

Introduction

When I was fifteen, my family went on a camping trip to the Blue Ridge Mountains in Virginia. Our campsite was near where the Appalachian Trail twisted up a mountain called The Priest. One day, my brothers Rich, Steve, and I attempted to climb it. They were younger, became tired, and stopped about halfway up. But I pushed myself to the top, where I was rewarded with a spectacular view of a broad, green valley. On the other side of the valley were smaller, neighboring mountains; smooth, undulating, avocado dreamscapes cloaked in wispy white clouds. A light breeze rustled the evergreen boughs. Tiny, moving dots far below indicated vehicles.

The valley and mountains were nice. A canvas of green, ranging from cheerful lime, where the sun shone, to darker, spinach green where the shadows lay. But this canvas, as picturesque as it was, was just the outline. It was the huge void that affected me the most. I'd never seen so much empty air. The space encompassed the azure sky. It was majestic but frightening.

While sitting in quiet in my private perch off the trail, I glimpsed some movement behind me. I turned and saw a tall figure moving slowly along the path. I had thought I was the only one here. But there was a shape that dipped behind the trees, then briefly emerged into a leafy opening, then dipped behind again. Eventually it entered a long stretch of clearing, and I got a good look. It was a lanky man with a bushy beard, ponytail, and a huge pack on his back. An Appalachian Trail distance hiker. I watched him for about fifteen seconds. Then he disappeared as he made his descent from the mountain.

I didn't know how long this man had been hiking nor his destination. He looked like he was in his twenties, but I couldn't be sure. I didn't know where he was from, if he had a girlfriend or wife, whether he'd attended college. Maybe he had no family or friends. Perhaps he'd fallen on hard times and been forced to haul his home on his back. Then again, maybe he was from a loving family with the security of monetary wealth, and he'd merely decided to take a break from college...or he'd recently returned from Vietnam...and stepped into the woods, alone, to "get his head together," as so many young adults seemed to be doing in the early 1970s.

He was a total enigma. But his solitary stroll through the mountains fascinated me.

By age fifteen I'd read several books about nature, the wilds, and living off the land—a schoolchild version of Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*, Jack London's *Call of the Wild*, Jean Craighead George's *My Side of the Mountain*, among others. I liked to camp with my family. While living in the Detroit suburbs in the late 1960s, I captured raccoons, opossums, feral cats, and an occasional skunk in my Havahart box trap. When I was eleven, my friends and I talked about traveling to northern Michigan to "live off the land." We discussed gathering roots and berries, hunting small game for our food, and living hermit-fashion in homemade wooden huts. We fantasized about sitting

around a large campfire and watching the stars dot the heavens. I fantasized about bringing my pet raccoon with me, a furry chatterbox to play with and keep me and my friends entertained. I remember lying in bed at night and planning this dream trip. Deep down I doubted we could ever pull it off. But thinking about it gave me a good feeling.

When I saw that lanky man on the Appalachian Trail a few years later, it reignited that feeling. I saw an older version of me. Someone who was experiencing adventure and getting close to nature. I wanted to believe that he'd *chosen* to hike and not been forced into it by bad circumstances. He'd realized his dream. He was living something that I'd only read about or planned while lying in bed at night.

After graduating from college in 1981, I came close to the lanky hiker. I went West, looking for adventure and evading the responsibilities of career and family. While there, I visited the Cascade Mountains of west-central Washington. Within those lofty peaks that towered above deep, blue Lake Chelan—a gigantic crevasse gouged millions of years ago by ancient glaciers—I managed a four-day hike. Part of my route took me up a trail that meandered along Prince Creek, on the eastern shore of the lake. I got as far as Middle Fork, where I discovered that the June snowmelts of Sawtooth Ridge had turned Middle Fork into a raging whitewater river. It had washed away the wooden footbridge that I needed to cross the river. A rude interruption.

I'd planned to cross Middle Fork because there was a little oval tarn tucked away in the forest to the north. It had a slightly comical name: Surprise Lake. I wanted to go there because I liked the name, and I wondered what the "surprise" could be. But without a bridge, it was impossible to cross the rushing whitewater. So, I had to sabotage my plans. I backtracked to Lake Chelan, eventually reached my

car, and ended up dousing my disappointment with mugs of bitter beer in the bars of Seattle.

But I learned two things: first, I discovered that as much as I wanted to play mountain man, I missed my family and friends. Also, I learned to expect the unexpected.

Not long after, while living in Colorado, I did a few overnight hikes in the Rockies. I saw my first bear while backpacking in the mountains just outside of Boulder. I was hiking with a friend on a ridge near Bear Peak. We'd summited the peak, had just finished a lunch of cheese and crackers, and were traversing a ridgeline when my friend tapped me on the arm and pointed to the forest valley below. Being nearsighted, it took me a few seconds, but eventually I made out a burly, black form rummaging in the brush. We watched the bear for a few moments. Then he vanished. We waited a while, then carefully moved down the hill to see if there was a cave, or some remnant of his presence. Nothing.

