

TRANSCRIPT

Spirituality & Health Podcast

Annabel Streets

Rabbi Rami: From *Spirituality and Health Magazine*, I'm Rabbi Rami, and this is the *Spirituality and Health Podcast*. Our guest today Annabel Streets is a writer of highly researched and award-winning fiction as well as the author of narrative and practical nonfiction. Under the pseudonym of Annabel Abb, she is the author of *Windswept: Walking the Paths of Trailblazing Women* came out in 2021. It's a nonfiction feminist meditation on the power of walking in the lives of several extraordinary women including Georgia O'Keeffe, Simone de Beauvoir, and Frieda Lawrence.

A little later in this podcast, we're going to talk about another amazing woman who wandered in Tibet that we don't really hear about much anymore. We're going to ask her to tell us about her. Writing as Annabel Streets, her newest book is *52 Ways to Walk*. Annabel Streets welcome to the *Spirituality and Health Podcast*.

Annabel Streets: Thank you so much for having me.

Rabbi Rami: I'm really looking forward to this because I love to walk and the book was a joy.

Annabel: Oh, thank you.

Rabbi Rami: This conversation will be the same I am sure. As I was reading *52 Ways to Walk* I was struck by this thought. I usually don't ask you to explain myself to myself, but I'm going to try. This thought struck me that, because I am an avid walker, I walk for the romance of walking. That idea popped into my head, I was reading your book, and then I said, "What the hell does that mean?" I don't know. [laughs] I thought I'd start out by asking you since your book triggered the thought about the romance of walking if you think of walking that way and what the romance of walking might be.

Annabel: Well, I do absolutely think of walking in that way because walking is just so many things. There's something intimate about walking, there's something very adventurous about walking. I think romance as a word works on so many different levels, doesn't it? I think when you talk about the romance of walking, you're partly talking about the way in which walking opens you up to the world. The way in which it enables you to have chance encounters with everything from people, to landscapes, to plants, to buildings.

I think when you talk about the romance of walking, you're talking about that love affair with walking, love affair with what walking brings. With how walking makes you feel because again walking works at so many different levels. Our bodies like to walk and we were designed. This is the odd thing, isn't it really? We were designed not to sit in a car at a wheel. Every bit of our body was built to move, to walk, and not really to run or jump. A little bit of that maybe but mainly to walk if you think of our origins as nomads.

We're designed to walk but walking also works on our brain too, works on our mood. It changes how we feel, our brain literally rewires itself when we walk. There's something very powerful that happens to every little bit of our body and mind and brain when we walk.

Rabbi Rami: This doesn't require a day-long trek? This can happen in you talk about very, very short walks. This transformation, physiological, psychological, and I would even say spiritual. You just said that we're made for walking, biologically that's what it's all about. If you look at-- well, I'm going to stick to the religion I know best which is my own Judaism, walking is central to Judaism. It was part of the DNA of who the early Jews were. The first commandment that God gives to Abraham who becomes the founder, Abraham, and Sarah, the founding parents of Judaism.

The first commandment that God commands them is to walk. It's in Genesis 12 the first verse. God says, "Walk. Leave your home, leave your parents, leave your country, and go to a place," God doesn't even tell them where they're going. "Just go to a place and I'll show you when you get there." Judaism is founded on walking, the Jewish legal system is called Halacha, it means the way we walk.

Annabel: Oh yes.

Rabbi Rami: When you look at Jesus who's a Jew and growing up in that environment, Jesus is always walking. Like you said-

Annabel: Always walking.

Rabbi Rami: -He can't get on a bike and He doesn't have a car, but He could get on an oxcart or something but He's always walking. When He needs spiritual sustenance, He leaves the path and walks out into the wilderness. As Westerners, walking is in our DNA and yet-- then you can look at the Hajj, the pilgrimage walking in Islam. It's this deeply Western thing then we're going to get to an Eastern aspect in a second. If that's true, how did we lose our love of walking?

Annabel: Oh, that's such a good question. The other thing is that the love of walking has been lost in such a short period of time. Well, my parents didn't drive. Even 40 years ago, it wasn't normal. Certainly over in Europe, it's slightly different in America I think. 40 years ago, it wasn't normal for everyone to have one car and now everyone has two cars. It's all happened in a very short period of time. I come from a deeply Catholic one line of my family, my ancestors very, very Catholic going back generations and generations.

