

Down to Earth

*A Stumblers' Guide
(to descending) in
33 not-so-easy
steps*



David Pearl

The road to here...

It might have been reading Isabella Tree's book Wilding during a high Covid fever in 2021 that started me thinking about the whole notion of re-wilding – restoring a more natural order not just to our environment but to our inner selves too. Or making a short film with climate champions at COP26. Or a creative session on sustainable tourism in a wild and windy Saudi desert.

Whatever, I was ready for a break with daily life, and a deeper connection with nature. Including my own.

So, when my friend, fellow experience designer Paul Bulencea, suggested we go track wild Bison in the virgin forest of Romania, an animal-like noise inside me bayed 'yes'. I had decided to take a month's sabbatical to start the year and loved the idea of designing it around an experience of what Paul calls (echoing the words of eco-philosophers David Abrams, Bill Plotkin and others) the more-than-human world. Paul has really dedicated himself to finding his place in that world, having spent most of Covid connecting with the jungle of Ecuador and hanging with the frogs in Mexico. Me, not so much. Mostly screens and the garden. So, the bison really excited me. Or was that feeling actually fear? A bit of that too. I sensed an ordeal in the offing but, as Paul so rightly – and so annoyingly – reminded me at the foot of the mountain, 'no ordeal, no transformation'.

Ah yes, the mountain. Let me explain.

As you probably now know, (and I didn't until now) Romania borders Ukraine. The Russian invasion meant a change of plans. Georg, the tracker who we'd hoped would accompany us to find those bison had an alternative suggestion; a bio-diversity hot spot that's under the wing of Rewilding Europe in the central Apennines, near Rome. Instead of bison, we would go in search of wild wolves. And Georg knows a fellow tracker there who really knows wolves: Valeria Roselli.

Rome was in Spring when Aldo, our infectiously enthusiastic driver, picked us up. When he told us "c'e la neve – lots of snow in Abruzzo", it didn't seem likely but 120 minutes later we were in what felt to me like Narnia. A charmed snowscape where for the next few days I learned the basics of wildlife watching, scat spotting, silent forest walking and sitting on backpacks to keep your butt dry. Valeria was the perfect mentor, dedicated to the area and its wildlife. Super experienced and yet still radiating childlike, seen-for-the-first-time delight when we encountered a pair of wolves on the third morning. Paul and I agreed she was probably only part-human and the rest was pure mountain spirit.

Valeria mentioned she and her colleagues at Wildlife Adventures had repaired a remote shepherd's refugio, high on a peak called

Monte Marsicano. Paul immediately asked if we could spend the night there. Valeria looked a little doubtful – particularly when she looked at me. “There’s no heat, electricity or running water”, she explained. “Great”, said Paul, meaning it. “Great”, I echoed, frankly, faking it.

This was the day Narnia got real. We climbed through thinning beech forest, meeting exquisite groups of red deer as we ascended. Night drew in and the snow came down. It was magical. And hard. My right knee, injured in the past, was not liking the hiking. Plus, my head for heights is so-so. And being out on the exposed flank of a mountain at night felt both exhilarating and scary. You might see a place like this from a car speeding to a cosy hotel and admire its majesty, but you wouldn’t necessarily choose to spend the night out here.

Sensing my uncertainty, Valeria gently herded me upward. ‘Walk straight up to that rock’, she gestured. And before I knew it, there was the refugio; as welcome and, to me, as sumptuous-looking as any Four Seasons anywhere in the world. A fine meal of cold pizza followed, a great conversation and a surprisingly good night’s sleep, cocooned in my sub-zero sleeping bag, fully clothed and woolly hatted.

Mission accomplished. Or so I thought.

The following morning, within a few steps down Monte Marsicano, I realised the real challenge was just beginning. I should explain. I am nearly two metres tall. And while I like to think I carry my frame well – I may be alone in that. This morning, with a heavy pack on, I was struggling to find my footing in the fresh, deep snow. And it seemed to me a long, long way down.