This bear experience was a thrill. It didn't amount to much, but it was fun to tell others about the "mysterious, disappearing bear," and others seemed to have fun hearing about it.

But it wasn't until the summer of 2013, when I was age fifty-five and spent a week on the Appalachian Trail, that I felt I came close to the lanky hiker on *The Priest*. I didn't know at the time that a late-in-life, eight-day wilderness experience would usher in a new stage for me, climaxed by a trek into the clouds along the Continental Divide, following the trail of a friend from long ago.

I'm not a globe hopper or adventure junkie. Maybe because I'm from the American Midwest, where life tends to move a little slower, but I'm used to mundane, simple things: burgers on the grill, a cold beer after work, a late-night film noir. I've read Ernest Hemingway, but I'm not interested in emulating him. And I don't think I'd call my middle-age urge to ramble a "crisis."

But like most people, I started losing some family members and friends when I reached a certain age. I wanted to see the wild places before the curtain falls and while I'm still healthy, and hike into green before it turns to brown. I'm still the little boy who dreams of living off the land in northern Michigan. I still dream of the enigmatic, lanky hiker with a bulging backpack, hiking over a misty mountain peak into the unknown.

The Appalachian Trail—Georgia and North Carolina

*“Whatever landscape a child is exposed
to early on, that will be the sort of gauze
through which he or she will see all the
world afterwards.”*

—Wallace Stegner

Companions

The Appalachian Trail (AT) is a 2,200-mile footpath through the rugged Appalachian Mountains of the eastern United States, stretching from Georgia to Maine. It was conceived in the 1920s by a bookish forest official named Benton MacKaye, who envisioned a series of hostels and wilderness workshops connected by a path. A young Washington lawyer named Myron H. Avery, more pragmatic than MacKaye, advanced MacKaye's idea without the hostels and workshops. The trail was completed in 1937 and covers fourteen states.

Today the trail is a monument to public activism and wilderness protection. All but a few miles of the trail are under the domain of the National Park Service (NPS), but it is maintained by the NPS along with the USDA Forest Service, various state agencies, the Appalachian Trail Conservancy, and over thirty local clubs. Though the route is continually changing, the terminus points now remain fixed at Mount Katahdin in northern Maine, and Springer Mountain in northern Georgia.

Those who walk this trail come in different shapes and sizes: day hikers, overnighers, section hikers and thru-hikers. Thru-hikers are an interesting breed and have become noticeably prevalent in recent years. They attempt to do the full 2,200 miles in one stretch. This, obviously, requires extensive planning and preparation, and from four to six months actual hiking. Supposedly, less than one-fourth of thru-hikers who start ever finishes. To do a thru-hike, it helps if you don't have educational or job responsibilities, a mortgage, loans to be repaid, or dependents to support. You also must be physically healthy. An idiosyncratic sense of adventure also helps.

Not many people meet these criteria.

I would have liked to, at minimum, attempt such an adventure. I can easily see myself part of this exclusive club: skinny and wild-eyed, crawling hands and knees up Mount Katahdin with a bottle of champagne tied to my pack straps and a faraway look in my eyes. But as much as I'd like to quit my job, forget about mortgages and college loan payments, and transform myself into a 21st-century, Eastern mountain man, I was afraid of the long-term consequences of such rashness.

So, in August 2013 I decided to use some vacation time for a weeklong section hike. I chose to tramp along a 75-mile section in Georgia, the unofficial trail beginning. *Hey, maybe I can string together enough of these "gentle" hikes to eventually complete the entire AT!*

This dream evaporated even before I stepped on the trail. I've never been good at math, but I finally did the math—after cementing my travel plans—and determined that I would be hiking the exceedingly difficult "100-Mile Wilderness" section of eastern Maine, the last segment of the trail, at age eighty. And this is only assuming I was still healthy and had already achieved my earlier goals of running a marathon in all fifty states and visiting all fifty-nine national parks.

I didn't like the odds.

But a one-off section hike would at least pull me out of the Midwest and away from grilled burgers, so I forked over thirty bucks for a guidebook that I later discovered was fifteen years out of date. I also did one overnight, practice hike in Kentucky's Red River Gorge to test my long-neglected equipment. (Everything seemed to be in working order except my body.) I then contacted a man to shuttle me from the Dalton, Georgia bus station to the trailhead at Georgia's Springer Mountain.

I told myself I was as ready as I'd ever be. I had Georgia on my mind.



The car turns into a cramped parking lot outside the Greyhound bus station in downtown Cincinnati, Ohio. I glance into the backseat at my brown, bulging backpack. Then I look over at the driver...my wife, Lynn. She's smiling, but it's not her typical joyful smile. It's more like her nervous "Why does he do this to me" smile.

