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If I Ever Lose My Way

*A writer shares what has made
Crawford Path a touchstone for her*

Bethany Taylor



ALL THESE WORDS . . . I MEAN THEM AS A THANKSGIVING TO the Crawford Path. It's just my collage of stories, which doesn't replace or compare or change the beautiful stories so many have of the stretch of dirt and rock and root from Crawford Notch to the summit of Mount Washington. What I love best about such shared landscapes is that each can mean so much to so many, while never diminishing what it means to us, individually.

PERSONALLY, I AM CONSIDERING A TATTOO OF THE CRAWFORD PATH on my right wrist.

I was first on the trail when I was 2 and my sister Hannah was 5. There is a picture of me sitting in front of Mizpah Spring Hut, as if I owned the place. And there is a picture of Hannah, sitting on the rock-chair in the middle of the trail that, a little more than a mile in, offers a perfect V-shaped seat for a small person to have some crackers and M&Ms. Someone got a picture of Hannah and our cousin David on that hike, and I've thought of it as Hannah's Rock every time I've hiked past it since then.

Which is too many times to count. I worked at Mizpah for nearly seven months between 2004 and 2005, which required a minimum of two round-trip hikes on Crawford Path every week, plus a healthy dose of running "downstairs" to grab the book I needed from my car or to sneak down for midnight visits to other huts, and so on.

Before that, though, was the hike at age 10, when I first went above treeline on a perfect summer day and saw the orange ribbon of trail noodling its way along the piles of golden rocks and scrubby trees from Mount Eisenhower to Mount Washington. And the hike at 16, when my younger sister Emily and I first walked down the Crawford Path with our mother. And when I was 19 and did my first Prezzi traverse,¹ which was long and slow and hot and humid and I hallucinated black cats crawling around the last two miles of the Crawford Path.

The most important trip I took on the Crawford Path was in October 2002. I was in college and back in New Hampshire on a fall break. Hannah was working at Mizpah, and I went up to visit her. Hannah and I had, at

¹Presidential Range traverse.

Crawford Path's beautiful orange ribbon of trail noodles its way from Mount Eisenhower to Mount Washington. JOE KLEMENTOVICH

the time, the dregs of a rocky relationship. For most of our childhoods, we were awful to each other, without—for my part—ever really knowing why and being a bit miserable that we could never get things right. Going to visit her at Mizpah was the beginning of the end of all that and the start of one of the most blazingly essential relationships of my life. In 2014, Hannah drew me a birthday card titled, “A Brief History of Time,” starting with darkness, working through dinosaurs, asteroids, the Scientific Revolution, Pilgrims, our parents meeting, her birth, my birth, “extended periods of Hannah mostly being a total poop to Bethany,” until we meet up again “where they realize they have much in common and can be friends.”

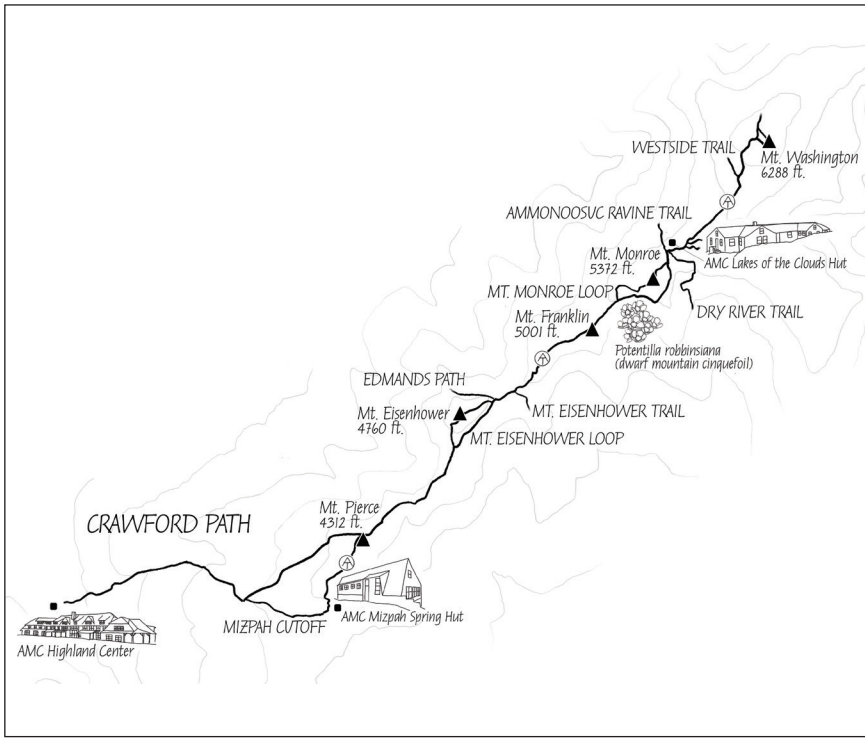
Where we met up, in her Sharpie-scribbled cartoon, was the Mizpah Cutoff, along Crawford Path.