I ‘knew’ I was going to fall. I just didn’t want to break something and ruin the day for my companions.

What I didn’t know was how much the mountain and its inhabitants were going to teach me on the way down. I think of it as a lesson in humility – in 33 not-so-easy steps.

I recorded my thoughts as I stumbled downwards – in stream of consciousness style – directly onto my iPhone. Ironic. Talking about being present while appearing to be online. But sometimes the creative channel just opens. And I didn’t want to lose anything. Because I thought you might enjoy this Stumblers Guide. I hope you do.



Step 1: New Language

On this trip, I have been sitting quietly with nature, slowly remembering what it means to have a place in a more-than-human world. It's like learning a new alphabet. And this stepping through deep snow feels like I am having to learn a new physical language. My mind understands what I am doing, but my body doesn't yet know how to do it.

Step 2: Baby Steps

The snow has made a toddler of me today.

I have to take baby steps.

How often do I not?

And I how often do I disguise my stumbling because it's not "manly"?



Step 3: My Safety. Our Safety.

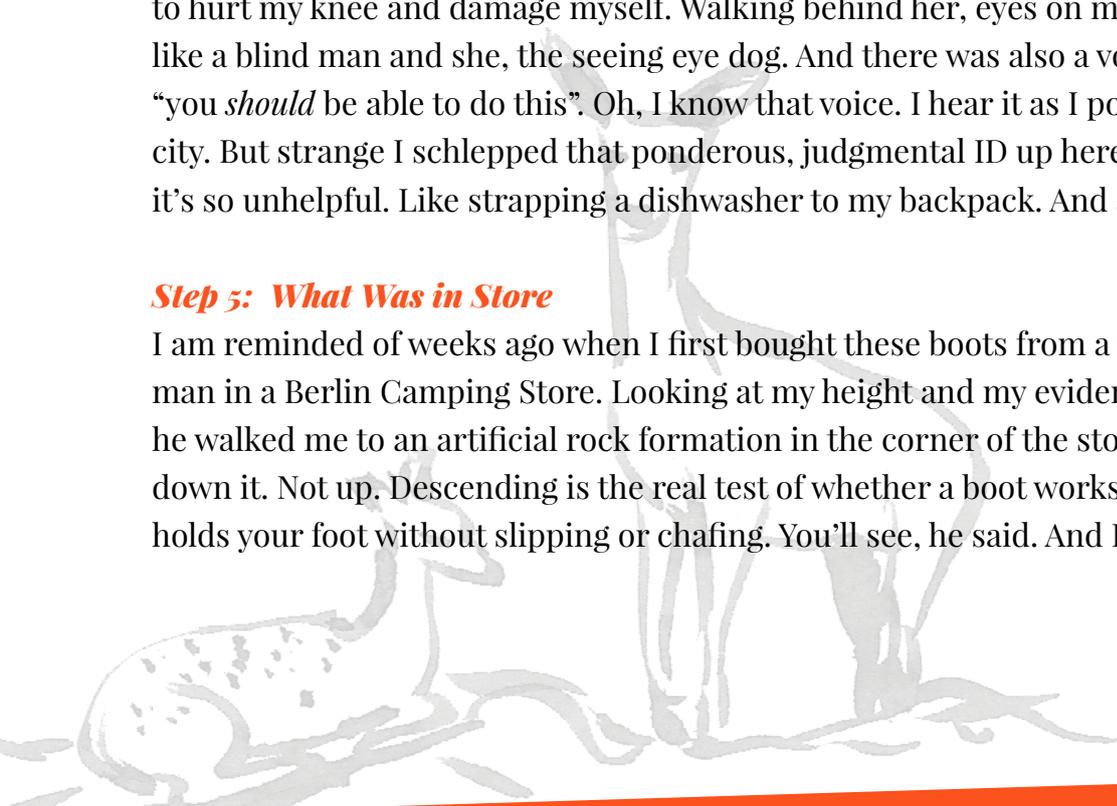
Across the valley through the diagonal snow shower, I see a herd of female red deer and their young sheltering against the weather. I watch them intently in my binoculars. And they watch back. Vigilant. After a while they return to grazing, convinced we are not an immediate threat. Confident in their collective. Safety in numbers. I continue to look and see one small deer in the herd look up while the others carry on munching. She's alert. Wanting to check for herself that all's well. Yes, there is the herd to rely on, but this individual is listening to her own instinct, answerable for her own wellbeing. If the wolves come – and we've seen fresh tracks nearby – she will have only her own four legs to stand on. And it makes me think. Yes, I am part of a collective. A family, tribe, nation, species. But my safety, my wellbeing, is my responsibility. It's a balance.

