

*Observation in
Participation:
A Journey on the
Appalachian Trail*

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As the rain poured down, the large group pushed forward.

The rain was cold on the shoulders of the crowd, but their spirits were not diminished. They had worked long and hard for this moment. For some, this was the ultimate goal. For others, it was merely a secondary goal on their journey. No matter their future, they were going to revel in this moment.

With the smell of hot dogs in the background, the group began their trek through the city. They were armed to the teeth and ready for challengers. A young boy in a kilt stood next to his father. His freshly cut Mohawk flopped down in the rain. He took out his gun and searched out a target. When he found his victim, he aimed and fired. His shot hit the mark. A stream of water hit the onlooker, drenching his crotch. A place that the young boy no doubt thought was funny. The cold water made the victim jump into action. Armed with a bucket, he scooped murky water from the gutter and the chase was on.

The agile boy leaped away in retreat, but the soaked onlooker had allies. A group of hikers grabbed the boy and he was drenched with filthy water. His father laughed and congratulated the boy. He was proud that his child became a victim in the Damascus Trail Days water fight.

Dubbed "the friendliest town on the Appalachian Trail," Damascus created the annual Trial Days festival to attract hikers looking for a weekend to relax. For me, Damascus was a right of passage. The festival, the halfway point on my two week journey, signaled a change. If the festival were held a week earlier, I would not be walking in the parade, flinging water balloons at the onlookers. I would be an onlooker, dodging water balloons and admiring the grizzled hikers walk through the streets.

One week earlier, I had not walked a single mile on the Appalachian Trail's more than 2,174 miles. One week earlier, I set out to report on the people who plan on hiking all 2,174+

miles. One week earlier I was just an onlooker, who was a bit annoyed at the drive and conviction that I saw in the hikers, but frustrated that the drive wasn't in me. I was an outsider reporting on what I saw and the people I met. While I was walking in the parade, I was walking as a participant on the trail. It was not just the miles that I hiked, or the shelters that I slept in. I had the mindset of a hiker. I had the drive and conviction of a hiker. I was reporting as a hiker.

Unknown

I sat in my room staring at my equipment spread out on the floor. My sleeping bag was stuffed in a compression sack next to my tent. My food for the next five days was divvied up into small plastic bags and put in a black sack. The remaining food was thrown into a garbage bag. My clothes (three shirts, two pairs of pants, three pairs of underwear and socks) were placed in a red sack. My toiletries and other equipment were all neatly packed in Ziploc bags. I sat staring at my floor thinking that this equipment was all I had for the next two weeks and I had to carry it all on my back the whole time.

For the rest of the night I packed up my equipment in my backpack and then unpacked, trying to find the best arrangement. Even when I seemed to have my backpack in the most organized way, I would unpack and start over. It was almost like a calming ritual for me. I was tricking myself into feeling like a hiker. I had no clue what I was doing but packing my backpack made me feel legitimate.

As our departure time of 6:00 a.m. drew near I placed my equipment, food and clothing into my backpack for the last time. I stripped out of my cotton clothing and dressed in my hiking clothes for the first time. I laced up my boots and strapped my backpack to my back. The weight was uncomfortable on my shoulders. I grabbed my hiking poles and stepped out of my house. The class meeting place was about a mile away. A morning fog had set in and the air was chilly. I walked down my driveway and began to hike my first mile of my trip, the first of many.

The First 48 Hours

Twelve hours later I was sitting in a hostel listening to the stories of the hikers around me. An older lady began to tell the story of her first day of hiking. She was going to hike a section of the trail with her friend. When her husband dropped them off on the trail, they waved goodbye and began to climb a sharp hill to meet up with the trail. They took their first step and were immediately tired. Looking behind, she saw her husband proudly watching them.

"No matter what, we need to at least climb this first hill," she told her friend. With her husband watching, she climbed that first hill. It was that initial exhaustion that almost stopped

her, but she pushed on and is back to hike another section of the Appalachian Trail.

Hearing the stories of the hikers around me made me feel both calm and nervous at the same time. Telling stories of the trail is like a handshake to hikers. I sat in the corner listening to stories but not speaking once.

