

A Walk in the Park

A meditation on the therapy of parks and the river BY JIM EARL

James Earl lives in Eugene and is a professor emeritus of English at UO. Previous essays by him can be found by searching for his name at eugeneweekly.com. Valley River Inn will host an exhibit of 26 of his riverbank photos in its lobby starting April 10.

Walking

I decided to walk to the Oregon Coast from my house downtown, out past Fern Ridge, up to Triangle Lake, down through Deadwood and Mapleton, and out to the beach south of Florence — 72 miles. Walking it would be a definitive act, yes! But this tired old body would have to walk 24 miles a day for three days. My wife, Louise, suggested I might want to get my legs in shape, so I started walking a 5-mile loop on the Riverbank Path. In a few weeks I got my time down from 95 minutes to 70, but then I stopped.

Months later, one day in February, I just got up out of my reading chair, where I more or less live, and went back to the park. This time I took a camera, and instead of trying to walk faster I decided to walk longer. In a few weeks I extended my loop from 5 to 7 miles, then 9, 11, and finally 12 and a half at a leisurely 3 mph; the first time I walked all 12 and a half miles it took 4 hours, 10 minutes. Oddly, I'd never walk it that fast again.

This 12-and-a-half-mile circuit meanders right through the middle of Eugene, from the Knickerbocker Footbridge on the east edge of town, by I-5 and Glenwood, to the Owosso Footbridge in the northwest, by Beltline and Santa Clara. All that way and back again on the other bank, and you never cross a city street. You pass three other footbridges, too — Autzen, DeFazio and Greenway — for a variety of big river vistas. It's an extraordinary city park, but most Eugeneans take it for granted.

After that first 12-and-a-half-mile walk, I bought some real walking shoes, but they made my feet hurt, so I had to slow down. At 2 mph they were OK, but, I wondered, what's the point of just dawdling on the bike path? At this speed I'm only an old guy hanging out in the park — and 12 and a half miles would take six and a half hours. The slower I walked, however, the more I saw, and the more pictures I took. At 2 mph the landscape began to brighten and come alive, and about half way around the circuit, suddenly everything but everything became beautiful. Of course: It was spring. I said to myself, out loud, "That's great! I don't have to walk to the Coast."

Parks

That's my kind of walking — aesthetic, meditative. But Eugeneans want to know, "*Why go to the park*, when there's real wilderness nearby?" The answer is, "*Because it's a park*." A city park isn't wilderness; it's a big garden. Parks are planned, planted, landscaped, mowed and managed; they have reasons for being, and their own aesthetics. They're a form of art.

The American city park was invented by Frederick Law Olmsted in the mid-19th century. He adapted it from the English city park, which was modeled on country parks of English lords. When Romantics like Wordsworth started raving about Nature, parks everywhere became less formal, made over as picturesque recreations of a lost pastoral world. Why a pastoral landscape in the middle of a modern city like London or New York? Because in the age of Dickens, cities weren't beautiful, healthful or relaxing; rather, factories, poverty, crowding, violence,

disease, filth and noise were everywhere. City parks were developed to cure the urban fantods. In Olmsted's America the city park was both democratic and therapeutic:

It is one great purpose of the park to supply to the hundreds of thousands of tired workers, who have no opportunity to spend their summers in the country, a specimen of God's handiwork that shall be to them, inexpensively, what a month of two in the White Mountains or the Adirondacks is, at great cost, to those in easier circumstances.

It is a scientific fact that the occasional contemplation of natural scenes of an impressive character is favorable to the health and vigor of men. The want of such occasional recreation results in a class of disorders the characteristic quality of which is mental disability, sometimes taking the severe forms of softening of the brain, paralysis, palsy, monomania or insanity, but more frequently of mental and nervous excitability, moroseness, melancholy or irascibility, incapacitating the subject for the proper exercise of the intellectual and moral forces.

So that's why I go to the park! The Riverbank Park is Eugene's Central Park, its Romantic, Olmsted-ian park. It's there to provide relief from the insanity of modern life. Olmsted called the city park a "pleasure ground," but it's really a form of *therapy*.

