



‘The Walk That Made Me’ – Energize On TV

Film Title: The Walk That Made Me

Year of Release: 2021

Written by: Chris Packham for BBC

Certificate: N/A

Running time: 59 minutes

Link to the film on iPlayer (until June 2022):

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/m000xqgp/chris-packham-the-walk-that-made-me>

(Available with audio description or British Sign Language interpretation)

BBC iPlayer summary:

“Chris Packham explores his past as he walks a familiar path in the Hampshire countryside. Chris cut his teeth as a naturalist in this beautiful corner of England. The journey evokes intimate memories from his childhood.

Wandering along the River Itchen and Itchen Navigation, Chris explains the importance of natural surroundings when it comes to our wellbeing. His journey stirs up powerful and difficult memories from his own struggles with mental health issues. Walking with a hand-held 360-degree camera, Chris heads north, starting a few miles outside Southampton and ending up at Winchester Cathedral. Following the path of one of the oldest waterways in the country, he meets those who live, work and play in the area.

Chris discusses the joy that water brings to wild swimmers. He also observes local enthusiasts as they maintain centuries-old farming practices by flooding a local meadow. Along the way, he reveals some of the difficulties of living with Asperger’s Syndrome and offers thoughts on mental health that may help others.”

Summary:

This is more than the usual Chris Packham nature film; this is a glimpse into his early life and the struggles that he had with his mental health as a teenager. At a time when many young people are trying to cope with mental health problems and poor wellbeing, hearing the story of a well-known TV presenter who shares about how hard things were for him but how he came through those difficult years himself might be a help to other young people today.

Part 1: What you felt about the film:

Sometimes young people find it hard to contribute to a group discussion. They may feel shy or that their contribution might appear silly. The first part of the session is therefore a chance for young people to think about the film and begin to develop a reaction to what they have seen in a way that everyone will have something to contribute. These are some simple, quick exercises to get everyone thinking about their reaction to the film.

About Chris Packham

Question: What did we know about Chris Packham before watching the film? What did we learn about him during the film?

About the themes

During his walk Chris Packham talks about his mental health, he identifies as having Asperger Syndrome (now referred to as Autistic), shares about periods of depression and of having suicidal thoughts, and considers how his walks in the countryside, as well as his connection with animals, including his dogs, saved him.

Question: Are there some overall themes in the film that the young people recognise in their own lives?

Part 2: Key themes in the film:

We've seen an increase in young people grappling with mental health issues over the past 18 months, during the COVID-19 pandemic, although even before then there has been an observable rise in cases of young people struggling with their mental health and wellbeing. Young people with additional needs of various kinds have been as adversely affected by the pandemic as anyone, possibly more so, with the Disabled Children's Partnership reporting from their survey¹ of families that one-third of young people with additional needs have experienced depression, half have lost confidence, and three quarters are struggling with social isolation, all themes that Chris Packham picks up on in his film.

As you journey together with Chris through this film, here are a few 'pause moments' to stop and reflect, discussing what you've seen and heard and how it might be relevant to the lives of the young people that you are connected with, including any with additional needs, as well as ourselves:

Time: 0.00 to 0.50 Introduction to the film

Start here, as Chris Packham explains why he has created this film, what it means for him, and so what it might show us about his past.

Question: As we look back at our lives, are there any key moments or places that we hold in our minds? Places that we might not have been back to for a while, but which are important to us?

Time: 1:40 to 2:40 Opening up and exploring memories

Chris starts to introduce some of the themes that he will pick up on during the walk. About how it can take courage to walk in distant footsteps, revisiting old memories. He says it can be difficult as "you don't know what you're going to find..." as you open up your mind to the past; it can evoke a lot of memories. He comments that he has a very good memory, but "doesn't always choose to open the cupboard and see what's in there."

Question: Do we have memories of the past that we keep out of sight? How hard do we find it to look back at those memories? What does exploring those memories do to us?

Chris talks about how taking in the sights and sounds, the sensory input, of the countryside helps him as he processes his memories.

Question: Are there places that we go to when we need to think about and process our own thoughts and memories?

Time 20:00 to 22:30 Itchy and Scratchy

¹ <https://disabledchildrenspartnership.org.uk/left-in-lockdown/>

This is a challenging section of the film, as Chris talks about his pet poodles, 'Itchy' and 'Scratchy', and how very important they were to him. How devastated he was when one, then the other, died. How he preserved their bodies until he was mentally strong enough to have them cremated. He also talks about his plans for when he dies, how his ashes will be mingled with those of his dogs and become part of the circle of life as they are scattered under a favourite tree.

Question: Is what he did with his pet dogs weird, or was he just unable to cope with the tremendous grief and loss that he was experiencing? How did it affect his mental health to lose Itchy and Scratchy, and if we have lost a pet ourselves, can we empathise with him?

Question: Although it may seem a long way off, have we ever thought about our own mortality? What might we want to happen to our bodies when we die?

Time: 25:48 to 29:30 The lowest point

At this point on his walk, Chris reaches a place where some really hard and gruesome memories come back to him. Going back to before 'Itchy' and 'Scratchy', Chris had other poodles, 'Max' and then 'Fish'. He clearly was very attached to his dogs, and they meant the absolute world to him, so when one, then the other, died, he was devastated. He talks about being really unhappy, everything falling apart and going wrong, that he was *"beyond the reach of everyone..."* and in the grip of depression, grief and bleakness.

Question: Have there been times when we have felt like that? If we are willing to share, what was the trigger for those feelings?

