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There Was No Mountain

But there were memories—of shoes

Elissa Ely



FOR THE MOMENT THERE IS NO MOUNTAIN, NO VISTA, NO TRAVELING, AND barely even breathing room behind the masks. Living in fear of the new coronavirus feels like living on a planet where the inhabitants cannot survive the surface. Everyone proceeds dutifully, anonymously, and mostly silently through the untrustworthy air. Passing strangers, you can't tell whether they are smiling at you or not, and because of this, it's much easier to look down. For many weeks in 2020, I saw more shoes than sky.

Instead of hiking in mountains, I hiked in my memories. It was a way to review the past—and, I suppose, not a bad rehearsal for the future. At first, the memories rose high: to the top of Mount Lafayette, to the Lakes of the Clouds, to wildflowers in Crested Butte, Colorado. The views were broad, without blisters and without pain (though without real satisfaction, either).

Eventually, like a falling kite, the memories sank closer to the ground. I recalled a sign on the Old Bridle Path in New Hampshire's White Mountains and a coiled snake near the bottom of the Wasson Peak Trail outside Tucson. When these memories hit ground, I started to remember shoes.

Footwear! If everyone who has ever walked a trail offered an opinion, it still wouldn't tie the laces on this topic. In one way, the discussion is simple: just wear the right kind—preferably one for each foot. Henry David Thoreau and John Muir did, and their results were spectacular. In another way, it's a discussion without end, one of those political arguments neither side enters thinking they will change their minds.

I've used the same hiking boots in various incarnations for decades. They're dense and clunky, high on the ankle and built for the rocky, rooty New England conditions that wear you down or trip you up. Life is too full of uncertainty to venture from success, and they get the job done. But everyone makes their own choices. There are many ways to walk.

Once I was setting off toward Artists Bluff and Bald Mountain above Franconia Notch and passed some families congregating at the trailhead. The women wore long skirts and open-toed sandals or loafers. The men wore black leather shoes. The children wore sneakers.

Shoes like this have no business on a trail, I thought to myself. Thoreau would not have approved.

A minute after I passed them in my reliable boots, I stumbled and fell. It was the imbalance of age—that growing unsteadiness that googling tells us

Everyone makes their own choices. There are many ways to walk. JAYNE IAFRATE/AMC PHOTO
CONTEST ENTRY 2015

can be prevented by standing on one foot while watching the news at night—but I landed hard. It took another minute to sit up and review the relevant body parts. There were scrapes that would be tender in a few hours, a bleeding knee, and torn pride.

When my boots and I finally limped onto Artists Bluff, the families were already there: they had taken the loop from a different direction. No one was scraped, scratched, or bleeding. The women sat serenely, shoulder to shoulder, on rocks overlooking Echo Lake. Some of the children had kicked off their shoes. In the end, their footwear had been just as steady as mine. Their balance had been significantly better. In these strange times, memory takes me back to other shoes: the old friend I hiked with, who constantly stopped to tie her boot laces because she didn't believe in double knotting. In the middle of an important thought, she would suddenly drop to her knees, and mumbled sentences would drift up from below. We argued about this for decades, but never stopped hiking together because companionship is far more precious than speaking clearly.

On a White Mountain trail, a stranger once paused to kick off his boot and sock and, while he rummaged in a pack for moleskin, he told me about his very ill wife. I could see the blister on his heel and understood that he might prevent it but could not cure the person he loved.

I remembered shoelessness. In Red Rock Canyon outside Las Vegas, I met a man climbing barefoot, wearing nothing but dreadlocks and a loincloth, deep in reflection. It was wrong to turn and gape as he receded, but I couldn't help myself; the rear of him was so dignified, and his pace was so sedate. Nakedness speeds some of us up, but it did nothing to hurry him. Maybe he was feeling gratitude for having feet.

These days, when driving from one New England state to another in order to hike is discouraged, the mind is left to climb in memories. Odd images emerge, from where they usually live in some folded inner place. Under normal circumstances, they remain there. But looking down, as we do now, has brought them into view.

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