

“Why Do We Hike?”

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I’ve been wanting to share this story for some time. The title is not mine, but a bit on that shortly. As many of you know, I like to spend a large amount of my time outside, away from civilization, out in the creation. Whether hiking or on my bike or just sitting quietly someplace where the view begs you to sit and be quiet.

In 2009, I decided to hike the “100 Mile Wilderness” section of the Appalachian Trail, which is located in Western Maine. The section is not one hundred miles, but close enough, nor is it wilderness since there are several logging roads that cross the trail at several points. However, there are no services to speak of to buy food or other needs. And if you were to get injured or were unable to continue walking, you might be in quite a pickle.

I set out on Father’s Day weekend in 2009. My friend Ben offered to shuttle me from Abol Bridge, where I had left my truck, to the AT crossing of Route 15 in Monson. After he wished me well and took my picture, I set off on the trail northbound and immediately was greeted by a sign that warned:

CAUTION: There are no places to obtain supplies or get help until Abol Bridge 100 miles north. Do not attempt this section unless you have a minimum of 10 days supplies and are fully equipped. This is the longest wilderness section of the entire AT and its difficulty should not be underestimated. Good hiking!

Well, I pondered that for a minute, then turned around and ran back to the parking lot—where I saw Ben spinning his tires as he drove quickly away, cackling like a maniac. No, not really, but I did ponder the sign for a moment. I actually had seven days’ food with me, but I knew I was fine, but otherwise the weight of this caution stopped me for a beat. Then I set out.

I could spend a lot of time sharing what happened over the next six and a half days, but a lot of it is really only interesting to me. I saw a lot of beauty while on my journey, and I met a bunch of interesting people all out on their own journeys, mostly southbound through hikes setting off for the AT southern end in Georgia. If you don’t know, the AT travels from Mt. Katahdin in Maine to Springer Mt. in Georgia, over a distance of 2,100 miles. Most people that do the trail start in April from Georgia hoping to finish in Maine in October. Others start in June on Katahdin and hope to finish by Thanksgiving. Most thru hikers finish the trail in five months.

But the people. . . On about my fourth day, I sheltered in a lean-to while hail and thunder pounded the roof. I shared this experience with a teacher from Nokomis High School and her student, who was looking to get a sense of what trail life was about. The student was going to write a paper titled “Why do People Hike?” She was asking other hikers this question, and she

said the answers were very different and very surprising. So I looked back through my previous four days at the people I'd met and also reflected on my own experiences, not just on this trip but over my life as a "hiker." Here is a summary:

The first person I met on this journey was a tall man walking out to Monson. He was bearded and smiling from ear to ear. He was using a fishing rod case as a walking stick because he had fallen hard on some wet granite ledges and smashed up his shin pretty badly. The evidence was seeping out from under the makeshift bandages he'd used. He didn't seem fazed, and after passing a few words, he was gone.

Later I met another hiker who told me that he'd had a couple of heart attacks, and he also had broken his leg twice in the same place. Not his leg in the same place, but the same location on the trail, actually not far from where we were standing. He said his wife made him carry a cell phone and SPOT locator so that if he didn't check in daily, they would know where to find him. I asked him why he was there if that was the case. He said he needed to be out in the woods. He needed to be able to break free from things.

I had stopped for lunch at the Rainbow Stream lean-to and had kept to myself for the most part, mostly because a guy named Andy was dominating the conversation. I didn't care because I was hungry and tired; I was thinking I would finish my hike that day and was already twelve miles into what ended up being a twenty mile day. Then I noticed the whole group went quiet as Andy said, "Well see you later!" and started to cross the three-log bridge spanning Rainbow Stream, which was swollen from a week of solid rain. The whole group held their breath as Andy worked his way over the slippery steps to the other side. I was curious and held my breath too. After Andy crossed he gave a final wave and headed up the trail.

At that point a person in the lean-to looked at me and informed me that Andy had told all of them he was legally blind and had accidentally gone back a few miles on the trail in the wrong direction after going out to a lookout, because he couldn't read the signs or see clearly. The group held its breath when he crossed the stream, because they were all willing him safely across the chasm. I caught up with Andy a little while later and we walked together for a bit. He said he was glad to walk with someone, because he didn't have to concentrate as much on the trail and could look around more. I was happy to stay with him, because he had a unique perspective on life. But the same theme as before was repeated. A need to be in the woods to get back to simpler schedules. This person was functionally blind and yet was out on his own happily splashing through the puddles and loving his experience.