The pilgrimage, going on a pilgrimage was just a really important part of their faith. Of course, pilgrimage as you just pointed out, it's just about walking. I think because I grew up with no drivers in my family, and we walked everywhere, I perhaps have a slight headstart in that walking is just in my DNA. Anyway, I didn't have any choice. Now, I cannot believe it. In fact one of the reasons I wrote this book was because I was really getting very distressed at the number of people who I would say, "Let's go for a walk," and they would say, "Oh, can't it's raining,"

Or, "Oh, it's a bit cold," or every reason under the sun. I thought this is just crazy because, in the past, we all walked all the time whatever the weather, whatever the

time of day. In light, in dark, uphill, downhill. I think that we're losing that bit of us. Although I think during the pandemic, I don't know about you but certainly over here there's been a huge surge in walking and people are rediscovering it and also reclaiming it.

Rabbi Rami: Yes, I think that's probably true here also. I lived in Los Angeles, this was years ago, a long time ago, and for just a couple of years. One of the things that struck me moving from Miami, Florida which is a very outside walking kind of place in a sense, I guess. To LA my office was two blocks from the supermarket where they had this wonderful lunch counter. I would walk to lunch and people would say, "You're walking? Why don't you just take the car?" It was two blocks but the thought of someone walking those two blocks was because, "Oh, that's too much." It was just mind-blowing to them.

Annabel: Yes. It's a mystery to me but it's quite common I think. [chuckles]

Rabbi Rami: Yes.

Annabel: They think, "Why walk when you can be driven or you can drive?"

Rabbi Rami: Yes, there's something about, we're going to lose our legs, we're all just going to get atrophies and just have wheels instead of limbs. We mentioned the Jewish-Christian-Muslim connection to walking. Just a few days ago, Thich Nhat Hanh passed away. He's one of the great temporaries and Buddhist teachers. Central to his spiritual practice is walking. He's got a number of books on walking. I pulled those books off the shelf and started to take a look at them, especially one called *The Long Road Turns to Joy*.

I want to just quote you something from what he writes in that book. He says, "When you take a step, you can touch the earth in such a way that you establish yourself in the present moment. You arrive at the here and the now. You don't need to make any effort at all. Suddenly, you're free from all projects, all worries, and all expectations. You are fully present, fully alive, and you're touching the earth." I thought, "Boy, that's right in line with what you're saying also."

Annabel: Yes, that's a wonderful quote.

Rabbi Rami: What do you think about the notion of he says, "You don't need to make any effort at all"? Do you get a sense that walking-- and you have a whole chapter in your book on slow walking. What's the relationship either to not doing it because it's too much effort like it's raining or it's cold? Or the gift of walking because it is effortless in the sense that we were born, we've been bred for hundreds of thousands of years to walk? Talk about the effortlessness of it.

Annabel: It is absolutely effortless, assuming that you are able-bodied. Literally that that feeling of joy when you just can just walk out of your door, all you need is your door key to get back in. You don't need anything else. In fact, I always think a walk is best if you leave everything behind, certainly leave your phone behind. There's something very liberating about having so little with you. Whereas if you go off in a car, you've got the whole car and you have to find somewhere to park the car and you lumbered really, but walking is completely liberating.

You don't need anything, you don't even need to know where you're going. You can just set off, you can go wherever you'd like. Certainly again in Europe, whenever I've been in the States, I have found walking a little bit more challenging. Over here we have an incredible network of footpaths, public access across all this private land which I think is quite different in the States. I can literally walk out of my front door and I can just walk and walk and walk and walk through fields and forests and on and on and on.

Just to know that you can do that and that that landscape is there for you, I just find that incredibly liberating. Also, it feels it's such a privilege, isn't it, to know that you can do that.

Rabbi Rami: Well, it's a privilege to know that you have that kind of access. I live about a mile from, it's called the Greenway. It's forest and a fairly large, they call it a river, but maybe it's just a large stream. I walk out of the little town I live in into, can't say the wilderness because it's an organized thing, but yes, you get to get away from all of it. On the other hand, since we are talking to you from London and you're talking about all these footpaths that are part of the English countryside, I watch a lot of British TV, all the British mysteries.