This, to me, is the beauty of the trail, of any trail, of public land and shared landscapes—what human stories we make special for happening in such surroundings.

There is my father, who carried me—and my favorite doll—in a frontpack baby carrier up the Crawford Path on that trip when I was 2. The pictures make it clear this was uncomfortable for everyone. And, there he is again, knocking on the door of Mizpah at 7:15 one morning in the summer of 2004, surprising me because he had a meeting in Gorham (“I heard you guys serve breakfast. Can I get some?”) and then merrily agreeing to don an academic robe and join me in graduating a bunch of little kids as Junior Naturalists. This is what love looks like.

There is my younger sister, Emily, who came to work at Mizpah and hike the Crawford Path as often and with as much deep love as I did. She and I overlapped our seasons in the hut, and so I heard her adventures along the Crawford Path unfold in real time. It was, again, a trail I hiked again and again to find a sister as a friend, always there.

Perhaps most crucial, there is my mother, for whom mountain words are insufficient, especially when it comes to the Crawford Path. There was the time when I was 10, when we hiked to Lakes of the Clouds Hut and saw a woman dressed up like nineteenth-century mountain innkeeper Lucy Crawford reenacting Lucy’s life and times. Something like a beacon flared to life in my mother. By the time I worked at Mizpah in 2005, my mother had done her research and sewn a period-accurate Lucy Crawford costume out of lightweight, packable material so she could breeze into any hut and launch into a beautiful, informative, and engaging presentation on the Crawfords.



From the parking area on Mount Clinton Road, Crawford Connector and Crawford Path cover 8.5 miles, from Crawford Notch to the summit of Mount Washington, passing mounts Eisenhower and Monroe. ABIGAIL COYLE/APPALACHIAN MOUNTAIN CLUB

When I complained to my croo that they never came to my naturalist programs but got front-row seats for the Lucy Crawford Show, they said, “Well, you don’t come prepared with a cute little suit.”

I hiked from Mount Pierce to Mount Eisenhower once with a professional naturalist, a slightly older woman being pursued by an irritating, grizzled thru-hiker who had met her at the hut the night before. We got rid of him by going off-trail to check a “test plot” she’d just invented. “Oh, there’s nothing here,” she told me, as we crouched beyond the krummholz. “I just couldn’t take him anymore.”

As a hut girl, I was invariably involved in some sort of romantic drama, and I’ve hiked the lower part of Crawford Path in every gradient of emotion for every hut boy and mountain man I’ve loved or thought I did. And

my memories of talking friends through their young love adventures . . . those rocks absorbed so much of us all learning how to be emotionally stable.

One summer evening, I hiked with friends down from the summit, along the old top section of Crawford Path. We followed what looked like a sunken trail, at the hour of the day when the alpine zone is almost always empty, and the light is the best. We were looking for the Curtis and Ormsbee shelter site.² The friends I was with all knew each other from working in the huts, and when we found the site, we poured out shots of tequila to toast the memories of Curtis and Ormsbee as we watched the sun set over Vermont. Their accident had led to the common ground where we had found each other. Gratitude, in some clumsy respect, was due.

