

Appalachia

Volume 70
Number 2 Summer/Fall 2019: Hitting "Reset" in
Wild Lands

Article 13

2019

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Recommended Citation

Polley, Benjamin Alva (2019) "A Wrong Turn: Lost in the Dark, Step By Step," *Appalachia*: Vol. 70: No. 2, Article 13.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.dartmouth.edu/appalachia/vol70/iss2/13>

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A Wrong Turn

Lost in the dark, step by step

Benjamin Alva Polley



INCH ALONG SLOWLY, WITH MY HANDS AND FEET FEELING OUT in front of me like giant antennas. I am stumbling along, mostly blind. Coming out of the trees into more darkness, I trip and fall. I catch myself on the ground and strain my wrist and scrape my hands. I lift myself up and begin to second guess. I backtrack. *It seems like the trail.* I ask myself.

Again, I turn around and walk some more downhill. The canyon drops off in front of me, so I move toward the creek. Sagebrush and ponderosa pine trees crowd me. Small rocks protrude from the uneven ground. Again, I stumble. The trail is here one minute and gone the next. Again, I backtrack. Again, it seems like the trail. I turn back around and follow. *Is it the human-constructed trail or just an animal trail?*

My breath shallows as my heart quickens. My palms sweat as my mind races. I feel my way toward the creek. Trees grow denser and water seeps into the edge of my boots. *Do I charge headstrong ahead?* The typical profile of a lost person is a man between the ages of 25 and 50, because we charge headstrong ahead. I back up. *I have lost the trail,* I admit. *I must have missed a switchback or something. I need to get to the other side of this creek. Do I wade across? Do I jump? How deep and fast is the creek moving?* I ask myself, *Why do people get lost and then die?*

I take three deep breaths, which calms me down and helps me think. I slip off my pack and put on all my underlayers: fleece, wool pants, down coat, mittens, and a wool beanie. I sit down and lean against a giant ponderosa pine. Wolves chorus in the distance, sending shivers trotting along my spine. Moments later, my friend Jami's words crash into my mind like a ten-car pileup: *Watch out for karmic retribution.* Three friends and I conducted a wildlife study weeks before and came across the arm of a mountain lion lying on a frozen lake, near where wolves were basking in the sun the previous day. Alone and lost, I start fretting. I think about moisture rising into my bones and envision hypothermia. I laugh at the irony because I was on my way to a ten-day, silent Vipassana meditation retreat in the hills of northern California. I realize that it's going to be a long night battling my thoughts.

I have five chicken and steak tacos with cilantro, cheese, and onions left in my pack. I ate the other five earlier. Black bears could be stirring out of hibernation anytime and ravenous. I decide to stand up. I elect to find a tree

Gold Creek in Idaho, seen here on a clear, frigid winter morning, moves beneath low-lying willows as it creases the open landscape. Near here, the author found himself lost one day. BENJAMIN ALVA POLLEY

to climb. I pick a juniper shaped like a hammock with a long, outstretched trunk. I lean back against my pack and close my eyes and start to doze off for about 15 minutes. Some leaves rustle across the ground. My heart quickens, and I rise to attention. Realizing it's just the wind, I watch the leaves dance and then fall. I choose to hang my pack higher and away from me. I lie back a little longer, but my mind is active now. My legs are falling asleep as I straddle the trunk.

I eat my tacos so I don't have to worry about bears. I know my tent and the parking lot are both downstream, but I cannot see in the dark. I decide to find another tree that I can climb higher. I feel my way closer to the creek and locate a tall, straight juniper with secure hand- and footholds. I monkey up, lock my legs around branches, and lean against the tree. I try to sleep again.

Darkness surrounds me. Stars pierce the black canopy and twinkle like "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds." It is the end of winter and bone-cold. A creek sings below me. Chimes of ice dangle from winter-brown-colored blades of grass along the bank, like bells. It is the 10th of March. I am alone in the Idaho wilderness, 25 feet off the ground, in a juniper tree that I climbed for safety, like our ancestors. The tree sways back and forth: "Rock-a-bye Benny in the treetop."

I start to chuckle. Days before, I was in Illinois visiting my parents. I had two duffel bags packed for the next 27 months of my life. I was going to Morocco with the Peace Corps to teach environmental education. The first full day I was home, I received a phone call from the private investigators of the Peace Corps world, who said my application was under review because I hadn't disclosed a DUI I earned more than a decade ago. They said they would call me back in a few hours. Hours later, they revoked my application. Here I am, putting my life back together.

Giant erratic boulders lie across the stream. A four-legged creature slithers toward me, like an apparition out of the shadows. At first, I think it is a coyote.

My parents had worried about my going to the Middle East, the land of more frequent violence, but I could die right here in the Idaho wilderness. Then reality sinks in. *Nobody knows I'm here.*

My senses are uberaware. I feel so alive. It is terribly cold. My scalp hurts under my beanie. My fingers and toes throb. The cold air stings my lungs as I inhale, and my cheeks are rosy red. When it is this cold, wilderness begins right outside the skin. I am waiting out the darkness and anticipating the full moon. I watch shooting stars and make wishes. Although there is no “last-minute escape hatch into religion,” as the climber David Roberts once said, I pray to whatever gods may be.¹

Hours later, long after my legs fall asleep, the light reflecting off the moon begins to light up the top of the hillside behind me. I still can't see it directly. The forest and the ground are still pitch black. I wait longer.