Annabel: Do you?

Rabbi Rami: Yes. As I'm watching these things, those footpaths, that's where all the murders happen.

[laughter]

Wait a minute, I'm not walking over there. That's where all these people are being killed.

Annabel: Oh, yes. I have to say that's just the television. Yes.

Rabbi Rami: I know. I just had to bring that up. Anyone else is addicted to BritBox which is all the British shows on my cable system here.

Annabel: It's not really like that here.

[laughter]

Rabbi Rami: Let's talk about walking with dogs because I do a lot of my walking, in fact today, my dog is at the vet so I noticed I didn't get up. I took her for a walk this morning, but usually, by now, we would've had one or two additional walks and then a long 90-minute walk in the afternoon. Again, you have a whole chapter on walking with dogs in particular. Talk to us about that.

Annabel: Well, I had a black Labrador for about 14 and a half years. She died two years ago.

Rabbi Rami: Sorry.

Annabel: Well, you know what it's like as a dog owner. I think being a dog owner is fantastic because you have to go out whatever the weather. Whether you feel like it

or not. You have to walk the dog. It's such a wonderful thing to walk a dog because even if you start off thinking, "Oh, I don't really want to go for a walk," the dog rushes off with such joy and abandon that instantly you think, "Oh gosh, this is marvelous. This is a wonderful walk." They are the best walking companion. In my personal view, nothing beats walking with a dog.

There's some really interesting research actually that showed that the dogs who walked rigorously had much closer bonds with their owners. There's something very, very bonding, isn't there, when you walk with a dog. The relationship changes when you're out walking with them. They're not just your sofa cuddle bug, they are your companion. They're your friend. They're your equal. In fact, quite often, I don't know about your dog, but my dog would lead me. She would go ahead, she would choose the path and I would follow.

It was a complete reversal of our usual roles. It was a very important part of my relationship with my dog with these twice thrice-daily walks. Infact, when she died, I was completely at loss. First of all I had to walk. I thought I'd get up early and think I've got to walk. Then my husband would say, "But we haven't got a dog now." I'd say, "It doesn't matter. I have to walk." I had to walk, but I didn't have my dog with me and it was a very, very strange experience. Just relish those walks because there's nothing like a really good walk with a dog.

Rabbi Rami: Well, you're going to have to tell your husband you need to get another dog.

Annabel: Oh, yes. We've been thinking about it.

Rabbi Rami: A couple of things that you mentioned in that, or one thing you mentioned in that chapter and then something else that came to my mind while you were talking, let's take the second first. When I'm walking a dog, and you've got this experience, the dog, I always figure on the long walks in the afternoon, this is her time. Like you said, she leads, but she doesn't just keep walking. She walks and then she stops and she sniffs and she looks around. At first, "What are you doing. We're out here. You got to keep moving," but he just doesn't do that.

Then I finally switched, I've had dogs forever, but I finally switched my attitude to, "Okay, you found something interesting to sniff at. I'm not going to do what you do. What is there about this spot that I can also tune into and not just be waiting for you to just move on," because she's not doing anything, she's not going to relieve herself, she's just smelling. It's a smell walk.

Annabel: Smelling. Yes.

Rabbi Rami: I'm trying to use her as a, "Okay, let's stop and be mindful of this place," which I think leads me into something that you say in the chapter about a Swedish study. If I get it right, that if people who have-- and we're talking about dogs, I don't know if it's true., I was just talking to someone about horses and someone else about cats so I don't want to be species is to something. The Swedish study site says that having a canine friend lowers your risk of death in all the categories.

Annabel: Absolutely fascinating, isn't it? Again, I think in the pandemic here, when we weren't allowed to meet anyone, everyone went crazy for dogs. In fact, it spawned a whole line of criminal activity as dogs were being smuggled around. People were desperate to get a puppy or actually any sort of dog. It was that sense of they needed the companionship and they needed that touch, that tactile. We weren't allowed to hug anyone and particularly people who were living on their-- dogs became very, very popular. In fact, the whole of London at the moment is covered. It's full of dogs which is rather nice.

I completely lost my thread there.

Rabbi Rami: The Swedish study.