Step 4: Give Me Your Hands

Valeria offered that I could walk holding her back which I accepted because I was scared to hurt my knee and damage myself. Walking behind her, eyes on my boots, made me feel like a blind man and she, the seeing eye dog. And there was also a voice of shame saying "you *should* be able to do this". Oh, I know that voice. I hear it as I pound the streets of the city. But strange I schlepped that ponderous, judgmental ID up here into the snow where it's so unhelpful. Like strapping a dishwasher to my backpack. And about as useful.

Step 5: What Was in Store

I am reminded of weeks ago when I first bought these boots from a very helpful Japanese man in a Berlin Camping Store. Looking at my height and my evident unpreparedness he walked me to an artificial rock formation in the corner of the store. And had me walk down it. Not up. Descending is the real test of whether a boot works for you. Whether it holds your foot without slipping or chafing. You'll see, he said. And I am.



Step 6: My Body Myself

Paul observes that when I lose my balance I seem to speed up, increasing the tottering. Instead of slowing down. I explain to him he's incorrect. Protecting myself from the pain of being seen so vulnerably. That's not what I am doing. It is what my body is doing. And then I hear myself.

Step 7: Snow Ladder

Walking down a smooth, snow-covered incline feels a bit daunting. Nothing between a casual misstep and the valley below. Bash, bash, bash. Valeria is showing me how to create a ladder of foothold, swinging her heel into the snow surface with a crunching, hammer action. I try it. A little politely. Don't hold back, she says, using an Italian idiom roughly equivalent to *you can't make an omelette without breaking eggs*. Quite.

Step 8: What Goes Up

When was the last time you heard someone say they *descended* Everest? In our thrusting, upwardly mobile era, the focus is all about climbing and conquering summits. Returning gracefully to earth doesn't get a mention. And yet. Climbing up to the *refugio* yesterday was a challenge, for sure. Not least because we chose to do the final stage in the dark, leaving our lights off so as not to disturb the wildlife. But it was, compared to today, fairly straightforward. Literally. Ploughing directly onwards with muscles aching and heart pounding. But today is asking a lot more of me. Poise. Precision. Awareness. Courage (I suffer from some vertigo and today I can see the drops that were yesterday shrouded in dusk). Let's hear it for descending!

Step 9: Look At Your Feet

The poet in me wants to take it all in. My ambition has me looking at the horizon. *Look at your feet, not the landscape*, says Valeria. This terrain demands my presence. Time to look down.

Step 10: Falling Behind

Interesting. While dictating these notes I find myself at the back of our trio. And my confidence suddenly surges. I am at the back, responsible. Though we're probably less than a mile from the nearest road, this experience seems to hark back to a distant past and an unimaginably vast wildness. Where bringing up the rear means being accountable for your survival. If I fall, the cavalry is not coming. If you're reading this, I didn't.

Step 11: In Her Footsteps

Yesterday, Valeria, a gifted tracker points out a double footprint. The first impression has been made by a boar. Directly on top you can see a second, the paw marks of a wolf. A strangely hybrid mark where hunter is intimately shadowing prey. This morning, taking

my wellbeing seriously, she recommends I do the same – miming that I should step my boot into the hole hers has made. This created instant confidence. Walking, in someone else's footsteps is a nice concept – but an even more comforting reality. The snow in Valeria's boot mark was more compacted and hence a little sounder. And what was safe for the leaders is likely to be safe for the follower. Likely. But not certainly. She is half my weight. With a different centre of gravity. And clearly shares significant DNA with a mountain goat. Two humans. Very different. As different as boar and wolf. And it dawns on me that ultimately my footprint is my choice. Helped to have footprints to follow but I have to put my own foot down where it will bear my weight on my way.

