

Two Flames, One Light

Walking Up Arthur's Seat: The Journey to the Peak of a Life Well-Led

by Phil Liebman

The pain from the plantar fasciitis that erupted at what I thought was the most inopportune time turns out to be just another piece of sensory input penetrating and weaving through my thoughts as I hike up Arthur's Seat in Edinburgh. It slows me down a bit and alters the way my mind's eye is framing the path in front of me. It made me realize that my experience is always more shaped by the things I cannot control than by the aspects I do. I choose to make use of the benefit that the slower pace affords me, rather than allowing this to be a painful distraction. The slower pace provides texture to the mosaic of sensory experiences the morning walk offers— as I weave the sheer beauty of my surroundings with the richness of the dialogue I had engaged in over the previous three days.

My mind remained stimulated from the inspiring conversations I had at the Scottish National Portrait Gallery and later at the Scottish Poetry Library. The thoughts, insights, and wisdom shared by this richly diverse group of people from around the world—who were the reason I traveled here—helped me connect my footsteps to the path behind me, reaching back more than 20 years to when this part of my journey started. As the sharp pain in the heel of my foot fades into a dull ache, I realize that the wisdom developed over time is actually forming beneath our feet.

This was the second-to-last day of our trip, and our walk had been planned for the first day after we arrived. Lynn finds purpose and comfort in a carefully and tightly planned itinerary, and I have come to realize that this is part of my purpose for being with her. But, as the saying goes, no battle plan ever survives contact with the enemy, so we abandoned our original plans for the first day. After a fiasco with the car rental agency that cost us more than two hours we hadn't expected, we settled for some local Scottish comfort food and caught up on much-needed sleep.

I love the explanation of how giant redwood trees explain my marriage and many things I have observed about life in general. Redwoods stay upright for more than two thousand years despite having very shallow roots, and the groves of aspen trees in Colorado depend on the interconnectedness of their root systems - and could not survive on their own.

Lynn finds comfort in her need to plan, down to the details she considers necessary, which is similar to the satisfaction I get from fumbling my way through the unknown. I force myself to soften my resistance to sharing her process, and by adding that layer of complexity, I find I also share her satisfaction in a well-made, even if ill-fated plan. She also softens her resistance to stumbling into the future beyond our plans and finds similar satisfaction in the unexpected things we discover.

It takes a long walk and space for me to understand that we share the same needs and beliefs about what is important in life. We simply have different strategies for getting there—and that can easily be obscured when I find myself losing my grip on my creative resourcefulness, becoming reactive, stuck in knowing mode, and trying to control rather than influence.

Recognizing and addressing this behavior is a key part of my professional work, so I clearly see this pattern in others. Still, it doesn't prevent me from falling into the same pattern myself. Lynn makes me see this because she pushes me to see her when she doesn't like what she notices in me. I believe this is how being tangled together by our roots works. It's not the gentle, loving support found in romantic affection; it's the binding and twisting of holding on in the face of a violent force that aims to knock you over - or tear you from the earth. Love is holding on fiercely for dear life when you're on the precipice of being unmoored.

It takes just under an hour to reach the summit of Arthur's Seat, an extinct ancient volcano, where you are rewarded with breathtaking panoramic views of Edinburgh, the Firth of Forth, and the Kingdom of Fife in the distance, along with everything in between. Now, all the places we've visited are laid out before us, and the experience brings together the pieces we've collected during our wanderings into a more complete picture of places, space, and time. From this height, the world feels vast - and small at the same time, and I feel humbled as I see myself as a tiny piece of an enormous puzzle.

On the distant horizon, three bridges, built side by side—each a remarkable feat of engineering—span the firth, representing three centuries of construction, serving as a testament to the ongoing influence of the Enlightenment that began in Scotland in the mid-18th century. Nearby, the steeples of the centuries-old kirks (churches) and Edinburgh Castle, along with many easily recognizable landmarks, complete the view.

Our view combines the constant preservation and celebration of history that runs through modern Edinburgh like a tartan. The rare beauty of the city and the captivating scenery of the Scottish Highlands made me reflect, for the first time in a long while, on how what I surround myself with is just as important to my experience of the world as the people I am with.

I easily directed my gaze and located the Holyrood Distillery, named after the park that surrounds Arthur's Seat, where we had visited earlier in the week. Whisky is just one of many intoxicants we encountered in and around the city. The term whisky is an 18th-century derivative of the Scottish Gaelic “usqui bae,” meaning “water of life.” Like beer, distilled spirits were far safer to drink than the contaminated waters available in overpopulated cities like Edinburgh - so the term may be more literal than linking the intoxication from whisky to the intoxication from nature, raw lust, or the passions of our love interests. Whisky is something of a religion, a refuge, and clearly, an art form.