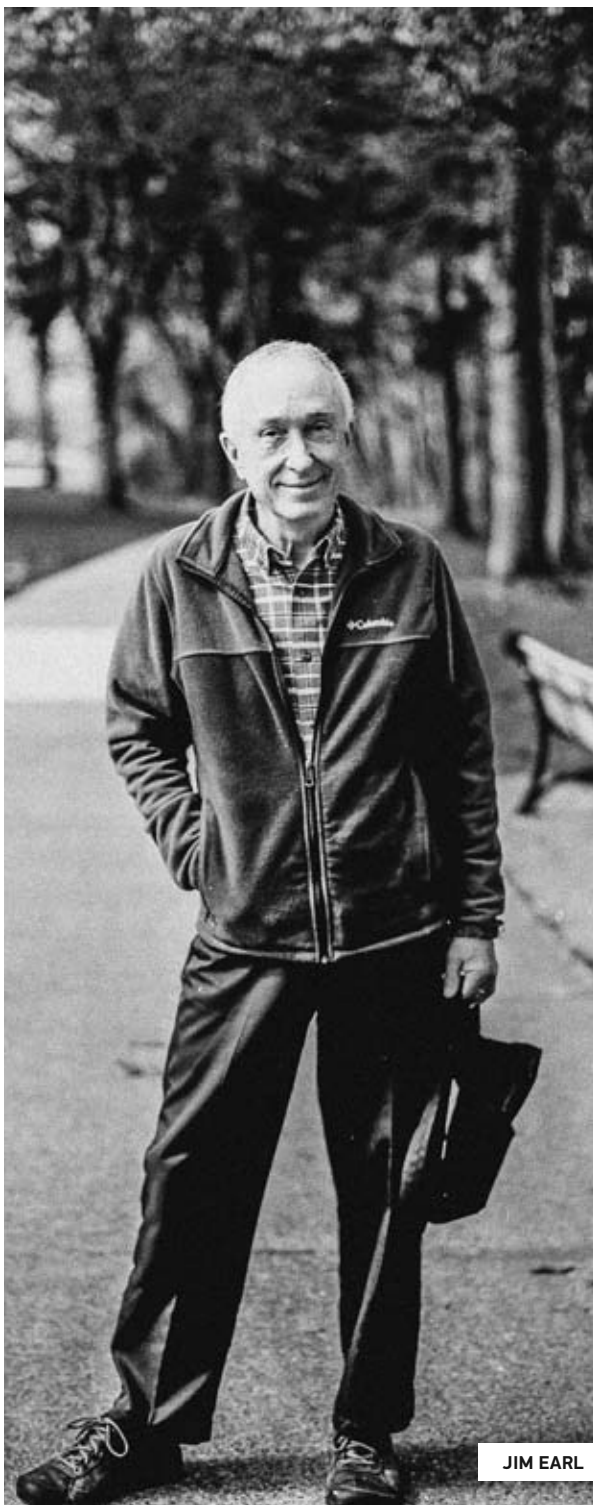
The River

I want a park where, as Norman Maclean says, "All things merge into one, and a river runs through it." He learned that fishing, I learned it walking. As I walk, all kinds of things pass by on my one hand: lawns, trees, playgrounds, picnic areas, gardens, grasslands, wetlands, woods — i.e., parkland; but also EWEB, the UO, a railroad, two restaurants, a stretch of highway, a shopping center, housing and a school — disappointing at first, but it's OK if the pastoral illusion is broken here and there, because on your other hand there's always the river — *and the river never disappoints*.

One of the first things a river teaches you is that it's always there: "Old man river, he must know something but he don't say nothing, he just keeps rolling along." But the river *does* say something. Maclean says, "A river has so many things to say that it is hard to know what it says to each of us."

And let me add, it may say something different each time you visit. Sometimes it's the river of time, or history, or life, sometimes it's Being and Becoming, or the Tao, or the stream of consciousness. It's one river when you think about it, another when you look at it, another when you take off your shoes and step in it — and there's no better place than a river to learn that you can't step in it twice.

The first time I left the bike path to explore the walking trails (and why did that take so long?) I stumbled onto an idyllic spot that only a few people seem to know about, a kind of grotto almost, with overhanging trees and a long flat rock extending out into the river. I walked out on the rock and took in the vistas and the sound of the rapids. The river seemed to say, "What are you waiting for, stupid?" so I took off my shoes and put my feet in. In front of me was an arrangement of large rocks, so beautifully arranged you'd think a Zen garden had been flown in from Japan and reassembled there. I jumped from rock to rock, took a photo, eventually got back on my walk, but could hardly wait to return. The next day I went back, and it was gone. *What?* I searched up and down the river, checking the photo. I met a guy named Bob who walks his dog there every day. He said, "Did you notice the river rose almost a



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