"I am a fraud and they know it," I thought. I couldn't even tell the story of my first day of hiking because I hadn't hiked a day in my life. I didn't know the handshake. So I sat in the corner of the hostile and listened. I had no questions to ask. I had no input to give. I just watched this strange culture and hoped that they wouldn't notice that I stuck out like a sore thumb and ask me to leave.

I didn't have to wait long for my first day of hiking. Early the next day, the class set out for what would be many students first hiking experience. Each student set off separately onto the trail so we could walk to first part alone. We were told to watch for the vertical white rectangles called "white blazes" painted on trees to know that we were going in the right direction. I was the first student to get onto the trail. I was ready to become a hiker.

About a mile on the trail, I met up with Wookie. Wookie was a student in the class last year who decided to hike the entire trail. He was sitting cross-legged on a large rock overlooking a view of the mountains and stream below.

"Look at that. It's just an amazing thing to see," said Wookie. As I looked down at the stream below me, I was amazed, but surprised that Wookie was still amazed. He was here last year and had been hiking for over a month this year. He told me that these types of views never get old. "You gotta love it out here to be able to do this," he said.

After stopping at a waterfall to eat lunch, I was beginning to think that hiking wasn't all that hard. It was easy to be a hiker, until I met up with Pond Mountain. Pond Mountain consists of a steep uphill climb, followed by a smooth plateau and a steep downhill. I started up the hill with five other classmates, Steven, Shari, Emily, Aimee, and Jane Berry. As we started up the hill, Aimee and Emily dropped off and our ranks were down to four. Looking up at the uphill ahead of us, it seemed like the mountain would never end. But I was cocky; I figured that I could make my way up easily. Then came the rain.

The rain poured down and I began to lose footing. I would grab for tree trunks to pull myself up the incline. Jane Berry was in front with Steven and Shari behind me. We were all gasping for breath and it felt like the mountain would never end. Soon Shari and Steven fell behind and Jane Berry and I were walking alone. "It's just walking," I told myself, but my body was telling me that I was running the New York Marathon.

Hikers that were hiking down the mountain as we were going up would stop to talk to us. The only conversation that I could muster was, "How far?" As I gasped for breath I looked at them smiling and joking about it being a nice day. They were having a great time. "You gotta love it out here to be able to do this," I remember Wookie saying. I didn't love it out here. I didn't even know what I was doing out here. I was about to go into cardiac arrest and these hikers were smiling. At that point I decided that I wanted to find out what was going on behind that annoying smile. Maybe if I knew why they were smiling, I could join in. Maybe I could understand what was so damn wonderful about climbing a mountain in the rain.

Behind me, Shari was struggling. As Steven walked with her, Shari was near meltdown. At one point, Shari thought that she had reached the top of the mountain, but it was only a false alarm. Realizing this, she broke out into tears.

Up in front, I wasn't faring much better. As the rain ran down my head and blurred my vision, I looked up and saw a never-ending uphill climb. "Don't look up," yelled Jane Berry, but I couldn't help it. My body was soaked with sweat and rain. My drenched shoes made it feel like I was walking in a swamp. I kept on going. As I learned later from Loose Goose, "It's the only thing you can do."

Sure enough, everybody reached the top of the mountain. Everybody had the same shell-shocked face that said, "I can't believe I just did that and I have to do it again tomorrow." More important than actually finishing the day was the fact that I had a story to tell. Every thru-hiker has hiked Pond Mountain and I could relate my story of hiking uphill in the pouring rain. I had a frame of reference when I talked to the other hikers. As I lay in my tent that night, I was glad that I finished my first day. It was my first step in participating in what I was reporting. Even if I didn't understand the attraction of hiking, I was still doing it.

Brick Top

To symbolize their different lives on the trail, hikers adopt a trail name. This name is given by fellow hikers on the trail. The name could reflect the personality of the hiker or a funny story that happens to the hiker on the trail. Sole Mate was given his name because he wore the same type of shoes as his wife while he was thru-hiking. Red Beard was given his name simply because the beard that he grew on the trail had a red tint to it. Turbo Joe got his name because he was known for speeding up hill to take a smoke break. Wookie got his name by snoring loudly in his sleep. My name became Brick Top.

