Like so many people, I’ve walked past one or more of these things on my daily school run or trip to the shops and never given them another thought. Head down or phone on, there’s always an A to B intention that inevitably means the sights and sounds in between don’t register. But when I stepped out on a Street Wisdom walk in Northampton recently, I realised these seemingly insignificant street-scenes could actually help answer many of life’s niggling questions – and bring a whole new meaning to the idea of a two-way street.

STEPS AHEAD
Put simply, Street Wisdom is a free way to tune in to what’s around us in the urban environment and use it to find answers to something that’s troubling us. A kind of mindfulness meets the ramblers, if you like, but for the street smart not the country set.

Founder and business innovator David Pearl likes to think of the street as an ‘invisible university’. “While mindfulness meditation might try to diminish the wandering of the mind and focus on the ‘now’, Street Wisdom is about focusing on the wandering and seeing where it takes you,” he says. “Whether you’re figuring out what’s the next step or struggling with the day-to-day stuff, an ordinary city street can be an inspirational learning zone, which costs nothing to use.”

But of course you need to learn to walk before you can run. While Street Wisdom runs numerous group taster events that introduce you to the concept, I took the plunge with a downloadable ‘wandercast’, which for a small donation gave me all the basics, albeit in a more condensed form. While organised events are normally around three hours long, my Wisdom walk lasted just over an hour, and with my question in mind – “how to better support my husband during a difficult time” – an answer was forthcoming.

I was intrigued. Had I tapped into something mystical? Had the stars aligned to bring me the answer, or was something simpler at play? Keen to find out, I engaged the services of my rather sceptical husband, Tom, and two friends to see if it was up their street too.

WARMING UP
Split into three parts, the Street Wisdom concept consists of a ‘tune-in’, where you sharpen your senses to pick up signals on the street; ‘the quest’, where you ask a question and look for answers; and ‘the share’, where you discuss what you’ve learnt.

So just as you’d warm up for an exercise session, or deepen your breath at the start of a yoga practice, the tune in – split into four 10-minute walks, each with a simple instruction – helps you slow down and observe what’s around you. “It wakes you up, helps you listen and connects you with the street,” says David.

For my motley crew, one particular instruction: to “walk slowly for 10 minutes”, proved to be as inspiring as it was frustrating.

While my friend Alison and I found it almost embarrassing to slow our pace – worried about strange stares and the fact it looked like we were casing people’s houses – my pal Lisa found it very helpful. “Walking slowly allowed me to really appreciate everything around me in a way I’d not experienced before,” she says. “And it was so different not having a purpose to my walk. We’re all so afraid of not keeping up with the pace of everyone else, but it made me realise it’s okay to slow down.”
THE BIG ASK
Once your senses are 'tuned up', it's time for that all-important question. I have to admit I struggled with mine, worrying I would either make it too meaningless (i.e. "What colour should those kitchen curtains be?") or too meaningful ("Is there order in the cosmos"), but David advises you stick to anything you'd like fresh answers to, such as "where should I buy a new house?" or "how can I make more friends?" "People often panic and think they only have a single shot at it but of course they can come back to Street Wisdom again and again," he says.
"It's not an exam, it doesn't have to be the ultimate question - it's more of a direction setting." And ultimately it's your personal journey so there are no set rules.

On my walk I was bombarded with advertising hoardings displaying photos of meals we'd enjoyed as a family; a graffiti 'hi' on the wall with a heart over the 'i'; a deep red leaf and a succession of couples holding hands. For me, this all pointed towards a realisation that I didn't need to 'do' anything to support my husband - love and companionship was enough - but someone else might have interpreted these 'cues' entirely differently of course.

Tom and my friend Lisa both came up with the same question: "How can I relax more?" and while Tom noticed lots of symbols for time management and self-care - diaries and calendars in shop windows, a give way sign, a box with 'lounge' written on it (surely a motto for a good life) - Lisa's experience was more auditory.

"Within minutes of my walk, my eye caught sight of a leaf falling very slowly and quietly from a tree and it immediately made me think about how much I needed to slow down," she says. "I noticed the sounds that had annoyed me earlier in the day - like car horns, road works etc. - were no longer affecting me and I was appreciating them for their tone and texture, rather than how loud or annoying they were. It has made me realise how noise sensitive I am usually."

STREET SAVVY
But of course Street Wisdom isn't right for everyone. My friend Alison, a voluntary worker, asked what job she should go for - childcare or retail - but felt as muddled by the choice afterwards as she did before, even though she'd seen a business card on the ground with the words 'Right Step', and a sign saying 'Children Welcome'. David says if nothing much seems to be happening, don't force it. "Sometimes wisdom doesn't shout, it whispers, and that breakthrough moment might appear but not in the way you expect," he says. Street Wisdom isn't (and doesn't claim to be) anything magical. The street can't physically give you answers, but the process helps you tap into life's natural synchronicity, and it's a fun way of allowing us to be more aware of the answers to our problems - answers that already lies within us.

If nothing else, Street Wisdom gives us an excuse for physical space and time to unravel our thoughts; the structure to spend a couple of hours doing nothing but worrying about ourselves - and if we could all do that more every day, just think how much better we'd all feel about ourselves.