

Movement of Faith

For centuries, people all over the world – from Buddhists to Native Americans to Christian monks – have combined walking with prayer. Now, women across America are blending exercise and spirituality in a new kind of movement, and it's catching on.

Health, September 2001

by Ann Japenga

JANET HOLM MCHENRY AWAKENS BEFORE DAWN in a little Sierra Nevada mountain town.

Her husband will soon be up loading hay and repairing fences. Her kids, Bethany and Joshua, cling to the final hours of sleep before school. Outside, frost frocks the windshields of pickups and logging trucks.

A pesky thought-you should get up and exercise-jostles McHenry further awake. But the cocoon of covers tugs the 50-year-old high school English teacher back toward sleep. As every would-be exerciser knows, in a contest between a workout and sleep, sleep almost always wins.

But wait, here come some more thoughts: What about Donna Carey"- and her deteriorating eyesight? Will the mill closure hurt my friends at the Golden West restaurant? And what about those guys who've planed boards their whole lives and are out of jobs now that the mill has shut down?

A list of names grows before McHenry in the dark, each with a set of needs, fears, and hopes attached. Each asks for McHenry's attention, so she creeps downstairs in the sleeping house. Pulling on fleece tights, a hooded jacket, and walking shoes, she slips out the front door.

Under the stars, McHenry is a dark, determined shape striding down Main Street. If you could glimpse the woman under the hood, you'd note her fine honey hair and her sideways smile, as if she's privy to a pleasing secret. She keeps up a brisk pace, past purring Smithneck Creek, past the post office and the library. At this hour, she is seemingly the only person alive in this village of just over 1,000 residents. Loyalton, California, is the kind of place where people don't just leave their cars unlocked; they leave their keys in the ignition.

As McHenry finds her rhythm, her head starts turning this way and that. Her gaze fixes on a locked-up storefront. "Father, I ask your blessing on this store," she says without breaking stride. She pictures her friends Richard and Liz Stern; "I ask that you bless their business and them personally. Richard and Liz's sons, Parker and Drew" and ... no, Parker and his little brother, whose name will come to me. I just ask that you bless their studies at school."

One by one, McHenry asks God to bless the cabinet store, the hardware store, the pharmacy, and the old hotel. As she nears the opposite end of town, the sun is just beginning to glaze bulky Elephant Head peak. McHenry is fully awake now and toasty from exertion.

A logging truck rumbles by, and McHenry requests a blessing for the driver. For years, she's watched the trucks tote logs into the mill. Now that the mill has closed, trucks are for the first time hauling logs away to be planed elsewhere. They're hauling away security, too: Loyalton's hospital, schools, and each business and family relied in some way on the mill.

Heading back on her lap of Main, McHenry reflects on the Loyalburger stand and the kids who hang out there. "Keep them positive, Lord." Each time she says "Lord," McHenry catches her breath, like a singer inhaling on "babe." She is breathing harder now, pumping her arms as she asks blessings for a newborn baby or two and a merchant who is recovering from cancer.

McHenry marches down a dark alley along Smithneck Creek, then stalks through the crunchy frozen grass behind the eerily vacant elementary school. Once, she might have been afraid to be out here in the near-darkness, but fear is something she no longer has time for. Her walks have become too important to her. Even when she came across fresh mountain lion tracks in the snow outside her house one morning, she kept right on walking and praying.

A rooster crows. The first tuft of wood smoke leaks into the sky. Two sisters cross paths with McHenry, nod hello, and keep walking. The sisters used to think McHenry was unfriendly because she never paused to chat. But recently word got around town that the English teacher has published a book called *PrayerWalk: Becoming a Woman of*

Prayer, Strength, and Discipline (WaterBrook, 2001). Now everyone in Loyalton knows why Janet McHenry can't be interrupted in the morning: She's praying for them.

Walking and praying might not seem connected at first glance, but as long as humans have existed, people across all cultures have found ways to combine the two. Hundreds of years ago, the Huichol Indians of western Mexico set out on 30-day walks to pray to the maize gods. For hundreds of years, monastics and contemplatives around the world have strolled through cloisters while reciting psalms.

And the traditional practice of mindful walking in Buddhism—which has been around since at least 500 B.C.—is enjoying a revival thanks in part to the teachings of Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh, author of *Peace Is Every Step* (Bantam Books, 1992) and dozens of other books on spirituality.

“There's a long history of people integrating walking with their faith,” says Carolyn Kortge, a walking teacher and author of *The Spirited Walker* (Harper San Francisco, 1998). “When you move the body, you move the spirit.”

When McHenry concocted the idea of walking while she prayed, she hadn't considered all that. And she didn't realize that her discovery was being duplicated in homes across America as busy women cast about for a way to exercise their faith and their bodies simultaneously.

Only recently has the impulse to walk and pray coalesced in a spontaneous, leaderless movement called prayer walking. The majority of practitioners are women, and most are Christians. In pockets of activity nationwide and in England, South America, India, and other locales, women of all ages are marrying their daily power walks with attention to their higher powers. Prayer walking is one of those rare instances in which multitasking actually enhances both activities. McHenry calls it “a twofer deal.”

There are no official figures on the size of the movement, but prayer walking promoter Steve Hawthorne says he has counted hundreds of independent start-ups and has talked to prayer walkers in every state. The movement has spawned a small industry of trainers, books, and workout tapes—there's even a mapping service that plots ZIP codes for ambitious large-scale walks.

