

The Walking Man

In silence and on foot, John Francis has worked to change the world

When John Francis turned on the radio one chill January morning in 1971, he got the wake-up call of his life. At the time, though, he wasn't aware of its import. All he knew was that two tankers had smashed into each other

near the Golden Gate Bridge, spilling more than 800,000 gallons of oil into the sea, and he felt sick about it.

Francis and his girlfriend drove a few minutes from their home, about 40 miles northwest of San Francisco, and watched residents wade into the black muck to save what they could. Mostly these efforts failed: More than 6,000 seabirds were killed by the spill. Businesses like Toby's Feed Barn, still an institution in the nearby town of Point Reyes Station where Francis lives, donated hay by the truckload to build a barrier that prevented the oil from glooping into Bolinas Bay.

Francis kept his distance while he watched the frenzied rescue work. "People were out on the beach trying to help," he remembers. "I felt guilty, but I didn't want to do that. I wanted to do something, but I wasn't sure what." He had been living what a friend has described as a "hippieish Marin County lifestyle." A college dropout, Francis was managing a band and enjoying a kind of bucolic bubble world free of racial strife, war protests, and ecological disasters. But now he started wondering about his role in a society powered by fossil fuels.

One day a few months later, Francis decided to walk the 20 miles to a dance rather than drive. He walked home. His



Inspired by John Muir as well as Mahatma Gandhi, Francis has folded respect for human rights into his environmental ethic. Environmentalism is "about how we walk in the world."

behavior puzzled his friends. Without fanfare or much thought, foot travel became his sole mode of transportation. When motorists passed him on the road and offered rides, Francis declined, which often antagonized his would-be benefactors. "They're figuring that my choice is making them look bad," he says.

"I actually thought that if I did this, people would jump

out of their cars in droves and walk with me,” says Francis, now 60, shaking his head at his naïveté. When he got tired of arguing about his decision, he stopped talking—a one-day vow he made on his 27th birthday that stretched to 17 years. His car abstention lasted for more than two decades.

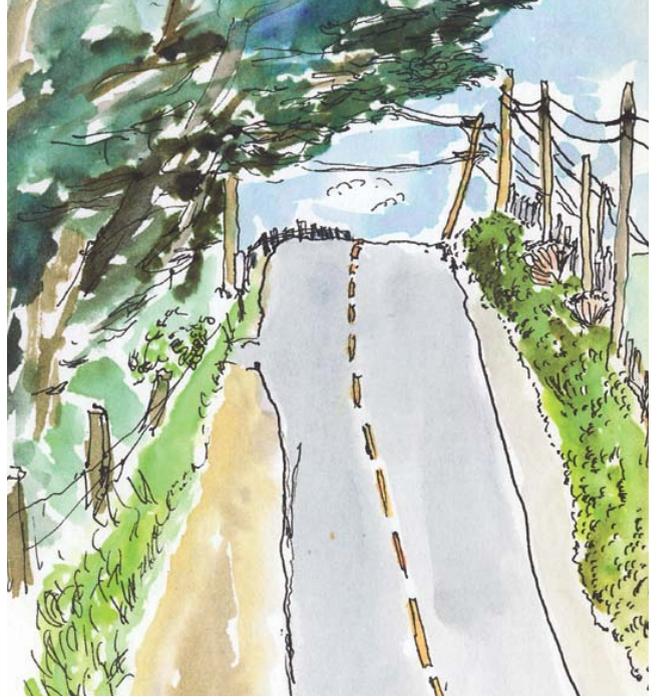
We are sitting at a picnic table outside Toby’s Feed Barn, where Francis’s brand-new red Prius is parked in front. He’s been driving since 1995. Below his cap, short salt-and-pepper dreadlocks protrude. Every few minutes, residents of Point Reyes stroll by and greet him or tell him they’ve just finished his book, *Planetwalker: How to Change Your World One Step at a Time* (Elephant Mountain Press). “I basically *am* the African American culture here,” he jokes. In the 1970s, he was its eccentric, silent, and peripatetic son, who then quit his tolerant community and embarked on a cross-country pilgrimage with only a pack and a banjo on his back and a letter that read, in part: “This is to introduce John Francis, who left his home in California on January 1, 1983, on a pilgrimage to raise environmental consciousness and promote earth stewardship and world peace.”