Step 12: Slow Up. Speed Down.

It's not a race. But tell my brain that. Somewhere I am conditioned to think I will be judged on my velocity. That an unseen panel of adjudicators is watching from the sidelines, ballpoint pens poised, thinking *he's going slow and therefore doesn't know what he's doing – nul points*. But when I really take my time to place my feet this way, I am actually being *deliberate*, not *hesitant*. And what's wrong with hesitating anyway? When I look up this word later, I will discover it's linked to the same Latin root as adhesive. Hesitating – or sticking – to this mountainside makes all sorts of sense. Like the goats. The question is, how often is that panel of judges looking on as a speed through city life? How often am I unaware of them?

Step 13: Hand Holds Hands

Watching the red deer and the goats, navigating this landscape on just two legs is starting to feel precarious. And when I am passing a rock or stump that's near hand-height I am tempted to use it as a support. But isn't that copping out? A short distance to installing hand rails, bannisters and Health and Safety notices? What if, instead of support, my hands think of their contact with the environment as a handshake, or a dance gesture? Maybe I could treat the mountain as my dance partner as I rock – and roll – my way down it.

Step 14: Let's Get This Straight

È un po' ripido, cautions Valeria with what feels like a practised understatement. This rocky, snow-covered decline is more than 'a bit steep' to my untrained eyes. It's so bumpy it commands almost all of my attention. With the sliver that's left, I muse about how obsessed we humans have been with flattening nature. Man's promise to the universe, so says the Bible, is to make 'the crooked straight and the rough places plain'. Faced with the majestically unpredictable ups and downs that Nature presents, we civilising humans whipped out our rules and set squares. The city abolishes uneven difficulties, flattening the inclines into mirror smooth pavements, bump free asphalt, escalators. Releasing us to do what? Think. Daydream. Worry. Look at our iPhones. Hard to do any of those up here. And I love that.

Step 15: Seeing Without Looking

Come va? asks Valeria. She's not looking but she senses all is not entirely well. *I am not looking at you, but I see you*, she explains. Paul and I suspected she was a witch – and now we know. *Va bene. Anche Duro*. It's good. And also hard. I use *also* not *but*.

Step 16: Enjoy the trip

I am enjoying the mini ordeal and how it's forcing me to wake up. A while back I tripped over a slight unevenness in the pavement near where I work. And fell. On my face. So embarrassing. Especially when I looked back and saw the offending paving stone could have been no more than a few millimetres out of true. But so, it is in a world where we have come to expect flat predictability. You turn off your senses. At the time I was thinking of suing the council. I realise now I should have sent them a donation.

Step 17: Three D

Phil¹, a cycling mentor, recommends that veteran athletes (as he calls people like me who intend to stay robustly, questingly active till late in life) introduce some chaos into their physical regime. Bones and muscles that are dealing with the unpredictable forces and angles respond by staying strong all round, rather than just in routine grooves. Phil favours clambering on riverbeds. I think this mountain descending might become my chosen way to stay three-dimensional, and not flattened into 2d by sitting in front of screens and/or defeatist thinking.

Step 18: Voices 1

My knee is hurting now. And talking of ageing there is a voice in my head that says *David, your knee is hurting because it is ageing. It's worn out. Sit down. Get a cable car. Call a cab.*

Step 19: Voices 2

Hey. HEY! I become aware of another voice, jostling for my attention like an angry customer in a Complaints queue. It's less polite. *What are you doing up here anyway? Boys born into a Jewish family don't go up mountains. They watch other people in documentaries go up mountains. From an armchair – on a widescreen TV.*

Step 20: Voices 3

These voices – arguing the birth date, culture and upbringing making this a place I shouldn't be – are just doing their job. They want to protect me from hurt. Protect me from the mountain. And the extraordinary experience I am having here.

