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New Year's Day 2014

A time for stepping forward boldly

When the streets get icy in winter, I walk more carefully. I take shorter steps, to make sure I've got a second foot to rely on, in case the first one slips.

For exactly the same reason, the infirm and elderly tend to shuffle when they walk. They're afraid of falling. They no longer have enough confidence in their ability to take a step – or, more accurately, in their ability to sustain a fall – to risk lifting a foot off the ground at all.

“Walking,” Paul Salopek wrote in *National Geographic*, “is falling forward.”

Salopek plans to walk 21,000 miles, across four continents. He started in Ethiopia, where the first homo sapiens probably originated. He'll end at the farthest point that those humans migrated to the southern tip of South America in Tierra del Fuego.

In his opening paragraph, Salopek wrote, “Every step we take is an arrested plunge, a collapse averted, a disaster braked. In this way, to walk becomes an act of faith. We perform it daily: a two-beat miracle – an iambic teetering, a holding on and letting go...”

Think about it. When you walk, you don't slide that second foot out in front of you, and then advance onto it. You lean forward; you start to fall; you swing that second foot forward to stop yourself from falling on your face.

And then you do the same with the next step.

We don't think about how we walk. We just do it.

When you trip, your second foot encounters an obstacle on its way forward. So it doesn't get there in time stop you from falling.

The length of your stride reveals your willingness to take the risk of falling. The longer your stride, the farther you let yourself fall before that second foot arrests your plunge towards the ground.

My stride is shorter now than it used to be. Once upon a time, I took pride in the length of my stride – almost a yard with each step.

Paul Salopek might argue that I have less faith than I once did. It's true -- I'm less confident of my ability to bounce back if I fall.

On this first day of a New Year, I find that notion of falling forward strangely attractive. Because that's what we're doing, isn't it? We're falling forward into a new year, an unexplored year, a year that may be filled with great joys and great sorrows, great successes and great failures. Maybe all of the above.

Like walking, we need to let go of last year. Not to forget it, but to make sure it doesn't become an anchor stopping us from moving. Like Salopek setting out on his epic journey, we need to travel light.

Faith is more than the affirmation of some supposedly eternal truths. Faith is also the willingness to step forward, to risk falling. Faith means putting one foot in front of the other, again and again. Even if we don't always know exactly where we're going.

So let's not shuffle into 2014, afraid to falling. Let's step forward boldly.