Along the way—on foot and in silence—Francis earned his undergraduate degree, a master’s, a PhD, and the respect of government officials and the oil industry, not to mention the esteem of many of those he encountered on his circuitous route across the United States. His odyssey took him full circle, from coast to coast and back to the town he loves. And what an exceptional journey it was.

By Francis’s own account, as a young man he was an opinionated big mouth who cocked his ear toward others just long enough to determine he was wasting his time. “I had stopped listening, which is the end of communication,” he says. “When I stopped speaking, I had time to reflect. The silence created a space for me to learn how to listen—not only to another person but to the environment around me and the voice within.” Because Francis no longer traveled in cars, he had a lot of time on his hands for contemplation: A trip to San Francisco, which required several days rather than an hour, was undertaken only rarely.

One foray Francis did make was to the College of Environmental Design in Berkeley, across the bay from San Francisco. His friend and neighbor, environmental architect Sim Van der Ryn, was teaching a class on ecological design and low-energy lifestyles and had asked Francis to “speak” to his class, meaning pantomime and perform. The walk took six days, partly because Francis was temporarily turned away at the Carquinez Bridge north of Berkeley. “They accused him of being a ‘nonmotorized unit,’ which was prohibited on the bridge, and it took a lot of negotiating to get him across,” Van der Ryn says.

Paradoxically, when Francis stopped going so many places, the world opened up. He began making a daily pen-and-ink drawing or watercolor of his surroundings, seeing things he’d never truly considered before: the sunrise re-



Silence helped Francis focus keenly on the world he inhabited. Above, a scene he painted near his Northern California home.

flected on Tomales Bay, the faces of his neighbors, even bamboo. “It’s not that I hadn’t noticed it growing,” Francis writes in *Planetwalker*. “It’s just that I hadn’t noticed it enough to give it meaning. It makes me wonder how much of life goes by me that way.” He also found himself becoming less and less judgmental—partly, he now says, because his community was so supportive of him.

“Maybe it was the times—we met in 1971—but I didn’t think he was strange at all,” Van der Ryn says. “He was simply taking civic initiative; he was practicing citizenship.” To this day, the architect says, Francis has been unable or unwilling to intellectualize his decision to start walking and stop talking. “It was just a passion that overtook him.”

Francis’s first extended foray beyond Point Reyes was a 45-day, 500-mile walk north along the Pacific Coast, into Oregon’s Kalmiopsis Wilderness, playing his banjo for tips and depending on the kindness of strangers. He had read John Muir and was moved by the Sierra Club founder’s “lightness in wandering”—his ability to disappear into the woods for weeks, carrying little more than a blanket and a canteen. While in the wild, Francis devoured works by Henry David Thoreau,

John Burroughs, and Ivan Illich.

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The elements became proximate in the forest. Weather dictated Francis’s movements. Temperatures dropped, storms swooped in; rain and thunder deafened him. In his tent, he listened and absorbed this new world. He bathed in the cold and rushing streams, cooked over an open fire. “The wilderness got inside me,” he says. It also reoriented his goals. When Francis emerged from the experience after months of solitude—drawing, writing, reading, and reflecting—he was determined to go back to school to formally study the environment.

The road was not always welcoming—like when two men pulled up beside Francis on his walk back to California. “Boy,



A banjo, a tent, some provisions, and a spare set of clothes were all Francis needed on his environmental odyssey across the northern United States.

are you lost or something?” one asked. Not speaking, Francis shook his head and tried to keep going. That’s when one of the men aimed a .44 revolver at his head and told him that they didn’t like “niggers.” Francis faced the man. The man pulled the trigger. Francis remembers having a crazy reaction: “Damn,” he thought. “I didn’t make a painting today!” There was no bullet in the chamber, and when that fact settled in, he used his fingers to make the universal sign of walking and motioned his intention to the men. Then he made the “OK” sign with his thumb and index finger and turned his back.