¹ That's Phil Cavell, author of *Midlife Cyclist*



Step 21: Are We There Yet?

Another mental commentary that's accompanying me down the mountain, like a whiney eight-year-old is the one that's asking me *are we there yet?* It reminds me that the mind likes to assess the progress of a journey relative to its arrival point. What's interesting here is that I have been travelling – willingly – not knowing where the end point is. Yesterday the summit was shrouded in dark and snow. Today the valley floor is obscured in slushy rain. And it is freeing. I am neither encouraged or discouraged by how far we've come or how close we are to finishing. It is a lot easier to enjoy this 'nowness' in the presence of an experienced guide like Valeria. I am so thankful she knows where she's going to, I don't have to. It just makes me think how important it is to choose a guide who knows where the endpoint is.

Step 22: The Eyes Don't Have It

This is a very visual age. We are obsessed by appearance. Information isn't regarded as engaging unless accompanied by a picture. We over-emphasise the importance of sight and downplay the evidence of our other senses – particularly what we feel. Today, on this precipitous journey back to the valley floor, the eyes are working overtime. I feel them assessing the safest downward path and issuing appropriate instructions to my humble feet, down there at the bottom of the neural food chain. The problem we are discovering is what looks like a practical path turns out to be slippery, or wobbly, or not a path at all. That smooth and welcoming-looking patch of snow conceals a hidden rock which only the foot can discover. Bit by bit the one-way traffic of mental orders becomes a two-way, neurological collaboration. Not a march – a dance.