Lynn was opposed to my hiking alone on the Appalachian Trail. I'm used to her concern, though. When I proposed marriage to her thirty-one years earlier, I told her I didn't want to give up my freedom (whatever that word means these days), and I still wanted to occasionally go off by myself...even at age fifty-five. She was fine with that. But there's always been a little pushback from her. I guess it's normal. Loyal to a fault, ever-protective and loving, she inevitably worries whenever my health or safety might be in the slightest jeopardy. This time, it was the possibility of bears attacking me, or my stepping on a poisonous snake, contracting hypothermia, or falling off a cliff.

"Honey, just pull around the corner of the building" I mutter weakly. "You'll probably see signs to get back on the interstate." This evening, on the cusp of riding the bus to Georgia, where I will be transported to mountain forests for a week, she isn't the only one who's nervous.

Her anxiety, and my trepidation, make for a hasty goodbye kiss. I shut the car door, clean-and-jerk my bulging, 35-pound backpack, and stumble into the grimy-looking bus station. The linoleum floor is stained with dirt, most of the people look grief-stricken, and the place reeks of cigarette smoke.

My biggest fear, now, is that my pack will be broken or misplaced during the bus trip. I hardly ever use public transportation, and I only venture into cities when I absolutely must. (When you hail from the Midwestern suburbs, and you travel, you always feel like you've done something wrong). I have nightmarish visions of the bus driver rummaging through the luggage compartment, searching for my lost pack, while I hold my breath in the bus depot in Dalton, Georgia.

But despite my fears, and an uncomfortable, sleepless night sitting in an aisle seat next to a guy who stank of tobacco and cologne, I am reunited with my pack—my combination kitchen, bedroom, and man-cave—in Dalton. After a five-minute wait outside a McDonald's that doubled as the bus depot, I see a brown Toyota Rav4 spin into the parking lot.

A grey-haired man wearing a brown t-shirt gets out of the car. *Must be my shuttle-driver, Rance.* I lift my pack, cradle it in front of me and walk over.

"Rance?"

"Yessir...Pete?"

"Yeah, nice to meet you" I exclaim. "You're right on time." Rance opens the trunk door of his Toyota, grabs my pack out of my hands like it's a bag of toilet paper, and stuffs it violently into already crowded trunk space. I'm amazed at his strength. It's a heavy pack, and while wearing it, it towers over my head. *Careful, Rance, that pack is my lifeline for the next week.*

I slide into the passenger seat, and we drive off in early-morning darkness.

During the drive, I learn that Rance is an ex-park ranger and native of New Hampshire. He now lives in Ellijay, Georgia, near the Springer Mountain trailhead, and he makes his living shuttling people like me to and from various points on the trail. He lost his ranger job during the 2008 recession. But he isn't bitter.

"I've got less money now, but I'm a helluva lot happier. You don't choose a life, life chooses you."

Rance tells me about some of the more interesting people he's shuttled. "I shuttled one guy who insisted on carrying his heavy, cast iron skillet. I tried to talk him out of it. Told him it added unnecessary weight to his load. But this crusty skillet was really important to him." Rance said the man was related to the actor who played the cook in the old television Western *Wagon Train*, and he hauled around this heavy hunk of metal in honor of his relative.

He also tells me of the obese man who managed only one or two miles per day at the start, but nailed all 2,000-plus miles to Mount Katahdin.

"I know he finished because he sent me a photo. I barely recognized him, he'd lost so much weight. But it was him. He was holding up the pants he had when he started, and you could've fit three of him inside."

I look around Rance's car. There's a red and yellow "Semper Fi" sticker on the glove box. A messy stack of road atlases and topographic maps are on top of the dashboard. He also has a GPS device that occasionally groans "Things are getting very strange" as we become immersed in the forest. A few other gadgets are scattered here and there. Several wires dangle from the dash to the floor, including one to charge cellphones.

One of the reasons for my hiking was to divorce myself from digital technology for a week. I don't own a smartphone, only an old-fashioned flip phone, but I planned to remove the battery from even this after calling Lynn from Dalton. (She was, reluctantly, privy to my anti-technology scheme.) I was going to leave the battery with

Rance. I wanted a purist experience. But Rance talks me out of it.

“The reception is spotty up there, but you may need that thing for emergency, you never know. Just turn your phone off the whole trip.” He convinces me, and I do just that.

Rance is energetic. He keeps glancing into his rear and side-view mirrors and messing with his GPS. He tells me he had several shuttle trips scheduled for today, and I’m the first.

“Is this your first AT hike?” he asks.

“Sort of. This is my first *serious* hike. I did a few minor backpacking trips out West after college, and when I was fifteen I did a day hike in Virginia on a mountain called The Priest.”

“Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned!” Rance blurts out, without missing a beat. “So, you’re a greenhorn, then, huh?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

I’ll bet I look like a greenhorn, too. He’s probably laughing to himself about my ugly backpack. At least I didn’t bring an iron skillet.