The sun was blazing on our second day of hiking. The class had stripped to the bare essentials of clothing and they were quickly running out of water. Two large hills stood in

the way of getting to our shelter for the night. I wrapped a red bandana over my head like a headband to catch the sweat that was pouring down my brow. The top of my head was left unprotected. As I reached the shelter, quickly took my pack off and grabbed for my water. I took off my bandana and soaked it in water to rub on my face. As I enjoyed the cool cloth on my face, my classmates noticed the top of my head. The unprotected top of my head had turned bright red. I was quickly dubbed Brick Top.

A nickname may seem like a trivial thing, but it is extremely important to hikers on the trail. The trail is a chance for most people to escape their regular lives and a new name represents this escape. Getting a trail name was my second step to becoming an active participant in the story that I was reporting.

Coping With Change

Loose Goose was sitting in the shelter when we got there. A tall and lanky man in his late 60s, Loose Goose was a little over a month into his thru-hike. Nestled into the left side of the shelter, Loose Goose's sleeping bag lay neatly on his thermal pad. His pack hung from a nail jutting out of the shelter wall. He looks excited to have some company tonight.

In high school, he was only known as Goose, a nickname that stuck with him his whole life. Now, with a wry smile, he explains that he added Loose to his name because he is free of any worries of his life off of the trail. Goose had always wanted to hike the trail but couldn't because of obligations to work and family. But when he retired and became Loose Goose, he was able to attempt the trail. He is quick to point out that he isn't entirely "unencumbered"; he still has a wife at home whom he misses very much. The first thing that he does is call her when he gets into a town.

"I love being able to spread my wings," Loose Goose tells me as he runs his hand through his stark white hair. Going through a change in life can hard for some. Any life change requires time for the person to get acclimated. Many hikers on the trail are going through a change in their lives. The trail has become a modern-day rite of passage.

In our society, we are given lackluster ceremonies to symbolize a transition. A two-hour college graduation celebrates four years of hard work. A three-hour retirement party can congratulate decades. The trail doesn't throw you a party.

When I look at Loose Goose, I don't see a man going through a massive change in his life. He looks too calm. He looks too focused on the trail. But when I hear him talk, I can hear his fear bubbling underneath his stoic demeanor. I understand what he thinks about when he's hiking. With

every step, he's coming to terms with his retirement. The trail lets you put your life on hold and gives you time to accept the change in your life.

I admire his reason for being out on the trail, but it's frustrating that I can't relate. All that I think about when I hike is "right foot, left foot, right foot, left foot, take a break." The trail is giving something to Loose Goose. I wish it would share with me.

Escape

Bella and Panoramic sit next to each other in the picnic table. Panoramic is stopping by for lunch before he heads back on the trail. Bella spent the night at the shelter and was just waking up. Panoramic takes out his food pack and begins to search for something to cook. When Bella sees his food pack, she nuzzles closer. Bella got her name simply because a fellow male hiker saw her and thought she was beautiful. They way most male thru-hikers look at her; you can tell that they agree. It's rare to see a young female thru-hiker on the trail and Panoramic is glad to be hiking with her. Her short dirty blond hair complements the soft features on her face. Her small frame is surprisingly feminine despite her bulky hiking clothes. Bella embraces her name and finds an opportunity to use her looks. She leans on Panoramic and asks if he could make her some of his food. He knows exactly what she is doing but doesn't seem to care.

"She eats all of my food," Panoramic tells the table.

Bella is one semester away from graduating college, but is taking a year away from school. She didn't choose to take a year off. She was forced to take a year off. One night, Bella and her friends decided to add some impromptu artwork to their dormitory walls. The administration wasn't too appreciative of the artwork and she was suspended for a full year. With nothing to do for the next year, Bella decided to hike the trail.