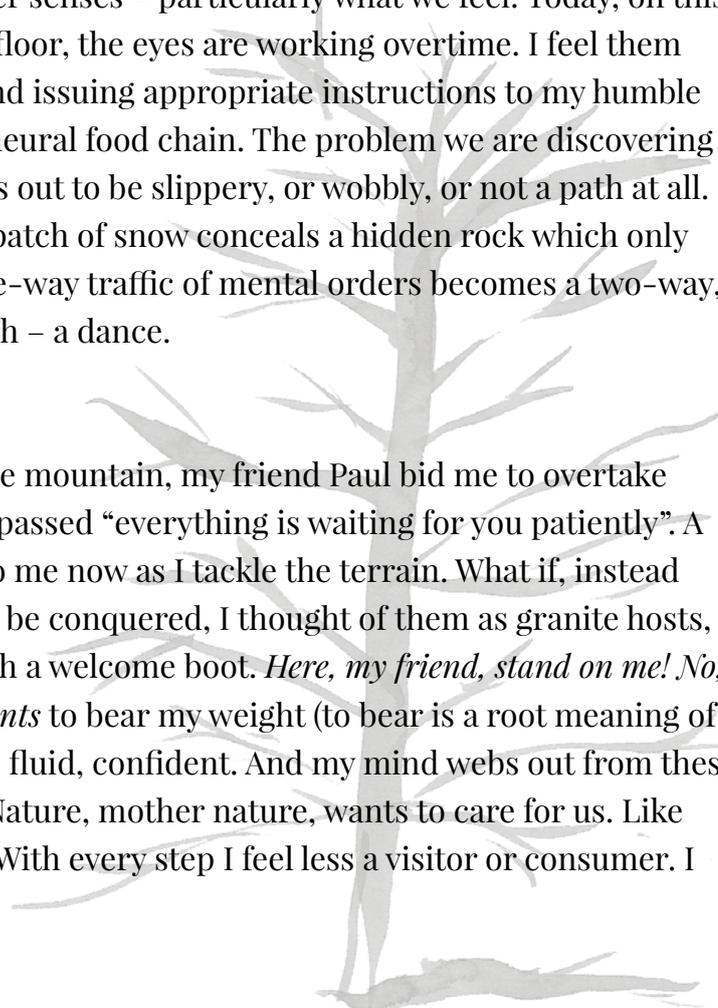
Step 23: Patience

Yesterday as I was keen to set off up the mountain, my friend Paul bid me to overtake him, mentioning in an undertone as I passed "everything is waiting for you patiently". A lovely thought. One that comes back to me now as I tackle the terrain. What if, instead of looking at the stones as obstacles to be conquered, I thought of them as granite hosts, joyfully willing me to step on them with a welcome boot. *Here, my friend, stand on me! No, me. No, ME!* When I feel the ground *wants* to bear my weight (to bear is a root meaning of the word *patience*) the walking is more fluid, confident. And my mind webs out from these small earth contacts to consider that Nature, mother nature, wants to care for us. Like the mother we used to picture her as. With every step I feel less a visitor or consumer. I remember I am nature. We all are.

Step 24: Beware Humans!

I think I'm coming to hate us human beings.

In principle, I love my fellow man, but when I see the damage we do, the anger and reproach sets in. But I do have to ask myself will the nature we are part of be helped by a



self-hating species? Maybe we need to first love ourselves – as a part of nature – and then extend that courtesy to the environment around. Love *who* we are to love *where* we are.

Step 25: Stand

The tree line is approaching. What feels like familiar territory. As my confidence grows, so does my belief that I can stand my ground. I hadn't thought about that idiom 'till now. And how keeping strong contact with the earth beneath your feet is a pre-condition of true confidence. Like making a stand. How many of the self-proclaimed leaders we choose in our droves to follow, are truly connected with the earth, grounded, able to take or make a stand?

Step 26: Up and Down?

I can't help noticing how the brain – ever the neat organiser of messy reality – thinks that a journey up and down a mountain comprises just those two components: up and down. If pushed, it might be pushed to three elements: beginning, middle and end. The reality I am experiencing now is the neat literary concept of 'journey' as actually thousands of points of contact with the ground. Tens of thousands of moments. Millions of fleeting choices. Words are useful. Until they aren't.

Step 27: The Pain Wheel

I feel we're making good progress. I doubt the deer agree. That said, I am feeling some pain from my body. Particularly my right knee. Mostly it's very bearable. But occasionally a severe stab of pain shoots up my spine to my brain where I, notice, a voice saying *You see, I was right!* I had never seen quite so clearly how pain and fear work together, telling the brain it is right to keep me scared. Down comes the signal that I should protect myself from pain, tightening the knee musculature and making a sharp stab of pain more likely. And so, the wheel turns.

Step 28: Not So Sure

The phrase 'sure footed' springs to my mind as I watch Valeria more or less glide down the slope. Looking closer she is taking many small steps. Down a mountainside she knows well. *I'm sure* is a phrase we throw around casually in our lives. I know I do. Usually when I am far from sure. What if we used it to mean the Valeria kind of sure? Conscious. Well planted. Economical movements. Even in familiar territory? The surer the leaders, the smaller the steps.

Step 29: The Two Step

I am slipping on the stones until Valeria shows me her technique. For each step you connect with the earth twice. The first time it's to check the snow or rock is a stable platform. The second, once you've proven the step is going to work, is the actual step.

Step 30: Not Warning but Waving

Ouch. It's that pain again (the one I mentioned a few steps ago). I see it as a red warning light on a dashboard. But look again. What if it's alert, not alarm, calling me to awareness not fear?

Step 31: Mis-step?

I just stumbled. Not a good look. But is stumbling a mistake? Have I been wrong-footed? Or can I rethink of that stuttering gesture as 'foot work' instead. An exploration and testing of the ground. A dialogue with gravity. *No, not that way, this way.* A way of self-righting.

Step 32: Follow the Leader

As we approach what looks like familiar territory from yesterday, I find myself reflecting that Valeria is – in the true sense – a step-by-step guide.

Step 33: Terra Firma?

I am in the car. Boots off. Noticing the squishy seating and noting how cushy we humans have made our lives. But as we pull away on the smooth surfaced tarmac towards our hotel and a shower, it dawns on me – we are all on wobbly terrain. Always.