Since I figure I have nothing to lose, I pepper Rance with questions about the trail. He patiently answers each one, even the ones that I think sound naïve, like how much weight I should be carrying.

“These days, everyone’s into lightweight. Not like the old days when packs towered over a person’s head and carried everything imaginable.”

Sheesh. Wait’ll he sees me wearing my own monstrosity.

He continues. “I shuttled one guy who actually transferred his toothpaste into a plastic baggie because he didn’t want the extra weight of the toothpaste tube.”

He asks me what my pack weighs, and I hesitantly tell him “about thirty pounds.”

“Hey, that’s pretty good! I’d say that’s just about right!”

Rance has learned a little psychology in his shuttle work.



Rance drops me off at a forest service road parking lot just north of the trailhead. From here I need to hike 0.9 miles southward to reach the Springer Mountain terminus, sign the hiker register, then turn around and begin my northward trek, re-crossing the parking lot. Then another hundred miles or so to Franklin, North Carolina, where I will meet Lynn and our daughter Holly.

I remove my pack from his car, he fills my canister with complimentary campstove fuel, and we shake hands goodbye. As I walk across the parking lot, I feel his eyes on me. When I get about fifty yards away, I hear him yell out the now-familiar “I shuttled one guy who...” But I can’t make out the rest of it.

The parking area is empty but for one vehicle. Outside the car, two college-age guys look like they are preparing for a hike, too. We exchange furtive glances. Other than the occasional murmur of their conversation, it is hushed silence. I hoist my pack onto my back and look to the left at a narrow opening in the woods. The trail. This will be my home and my lifeline for the next eight days. I take a deep breath and walk slowly toward the opening.

Looking at the open pathway in front of me, I think of Armstrong and Aldrin stepping off the ladder onto the moon, or Alice on the verge of tumbling down the rabbit hole. Instead of the moon or a hole in the earth, though, I am entering a different wonderland. I shuffle quietly through the mighty oaks, the eerie half-light of morning, and the smoke-like fog. I listen for wildlife sounds, but only hear a slight creaking of my pack frame and some jostling of plastic and foil in my pack’s food pouch. After a few minutes, my breathing becomes heavier, and I suck in the tangy odor of wet leaves, bark, and moss—a thick porridge of primordial smells, smells of the wild. There are deep, dark forest tales waiting to be unraveled. Forms of

things unknown. What will I discover these forthcoming days and nights? What mountain mysteries await me?

I am surprised at how rugged the AT is. There are lots of rocks, some of which classify as boulders. There are also a lot of gnarled, twisted roots that protrude from the dirt path, telltale signs of innumerable hiking boots tamping the soil for many, many years. Here had walked Benton MacKaye, Myron Avery, distance hiking champion Earl Shaffer, the eccentric, sneaker-clad Grandma Gatewood, as well as several authors whose books I'd read and whose adventures I'd reveled in. I've always shunned fraternities and clubs. But I liked being part of this club.

On the hike south, I find a slightly bowed, chest-high tree branch. Sturdy, not a lot of knobs, and the bowed look gives it distinction. I adopt it as my walking stick. I christen it "Kip" after a boy from my youth with whom I attended summer camp. (Kip occupies a special place, and I talk about him later in the book.) I also pass a few hikers, the first being a blonde woman who says she is doing a short section to Neels Gap.

I arrive shortly at a large rocky clearing shrouded in fog: the top of Springer Mountain.

This is it. I'd dreamed about this place. Sure enough, to the right is the 1933 bronze plaque showing a hiker with a hat and backpack. On the left is a large boulder with a more recent plaque. At the bottom of the boulder is a shiny metal door with a handle. It is a cabinet drawer that is tucked into a drilled cavity of the boulder. I grasp the handle and pull the drawer open. Inside I find a notebook that is damp from rain and humidity. Within this notebook are short essays penned by dozens of recent hikers who'd also reached this spot.

I write a few sentences about my motivations for being here and sign with a made-up nickname, a "trail alias." Trail aliases are colorful names that distance hikers either adopt themselves, or which are bestowed upon them. I like

the name that follows the entry directly above mine: "Rainbow Slug."

I'd like to take a photo from Springer Mountain, but it's so foggy that I can only see about fifty feet in front of me. The damp air and smoky haze adds to the phantasmagoric feeling I already have. The dirt path under my feet, leading into the haze, is pregnant with possibilities this coming week.

It is so good to be hiking, to be moving. Some people think distance hiking, even a short weeklong trip like mine, is difficult. It is, and it isn't. Yes, muscles hurt at the end of the day. Sores and blisters are irritating. Thirst and hunger are frequent companions. But it's all temporal. Hikers know there's an endpoint. The pain on the way will soon be supplanted by a feeling of achievement, of having surmounted hurdles, and of surfacing alive. The endpoint drives the hiker, which enables him or her to get up in the morning and begin the ritual anew.

