't want to 'escape' from it. But maybe just a bit of distance. Separation."

Graeme is delighted by this. "The definition of words is vital. In essence that is what philosophers do: argue about the meaning of words and the values they represent."

> **"The great thing about walking is that, unlike most other things these days, you can't pay someone to do it for you."**
>
> FRÉDÉRIC GROS, *A PHILOSOPHY OF WALKING*

Graeme aims to use the walk to generate questions, and eventually find one that we all want to tackle together. When we get back to the pub, we'll drill deep into it, in a bid to find an answer we are all reasonably happy with – if that is possible.

With the conversation already flowing, we're off. Down into the woody ravine of Middlestye Bank we go, where Mark pauses to talk about ancientness. He points out dog's mercury, golden saxifrage and wood sorrel, all of which are good indicators that the woodland we are in is truly ancient and unsullied. The interplay of knowledge and evidence, says Graeme: that's philosophy too.

Quieting the conversations for a moment, Mark invites the group to stand still and close their eyes, and describe everything they can hear, taste and smell. The stream. The breeze. Mist on the tongue. The wet scent of sphagnum moss. It's the kind of in-the-moment focus that Graeme believes will unlock the questions in people's minds.

As we head up into Oak Dale, it's Graeme's turn to pause the group. This time he hands around cue cards on which we are each to write an 'easy' question and a 'hard' question. It's not an easy thing to do, off the cuff.

"People often tell me they have no idea where to start," says Graeme.

"And I say, well, if you have *half* an idea, you can bet someone else will help you develop it."

So we pair up, move around, and exchange questions. There are some real doozies: is 'news' a product we are sold rather than actual truth? What does it mean to be happy? Why do we fear getting lost? It might have been a struggle at first, but soon the conversations are getting intense and profound. Graeme circulates, acting as the 'gadfly' – disrupting any cosiness and urging us to consider the opposite of any conclusion we might have reached.

"Retain your independence of thought," he advises. "Be wary of moving to consensus too quickly. When you stop questioning or criticising, that's when to worry."

He's a hard taskmaster, but he's just using a technique developed in ancient Athens some 2400 years ago, and he does it with such gentle-voiced charm that you can't take umbrage at it.

Climbing steadily, we reach the intriguingly named Square Corner on Thimbleby Moor. Here Mark mentions a stone circle – the Ninestones – which lurks way off the beaten track in the wilds of the moor. He didn't expect this, but our group of wandering thinkers is tremendously excited by the idea of finding the Ninestones; they are intrepid in both thought and ambition. So he amends the plan and we head out across the squelchy terrain. He's delighted, as it's an opportunity to talk about his favourite subject: navigation.

"Knowing a bit about map reading will unlock so many interesting sights like this," he enthuses. "We'll use a feature on the map – this stone wall – as a handrail to get us as close as possible, then a bit of dead reckoning to branch off and find the stones."

It might be a digression, but it's one that Graeme loves: changing plans, embracing the risk of getting lost. From his sheaf of useful quotes he finds one from fellrunner, philosopher and former Chumbawamba guitarist Boff Whalley: "Getting lost doesn't make you a loser. It reinforces the reason why you go outdoors. It's about demonstrating that we have the capacity to change our plans, try new routes, see what's over there, explore, take a chance."

Thankfully, Mark doesn't get us lost. Eventually the stones loom out of the mist. And they become a peculiar crucible for philosophical thinking.

WALK AND TALK
"Community philosophy holds that we think better together," says Graeme. "And when we are moving."



SOCRATES THE COUNTRY WALKER

Socrates *(470BC-399BC)* was a walker and a talker, but he never wrote anything down as he felt "the truth should never be frozen". Instead we get his wisdom from his disciple Plato, who wrote down the thoughts of Socrates in a series of around 30 'dialogues'.

"All of the dialogues take place in the city – except one," says Graeme.

"Socrates said landscapes and trees and open country had nothing to teach him; he could only learn from people in the city.

"But one day he meets Phaedrus, who likes the countryside and insists they go walking together. They paddle in a stream, sit in the shade of a tree, and ponder the nature of love, art and madness. And guess what? Socrates loves it. He tells Phaedrus: 'You seem to have discovered a drug for getting me out of the city.'

"So if you're a walker with an interest in philosophy, Plato's *Phaedrus* is a very good place to start."







▲ WHAT'S ON YOUR MIND?

Above and left: The 'easy and hard' question challenge. 'Is there such a thing as bad weather?' asks one card.

