Out of Eden

STORY BY ASHLEY WILDA
A lone man and his guide stand silhouetted against the Caspian Sea, watching cerulean waters lap against the cold, bleak shore. Mile after mile has passed under the man’s weary feet, thousands upon thousands of words trailing in his wake. He steps forth again, face grim yet eager, with many more miles to walk and many more stories to speak into existence and release into the void until they are caught by some curious stranger. That is his goal—to walk, to speak, to share. To connect. Nothing more, nothing less. And so he moves on.

A group of students gather in the Learn Lab, overseen by a man with a firm handshake, grey-black hair, and weathered lines around his eyes. His presence is gracefully commanding yet laidback, and the students feel comfortable around him in this brightly colored space. Five large screens, each displaying a map dominate the room, but do not inspire or impress among the cheerful greens and light browns. The students chatter among themselves until the man calls the class to order, drawing the group into a lively conversation. The discussion is fast-paced and thoughtful, each sentence revolving around one man walking across the world, leaving only words behind.

THESE TWO GROUPS, although vastly different, have much more in common than perhaps appears at first glance. The walking man is Paul Salopek, writer for National Geographic and two-time Pulitzer Prize winner, and the professor is Don Belt, journalist, teacher, adventurer and longtime National Geographic contributor and editor. Belt was hired as Salopek’s National Geographic photo caption writer, and the two became close friends as Salopek moved into an influential writing career. When Salopek approached Belt about his idea for the walk, Belt wholeheartedly supported the venture and now serves on his support team, having actually joined Salopek for a portion of the walk in Jordan. Belt now teaches an upper-level journalism course, “Slow Journalism in a Fast World: The Out of Eden Experiment,” which attracted students from the journalism, geography, and international relations departments as well as students with diverse majors such as mathematics and environmental science. The class mission is twofold—to analyze Paul Salopek’s walk and practice his slow journalism techniques in the city of Richmond.

So what is this walk and why is it such a big deal? The walk began in 2013 and is slated to end in 2020. It is the brainchild of Salopek. His goal is to follow the footsteps of humanity from Ethiopia, where many believe the species began, and trace the journey to South America’s southernmost point. By refusing to use cars, planes, trains, or any other kind of transportation except boats when necessary, he truly lives alongside the people of the world, connecting with their lives and gathering the small, important stories that comprise the true fabric of our world.

Belt is a passionate supporter of Salopek’s project and the ideals that drive it and aims to teach his class through the lens of his work. “Paul is active now,” said Belt in an interview. “It’s not studying literature in the past tense so much as it is studying an ongoing, vibrant, dynamic, living project that is unfolding every week before our eyes... As he walks, as you know, he is leaving behind dispatches and all sorts of a very rich motherlode of material—of written material, of photographs, of videos, of sound files, of GPS coordinates that are turned into maps, [of] social media posts, etc., etc.”

Belt’s students are reading these dispatches in sections, starting from the beginning of Salopek’s walk, gleaning understanding from his expert storytelling and his intuitive mind. “He’s trailing these breadcrumbs as he walks around the world, and each of those little breadcrumbs is worth studying because it’s the work of a very, very highly skilled, Pulitzer Prize winning writer and reporter who is walking as opposed to driving or flying into the stories that he’s covering,” Belt continued. “So he’s walking and covering stories that often get overlooked in today’s world.” Belt went on to talk about climate change and its effect on crop growing and migration in Africa, just one example of the important issues that Salopek’s walk is uncovering through his slower-paced reporting style.

Belt believes this particular approach to journalism is an essential idea for his class to grasp and implement into their own work. “This slow journalism approach to storytelling brings you into close contact with ordinary people on a daily basis; it gives you details about life that often get overlooked; it helps make you a better reporter because you’re paying closer attention to the little details that are often only available to our brains when we sit for a while and notice things,” said Belt. After spring break, Belt’s students are going to split into five teams, three students to a team, and scatter around Richmond, hunting for the important, thought-provoking stories that so often are missed by the larger news outlets.

For Belt, this mindset is not only a useful teaching tool but also a truth of life. “We’re often racing through and we miss a lot... things are moving more quickly all the time. The speed of communication, the speed of the information, the volume of information that we get is overwhelming at times. I feel this constant sense of running behind and multitasking and trying to keep up. We’re all sort of drowning in information. What we
often lack, though, is meaning,” he said. This wisdom is especially applicable to college students; we are constantly cramming information into our heads, rushing from class to class and attending event after event. Sometimes we fail to truly connect with those around us and appreciate the beauty of our world. A simple determination to slow down might reveal a whole world of rich experiences.

However, Belt hastened to clarify that his students are not reporting on every sneeze or oddity they discover during their wanderings, but are instead thoughtfully hunting down stories with deep meaning and importance. “We’re not just going to be racing around Richmond taking pictures and going madly about our business; we’re going to be looking for what those pictures and those stories say about Richmond as a whole,” said Belt. “I think that if I do my job as a teacher — and I think this group of students is extraordinarily open to it — we will all, including myself, walk out of this class a little bit richer for the experience because we will have learned and practiced the art of slowing down and noticing the things around us that give life so much texture and so much beauty and so much meaning in lots of ways... I think it’s also a valuable reservoir for any human being to have, to be able to slow the heart rate down, slow the breathing down, slow the whole metabolism down, and pay attention to where you are, living in the moment that you’re in.”

The end goal of the class is to compile a website to share these dispatches with the rest of Richmond, and perhaps expand it through future classes. Belt describes the project as a time capsule of what Richmond, Virginia, was like in the spring of 2016. “Good writing always has depended on slowing down in some way or another,” Belt said. “That’s what we’re looking for. That is really the heart and soul of the enterprise, the human element in the landscape that we’re covering.”

When asked for the ultimate takeaway for these students and anyone learning from their experiences, Belt said the following: “I would say two things. One would be, if you have any free time and a computer, to take a look at Paul Salopek’s walk. You might want to go to outofedenwalk.com and take a look at the work that’s been done so far because if nothing else, reading and following along with Paul as he goes will teach you a lot about the history of the world or about the geopolitics in the world or the way life is lived in everyday circumstances in parts of the world that we don’t often see. It’s an education in and of itself. The other thing would be to just savor life in the moments that will pass. These moments will pass away and they will be in the distant memories one of these days. But while they’re here, while they’re with us, while we’re in these conversations, while we’re interacting with each other over a piece of beautiful writing, all these moments are worth paying close attention to, because in the end, that’s what we have. That is our life: this one amazing moment after another.”

This is a truth that we, especially as college students, would do well to hold onto. Our lives are but a fleeting moment and Paul Belt and his class are endeavoring to savor them in following in the footsteps of Paul Salopek.

Let us learn from their example. Stop. Drink in the sweetness of the air. Relish the textures and colors of the world. Our own stories will come alive for it.