Annabel: The Swedish study, yes, that's right. Yes. Of course, loneliness is one of the big risk factors for death, with some people saying that loneliness is as dangerous for your health as smoking or a sedentary life or eating processed food. A dog is really a foil against loneliness, it's companionship. Then they bring all these other interesting little things into the home. They change you. People who have dogs have better microbiomes, they have more diverse gut flora just from sharing their lives, their homes with the dog. That also could be part of it.

Rabbi Rami: That gives me a new perspective on all the crap that he brings into the house. [laughs]

Annabel: Yes. It's all doing you good. [laughs]

Rabbi Rami: It's doing me good. I mentioned when I was doing the introduction a yearbook *Windswept: Walking the Paths of Trailblazing Women* in which you do just what it says, you explore a number of women walkers. You do the same thing in the new book, *52 Ways to Walk*. The woman I wanted you to talk to us about is a woman who was-- I've never met he obviously, you'll tell us why she's been dead quite a long time, but Alexandra David-Neel.

Annabel: Oh, yes.

Rabbi Rami: She was somebody when I was studying religion and Buddhism in particular in the '70s and '80s, she was top on everyone's reading list. Her writing about wandering around in Tibet, this was not something that women did back then. She was extraordinary. Tell us about Alexandra David-Neel.

Annabel: Well, she was absolutely extraordinary. She was originally an opera singer of all things. She luckily married a man who was A, quite wealthy and, B, very happy to let her just go off on her adventures. She struck gold really in that respect because most women would never have been allowed to go off and wander around Tibet as she was. She was obviously also brilliantly intellectual. She spoke multiple languages, she gave up being an opera singer, and then decided that Buddhism was her calling. I think fair to say she became a Buddhist, but she studied it and then she set off to Tibet and she was the first woman to go into Lhasa and into the Hidden City and she went in disguise. She had to disguise herself as a man, a peasant man. She had this wonderful guide, this young guy who took her everywhere. She walked through snow. In fact, she's one of these extraordinary women that made me rethink

walking because she writes beautifully about how wonderful it is to be totally immersed in elements that we would not want to be out in.

She loved the snow, she loved the wind, she loved the remoteness, she loved the solitude. All the things that most of us today are like, "Ooh, no, I wouldn't want to do that," she just relished it. She writes about it in such an evocative way that really you're reading her, you think, "Gosh, why do these things frighten me so much? Why do I not want to be in the cold? Why do I not want to walk in snow? Why do I not want to walk alone in the dark?" She does a lot of very dangerous walking as well.

Of course, she learns to keep herself warm through breathing, it has a name, which has gotten out my head at the moment. What is the name for-- I have to look it up in the book anyway?

Rabbi Rami: I don't remember the name, but Tibetans have this technique for certain breathing to warm the body.

Annabel: That's right, so it's a self-heat. It's a way of breathing that self heats them. There she was often very, very cold and breathing below-freezing temperatures. She was able to keep herself warm through her breathing techniques. Then of course she came back to-- She eventually settled in France and lived out the rest of her life there. She also lived to be incredibly old as a centenarian. I think she was about 102 or something when she died. These very grueling walks had in some way fostered in her not just the curiosity, but also really good health.

She's a really interesting woman and I wish I knew more about her. She's fascinating.

Rabbi Rami: Yes. Well, if Alexandra David-Neel is new to anyone who's listening to the podcast, check her out, go to a library, go to a bookstore. Preferably independent, but any bookstore and see-- Though, I doubt you're going to find an Alexandra David-Neel book anymore on the shelves of a bookstore but you will in a library certainly online. She is amazing. Her adventures are, I don't know, if I say mind-blowing, that sounds a little cliched, but really, really impactful when you read her tell her story.

Let's move beyond to Tibetan walking. [laughs] Go back to the idea of, who has time to do this. I was talking to someone about your book and the first response was, "Yes, oh sure, but who's got time for this?" I said, well, you talk about-- I'm quoting, I'm citing you. I said, "Well, Annabel talks about taking a 12-minute walk." Then their response was, "oh, well, but who has 12 minutes?"

Annabel: No.