Most hikers and backpackers I know are attracted by simplicity. Hiking is contemplative and Zen-like. Buddhism in the out-of-doors. I feel that way about running, which is why I run marathons. Like distance hiking, marathons are physically challenging, but they're very doable if you put in the training time and prepare well. Like backpacking, running equipment is minimal, and other than tying shoelaces, there's little technical knowhow, very appealing to people attracted to the purest forms of things.

This marathon courses through the forest. North Carolina is the finish line. I estimate I need to do about thirteen miles per day to reach Franklin. *Easy. Heck, my marathon training runs are longer and only last a few hours.* As I soon find out, hiking on rocks and roots for ten hours, up and down mountains, with a small hippopotamus straddled on your back, is much different from running a couple hours on a flat, paved bicycle path with nothing at your back except breeze.

I arrive again at the gravel parking lot where Rance had dropped me off, but I am pushing northward this time. I see a few other hikers unloading their gear. After a couple hours of heart-pumping, muscle-churning exertion, I start humming an old Bob Dylan tune. I only do a few verses when I detect someone close behind me.

Whoops. Did he hear me humming? Should I let him catch up, or keep walking? What the heck, might as well be sociable. I walk a little slower, then turn around. It is a young guy with sandy, shoulder-length hair.

“Thought I heard someone behind me,” I remark, then wait for him to catch up. Up close he looks even younger. His backpack looks brand new. Like me, he’s using a wooden walking stick. It’s shiny, and straight, compared to my recently acquired stick, Kip, which is bowed.

“My name’s Pete,” I say.

“I’m Dylan.”

His name, after my singing, is the first of several strange coincidences.

I learn that Dylan is a 24-year-old from Augusta, Georgia. Like me, hiking the AT is a longtime dream. His parents had dropped him off at Amicalola Falls State Park, 8.8 miles south of Springer. Dylan enjoys hunting, flounder fishing, and winemaking. He has a girl back home who is pressuring him to get married. He tells me he loves her, but needs a little distance, a little breathing room. He took time off from work and hopes a short AT hike will provide this.

Dylan’s singular features are his southern Georgia accent, long hair, narrow eyes, and high cheekbones. *I wonder if he’s part Native American—maybe Creek, Seminole, or Cherokee?* Dylan seems easygoing. He has a strong gait but doesn’t rush his walking.

There isn’t much conversation, at first. It’s a little awkward, being thrust together with someone at the beginning of a long journey, especially one young enough to be my son. I intended to hike alone, since I’m a loner by

nature, and I wanted that introspective, John Muir experience.

But Dylan and I seem to hit it off. While the conversation is stilted at first, eventually we discover that neither of us feels like we *have* to talk, so we settle into a conversational rhythm as smooth as our hiking pace, only speaking when there’s a need.

I’ll later reflect how odd it was that we met right at the start of our hikes. And of all the hikers I will meet in years to come, he’s the only one I hike with for any extended period.

It’s like the time my dad taught me how to ice skate at Sunset Park when I was seven years old. He held my hand for a few laps around the ice. Then he released me to skate solo.



Eventually, we arrive at a tree with a blue rectangle painted on the bark. The blue-blazed rectangles signify AT side paths, which lead to a shelter or water source. (White-blazed rectangles, painted on trees or boulders every hundred yards or so, indicate the official AT.) This blue-blazed path leads to our first shelter. Most AT shelters are five-sided structures, including a wooden sleeping platform and roof, and with the front side open to the elements. They’re located about a half-day’s hike apart, usually near a spring or stream, and they have overhead cables for “bear bags.” (Hikers are urged to put their food and waste in sturdy bags and tie them overhead at night, at least ten feet high and four feet from the nearest tree.)

Here at Hawk Mountain Shelter we meet three guys on a Labor Day weekend hike: Stan, his son Derek, and their friend Ed. I talk with Derek and find out he plays trumpet for his high school marching band in Gwinnett County, Georgia. Good-looking kid, dark hair, with a cheerful naiveté and shyness typical of many teenagers. With his

stocky build and bushy hair, he reminds me of my son, Nick, at that age. I feel the slightest twinge of homesickness.

Derek's dad, Stan, is quiet and sullen. He's slightly overweight, rarely smiles, and looks out of place in the mountains. I can picture him wearing a white shirt and tie, crunching numbers in an office. Not wearing Patagonia clothing, and hiking in the forest.

Their friend, Ed, is just the opposite. Younger than Stan, he smiles frequently and is either gazing upward at the treetops, or energetically adjusting some piece of equipment, his tongue clamped between his lips. Ed is the first hiker I've seen to carry dual, aluminum trekking poles rather than a wooden stick. I assume Ed is related to Stan. Or maybe a client of his.