Their whisky is still too young for regulatory and marketing purposes to be released, so while it is aging, they have focused on crafting artisanal gins with unusual ingredients like beeswax to create what foodies call “mouthfeel” - which, in its subtlety, is as alluring as it sounds — and salt that highlights the juniper botanical notes, as our guide points out — who seems drunk (he is not) from his theatrics and emphasis on how he combines his love of gin with his Scottish culture and heritage. It makes me want to get drunk with him - which is exactly the point of the tour. Dutifully, a bottle was carefully packed to be brought home protected by the dirty laundry in my luggage.

There is something ironic and poetic about the containment of that bottle for its safe journey across the ocean. I had crossed that ocean for a gathering we call The Guardians of the Flame. We are a close-knit group of loosely connected individuals united by our shared dedication and

passion for the work we do. We are kindred spirits, many of whom have come together annually for the past twenty years in Boulder, Colorado, for what we call Keepers of the Flame.

When we are gathered, it sometimes feels as if we're airing out our laundry. We openly discuss topics we rarely talk about even with our spouses and partners. Buoyed by the safety of being with experienced listeners whose judgments are always fair, I am not only free from burdens but also feel supported, motivated, and inspired to share my thoughts in ways that few people, except for a few of my college professors I befriended, have.

This group is different. Whatever I take away from our time and conversations is entirely up to me. There is no agenda or acknowledgment of any individual achievements. What we are there together to accomplish is unique to each of us - and the collective takeaway is that when we strive to be better human beings, we become better at leading our lives and guiding others. The purpose of learning is not in accumulating knowledge, but in understanding that we are responsible for gaining what we need to become as fully competent as possible - and that we improve by helping others do the same.

We are a modern salon reminiscent of the gatherings that fostered the thinking and art that propelled the world into modernity. We immerse ourselves in this experience to improve our professional work. We don't discuss the work directly. Instead, we explore our thoughts about what matters most to us through thoughtful, lively conversation. I have been doing this work for over twenty years—and attending gatherings like this for half that time. It always surprises me how purposeful dialogue aimed at understanding how others think and perceive the world helps me better understand myself—and my relationship to the challenges I face regularly.

Edinburgh is the birthplace of the Scottish Enlightenment, where David Hume and Adam Smith, among many other notable thinkers, challenged the traditional ideas that had calcified in Europe under the influence of the Church and the complicated history of often-feuding monarchies. It made me realize that evolution and revolution are, in fact, the result of our thinking and subsequent actions. It also showed me how the arts nurture curiosity that inspires the kinds of thinking that move the world forward.

Our group spent one of our two days in the Scottish National Portrait Gallery, watched over by the eyes of David Hume, Walter Scott, David Burns – along with Robert Louis Stevenson – whose essays inspire my own reflections on the world through my writing. I am fortunate to have the resources to choose my environment, including the ability to travel freely. But I have also come to realize that what we make of our environment is a matter of choice. The things that surround us may influence who we are, but that influence is the meaning we create – and that resource is a matter of free will– regardless of where our lives find us.

On the second day, we gathered at the Scottish Poetry Library, where the works of great Scottish poets, such as Robert Burns and Walter Scott, are housed alongside thousands of assembled works by lesser-known and contemporary poets from Scotland and around the world, to be shared with everyone.

We reflected on how others perceive us through our thoughts and expression, much like the great portraits we observed the day before. “How might we want to be seen?” or remembered. It raises questions about how we see ourselves, how others view us, and how a talented painter or poet might depict us through their art.

With my gin and a bottle of Highland whisky safely in tow in the luggage hold of the plane headed back to JFK Airport, I felt inspired to leave this note:

To my dear friends—old and new—in my reflection, this remarkable experience can perhaps best be described in terms of what Lynn and I learned about fine single malt whisky: The oak containment influences the color and flavor—what we perceive with our senses; time is then crucial as the wort settles and ages to perfection. Like the aging of a fine whisky, the time spent in our two carefully curated vessels, so carefully and perfectly crafted, produced two wonderfully intoxicating concoctions. But it is—and always has been—the quality of the ingredients that matters most: the quantity, just right; the quality controlled by careful selection and perfectly balanced to leave no doubt that this isn't just a premium blend— but a true classic destined to be long remembered and revered. Cheers!! And bottom up!

Since returning home, I have been reflecting on how I've come to understand that leadership isn't just about what we do — it's about who we are. Our thoughts not only shape our actions but also build the credibility that fuels our influence. Like a poet or artist, we can cause people to pause, reflect, and think. That's the difference between seeking to influence and desiring to control. Having influenced the world for the better is the foundation of a life well-lived.

The value of our lives isn't measured by what we accumulate. It's about what we contribute to the world around us and ultimately leave behind through our influence. It's that influence which makes us valuable to others and helps them develop the worth of their contributions to the world. That's why a life well-lived truly comes down to living a life well-led.