Rabbi Rami: Yes. My sense is that time is not the real concern of most people. Something else is acting as a block because if you don't have 12 minutes, I don't know, that makes no sense to me. Something else must be doing that. We've talked around this a little bit, but do you have a sense of why people just don't want to do this?

Annabel: Well, I do actually, and it's not my own idea. There's an American evolutionary biologist who wrote a book called *Exercised* and it came out last year. He spends a lot of time living with tribes and studying them. He explains that, the human body is really, we're also designed to preserve all our energy so that should a lion chase us or should we need to go and hunt down a stag for supper, we've got those reserves. What he said was quite interesting, actually, it helped me understand why my children were like, "Oh no, no, no, I don't want to go out."

There is also this natural innate instinct in us, which is to just sit and preserve our energy in case we need it later. That would've been very useful 2000 years ago, or even 1000 years ago, or even 500 years ago. When we may well have had to run away or preserve our energy in case there was no food coming, but we don't live in a world now where we need to preserve our energy. In fact, quite the reverse there's such an abundance of everything, of food and warmth that we've moved into a situation where it's the opposite.

We actually need to force ourselves to go out and to use up all this energy that we're sitting conserving all day in front of our laptops. That helped me be a little bit more passionate to all the people that were like, "Oh, it's too cold, it's too wet, it's too dark, whatever, something better on Netflix tonight," or whatever their excuse was.

Rabbi Rami: Your bottom line is the person I was talking to who says 12 minutes, who's got 12 minutes. They're really concerned about protecting themselves in case of a saber tooth tiger attack.

Annabel: Oh. At a very, very, very deep, deeply unconscious level. In other words, that's also in our DNA, this instinct to preserve energy, to preserve our whatever little energy we have in case we need it later.

Rabbi Rami: Well, there hasn't been a saber tooth tiger attack in my town in Tennessee in, well, maybe since prehistoric times, and maybe not even then, I don't know if we had saber tooth tigers, but I get the gist of it.

Annabel: It's quite nice to have a reason because otherwise, I kept thinking, well, why is everyone so key just to sit on the sofa for hour after hour after hour.

Rabbi Rami: It's crazy. I work from home and my office has a window that looks out into this street and we have sidewalks, not everywhere has sidewalks. There are always people on the sidewalk sometimes with their dogs sometimes just by themselves, but there's like a parade of people walking by. We put what's called a little free library on our front lawn near the sidewalk that's just filled with books that people bring by. Lots of times people come by with bags and they take books out and they walk away with them or they leave books and take other books.

Also, they come by in cars, which is fine as long as they're using the library. Because this is such a walkable little town, I wanted to create a place where people could stop, so there's a bench and you can sit on the bench and look at the books that people have put in the little free library. It becomes a little-- it's not a watering hole. There's no water but it's a reading hole. Oftentimes, I'll walk outside and just talk to the people and say, "Oh what's your name? What part of the neighborhood are you from? What books do you like?"

I think that-- I don't think, I know that wouldn't happen if people weren't walking. It's a community-building thing. Imagine I'm walking by myself or with my dog, still there's other people and you do walk into them. Let me ask you, this is a off-the-wall question, and then I'll get back to the book. I took a class not too long ago an architectural class and the class was about the disappearance of a front porch. Now, this is about American rural or semi-rural architecture, residential architecture. where I live, my house is a hundred years old and it's a tiny house.

Anyway, it's got a front porch. I never grew up with a front porch. I always lived in much more modern houses and the backyard was where all the action was. This woman was giving the seminar and she said, "There was a time when people lived in the front of their houses because everybody was walking around and you would meet people. Then somehow that shifted and we started building fences around our backyards and doing backyard patio things and barbecuing in the backyard where you never meet another soul."

It just seems to me that your book is calling for kind of a revolution. There's no chapter on building a front porch, but you're calling for our revolution not just in an individual's get up, move, it's good for you emotionally, physically, spiritually, but a social revolution. Get out and discover where you live and whom you live among.

Annabel: Yes, absolutely. Please, and when you are out walking, please don't walk along looking at your phone. The other day I passed someone walking along and he was actually watching a film on his iPhone. I just felt like instead of taking it off him, although he was actually walking, so I can't complain. He wasn't in a car, but that whole thing about a community is built by people being outside and being public, and that happens when you are walking.