When I was working as a naturalist for the Appalachian Mountain Club, Emily and I once tied my dog, Noah, to a trailside rock below Mount Monroe and tiptoed across rock shards to check on a plot of dwarf cinquefoil, *Potentilla robbinsiana*. That spot was set aside exclusively for regrowth research, and I was happy to point out these rarest alpine flowers to my sister but wasn't going to bring my dog waltzing into the research area. Bending over the tiny flowers—the largest cushions were not much bigger than a quarter—we could hear Noah barking and yowling. Lost in the flowers and conversation, we didn't notice he'd gone quiet until we heard a cheerful jingling, looked up from the flowers, and saw Noah trotting toward us from the top of a rise, preening to have found his pack. I scooped him up and scrambled carefully back to the trail, while Emily danced carefully away from the flowers, laughing the whole way and congratulating Noah on the coup of finding us.³

All these experiences, while essential to me, are just the clothes I see this landscape wearing. For more than 200 years now, people have been shimmering along the Crawford Path in all weather and seasons and times of their lives. This trail, like so many public lands, is a conduit between people,

² On June 30, 1900, William Curtis and Allen Ormsbee perished in a snowstorm as they hiked to an Appalachian Mountain Club meeting held atop Mount Washington. Recognizing the dangers of the mountains to even fit hikers like Curtis and Ormsbee, AMC installed a small emergency shelter near where Curtis's body was found. As more and more people came to these mountains, the shelter became inadequate, and eventually moved, along with Crawford Path, to the top of the Ammonoosuc Ravine and became AMC's Lakes of the Clouds Hut.

³ I kept Noah on a leash whenever he hiked in the alpine zone from that day forward.

as much as between points on a map. I halfway think that all the love and sweat and laughter hundreds of years of people have poured along the rocks stays there and can be felt if you're the sort who seeks that grace—sort of the way a cathedral looks somehow bathed in an accumulation of the sacred, if you hit it at the right mood and light of day. Does the faith and hope of all those prayers and hymns reside in the rose windows and stones, the same as all the glee of hikers catches in the spruce and fir and dwarf birch?

I think so. I may simply need to feel that all who've loved that trail with me are still, somehow, there. My father died in 2015, and my rich memories of him mean an enormous amount to me on this trail I will love until I die—and possibly beyond. My father's prankster-glee at sneaking up Crawford Path to surprise me lives alongside the Bicknell's thrush and white-throated sparrow. That means he comes with me—with his absurdly bright white sneakers and canvas hiking shorts and cotton T-shirt and love of the ocean—whenever I hike Crawford Path. Part of him lives here, where I feel so alive, and by extension, the place means ever more to me.

The layers of a topographic map are nothing compared with the layers we each bring to these places. Alongside and atop the memories of my father, I now must add my sister Hannah. She died in a hiking accident in Colorado in 2018. A rock came loose above and hit her head, killing her instantly. My father's absence I can almost reconcile. Hannah's, I cannot. When I visited her that first time at Mizpah, a guest asked her what trail she recommended. "I'm a ridge junkie," she said, grinning at the thought of running along some open summits, "so if you're here and the weather is any good, you've *got* to get up there." When I visited her then, the weather had not been much good, but we'd done a loop through the Dry River to Mount Eisenhower and home to Mizpah along the ridge, anyway. It was the first hike we took as something like the friends we became, and it meant the world to me.

I SPEND A LOT OF WAKEFUL NIGHTS NOW WONDERING WHERE, EXACTLY, the departed are. Or if they are. Maybe Hannah, if she can't be with the people she loved anymore, is along a ridge somewhere. I figure, I found her on the Crawford Path once, so maybe she'll be on *that* ridge, at *that* junction. If she isn't, then my memories of her love for it always will be, and I have to wonder if there's any difference between our loved ones' spirits and our thoughts of them.

A tattoo on my right wrist of the Crawford Path won't change anything about these awful losses. I know the path well enough to hike it as a meditation exercise. Besides, far more accurate maps would guide me if I ever lost my way. And yet, I keep drawing the jagged line on in Sharpie, week after week, because I like to look down and find the way to my family.

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