

How a three-hour walk solved all my problems

Street Wisdom arranges free workshops that blend meditation, group therapy — and wandering round your local streets

Rachel Carlyle

October 29 2016, 12:01am,
The Times



Rachel Carlyle, who was wondering whether to get a “proper” job rather than the freelance writing she was fitting in around children

For years people have searched for answers to life’s big questions at remote monasteries or on wilderness retreats, but could enlightenment strike just as easily outside a sandwich shop in SE1?

That’s the idea behind Street Wisdom, a not-for-profit urban walking group now in 25 countries around the world that holds events in cities such as Los Angeles, New York and Paris, and is increasingly being used by businesses including Google and Barclays. The free, three-hour workshop is a mixture of solo walking, meditation and group therapy. Participants turn up at a meeting place with a personal problem to solve and, through a series of simple activities performed while walking around the city centre, are encouraged to be introspective, tune in to their gut instincts and find a solution.

It sounds pretty New Age, but thousands of non-hippy participants have gone off afterwards to start businesses, resign from their jobs or move house, according to its founder, [David Pearl](#), an ex-opera singer and creative consultant to chief executives. “The idea is that you don’t have to go to Machu

THE TIMES

Picchu for answers,” he says. “I wanted to bring that magic to Bracknell on a wet Wednesday so we ordinary folk, not necessarily natural ashram dwellers, can get a handle on that level of insight and inspiration.” He launched the programme in London in 2014. “There’s a huge number of people who feel troubled but don’t really know what to do about it.”



This fretting has brought 23 people — including me — to the banks of the Thames in London to try out Street Wisdom. Most of us are in our thirties or forties and there are slightly more women than men. One couple are wondering whether to move house; two men have recently given up their jobs; and a woman in sales is wondering whether to give up her safe but

unchallenging job. My question is also about careers: should I get a “proper” job rather than the freelance writing I’ve fitted in around children? I always thought it was temporary, but that was 15 years ago. Working from home has made me feel isolated and depressed at times, but then I like being there when the kids come in from school, especially now I’ve got a teenager. “So you want it all, then?” says Pearl. Armed with our questions, we’re split into two groups, each with a leader, and gather for a “tuning-up” session. We each get four ten-minute assignments; first to walk off alone in any direction and simply notice what attracts us (and what doesn’t) and not to be embarrassed to take a closer look. When we return Pearl instructs us to walk off again, this time slowing right down. This has the bizarre effect of awakening the senses — the takeaway coffee tastes better, gulls seem louder. Next we have to make connections between the things we see, and finally we’re challenged to see the beauty in everything. Then off we go for an hour’s solo wanderings before the group debrief later.

I find myself pulled towards the river, to the parallel community of birds on the shore. In the concrete jungle behind the Royal Festival Hall, my eye is drawn to a tiny sticker on the tread of a step saying Only Human. Is this pointing to my perfectionism, the “wanting to have it all” that Pearl noted earlier? I stop

THE  TIMES

to watch a man with a metal detector on the shore: scanning a tiny area slowly, then bending down to examine something before discarding it and continuing. In five minutes he's barely covered a square metre.

At the debrief, it's striking how many people have taken meaning from street signs; the woman wondering whether to give up her safe job, for example, who wandered into an amusement arcade and was drawn to a sign saying "Escape". Others found themselves striking up conversations with complete strangers.



How does Street Wisdom work? "There is a lot of solid neuroscience behind it," says Pearl. In the four stages of "tuning up", you're learning to slow down and exist in the present moment, feeling well-disposed towards life rather than negative, and — vitally — awakening the pattern-making part of the brain, so your subconscious can get to work and give you clues. "The mind will always make connections, but you have to harness that. Research shows it's the basis of creative thought," Pearl points out. It's also a mini digital detox.

Participants walk around the city, tune into their gut instinct and find solutions

The walking element is also important. Research at Stanford University, California, in 2014 found that walking doubled creative thinking. Volunteers walking outside or on a treadmill facing a blank wall came up with twice as many alternative uses for an everyday object than those sitting down. Why? Researchers weren't sure, but it might be the extra blood pumping around the body (including the brain). Or that, because walking doesn't require conscious effort, our minds are freer to make creative connections.

THE TIMES

Most in our party got some kind of answer. The couple unsure about moving felt drawn to green space and realised they needed to move farther out of the city; it sounds like the frustrated officer worker will finally take the leap; and I realised that my fixation on a “proper” job and a Big Plan was a distraction that had stopped me making smaller changes that might improve my work life, such as sharing an office space

with other freelancers. Essentially, like the man with the metal detector, take small steps and enjoy the hunting. See streetwisdom.org

Images AMIT LENNON FOR THE TIMES