



The class stood loosely around Professor Kip Redick.

*Communitas*  
on the  
*Appalachian Trail*

PHOTOGRAPHS & STORIES  
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Two weeks and about one hundred miles with a religious studies class, hiking the Appalachian Trail from northern Tennessee to the Grayson Highlands in Virginia.

It was early in the morning and we were preparing to head out on our first day of hiking. Some stared at their boots, others at Kip, and others off into the trees as he spoke. He told us to walk alone for the first segment. He wanted us to be present in the wilderness. But before we left, he told us a few things about the trail. He said the trail was marked by white blazes, small rectangles of white painted on trees about head high. He also told us that blue blazes marked side trails and told us a story about some of his students in previous years who had gone two miles on a blue blaze before realizing it and had to turn around and go back to the main trail.

We started hiking that morning alone. One person would head down the trail and the next person would wait until they were well out of sight before heading out themselves. The sun was out and the day was warm for early May. The first segment of trail

was easy to identify. It ran along inside a rhododendron thicket for a ways and then through some fairly dense trees. Kip was waiting for us as we came down the trail just over this one bridge. As I passed him he said to me, "Stay on the trail. Watch for the white blazes." I walked on. Down the trail a quarter of a mile or so, I met up with a new acquaintance of my, one with trail experience and a "trail name"—Wookie. A trail name is a sort of alter ego that you can give yourself as you hike a section of the two-thousand-mile long Appalachian Trail, which stretches from

Georgia to Maine, or that others can give you. My group of about fifteen students and two professors was hiking about one hundred miles, mostly in Virginia. Wookie was named for his snoring like ... a wookie. When I met Wookie, he was waiting on the side of the trail. He was leaning against a tree and the tree had two white blazes on it. He looked up at me and told me to keep an eye out for what he called the double white blazes. He said that the double white blazes were the sign for a change in the trail being up ahead. The one he was standing at marked the intersection of a blue blaze trail and the AT.

We were headed for Damascus, in southwestern Virginia, and for the rest of the way into Damascus the blazes were consistent. Every few hundred feet there would be a white blaze showing us the way. But a few days after Damascus, the trees disappeared and the white blazes started to appear on rocks or on posts along the trail. At one point we were hiking out from our base camp that day in Rhododendron Gap (about forty miles

north of Damascus) when Kip turned around to us and said that the blazes in this area were tricky. He pointed out how the blazes weren't on the trees anymore but on the rocks. "He told us to keep a close eye on the rocks and the blazes.

The next day the class came back from our visit into a town near the trail, and as we started hiking back up to camp, a thick fog blew in off the top of Mt. Rogers and the group split up. When one group of us had made it back to camp we thought everyone had made it back. But an hour or so later someone noticed that Christy and Mr. Pink were missing.

After about an hour of yelling and searching Mr. Pink and Christy arrived back at the camp and Mr. Pink told us



Double blaze



Uncle Silly

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their story.

Christy had been falling behind and called for someone to slow down so she wouldn't be alone. Mr. Pink slowed down and walked with her but then the fog rolled in and they lost the white blazes. When it got dark, Mr. Pink pulled out his head lamp and found a blaze. It was blue, and they had lost the white blazes. He said he didn't know what to do. Eventually they found the white blaze and were able to make it back to camp.

A few days later I was hiking with Uncle Silly and we passed by a tree with a double white blaze on it. He turned to me and said, "Mr. Pink and I are starting to really dread seeing these." The double white blazes symbolize a loss of security. Even in the wilderness, hikers find a sense of security in the white blazes, telling them they are on the right trail; they are headed in the right direction. When the double blaze shows up and there is a change in the trail up ahead, hikers lose that security.

The white blazes offer guidance in an environment we are not used too. Most of us hiking out on the AT are not native wilderness people and need some sort of civilization to protect us even while we are trying to escape some form of civilization back at home, in our ordinary lives.

**"We're gonna smoke pot. You want some?"**

Panoramic's face was nonchalant and his eyes asked me matter-of-factly. His buddy Golgi was waiting impatiently, shuffling his feet and glancing back and forth down the trail. A small stream ran across the trail where I was standing and looked green in the shade of the rhododendron.

"No, thanks. I'll just meet you all down the trail." The two of them dropped their packs and sat down, right on the trail.

"Alright," Panoramic said, "We'll see you later." I walked on. I was still a mile or so from the shelter and already tired enough to turn in for the night. I met Panoramic the night before. He had come into Saunders shelter after dark,



Panoramic

and I was sitting by the campfire when I saw his headlamp. I went over to him while he was cooking his dinner and introduced myself as Quaker Oats.

"Quaker Oats, huh? You eat a lot of Oatmeal?" he asked. I told him no, they were just poking fun at me being a quaker.

"Oh, you know I just recently read some about the quakers. I had no idea they were so open minded. You would expect a religion that old to be more strict on its members. I was impressed." I found out the next day that Panoramic was an agnostic libertarian. Which made clear to me why he valued open-mindedness; he wanted to be free to do as he wished. While we were walking, he explained being a libertarian as "wanting the fewest number of people telling you what to do as possible." He told me that the result of this belief is that he typically votes democratic because he would rather be told what to do with his money rather than told what to do with his mind, body, and soul.

He told me he was a naturally reclusive individual who would rather read a book than be social. But one of the distinctive features of the Appalachian Trail is its social nature. Panoramic said he had to force himself to be social by staying in shelters rather than camping and hiking

with others rather than alone. But when he is in a group it seems he is always the center of attention. At one point Panoramic and I were hiking together and a large group of hikers, including our class, had stopped at the side of a creek to go swimming. I told Panoramic that I was going to just keep on hiking but he told me I couldn't; he said I had to come down to the water while he went swimming with the group. Once we were down where everyone else was he walked straight over to Linda and started talking about Korea and how much he loved Asia. His manner in groups was one decorated with frequent violent hand motions and gestures.

In 1998 he worked for four months on an off-shore oil platform with a single magazine for reading material. The magazine was a Backpacker magazine, and he read it multiple times. He pledged to himself that when he returned to the mainland he would take a few weeks off and go backpacking. After that he started joking, "If I ever get laid off I'll just go, put my stuff in storage and hike the AT." Then he got laid off twice in one year and did just that. Now he is through hiking the AT and feeling free of the complex worries of modern society and escaping the conservative people of his home in Louisiana.