Chris talks about how 'Itchy' and 'Scratchy' then came into his life, and that although he was still having suicidal thoughts, he became attached to these new dogs and couldn't leave them behind, *"those dogs saved my life..."*

Question: Have we ever been so low that we felt that we couldn't carry on? Was there something, or someone, that made the difference, that we couldn't 'leave behind'?

Question: Chris talks about his dogs as being unofficial 'Autism assistance dogs'. How do we think that dogs, or other pets, can make a difference for anyone who is struggling as Chris was?

Time: 37:15 to 38:40 "And a river runs through it..."

Chris talks about the River Itchen, which flows along the route of his walk, as being a part of him, that he was 'made' by this river, *"this river runs through my heart..."* He talks about how he grew up there, had fallen in, swam, got muddy, cold, had cried, loved and lived there. It is a hugely significant place for him.

Question: Is there a place that is special for us? A place where we have lots of positive memories or have had great experiences?

Time: 39:45 to 44:05 Taking care of our mental health

Chris continues on his walk, talking about the importance of taking care of our mental health. That walking every day is central to his mental health regime. He shares about how it started with him seeking a space that was mentally more healthy than being at home, as he tried to understand and cope with his Asperger Syndrome (commonly now referred to as being Autistic).

He searched for any place to find comfort in his perceived isolation. He hated himself and hated the world, so he wandered around on his own. He talks of a birthday that he spent out in the countryside as he couldn't bear to celebrate a 'happy' birthday at home.

He shares his worry that there are many teenagers today experiencing the same feelings that he did when he was that age, that are really unhappy, but he also wanted to offer the hope that it does get better. For him it was through gaining more control of his life.

Question: Do Chris' experiences strike a chord with us? Have we wandered around outside because we struggled to try and be 'happy' at home when we actually were really unhappy? Where did we go? What did we do?

Question: Have any of us found strategies, like Chris has in gaining more control of his life, that have made a difference for us?

Time: 47:20 to 49:28 Kestrels

In his teenage years, Chris became obsessed with kestrels; he would go out to the countryside with a quest to find them, he talks about how seeing them *"lifted my spirits..."* and that when he kept one it was *"the happiest time of my life..."*.

Question: Can we remember the happiest time of our lives so far? What made it happy? Are we able to replicate that happiness again and if so, how?

Time: 51:40 to 52:23 The Itchen

As Chris nears the end of his walk, he looks down from a high point over the River Itchen, the various parts of it and the water meadows that it meanders through. He talks fondly of it as a place which was *"my playground, where I used to skip, run, search, learn, escape and survive..."*. He recognises the importance of that place for him as a place that *"shaped and saved my life..."*

Question: Where has been the 'playground' for us? When was the last time that we were there?

Time: 56:40 to end (59:00) It's important to talk

As he arrives at the final destination of his walk, Winchester and the Cathedral, Chris shares about the importance of talking to people, asking *"Are you OK?"* and meaning it; listening to the answer and digging deeper if they try to brush you off with *"I'm fine"* but clearly aren't. As he points out, *"maybe they won't have poodles to get them through..."*.

Chris highlights the benefits he's found, and that others have too, of getting a bit of a natural mental health boost by walking outside on a sunny day, *"...walking with that lovely rhythm, healing your mind."*

Question: Who can we ask if they are OK? Will we dig deeper if we just get *"I'm fine..."* but don't believe it? Who do we trust to ask us? Who would we tell if we are not fine ourselves?

Question: How will we get that 'natural mental health boost' ourselves? What can we do to exercise and heal our minds?

Part 3: Comparing the story

The third part of the session is a chance to compare the story of the film with a story in the Bible. What are the similarities and differences, and what does this tell us about God's Kingdom?

Young people may not grasp all the theological points that could be made, but it's important for them to begin to get used to the idea of critiquing what they see and holding it against the values and beliefs of the Christian faith.

Some of this reflection may come from an open discussion and as seen above, there are many themes and directions that this could take.

Jesus went to the wilderness

"But Jesus often withdrew to the wilderness for prayer." Luke 5:16 (NLT)

Often our image of Jesus is that he was always with and around people, but time and again we read that he needed to go somewhere quiet to be alone with his thoughts and prayers, and often it was a

remote, wilderness, place that he chose.

“Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed.” Mark 1:35 (NIV)

These times were clearly important to Jesus and renewed him mentally for the next thing he was to do. Perhaps some of the themes in Chris Packham’s film about the importance of walking outside, of being in the countryside, and how this can renew and restore our mental health, are relevant here.

Question: Why did Jesus regularly go out to remote, isolated, wilderness places? How did these times help him mentally? How did he connect with his heavenly father there and what can we learn from his example?

Optional activity: If possible, go for a short walk outside; if you are in a town or city maybe to a park or recreation area, if you are more rural maybe into the surrounding countryside. Enjoy the feeling of being outside (hopefully in the sun!) and recognise the mental health boost that this can provide. If appropriate, stop somewhere quiet and pray, bringing all that has been journeyed through in this session into God’s presence.

Follow up activity: If this session has provoked some challenging memories and feelings, or if some of the young people need further support with their mental health and wellbeing, explore some of the resources provided by the Mind & Soul foundation together here:

<https://www.mindandsoulfoundation.org>

Follow up activity: At Urban Saints, we are planning a walk of our own, maybe you could join in? Urban Saints are committed to traveling the journey of faith with young people. This event symbolises that commitment that goes back to our very beginnings and will continue to be our calling for many years to come. Across the weekend of 25th, 26th and 27th March 2022, we hope that as many Urban Saints Groups and supporters as possible will take part in a journey together; your own long walk or roll with others from your Urban Saints Group or Camp in and around your own community. For more details click here: <https://www.urbansaints.org/events/781>

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17th August 2021