I also see the blonde woman I'd seen at Springer Mountain. Her name is Jenna, and she lives in Fort Benning, Georgia, though her hometown is beautiful Lake Tahoe, California. She's slightly chunky, in an attractive, athletic way. She has a self-assured manner, like most of the solo women hikers I'll soon meet, and when she talks, she takes her time to choose just the right words. I ask her if she's the infamous Rainbow Slug, but she laughs and says no, that she isn't much for trail aliases. Dylan and I have dropped our aliases, too. They don't seem appropriate for us section hikers.

Trail aliases are convenient for marathon backpackers, who often reunite, share campsites and shelters, and exchange news about other hikers. They provide color and anonymity, as well as distinction. (Keeping track of a half-dozen people named "Zach" or "Lindsay" could be difficult on a thru-hike.) Still, I've always thought they were a bit silly. They remind me of a fraternity I knew in college. The members all wore bright green t-shirts that had pet nicknames printed on the backs, like "Zonker" and "Brillo Pad." It was a kind of sub-cultural affectation.

I spend some time poking around the shelter vicinity. About forty yards from the shelter I come upon a large fire ring, about ten feet in diameter. There are a few charred logs in the center, and a small pile of kindling just outside the ring. Evidently some hikers had recently built a nice fire. I also notice trash. A metal cap from a fruit or preserved meat can, and some partially charred foil, leftovers from a freeze-dried meal.

Back home, I volunteer on the 78-mile Little Miami Scenic Trail northeast of Cincinnati, where I do a lot of running. I'm an adopter of a four-mile segment, so I do a lot of tree planting, brush cleanup, limb trimming, and trash pickup. I'm often bewildered why so many people don't seem to give a damn, even in a state park. Every weekend, on my Saturday morning run, I scoop up discarded water bottles and gel packets from littering pedestrians and bicyclists.

My running friend, Baxter, is a co-adopter like myself, as well as a trail board member. And, like me, Baxter has a streak of misanthropy. Between complaints about fickle volunteers and the side-effects of his pre-diabetes, Baxter often speculates what he'll do if he ever catches one of these slobs in the act of littering. I can imagine the local headline: "Trail Volunteer Pummels Bicyclist for Dropping Candy Wrapper."

Baxter and I find common ground on a lot of things. One of my most memorable conversations with him centered around a Caribbean cruise Lynn and I took. Baxter didn't understand the appeal. We both object to the carbon emissions and well-publicized waste violations of cruise liners, but Baxter goes even further than me. He hates the excessive hedonism and believes a vacation should be earned, that one should work for one's leisure.

"Well, we worked our regular jobs all year for this vacation," I explained to him. "So, didn't we earn it?"

Evergreen Dreaming

“No, I mean you should have to work *during* your vacation, as well. Like run a marathon, or spend a week volunteering on the bike trail.”

Baxter admitted to me once that he’s an “anal-retentive proctoid.” So maybe his opinion doesn’t count.



I look for a trash receptacle but can’t find one. *Guess that makes sense. A trash can in the forest will only entice bears and other hungry critters. Don’t want a bear near my tent.* I have a trash bag for my own use, but don’t have the stomach to pick up someone else’s bug-infested mess. I just shake my head, then return to the others.

We all have a respite at the shelter, sharing trail mix and candy bars. Jenna then decides to hike with Dylan and me.

Sometime in early afternoon we get drenched when a thundershower strikes while climbing Sassafras Mountain. Rain is especially bothersome on a distance hike, because it’s so difficult to dry your belongings when they’re stuffed all day inside a backpack. Judging from the others’ packs, mine is an outdated model. I think I bought it when Jimmy Carter was president, and last used it during the Reagan era. Maybe it’s why everything inside gets wet. Cotton clothing is another problem. I should’ve bought some good wool socks, because my athletic socks become increasingly dirty and smelly, and never completely dry out the entire hike.

I tell myself this journey through Georgia is my Backpacking 101 course. It’s like so many learning experiences, some of which are in the classroom, but most of which are not.

1978—ATHENS, OHIO

At Ohio University, Randy and I live on the same dormitory floor. He’s two years ahead of me. He’s also ahead of me intellectually and socially. He’s majoring in pre-med, carrying a perfect 4.0 GPA.

Companions

(I’m undecided and struggling to keep a 3.0.) He’s also able to move fluidly on a dance floor, chat up attractive women, and sometimes coax them to his dorm room. (I can’t dance, I’m still uncomfortable with women, and they only knock on my door by mistake.)

But Randy’s a nice guy. When he’s not studying, he lets me hang out with him on weekend nights in his room. His room is a refuge, away from the campus hordes. It’s like a cozy tent on a bed of pine needles. His room is dark, with just a soft yellow glow from his study lamp. It has a thick shag rug, and a musky odor of vanilla pipe smoke and roasted coffee. My other college friends all listen to generic arena rock. If there’s no party going on, they’re playing pinball in the student union. But Randy listens to English folk-rock like Lindisfarne and Pentangle, and progressive jazz musicians like Pat Metheny. He introduces me to Fleetwood Mac, but not the commercial Buckingham and Nicks stuff, rather the earlier and heavier Peter Green and Danny Kirwan versions of Mac. And instead of playing pinball, he prefers to just talk and mellow out with music and a joint.