Several times—most recently in September of last year—prayer walkers blessed every household in San Francisco; another team covered 800 miles from London to Berlin. Usually, prayer walks are not so big and organized. Most walkers travel through their towns either alone or in groups of two or three. They talk over situations they encounter along the way (“This house is missing a lot of shingles. I wonder what these people are going through?”) and seek insight into their neighbors' lives and needs. Walkers may pray aloud or silently; in either case they intentionally keep a low profile—no theatrical preaching or choreographed gestures.

What most distinguishes the recent prayer walking movement is where all this prayer is being directed. It's about praying for others, which is known as intercessory prayer. The practice has been in the news of late: Some controversial studies suggest medical patients who are prayed for may experience less pain and recover more quickly, and such mainstream research centers as Duke University and Temple University continue to investigate it. Like other dedicated prayer walkers, McHenry is so busy thinking about her neighbors that she sometimes has to remind herself to pray for her own family: husband Craig—a lanky attorney-turned-farmer—and their four children, two of whom are grown.

“Prayer walking is as basic as caring for others,” explains Hawthorne, who wrote *Prayer-Walking: Praying On-Site With Insight* (Creation House, 1993). “When we notice the lives of other people, it helps us break through our self-absorbed shells and frees us from isolation.” That's what June Varnum says happens when she walks, often with McHenry, through the streets of Loyalton. “Prayer walking is good for me because I'm not focusing on myself,” says the 76-year-old Varnum. “I'm not thinking about how broad a stride I have or how much I swing my arms.”

This ability to take walkers outside themselves so they can connect with others is one quality that makes prayer walking such a potent prescription for well-being. Studies have shown that social connection can be an effective buffer against illness and premature death.

That's not all. “Prayer walking is a great idea because it accomplishes a lot of things at once,” says Harold G. Koenig, M.D., associate professor of medicine at Duke University Medical Center and author of *The Healing Power of Faith* (Simon and Schuster, 2001). “It provides a very important part of health maintenance—exercise—at the same time it enhances socialization, increases spirituality, and allows people to be of service to others.” All these factors are known to have health benefits, says Koenig. For example, his new *Handbook of Religion and Health* (Oxford University Press, 2001) lists 800 studies showing that religious faith is related to improved physical and mental health.

While no studies have looked specifically at the benefits of prayer walking, almost every practitioner can tell you a story about how the habit made her feel better. Varnum's insomnia eased when she started prayer walking regularly with McHenry. Susan Wales, who lives in Los Angeles, lost 20 pounds while prayer walking on the beaches with friends. "It's a great shot of positive medicine," says the 50-year-old.

As for McHenry, she was tired all the time before she took up prayer walking. She never seemed to catch up with grading essays or folding the laundry. Excess weight and inactivity had caught up with her: Her back ached and her right knee buckled when she went down stairs. Then there was the depression that had dogged her for much of her adult life. She tried dieting, swimming laps, and participating in aerobics and weight-lifting classes. She tried Saint-John's wort. Her blues would lift for a while; she'd lose a few pounds. But the weight and the depression always came back.

A lifelong Christian, McHenry figured it would help if she devoted some time each day to her spirituality. There was never any time, of course, so she hit on the idea of propping her Bible on her NordicTrack. But McHenry wasn't motivated to keep "prayer skiing" -perhaps because she was still focusing exclusively on her own concerns.

She did start walking, however, and one morning passed a day-care center just as a young father was dropping off his sleeping daughter. McHenry suddenly was inspired to pray for that father and for all the parents who had to leave their children behind when they went to work. From there, it was natural to move on to saying blessings for the kids. And the day-care staff.

She began lifting her eyes from the sidewalk and noticing what was going on along her walking route. The mill was still operating at the time, and the cars shuttling back and forth on the highway nearby made McHenry ponder the lives of the mill workers. Their needs began to keep her company on her walks. Until now, she'd quit every exercise routine she'd started. But something was different this time. Her prayer list kept growing, and soon McHenry was walking an hour or more five days a week. She beat a lifelong struggle with depression and lost 20 pounds. She calls prayer walking "cheap therapy."

One morning, several months after McHenry hit on the idea of aerobic praying, her son Joshua (now 15) wandered into the kitchen and asked accusingly, "What are you doing, Mom?" McHenry explained she was making peanut butter sandwiches, as she did every morning. "No, Mom," Joshua said. "You were singing." He walked away, shaking his head at the change in his formerly depressed mother.

By the time the light is full on Elephant Head, McHenry is off to work and Main Street is beginning to stir. It's another uncertain day in Loyalton, but you wouldn't know it by the bright demeanor of the merchants. At White's Sierra Station, Kelly White cheerfully takes a telephone order for tires. The pink-cheeked redhead at the gas station is as worried as anyone about the mill closing, she says, but she goes about her work with added confidence knowing that her business has been blessed before the doors opened.

Over at Buck's TV and Appliances, owner Jan Buck is well informed about the town's woes-she's also the editor of the local paper. But she, too, finds McHenry's morning routine reassuring. "I love the fact that Janet takes the time to go by my store every day to pray for my business," she says.

Beverly Wilson, a 36-year-old mother of four running errands on Main Street, likes the idea that McHenry prays for her kids. "It's an extra comfort to know there's someone who cares-and not just about her own family," she says.

It may be a testament to McHenry's likeability, or it may have something to do with all the recent media attention on prayer-but nobody seems to mind being blessed. Once word got out about McHenry's morning routine, more and more people, including non-Christians, requested special prayers. It got so McHenry was scribbling names on her palm, a habit she borrowed from her high school students.

In the end, proving the effects of McHenry's prayer walking isn't even the issue. One woman who is not a Christian says she welcomed McHenry's prayers when her parents were ill. "You can call what she does praying or whatever, but she's basically thinking good thoughts for people. Here in Loyalton, she's not going to get much resistance to that."