The last person I want to talk about before I get to the point is Dave from Virginia. I arrived at the Hurd Brook lean-to footsore and weary after hiking twenty miles and having had enough. My plans of getting a big dinner in Millinocket that night switched to getting a big breakfast the next day after walking four miles to the trail head. I stopped at the lean-to to say Hi and talked to a couple of guys about where I'd been and where I was heading. Then I found a couple of trees for my hammock and settled in to make camp, get water, and make dinner. About the time I was sipping some whiskey after dinner, a man walked over and introduced himself. He was quiet and

looked kind of sad. He said his name was Dave and he had set out to hike the AT but realized he wasn't going to make it. He had already climbed Katahdin, but here, four miles from the trail head, he had already made up his mind. So he asked, since I was planning to walk out in the morning, if he could get a ride to Millinocket. Around trails and in the hiking community, rides are given and taken freely, so of course I said yes. I had no idea what a profound impact this was going to have on my life.

The next morning I got up, had a light breakfast with a priority on coffee, and packed up. As I was walking out past the lean-to, one of the guys I'd talked to the night before said Dave had already left. He was worried I wouldn't remember about the ride. The guy also said he wasn't surprised Dave was calling off the hike, since he was very slow and didn't seem to really have his heart in it. I had caught that vibe, but I sensed something else when I had spoken with Dave. I got under way and quickly caught up to Dave a couple of miles later. He was very worried I was going to leave him behind and I really had to assure him I would give him a ride as I'd promised. But he walked very slow, so I quickly left him and headed out to my truck. I had no intention of backing out of my promise, but as I learned a bit later, Dave was having some trust issues. There comes a time when an act of kindness, no matter how small, can make a difference. Whether it's in the form of an anonymous donation for your family when finances are tight, or a simple lift to a place where you can start again. I don't know if any of my time with Dave helped him or not.

I got back to my truck and loaded my pack into the back. I had a change of clothes, and my plan had been to go up to what's called Horse Race Campsite to check in with Ben, who I knew would be fishing, and to change. So I started my truck and drove to Abol Bridge to wait for Dave when he came out of the woods. As I got to the trail head, he came running out to catch me, sure I was leaving. After loading his pack in my truck and telling him my plans, we drove up to the camp site, where I saw Ben and then changed in the outhouse. Ben was not as comfortable about Dave as I was, and unknown to me, he quickly picked up his stuff and followed us to Millinocket, sure that Dave was going to murder me and leave me in the woods. Instead Dave and I drove to the AT diner for a late breakfast, which was awesome, and Dave started to tell me his story. Ben arrived and ate with us, and by then I'd decided to take Dave all the way to Bangor where he could catch a bus to Portland where his daughter lived.

As we drove down I-95, Dave told me his wife of twenty-five years had decided she didn't want to be married to him any more because he wasn't ever going to do anything good. Ouch. Like many others who often mark significant changes in their lives, he thought he could walk off his divorce on the AT. It only made it worse. He started to break down, and I could tell he wasn't well and wasn't prepared for what was next in life. I simply listened, and I tried not to cry, even though his story touched me greatly, and I wondered why he chose to hike. Was it refuge from his troubles? Was it an unconscious desire to commune with his creator? Was he hoping to find reconciliation or maybe punish himself through the days' arduous and rewarding torture that hiking can be? I don't know. I dropped him at the bus station and wished him well. I still carry him with me, a man I knew for five hours.

Maybe we don't all hike or undertake physical challenges but I think we all have our escapes. Or is it a return to home? I know I go into the woods to explore the creation and adore my creator. Others like Dave go to have a place to reassess their lives. Maybe Dave was looking for some kind of forgiveness. I don't know, and besides, that was *his* journey. Maybe later he had a less ambitious adventure and found what he needed. I know that on the one-week trip, I certainly had my own life altering experiences. Maybe God was speaking to all of us that week, telling us that all was good and thank you for appreciating all the work I put into this world. Maybe the fisherman with the bloody shin, Andy the blind hiker, or the guy whose wife needed to be able to track him were all showing their own profound appreciation for what they had and where they were. I pray that Dave was able to forgive himself and his ex wife. I hope Dave found his peace eventually.