One Saturday night, Randy and I go out on the town. I’m underage, so Randy’s buying me tequila sunrises all night long. We’re sitting at a small table in the upstairs foosball room, and Randy meets a woman. She’s dressed in a business suit. She has a fake intellectual air about her. She’s not attractive...to me, at least. But Randy’s smitten. Eventually, we end up at the woman’s apartment at 3 a.m., where one of the woman’s friends keeps trying to get me interested in her (I think). But I’m not attracted to her, and I’m dog-tired and just want to go home. But Randy drove, so I can’t leave. Every now and then, I get Randy alone and plead with him

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to take us back to the dorm. But each time, he smiles complacently, puts his hand on my shoulder, and gives the same response:

“Think of this as a learning experience.”

I curse silently about my smelly, dirty, wet cotton socks. And curse at myself for not preparing as well as Dylan and Jenna, who are much younger than me, and who should be following *my* lead.



Sassafras Mountain is my initiation into straight, steep ascents. The amount of carbon-dioxide I expel getting to the top is incredible. I notice that each of us adopts a role. Dylan is the strongest, so he leads. I come next, about fifty yards behind. And Jenna is somewhere downslope behind me. But there's teamwork and encouragement. Occasionally Dylan stops, perhaps at a scenic overlook, while I catch up. Then the two of us wait for Jenna. Sometimes I stop and wait for Jenna. We pull each other along, uphill, through the pelting water. Occasionally, we share groans.

One thing that strikes me about hiking a long trail is the frivolousness. My boy, Nick, loves sports. When he was small, he once asked me after a particularly nail-biting ballgame “Dad, why are sports so important?” I struggled for an appropriate answer, then came up with the off-the-cuff “Well...they're *not* important. That's why they're...uh...so much fun.” Later, I realized it was actually a pretty good response. Homework, job, and paying bills are all important, but hardly enjoyable.

I'm now with two strangers, who are much younger, with very different backgrounds, one a different sex, and we're sharing an activity that makes no sense: walking over mountains, far from home, in the rain. *What?!* At first glance, this pursuit seems totally senseless. It's like sitting

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on the beach in a yoga position and counting waves. But we're actually having a lot of fun. And I can't think of many activities where you can share senseless fun with total strangers.

The rain has stopped, but in the quiet of our private struggles up the mountain, my eyes take in the water-laden leaves. Large raindrops dangle from the tips and edges. They're like shiny, translucent Christmas baubles. Watery ornaments everywhere, hanging delicately, but dispersing into spray as soon as my clothes and pack come into the slightest contact. Christmas ornaments, when they shatter, have a jarring sound, but raindrop shattering is silent.

Exploding raindrops. How often do I think of such things at home?

By the end of the day, Dylan figures we've covered fifteen miles. Tack on another mile for my backtracking from the forest road near Springer, and sixteen total miles is impressive—although I remember Rance saying to expect only seven or eight miles after the first day.

We overnight at Gooch Mountain Shelter, meeting up with Stan, Derek and Ed, as well as a few other hikers. The shelter itself is full, probably due to Labor Day Weekend, so Dylan and I pitch our tents about fifty yards away. He gets a good fire going. Then he pushes some sticks in the ground near the fire and drapes his wet socks over them. *Great idea.* I do the same for my socks and sneakers. But all I manage to do is singe the rubber sole of one of my sneakers.

Dylan, whose mane of hair requires more maintenance than mine, mentions he could use a bandana, so I give him an extra one I have. Bandanas are handy pieces of clothing on the trail. During marathon runs I employ a bandana as both hairnet and sponge, and on the trail, it serves these purposes, and becomes a satchel and potholder.

Dylan returns the bandana loan by letting me sample some of his homemade cherry-blackberry wine.

At home I'll typically have a beer or two after work, and I rarely drink wine—usually only with Italian cooking. But his nectar tastes so good out here in the forest. Alcohol dehydrates, and we lost a lot of water today, but somehow this juice is invigorating. Maybe because we *earned* it. It's the best vino I ever tasted. There is nothing like a shot of cherry-blackberry wine after an exhausting backpack trip.

As the fire crackles and the wine warms our insides, Dylan and I begin to warm to each other. Although we've hiked together the better part of the day, our conversation occurred in spurts. He was usually at least ten feet in front of me, and because of our exertion and concentration on roots and rocks, our talk consisted mainly of mundane trail observations. Of his home life, I know little, other than he likes to rabbit hunt, go fishing for flounder with his older brothers in the saltwater coves around Augusta, and hang out with his girlfriend. I ask him whether he works or goes to school.