As Panoramic cooks two meals in his pot, Bella rests her head on his shoulder. Behind her on the shelter wall, many hikers have carved their names into the wood. I'm sure adding her name to the wall wouldn't interest Bella.

Hiking the Appalachian Trail is much different than an average life outside of the trail. Its life stripped down to the essentials. You wake up and hike to your next destination. You eat when hungry and drink when thirsty. You find a place to set up your shelter and sleep when tired. In the morning you wake up and do it again. You don't have to get up and go to work or school. There are no bills to pay or PTA meetings or midterm exams. Those who are unhappy with their lives find solace in the trail life. Bella left the rules and punishments of her life and now makes her own rules on the trail. Cheek and

Peas, a young married couple from Wisconsin both quit their dead-end jobs hike the trail. Red Beard couldn't even find a decent job with a college diploma, so he decided to hit the trail. For these thru-hikers, the trail acts as a reset button. By leaving their lives for six months, they are able to come back and make their lives better than they were when they left.

The trail also gives you time to appreciate the things that are going well in your life. Cheek mentioned that the thing she misses most is her family. Loose Goose misses his wife and calls her every chance he can get. Most hikers don't go out on to the trail because they reject everything about their lives, but the trail lets people step back and analyze everything as a whole and helps them deal with the negatives.

The Barn

On the third day of hiking I find myself sprawled out in an abandoned barn with hornets whizzing around me. The barn feels like 100 degrees with the decaying wood walls blocking any chance of a breeze. Outside the barn was not any more hospitable, with a brutal sun blasting against my already burnt scalp.

Inside the barn, Caroline and Kip were busy making Tang and Jane Berry was busy snapping pictures. I was busy trying to breathe without expending any energy. Four students traveling with the class but not enrolled came into the barn with an idea. They heard that Wookiee hitchhiked to Damascus from the road that we just passed. We were only about 14 miles till Damascus and had about 5 miles left in the day. Their idea was to do the same thing. In my near comatose state, I considered their idea brilliant. From discussions with hikers who had previously been to Damascus for Trail Days, it seemed like a paradise, where the fatty foods were plentiful and walking was minimal. It was certainly tempting. If Wookiee had decided to hitchhike, why shouldn't I? I considered Wookiee and authority on hiking the Appalachian Trail and his decision to take a shortcut made the decision very reasonable. In fact, it would be insane to hike five more miles. I had already hiked ten miles that day. I was exhausted. I couldn't walk anymore.

My body started to convince my mind to walk down to the road and grab a ride. When it seemed like my body was about to win the argument, a third player joined into the discussion. This newcomer was telling me to get up and finish the day immediately. Not only was hitchhiking unacceptable, lying around and considering the possibility was just as bad. This third voice in my head spoke with such conviction and authority that I couldn't help but listen. I sat right up, threw my pack on and got back on the trail.

The last five miles to the campsite were not easy. My

schizophrenia was gone, leaving only my body to yell at me for my decision. I pushed on, ignoring the protest of my legs. I had made my decision to not take the easy way out and for better or worse, I would deal with that decision.

As I lay in my sleeping bag that night, I considered what happened in the barn. Why didn't I give up? Who was that third voice in my head that spoke with such authority? I thought about the thru-hikers that I had met, who regularly hiked 15 miles days for half a year. Why didn't they give up? From my interviews with hikers, I had the answer. The trail was important to them. Every aspect of the trail was important, even the pain and exhaustion. These hikers needed the trail, whether it be Loose Goose coping with his changing lifestyle, or Bella escaping the disappointment and failure of her normal life. These hikers begin wanting to go on the trail, but end up needing it. That is why they don't give up when their body is telling them that they can't continue.

I was still no closer to discovering why I didn't give up. Even though I dedicated my time on the trail to becoming a hiker, I did not have the mindset of the thru-hikers that I talked to. I was not going through a time of change like Loose Goose or the graduated students that were hiking with us. Unlike Red Beard or Bella, I was very happy with my life outside of the trail. I missed everyone and everything about my life dearly couldn't find anything negative to dwell on while hiking. It seemed that I was at a loss to find out why I left the barn in the direction of the trail, rather than in the direction of the road.