His parents, living in Philadelphia where Francis had been born and raised, agonized over their son. His father was sensitive to how a young black man might be viewed with derision—as a clown. “I was miming and acting things out. I had a banjo. He really worried about this, as well as that someone would hurt me,” Francis says. “He always wanted me to change; he always questioned what I was doing, told me to start talking and riding in cars.” Both parents kept close track of their son, however, and his father in particular—a lineman for the Philadelphia Electric Company—would visit Francis on his exploits whenever he could.

When Francis headed north again, it was through the sweltering summer

heat of the Sacramento Valley, to Ashland, Oregon. He toured the campus of Southern Oregon State College, imagining how pleasant it would be to go to school there. Francis had not spoken in six years. He dropped in at the registrar’s office with some of the news clips that had been written about him and scribbled notes of explanation in response to the perplexed staff’s queries. He applied and was accepted.

Two years later, Francis received a general studies degree in science and mathematics, with a concentration in biology and a minor in creative writing, all while maintaining his vow of silence. His father, who never went to college, attended the graduation but still thought his son was a little lost and crazy.

Next Francis applied to the University of Montana’s graduate environmental studies program, was accepted, and then deferred to continue on his zigzaggy way. He completed boat-building school in the San Francisco Bay Area, and on New Year’s Day 1983, after saying goodbye to friends in Point Reyes, Francis headed out again—on what he calls his “pilgrimage.” “I didn’t have an agenda or a route. I was on a sacred journey, something from which I was looking for meaning.”

Francis walked to Washington State and constructed a seaworthy dory—the

accomplishment of a childhood dream. (He calls the process of building a boat an “almost perfect metaphor for life: You dream where it can take you, but the reality is that getting there is a lot of hard work.”) When his mother visited, she sat on the porch reading Bible verses as Francis hammered and planed. He named his oar-powered boat *Twana* and studied the currents. He then set off from Port Townsend, navigating the treacherous Strait of Juan de Fuca in Puget Sound, and landed on Whidbey Island.

From Washington, Francis aimed east, toward Missoula, Montana, and graduate school. Reporters wrote stories. Curious boys pedaled next to him on their bikes, peppering him with questions to which he pantomimed responses. Strangers tracked his progress in the local papers and left water for him along hot, dry stretches of road. A cowboy who’d read an article about Francis drove around until he found him. “There had just been that bombing in Beirut, and a lot of our military guys had been killed,” remembers Francis. “This cowboy really needed to talk to someone about it, and for some reason, he felt he could talk to me.”

Rodeo champions, grandmas, farmers, and Vietnam vets read Francis’s introductory slip of paper and then took him into their homes and told him secrets. They shared their own views on environmental and other issues. He listened, then kept on walking.

When Francis finally settled into the University of Montana’s graduate program, he enjoyed its multidisciplinary approach, making connections. He now says that environmental problems “are a manifestation of our relationship with each other, how we live. Sure, the environmental crisis is about pollution, endangered species, human-made ugliness, loss of habitat. But it also reflects a crisis of mind and spirit. Environmentalism is also about human and civil rights. It’s about how we walk in the world.” (Francis refers to himself as an environmental practitioner rather than an environmentalist—because the former, to him, is less sclerotic and self-righteous. “I don’t necessarily know

the truth. I'm just practicing as much as I know. I worry that as environmentalists we get entrenched in our positions and stop questioning.")

Francis's mother, a teacher to whom his memoir is dedicated, could not take time away to attend his graduation, but his father came—taking the opportunity to both celebrate Francis's achievement and question his approach. How are you going to get a job with your fancy master's degree if you don't talk or ride in cars, he wondered. "That was his mantra," says Francis of his father. "I knew he loved me, but he always questioned me. He also always showed up."

One time, the elder Francis visited his son in Madison, Wisconsin—where in the late '80s Francis was ensconced in a doctoral program at the Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies (IES). His academic advisor was Barbara Borns, who is now on the board of directors of Francis's nonprofit, Planetwalk. "When I got his application, I remember thinking, 'Oh brother. What are we going to do with this kooky guy?'" Borns says. But he had a stellar academic record and had even won an award for distinguished teaching. "Even without talking, John was very communicative—with his eyes and hands and written notes. It's strange to say, but he was really easy to talk to. He was being a witness to what he believed important and made a great contribution to the program," she says.

