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The Long Way Home: Convertible Pants Parable

Christine Woodside

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Convertible pants parable

FOR SEVERAL YEARS I OWNED A PAIR OF NYLON HIKING PANTS THAT convert to shorts. Convertible pants have sideways zippers that allow the bottom leg portions to come off. They are advanced outdoor clothing. One pair of pants acts like two pairs, saving room and weight in my pack.

I would start out wearing them as shorts, down in the warmer valley. I'd climb higher and the temperature would drop by a few dozen degrees. Brrr: I must zip on the bottom of the pants quickly. The zipper circumnavigated my thighs in an awkward spot. I felt as if I were standing on my head just to see the place where the zipper connects.

The wind whipped my hair into my eyes as I tried to work with my pants. Rain started spitting. In a moment it would be colder as the trail emerged from the stunted spruces. My legs were goose bumps. I needed to zip on my pant legs *now*. I pulled the leg bottoms out of my pack. I peered at the small labels marked "R," for right leg, and "L" for left. I must match the bottoms and turn them the right way.

I hovered over the inside of my leg, pawing at the zipper. I needed my glasses from deep within my pack. I stabbed the little plastic slider against the zipper teeth. Brrr. Numb fingers lost the tiny zipper pull again and again. Finally it caught. A fold of same-color fabric got stuck in the slider. With both hands I tugged apart fabric and zipper, then again.

Many minutes later, I had pants. I was cold and mad. Every time I shut my eyes for a second, instead of seeing in my mind's eye the vistas unrolling beyond a boulder, I saw zippers.

Now I was experiencing mountains through my gear problem. My pants had become the challenge instead of the conduit. Where were the ravens soaring and Canada jays landing on dead trees? I had things backward. I remembered that I used to simply pull on lightweight wind pants over my shorts. That took a moment. Now I had my convertible pants that brought extra problems while solving one: the cause of lightening my backpack. The simplest way into the backcountry does not involve new pants.

Until I finally stopped wearing them, my zipper pants began to seem like a nylon metaphor for mistaken priorities such as chasing after the wrong



Zipped up, in action. Don't ask about the gaiters. CHRISTINE WOODSIDE

things. I comforted myself with the reminder that I'd bought them at a rummage sale. My mistake felt big, anyway, silly as it was. I had focused on something unimportant, my pants, on my way to something that mattered, the mountaintop. The pastor David Horton once said, "Materialism is the only form of distraction from true bliss." I wouldn't buy a house to fit a rug. And I have learned not to chase the wrong goals or people, not to go round and round trying to force a connection. I would miss a lot if I did.

I gave the pants away.

—Christine Woodside