

The Trail is no longer ahead of me

Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—At the unpleasant hour of 4:16 a.m. this Monday, I woke up with the mostly pleasant realization that I would never walk the entire Appalachian Trail (AT) in one calendar year.

This monkey was now off my back. I was, however, upset that I would not have the opportunity to fail.

My night demons are unremarkable for the most part. For decades after graduation, I lost battle after battle with a faceless registrar at Oberlin College who kept moving his office just before I was to be given the classroom locations of my scheduled courses. The Alumni Association insists that I'm the only graduate so afflicted, even though our gatherings of the traumatized are now held in domed stadiums twice a year.

The Appalachian Trail is a near-2,200-mile-long footpath that links Maine's Mount Katahdin to Georgia's Springer Mountain. Most of its narrow corridor lies on public land in the series of mountains that run from Alabama to the Atlantic Ocean off Newfoundland. Volunteers maintain the trails and shelters in 14 states.

Over the years, I've walked Trail sections in New Hampshire, Virginia and North Carolina. I've been rained on, snowed on and sniffed up in my tent at night by a gregarious bear who had dedicated his life to greeting campers bearing Snickers and gorp. I've also napped on a 5,000-foot-high bald in an early spring's sun.

A five-to-ten-mile AT hike is usually fun. There's enough sweat generated to make the nice views feel earned and the candy calories of no consequence.

Walking the entire Trail is a test of both fitness and character. I've always thought that it would be more mental than physical. It would be a matter of willing yourself to push through endless, plodding drudgery. Bill Bryson, who spent parts of a year completing about 40 percent of the Trail, described it in *A Walk in the Woods* (1997) as the hardest thing he has ever done.

Much of the AT's hiking is through dense woods with limited views. Some of the up-down is very steep and treacherous. Weather will range from 100 degrees to way below freezing with wind storms. Thru-hikers count on snow in the spring and fall at each end. Rain will settle in for three or four

days straight. Biting bugs cloud up around your head in the north woods; deer ticks carry Lyme Disease; mice infest the shelters. Water has to be filtered or treated. Some sections are dangerous—knife-edge ridges, rock-face scrambles, water crossings and ball-bearings for footing.

Carried food tends to be dull and heavy toward sugar and fat calories. It's common for hikers to crave civilization's junk food—pizzas, ice cream, fries and grease.

When I came out of four or five days in the Presidential Range years ago, I gulped seven chocolate sodas (14 scoops of *chocolate* ice cream, and this was back when scoops were scoops not teaspoons with inflated egos) one after the other at a drug-store counter in Randolph, New Hampshire. The owner who fixed me up understood.

The most remote AT section is the 100-Mile Wilderness in Maine. The least popular seems to be the tramp over Pennsylvania's fractured rocks. Virginia is the least hilly.

The written accounts of thru-hikers are framed in misery and deprivation, which are accepted as the norm. Discomfort of this type quickly becomes boring copy.

So writers emphasize the occasional life-threatening mishap; weird characters that appear and disappear; squabbles with companions; rank body odors; off-Trail runs for showers, provisions and "trail-angel" meals; and encounters with strangers (some of whom are genuinely strange, like the family of a tax-resister who hiked through knee-deep snow as the mother nursed her baby).

There is an addictive aspect to AT trudging. Thru-hikers find that they start needing to do it; that hiking 15 miles a day becomes the embraced definition of self. Without doing the Trail, who am I?

Trudging focuses your life on repeatedly getting one foot safely in front of the other, on making your daily miles, on eating calories and drinking water, on staying dry, on postponing decisions that await and on finishing something through sustained, uncomfortable individual effort.

AT trudging starts to fill a psychological hole, a need. Some think that it works as religions do, showing a way to something different and better through belief and participation. Trail sweat becomes purification. Others think it's not unlike serving time and, one hopes, coming out the better for it.

And having said all of that, most serious hikers feel that any day on the Trail is a better day than anywhere else that comes to mind.

Some thru-hikers think themselves morally flawed if they stop for a time, or quit altogether. Bryson and his friend, Stephen Katz, left the Trail in the 100-Mile Wilderness. But they ended with a sense that they had

accomplished a lot -- accomplished enough -- even though they had not finished as they had planned.

Sisters Lucy and Susan Letcher completed the trip from North to South barefoot, except in snow. This choice, they write, was simply a matter of feeling better without boots than with. (The Barefoot Sisters Southbound, 2009.)

Their miseries seem to have been no greater than those, like me, who swear by Peter Limmer boots, which are built like battleships and weigh about the same. At Trail's end in Georgia, the sisters talked about "yo-yoing," turning around immediately and hiking back to Maine.

Building a house in my experience is a similar plod through physical and psychic combs. Endurance becomes its own reward as the goal becomes more nuanced and even abstract while it slowly takes shape.

I've found that repetitive physical activity over time allows thoughts that undermine the sensibility of the task to run fast and loose. A lot of marriages break up in the course of new home construction.

Whether hiking the trail does or does not make sense of some kind for me, I realized early in the pre-dawn darkness that my knees and feet for starters would not put up with the pounding. A 40-pound pack would stress this infrastructure even more.

It's not the discomfort, pain, simplicity or drudgery of the task that would get to me. It's the fear of being irreparably hobbled.

I love the stories about one-legged, 90-year-old guys with bad hearts hopping from Maine to Georgia in three months, doing 25 miles a day in a penny loafer.

This ain't me, babe.

But I don't like knowing that I'm too old to take a crack at things.

I intend to complain to the Oberlin College registrar about this matter the next time I try to visit his office about classroom assignments.

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