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Katahdin: Standing Above Unsettling Thoughts and Emotions

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Katahdin

Standing above unsettling thoughts and emotions

Anthony Emerson

IT'S MAY NOW IN MAINE, WHICH USUALLY MEANS SPRING, PETRICHOR, songbirds, and snowmelt coursing beneath rock and earth. It means frigid hikes on trails blocked by fallen trees stripped naked by the wicked months



On top of Pockwockamus Rock, early April 2020. The author hiked here from the Golden Road, a logging route, because the main road was covered in snow. JUDITH ARCHIBALD

of January and February. It means the restlessness that brings me on drives up familiar roads flanked by birch trees bent like parentheses, each drive bringing me farther into the woods as the snow recedes out of sight. And, it seems, out of memory. It's May now in Maine, and those things are still true, though barely noticeable behind the pall of a global pandemic.

As John Muir said, "Nature in her green, tranquil woods heals and soothes all afflictions." My particular afflictions—anxiety, boredom—have been amplified inestimably by the pandemic. The momentum of the changing seasons cannot be slowed by the spread of the virus, and neither can my enthusiasm to get into the backcountry. I wanted to be near the mountain, to feel the escapism of drifting into the timelessness of the wild. Instead came the recent news that Baxter State Park would be closed until July and with it the crushing realization that I'd be forced to cancel my season-opening camping trip and take day trips below treeline.

There are many uncanny differences between this spring and springs of the past—differences you cannot escape no matter how far into the woods you go. In the park the evidence is everywhere. Yes, volatile weather conditions often delay the opening of certain trails or even the entire park this time of year, but there is a palpable stillness now, like a vacant movie set or a ghost town from the old West. I half expected to see a tumbleweed galumphing down the tote road. The park's visitor center is shuttered, facilities locked up. The website displays a ticker with font and colors that imply foreboding. There's the empty ranger truck being used now as a receptacle for winter signage. The closed gate at the entrance and downed tree left unattended in the parking area are less than inviting. Then there's me and my new behaviors: sanitizing my hands after using the pencil at the registration box. Casual trail etiquette has been replaced by the dread of meeting a fellow hiker on the trail and exchanging hurried pleasantries behind a bandana pressed against my face. And the new thoughts: Do the animals know? The trees? Can the forest sense my fear the same way I can feel the leaves surge with the wind?

Typically, my time in nature forces me to consider things both small and large at the same time: the immediacy of honking geese and the complexity of their migration patterns, their inscrutable instincts. My hikes fix my awareness on the concrete and the abstract of the wilderness. This has not been my experience since the spread of the virus. On my recent trips into the woods, I have struggled to grasp the dichotomy of an intimidating, robust landscape, which is also part of a sensitive ecological system. A system that when standing beneath a 100-year-old, 100-foot-tall white pine feels infallible

but is in grave danger because of our human influence. I found this easier to understand recently when I returned home to several inches of May snow blanketing the boughs of evergreens. I watched as the waterfowl that had made a home in the boggy pasture behind my house were forced out by the fickle whims of Maine climate, and something called the polar vortex.

A man walks alone in the woods; what is he looking for? I've had this refrain stuck in my head, as a kind of prompt, on my post-virus outings. I have no good answer. Is it solace or solitude? An escape from the horrors of a diseased society? Maybe. And maybe the forest is medicine. I have felt a kind of existential sickness over a dislocation from the natural world. And if the forest is medicine, then Katahdin is a monument to good health—a beacon of aliveness, and light. The mountain has been a spiritual stalwart for thousands



Anthony Emerson posed for this photo, taken by his grandmother, on Logan Pond Trail in late April 2020. The trail begins at the south gate of Baxter State Park. Katahdin rises in the background. JUDITH ARCHIBALD

of years, from the native people who deified it, to the adventurers who conquered it, to the writers and artists who immortalized it, and the conservationists who helped preserve it. For me, mostly, it was the aesthetic backdrop to my early childhood. It didn't become a source of curiosity, pride, or importance until very recently, when my interests in self-reliance and self-discovery pushed me into the woods to experience for myself what I had only read about.

I have over my lifetime engaged with the mountain, but only as art or idea, never in a physical sense. My family for generations has lived in sight of Katahdin. I feel something bizarrely akin to birthright when I see it, though I know better. When my mother was growing up, her mother would make her wear a snowsuit until the snow

was totally off of the mountain. Now, I have a yearly bet with that grandmother—born out of that unsettling tale of my mother’s childhood—about the date the snow will disappear fully from Katahdin’s peak. Every year we put the kayaks in the alpine ponds at the mountain’s foot long before the snow is gone. As I write this, I am sitting beneath a black-and-white photo of the mountain’s Great Basin. It was taken by my great-great uncle for the Great Northern Paper Company, and if my house were suddenly ablaze, it would be the first thing I’d grab.

I am 29 years old, the same age Henry David Thoreau was when he first climbed Katahdin. I don’t know why exactly, but that fact seemed important to me when I first discovered it. I still was planning (and as of this writing still am planning) to climb the mountain several times in summer 2020 with Thoreau in mind. I’m hoping he can help me glean from the mountain the kind of wisdom I might need entering my 30s in times such as these. I know well the feeling of triumph over unsettling thoughts and emotions. I have not experienced the kind of victory that comes from exceeding the perceived limitations of my own body. I want to explore the boundaries both within and without myself, and I know the mountain exists somewhere on those boundaries. I don’t know if I’m handling this crisis well now, or if I’ll get any better or worse as the summer rolls inexorably on. I know that I find myself clinging to books by people with such names as Leopold, Emerson, and Muir.*

The ones who opened my eyes to what Thoreau called “the tonic of wildness.” I know that I wake every morning with the urge to be outside and to see Katahdin flourishing in the sky. I need it.

Before the COVID-19 outbreak, I used to think of the mountain as a metaphor for various principles of my mindfulness practice. I’d think of a time-lapse video of clouds passing by the peak while the mountain sat in quiet observation, grounded, unperturbed. Now I think of the clouds not as ephemeral thoughts but as the collective societal turmoil of our present and near future. It comforts me knowing that Katahdin—that greatest mountain—will be standing serene, unfazed through it all.

ANTHONY EMERSON is a student and writer living in northern Maine.

* Aldo Leopold, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and John Muir.