Our grandparents would've been walking all the time, bumping into neighbors every time they walked to church or walked to the shop or walked to the market. They would've just been passing their neighbors and people all the time. There was these constant little points of interaction which we are losing rapidly because people are now getting in their cars and just sitting in traffic. The only time they get out of their cars is if they're really angry with the driver in front of them, and they've got some road rage.

There's nothing conducive to community building when we're all driving cars. In fact, the reverse.

Rabbi Rami: What you're describing is exactly what I'm watching right now. I am binge-watching *Father Brown* mysteries on my British cable station, and everyone walks. There's two cars in the show. One is owned by a very wealthy woman and the other is the police cars. Police have cars. Everyone else is-- Father Brown's on a bicycle most of the time. Everyone else is just walking around and they're always bumping into each other. They're always killing each other because that's the show, but that kind of community is part of your heritage I think as being British.

That was part of the American psyche and the American cityscape at one time, but no longer. We've got to get back to that. We are going to-- Well, we've actually gone over the amount of time that I said we would talk, but I want to ask you one more question and then ask you to read something from the book. One of the chat, well,

it's on page 55 in the book if you need to look it up, but I don't think you will. You have this notion of walking with your ears. We've been talking about what you see, and even the dogs or smelling things. Walking with our ears, can you tell us a little bit about what that might mean?

Annabel: Yes. Then again this is something that's becoming clearer and clearer really, is that we are becoming much more visual, aren't we? Everything is about what we take in through our eyes. With technology, and we've become even more visual I think in television and whatnot, but actually, we've forgotten a little bit about our ears and what we can hear. There was a neuroscientist actually who said to me, "Yes, go, go for a walk," and he said, "Put your hands around your ears," and he said, "pull them forward so you've got like elephant ears."

It's definitely worth trying. He said, "What that does is, it amplifies the sounds." Then he said, "Try and walk very, very quietly on the tips of your toes." Then he said, "Just listen." I went for a walk like that. I must have looked a bit odd because I had my ears stuck out. It does. It amplifies everything. When you walk on the tips of your toes, everything also seems to be louder, which just might be because you can't hear your own feet. You start to tune in to all of the sounds that normally you miss, because normally, either we're plugged into something on our iPhones or we're busy with our eyes, aren't we, looking?

It changes how you walk and I would recommend everyone to try. The other thing I'd recommend to do, if you are interested in how using your ears completely changes the experience of walking, is to go for a walk at night. When you can't see anything because there's no light, but just walk along a track when in the dark, and just listen. It's a absolutely wonderful, wonderful experience because you start to hear the inside of your body. You hear your breath, you hear your heart, you hear the crunch of your feet.

Then you move out, and you start hear the wind and the leaves, and all sorts of other things traveling across the fields or across the cit. Things that you've never noticed before when you walk, and it's slightly strange. You think, how come I've never noticed any of this? Walk with your ears.

Rabbi Rami: Walk with your ears. Excellent. I'm going to ask you to bring the podcast conversation to a close by actually reading something from your book. I loved the way the book ends. I'd like you to read the last two paragraphs on page 221.

Annabel: This book is my love letter to walking. I hope it compels you to get up, get out and get going to relish the great privilege and richness of a life lived frequently on foot, and often in the wild open air. I'll leave the last word to my father, whose refusal to drive compelled me to walk and who died as I was writing this book. Move more gently, consider the lightness of a feather, follow the flight of the run, and that's it.

Rabbi Rami: Our guest today, Annabel Streets, is the author of *52 Ways to Walk*. Annabel, thank you so much for talking with us on the *Spirituality and Health Podcast*.

[music]

Annabel: Thank you so much for having me, it's been a joy.

Rabbi Rami: You've been listening to the *Spirituality and Health Podcast*. If you like this episode, please rate and review us in your favorite podcast app. If you enjoyed this episode, be sure to share us on social media and tag us @spirithealthmag. You can also follow me on the Spirituality and Health website, where I write a regular column called Roadside Musings. Don't forget to subscribe to the print magazine as well. The *Spirituality and Health Podcast* is produced by Ezra Baker Trupiano and our executive producer is Mallory Corbin. I'm Rabbi Rami. Thanks for listening.

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