"I can't afford college," he says. "I work as a production assistant in a turpentine factory."

"How do you like it?" I ask, immediately thinking it was a dumb question.

"It's not bad. The pay's good, and I like the people I work with. The worst part is I have to smell turpentine all day, and it stays with me after I go home."

His confession jolts a memory of a factory job I had one summer between college quarters. The work consisted of placing steel augers in a holding fixture, then taking a large metal file and striking the auger tines to knock off little metal bubbles that had formed during forging. This labor was supplemented by occasional sanding with the file, then bending the tines with a wrench device so they were perfectly aligned in the fixture. I never asked where the augers went, or why it was important to scrape bubbles and bend tines. The work was tedious and soul-killing, to the point where I looked forward to my monotony-breaking bowel movements. Despite my mom throwing my grey

jumpsuit in the washing machine every few days, the smell of factory grease and metal shavings never totally disappeared. Even today I smell it.

Unlike Dylan, I wasn't forced to keep my factory job. The money I made didn't go toward food and rent, but textbooks and beer. My parents weren't wealthy, but they sent me to an expensive boys' boarding school, and me and my two brothers to college.

But I've worked blue-collar jobs, even after college. I still have friends I met while working them. So, unlike a lot of my peers, I think I can relate to working class folks like Dylan. Can't I?

I tell Dylan about my work as an aviation technical writer. I tell him I appreciate my job, "but the work can be dry. That's why I like escaping to places like this," I say, waving my arm. "Where it's *wet*." He laughs. "I'd like to do more writing related to alternative energy and transportation. It's mostly gas turbine, though. Oh well."

But he says it must be "cool" to write about aircraft engines. I try to self-deprecate.

"Gas turbine technology is just fan, compression, combustion, and turbine. Or, as we say in the business: suck, squeeze, bang, and blow."

He laughs again, then passes over the Mason jar of wine. A log cracks in two, and a few sparks from the fire shoot high in the darkness. *Lewis and Clark once sat around their own campfires, like this, long ago, on the other side of the continent.*

I think of how society has changed since Lewis and Clark. *While they were plowing through wilderness and river currents from 1804 through 1806, most people worked where they lived, usually right on their homesteads. Some were my Tupper ancestors, farmers, foundry workers, and family doctors who lived on former Cayuga land in the Finger Lakes section of New York. They could never have imagined the coming Industrial Revolution, which brought the assembly line, cotton gin, and mechanical reaper. Then*

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a technological revolution, with the telephone, automobile, airplane, television, computer, and now iPhone. We're more productive because of machines, and we have more leisure time to enjoy nature (or, in many people's case, to enjoy punching buttons). Nature is now thought of in the abstract. It's something we gaze at dreamily, or sometimes frolic in.

The down side of machines is that we're now geographically separated from our workplaces. Unlike my forebears Benjamin, Josiah, and Asa, we don't see where our goods come from, and a connection to land—the earth's resources that sustain us—has been severed. We cut, strip, and drill those resources to propel our machines, with little thought of consequences.

I take another gulp of wine, then pass the Mason jar back to Dylan. He shoots me a glance with his narrow Cherokee eyes in the glow of the firelight.

There is enormous faith that somebody else will take care of things. Including our lawmakers. We hope they make the right decisions about limiting air and water pollution, passing workplace safety laws, and going to war. But politicians never have to fight the wars, or work in turpentine factories.

"Squeeze, blow...suck...then bang?" Dylan asks, after a few minutes of quietness in the firelight.

"Sort of," I reply.

He takes a gulp of the wine, then looks at me with a smile. "Sounds like I could enjoy that!"

That must turn his mind to something else, because he then asks me what I think of Jenna.

"Well, she's a strong hiker, and she has a nice personality. Good-looking, too."

Dylan doesn't respond. He's slapping one of his socks against his shorts to put out the flames.

Perspectives

Earlier, I mentioned Ed, the hiker with the trekking poles who gazed at the treetops. As opposed to his sullen friend Stan, Ed had a cheery way and seemed to absorb as much of his surroundings as possible. I'm not the cheery type, but I was out here to absorb nature, too. And because we're always drawn to our own sort, I hoped I'd get an opportunity to talk with Ed.

The following morning—after shaking off the rain puddle from the top of my oblong tent, and untying my bear bag to discover an adventurous mouse had made a pilgrimage from the shelter to the woods, then scaled a tree, then tightrope-walked the limb that held my bear bag, then gnawed a hole through the nylon bear bag, a plastic baggie, and several granola bar wrappers—I see Ed descending down the hill to the stream. I follow him.

I arrive at the stream while Ed is filling his filtration bag with water. I get my first good look at him. His yellowish hair is close-cropped, he has a square and sturdy jaw covered with blond beard stubble, and some of the bluest