After course work in remote sensing, policy analysis, political theory, and environmental economics, Francis focused his research on the costs and legal conventions of managing oil spills from ships. Though it was an oil spill that had ignited his pilgrimage, Francis says that with the 1989 Exxon *Valdez* disaster, his research took on a whole new dimension. In his memoir, he writes: "When reporters call IES to speak to 'an expert' about the environmental catastrophe in Alaska, they learn about my research and that I will not answer the phone." His advisor fielded calls so he could continue his work uninterrupted.

Francis finished his course work, filled his backpack and shouldered his

banjo, and hit the road heading east again, toward his parents' home. He arrived on their doorstep in time for Thanksgiving.

On January 2, 1990, seven years and a day after leaving Point Reyes, Francis touched the Atlantic at the New Jersey shore, near where he holed up to write his thesis.

Every February on his birthday—the day he first took his vow—Francis made a point of asking himself whether silence was still appropriate. "In 1990, I reflected that I had walked across America and worked on a PhD, and I realized that the environment had been redefined for me, and I was ready to speak about that." On Earth Day, in Washington, D.C., in front of his parents and a few others who had gathered for the event, he started talking again. The next day, in a bizarre twist of fate, he was hit by a car as he crossed the street. He refused the ambulance and walked 15 blocks to the hospital.

In 1991, Francis defended his dissertation, speaking to committee members who had never heard his voice. Then he got a call from the U.S. Coast Guard.

The Oil Pollution Act of 1990 had been passed by Congress, but the actual regulations still needed to be written. Officials at Coast Guard headquarters in D.C. wanted Francis to come to Washington right away to begin the work. He was in Vermont and told them he didn't drive or fly, or even travel by train. They still wanted him. He rode his bike.

"The first thing my new boss said to me when I arrived was that if I had any crazy ideas about how they could do things better, I should speak my mind," Francis says. "Then I asked why they hired a guy who doesn't ride in cars and didn't talk for 17 years. He just laughed and said that the last time he checked, they weren't giving away PhDs."

Oil companies, whose vessels needed to be inspected, didn't much like the fact that the person doing the inspection refused on principle to travel in motorized vehicles and would have to ride his bike to the port—sometimes days away. "I'd sit on these tankers with

the oil company reps and tell them that I thought each of us has a responsibility [for oil spills]," says Francis, "so we shouldn't start throwing stones and saying it's only the oil companies' fault. After we talked, and I didn't seem like a nut or someone who wanted to blow up their tanker, that I would listen to them and I wanted to learn, we always developed a good relationship."

We are now sitting in Francis's home office in Point Reyes, where he pulls the hardbound copy of the 1990 Oil Pollution Act, replete with regulations, off the shelf. On the wall is a commendation for notable service from the Coast Guard. There is also his PhD certificate; photos of his wedding to Martha Smith, whom he met the day he first arrived in D.C.; and drawings by their five-year-old son, Sam. Francis's car is in the driveway; it was a gift from a Hollywood producer who was moved by his life story. (Universal Studios has optioned his book.) Before leaving, I ask if I can hear him play banjo. He begins a song he composed and performed often on his pilgrimage across America. "Life Celebration" exudes a kind of bounce and goodwill; it also sounds like a traveling song.

"When I began, I wondered if I could make a difference. I'm just this guy with a banjo walking around," Francis says. "I'll always be on this kind of journey. I see it as my life's work." He still walks every year, a few hundred miles, spreading his singular message and making friends. This summer, he'll join folks from Native American cultures on a 2,000-mile canoeing, walking, and running trek through Alaska, listening as indigenous people along the way discuss how climate change is affecting them. Francis, the former big mouth who spent so many years in silence, says: "We want to hear from people who don't have a voice." ■

MARILYN BERLIN SNELL is the senior writer for Sierra.

► **ON THE WEB** For more information on John Francis and his nonprofit, visit planetwalk.org.