▶ A THOREAU INVESTIGATION

Philosophers from Henry David Thoreau to Frédéric Gros have coupled walking with deep thinking. Now it's our turn, on a wet hillside in Yorkshire.

"Has coming here made us *happy*?" Graeme asks.

Yes, the group concurs. Why? Because it was a surprise, says someone. A connection to our ancient past, says someone else. It was a challenge and we've overcome it, says another.

"So do we think the people who built this were happy?"

"They built this to *make* themselves happy."

"How would it do that?"

"Maybe it was a religious thing: to pray to their gods and become happier that way."

"Or it was about finding the solstice, and planning when to plant their crops so they could survive and thrive. Which would make them happy."

"Or just to understand how the sun moved. To become more learned."

To become more learned. That, in a nutshell, Graeme says, is why we all came out here. And it's the primary aim of philosophy.

It's food for thought that keeps us going all the way back to the pub, where Graeme asks us to choose a question we can really go at.

We agree on it pretty quickly: *"Why does the outdoors make us happy?"*

The theories fly. We crave a simpler life. We want to touch our ancestry. We think being healthier is a good thing. It gives us more control over our minds and bodies than daily life usually allows us. It's an act of rebellion: we are not in a town or city where society expects us to be, consuming things and 'being digital'.

"So our theory is the outdoors makes us happy because it is often a contrast from something," says Graeme. "It's the very contrast that makes us strive for something new. Is that right?"

Yes, the group agrees. At which point, Graeme asks: "Now, why might that theory be wrong? Problematise it. What's bad about being outdoors?"



'An unbelievably good day!'

We asked one of the walkers – 55-year-old Sid Bell from Harrogate – to sum the day up...

"For me, walking is moving meditation, and going from meditation to philosophy seems a pretty natural leap, so I was really interested to come along. I want to think more deeply about things, train my mind to ask questions. And nothing makes me think like being on a walk.

"It has been an unbelievably good day. What I've enjoyed is everyone's input. They all bring in opinions from their own realities, and it's fascinating to hear all those opinions coming together and different theories forming out of them."

Our thoughts turn to people who spend all their lives outdoors, but for whom it may not be such a dreamy paradise. Graeme points out that many farmers endure a very difficult life out on these hills; social isolation and even suicide are not uncommon in the industry.

Then there's the point that a city environment has much that can make us just as happy: art, music, cinema, culture.

But Mark counters: "I love all those things, but they can't immerse me the way walking can. In a theatre I'm a spectator. On a walk, I'm totally immersed. It's my thing, not someone else's."

Graeme cites Henry David Thoreau, who said that walking teaches us how to distinguish between *profit* and *benefit*. Walking produces nothing saleable, nothing that someone can pay for. In economic terms it is time wasted. But the benefit to the walker's own self is immense.

"Nature lavishes all its colours on me," says Thoreau. "In the end, walking has been more beneficial for being less profitable."

At this point someone suggests that walking is *slow-release happiness*. In a world of instant gratification, walking is a pleasure-delayer. You're always making for something: that distant stile, those woods, that summit, that stone circle, the pub. The cycle of anticipation and reward is continuously turning. And Graeme likes this.

"It sounds like we have a working theory," he says.

"But it depends what kind of philosopher you are. Pure philosophy says that if you dig deep enough, you will get to an eternal, unchanging truth.

"But then there's the field of hermeneutics, which says the truth can change from day to day, on the basis of new experiences. So remember that, and *always* keep asking questions. Because the truth could be different tomorrow." CW



Plan your trip

WALK HERE
To follow in the philosophers' footsteps from Osmotherley, see **Walk 17** in this issue.

WHERE TO EAT/STAY
The **Golden Lion** in Osmotherley (01609 883526, *www.goldenlionosmotherley.co.uk*) is loved by Alistair Sawday's guides and has mains such as calves' liver with crispy onions, mash and red cabbage for around £16. Double rooms with breakfast from £95.

MORE INFORMATION
Mark and Graeme will be running another philosophy walk on Monday 17th September in Hawes as part of the **Yorkshire Dales Cheese Festival**. Find out more at *bit.ly/thinkwalk*. For a full list of Mark's **Walking Weekenders** (which include themed walks and navigation coaching) visit *www.walkingweekenders.co.uk*. And for more on Graeme's community philosophy work, visit *www.graemetiffany.co.uk*

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BIG CONVERSATION
Debates and drinks in the pub after the walk, as we pair up to decide which big question we want to tackle.

IN SEARCH OF TRUTH
Okay so there wasn't a gorgeous view, but the inner journey was beautiful.