Then the voice spoke up again. It was more maternal this time compared to the fatherly scolding that it gave me in the barn. "Why aren't you going through a time of change in your life?" it asked.

"I'm still in school. The closest thing to a change will be my graduation in December," I said.

"But you should have graduated a couple of weeks ago," the voice answered.

"But I didn't," I returned.

"And why is that," it asked.

"I'm one class short," I said.

"But you could have taken that class last spring if you really wanted to," said the voice.

I didn't have a response. The voice was right. I could have easily taken my final graduation requirement during the spring semester but decided to return in the fall to take it.

"What about your life?" asked the voice.

"I have a great life. Norman Rockwell would be proud," I said.

"Friend and family doing well?" the voice asked.

"Of course," I quickly replied.

“What about you. Did you picture yourself like this four years ago,” asked the voice.

Again, I had no response and the voice stopped. It had pointed me in the right direction. It served its purpose. I thought about why I didn’t graduate, why I elected to take another semester. I feel safe in college. It’s like real life with a safety net. I wasn’t ready to give up the net. And then it hit me. Even though my life wasn’t currently in a state of change, it was about to be... it should be. I was already coping with the change that was about to happen in my life. I was prolonging the change as a way to cope with it. I, like the thru-hikers that I talked to, was coping with change in my life, just preemptively.

I then thought about my life outside of the trail. I couldn’t think of anything that I would be running away from. I had plenty of friends at school. I was renting a nice house to live in next to campus, complete with a dog running around in the backyard. Even my love life, which is a major point of drama in most college student’s lives, was completely drama free with a long term girlfriend. Then I thought about myself. Sure I haven’t really lived up the potential that I had when I started college. I was about to graduate with decent but not stellar grades. I didn’t really have any options for a job after college. I had grown pudgy around the midsection and stopped playing organized sports. My life wasn’t a disaster, but it wasn’t exactly noteworthy. In coming to the trail, I was escaping myself. I was escaping the life that I was leading for the past four years. The trail was an opportunity for a fresh start. It was an opportunity to do something important and noteworthy. Like Bella, I was escaping something in my normal life. I was escaping my *normal* life.

I still don’t know who or what that voice was that told me to finish the 15-mile day. At first I thought it was my first step into madness after a long day of walking in the sun. But I doesn’t matter what was telling me to finish. I did finish the day and it was because I was a hiker. I had the mindset of a hiker, I just didn’t know it. Like Loose Goose, I was coping with a change in my life. Like Bella, I was escaping my life outside of the trail. At once I understood the mentality of the people that I had met on the trail. I wasn’t frustrated or annoyed at their mindset anymore. I was frustrated and annoyed at my mindset. I didn’t want anything from the trail so I wasn’t getting anything. All I had to do was ask. So I asked.

My Story To Tell

The group became anxious as the mist set in on top of the Grayson Highlands. The thick fog clouded their vision. Were they lost? They couldn’t tell. The mist didn’t even allow them

to know if they had gotten off track. The mist clung to them, giving them the sensation of cold sweat. They didn't know if it was the mist or their own nervous perspiration. Their leader seemed sure that they would get to their destination shortly. They had to trust the man leading them. What other option did they have?

The smell of campfires made them sure that people were around, but they could not see the campsites around them. With their sight clouded, they must rely on their other senses.

"Watch out for the swamp," said their leader, as their feet sank into the muck. Those with sandals felt the cold water between their toes. The leader yelled out a whooping call which changed to silence. And then through the mist, a whooping call replied. They knew they were close. They pressed on.

I was walking with the group. I was reporting on the events of the hike as well as participating in the hike. Two weeks prior, I was just a scared student trying to find a story while not dying on the trail. I was now a hiker with a big smile on my face, enjoying every minute of a story that I would tell all the other hikers. "Did I tell you about the time I was hiking in fog so thick that I couldn't see the person in front of me?" I would ask. They would listen to my story and then tell one of their own. Telling stories of the trail is like a handshake to hikers and I would be let into their club, with blistered feet and a sunburned head.