

# Walking Around K-Mart

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“I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.” —Henry David Thoreau

While living at Walden Pond, Thoreau took his laundry home to his mother. That’s hardly news, but it can be a reason for dismissing him as a hypocrite. His woods weren’t even close to being a wilderness—a Boston commuter train ran nearby and the land he built his cabin on was owned by Ralph Waldo Emerson. In fact, the odds of *any* of us spending significant time in a true wilderness is highly unlikely. Civilization has encroached on damn near everything. But that doesn’t mean there is no value on the margins.

The cul-de-sac where I live backs up on a tributary to Catfish Creek. As the Mississippi River, three-plus miles away, punctuated its erosion with occasional glacial meltwater for 500,000 years, Catfish Creek and the other tributaries incised their channels that—like the crow’s feet around my eyes—show the landscape’s age, having never been smoothed by the glaciers that botoxed the rest of Iowa. Fortunately, many of the steep slopes around here have remained undeveloped, their tree-lined buffers easy to spot on an aerial photo. But if I stand on my back deck and look closely through the trees, I can spot manhole covers, and I know that my waste flows downhill through pipes near the streambeds to the city’s treatment plant located by the Mississippi River at a spot once occupied by Meskwaki Native Americans.

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Last night it snowed, and my dog, Harold, nose-plows through the underlying grass and unraked

fall leaves, sniffing and prancing like a colt, the snow bringing out his inner puppy while leaving a white dusting above his graying whiskers. I put his leash on him and head up the driveway toward the sidewalk along Highway 20 that leads to the abandoned K-Mart.

As we approach the relatively new Harbor Freight Tools that anchors the northeast corner of the shopping center, I spy a red-tailed hawk standing sentinel on the building's corner, watching for mice and chipmunks in the grassy cover of a downward-sloping bank of fill. From the bottom of the drainage ditch, an old cottonwood reaches up a dead limb that I have often spotted this hawk on. A turn past Harbor Freight, a stroll past the appliance center, and the back of K-Mart opens to near wilderness—wild turkeys whose tracks in the snow are the size of my hands, overabundant but well-fed squirrels, an occasional skunk, finches flitting among powerlines, seagulls soaring toward lunch at the landfill, crows scouting from light poles, and a strangely located apple tree whose lower limbs have been browsed free of leaves by the numerous deer who use the nearby stream bottoms as superhighways for traversing the city.

Harold and I have made this loop daily for most of our years together, only missing the days when I am out of town or when the ice is too thick. We are known to the baristas at the nearby Starbucks where we often stop, Harold looking in through the glass door as I order a medium dark roast, room for cream, and by Clyde, the eighty-year-old handyman for the shopping center who changes the outdoor pots and decorations with the seasons. He drives a Jeep with a Tweety-Bird seat cover and often stops to chat about the weather or neighbors or, rarely, his ailing wife.

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When my older daughter, Ananda, is home from college, she and I often walk with Harold together. During her most recent spring break, Ananda and I had barely exited the door when

something dropped nearby. We walked into our neighbor's yard to look beneath a tall oak tree. In the grass lay a spine the bright red color of fresh blood attached to the untouched hind legs of a rabbit. Looking up, we spotted our neighborhood hawk. It should eat more squirrel.

Ananda and I love mornings, something neither my wife nor younger daughter, Tess, care for. Ananda wants to be a psychologist. My morning walks with her and Harold improve my mental health. I'm connected to something deeper than mere genetics.

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On good days, my first cup of coffee rests by my recliner as I journal and occasionally look through the front window at the birdfeeder I built from tongue-and-groove cedar and a pressure-treated four-by-four post. Beneath the roof are mounted two suet feeders wired shut so squirrels can't open them. Depending on the season, cardinals and blue jays, downy and red-bellied woodpeckers, mourning doves, sparrows, nuthatches, titmice, chickadees, and robins flit in and out. The robins are the worst bullies, actively chasing the smaller birds away, but the blue jays are a close second. I've also come into the living room at night to see a large raccoon eating seed and once saw a deer standing on its hind legs to snack from the feeder. That same deer washed down its snack with a sweet sip from the hummingbird feeder hanging nearby in a peach tree.

But on a bad day, I get sucked down the rabbit hole of news, like the day Trump spoke of raking the forest, a supposed fire suppression tip from the leader of Finland. But only Trump had ever heard of it, and the Finns promptly made fun of Trump's "forest raking." Even the Germans got in on the fun, showing pictures of their Roombas cleaning the forest floor. Later, a more serious article analyzed the explosive development of the Chinese economy unaccompanied by an increase in democracy. And in no time, much time has passed with little to show for it. Time for my walk around K-Mart.

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K-Mart was the first big-box store in the area, built in 1962. The empty structure shows its age. No retention basin catches the runoff from its huge parking lot, where tons of salt are dumped each winter and piles of snow fifteen feet high are still melting in spring after most of the ground is barren. The cement-block building shows its multiple uses—a Little Caesars sign is still discernible through a recent coat of paint, and an entrance to an auto shop, once part of K-Mart, then a Penske's Automotive, is now home to a camper pulled up to escape bad weather, with folding chairs set out under the dripping overhang. Around back, an old grease container stands near a cardboard compactor left over from the days when Martha Stewart housewares kept K-Mart from collapse for a few years.

Walmart, a major cause for K-Mart's demise, almost purchased land across the highway. Fortunately, the owner of the land, the university where I now work, decided to hang on to it despite being in almost desperate financial condition. The university rebounded, and student housing now stands on that land. Walmart built farther out, part of the city's great migration west that left carcasses of old buildings to be demolished or repurposed, just as K-Mart once left behind dead downtown businesses to wash up by the river.

But new businesses are moving in. If Harold and I begin our morning walk around eight a.m., the traffic at the northwest corner of the shopping center is stalled by the backed-up drive-through lines at Dunkin' Donuts and Starbucks. On these mornings, Harold and I keep walking as we dodge the occasional car that dashes by on the wrong side of the road and turns into the parking lot, its driver impatient for a caffeine and sugar fix.

But it's easy for me to be judgmental on days my fires have been stoked by the news. I recently saw a lady leaning on her car beside Dunkin' Donuts while smoking a cigarette. She

looked more than a little bedraggled. Trump would have called her a loser. But I was no better. Not many days before, I had met two people dumpster diving behind Suntan City. Losers! But my own family is littered with such people, some mentally ill; some addicted to drugs, alcohol, or gambling; and some just struggling to get by in a world that has changed without their input, approval, or consent. They are living on the margins of their own wilderness.

Walking southwest along the strip mall across from Jumpers, a bar with outside seating that has a view of the parking lot, I pass the Riverview Center. I tend to mock places with names that don't fit, but perhaps it's my own view that's too limited. My tendency is to live in the words, not the deeds, a noetic disorder that separates me from appreciating generous acts and unassuming people. I may have no clue what it means to rehabilitate a vocation, but the Vocational Rehabilitation Center's goal of helping people with disabilities to get jobs is worthy of my support. And the Riverview Center, begun in Galena, Illinois, helps sexual-assault victims that a nurse in the Galena sheriff's office believed were falling through the cracks of the system. Though I don't know for sure why they chose the name Riverview, the title shows an expansiveness and a love for those on the margins that put my petty thoughts to shame.