WHY ARE SOME OF US DRAWN TO THE PLACES WHERE EXISTENCE IS A struggle? Is it some kind of search for clarity? Authenticity?

Hours before, I had pulled into the parking lot at Goldbug Hot Springs. One other car was there. I raced the setting sun. I stuffed everything I thought I needed for the night into my backpack: beanie, down coat, fleece, long johns, wool pants, mittens, a couple of polypropylene shirts, sleeping bag, sleeping pad, tent, towel, water, and the Mexican food I just bought. *I can't forget that.* I filled my pack as fast as I could. I pulled my bike off the rack and locked it to a jackleg wooden fence. I tapped my car's power lock button and glanced quickly at the sign that points toward camping then took off hiking through the dun-brown grasses of the high Palouse prairie. Giant sagebrush peppered the landscape and Gold Creek creased the swollen, rippling land. The day was relatively warm for mid-March. I trudged up the trail, crossing two bridges without studying the water depth, the flow, or the speed. About a mile in, I set up my tent, blew up my sleeping pad, laid out my sleeping bag, and continued 2 more miles up the trail with my pack up toward the hot springs. The reddish-orange sun glowed like a hot coal and sank rapidly.

Vegetation was sparse along the toe slope of the foothills, but Douglas firs, junipers, and ponderosa pines grew dense, lining the edges of the vodka-clear stream. As I climbed higher up the switchbacks, the canyon walls were whittled away by the creek.

Night didn't fall but pooled in shadows behind rocks and trees, creases and folds where it hid from the light all day. Shadows lengthened and gained strength and slowly filled open meadows and the night sky last. I crossed

¹See “Rebelling Against the Void,” a piece about David Roberts by Brad Rassler, outsideonline.com, October 24, 2016.

the few remaining switchbacks in the dark woods and went across the two remaining footbridges. The air had a hint of sulfur. I was getting close.

Giant erratic boulders lay across the stream. A four-legged creature slithered toward me, like an apparition out of the shadows. At first, I thought it was a coyote. Then I realized it was a dog, with a man basking in a pool. A waterfall gushed over him—Goldbug Hot Springs.

“Hey, how’s it going?” I asked. He nodded. I got the sense I had intruded on this person’s solitary paradise. Jean-Paul Sartre’s words rang true: “Hell is other people.” I undressed. I wadded up my clothes next to my backpack and stepped naked down into the steamy pool that rose from the creek bed. The sun dropped behind the horizon of a distant mountain range. Bright, beautiful colors of mauve, peach, pink, and tangerine lit up the evening sky. I tried to calm my anxiety after the seven-hour drive and all the stress from the past week.

The other man dried off, gathered his things, and left with his dog. I was left with myself and my mind.

Why do I feel the need to experience the world the way I do? I have climbed some of the highest mountains—Aconcagua, Kilimanjaro. I didn’t seek them out; the opportunities just arose, and I couldn’t pass them up. For thirteen years, I camped out, as long as six months at a time, working on backcountry trail crews in national parks and wilderness areas. I have skied across frozen lakes, 15 miles back, carrying deer hindquarters for wolverine studies. I lived in a remote ranger station, 4 miles from the Canadian border in Glacier National Park for eight autumns to keep an eye out for poachers during hunting season. There I chopped wood for heat, carried water from a half-mile away, with grizzlies, mountain lions, and wolves right outside my door. I sat in a fire lookout for more than 70 days in Montana’s Bob Marshall Wilderness. I have fasted from food for days and gone on vision quests. What am I seeking? Where is there meaning in all of this?

Henry David Thoreau went to the woods to “live deliberately,” to find the essential facts of life, and to see what he might find there. He did this to assure himself that, when it came time to die, he would know he had lived life to its fullest. He sought a Spartan life, one reduced to its lowest denomination. What does that look like for me?

AN HOUR HAS PASSED. I SIT NESTLED IN THIS POOL, CUPPED AND BATHED in darkness. The beauty is sublime—both terrifying and amazing. I once

joked with trail crews I supervised that if I ever found myself fretting so much about some worry on the trail that I could not pause in awe for beauty, I might as well not be alive. But now, I cannot sit still, for my worrying. My mind rushes with the stream. I think, *I should grab my headlamp and get my things ready*. I crawl out of the pool. I pull out my towel and search for my light, but I can't find it. I find my lighter, set it on my towel, and go back into the warm pools. I sit a while longer and try to relax. My mind can't. I crawl back out. I grab the lighter and look some more for my headlamp. My hands come up with nothing. I set down my lighter. I look downstream where the wall of trees is blackening like a dark alley in a city with no name. I get back into the pools one last time, but only for a few minutes. My mind can't take it, and I climb back out. I dry off. My hand reaches down trying to find purchase on my lighter—nothing.

As darkness gathers, cold air sinks. I dress. I cross the bridge and head down the trail.

ROBERT KOESTER WAS LARGELY RESPONSIBLE FOR FRAMING THE SCIENCE of understanding and predicting what people do when they get lost. He spent a lifetime organizing search-and-rescue missions, often to locate people with Alzheimer's disease. Eventually, he started developing an intuitive sense of where they likely would be found. I imagine older people walking around their neighborhoods, their minds confused and disoriented. Is this place new or something they see every day? The answer never comes; the lines between ordinary and extraordinary blur. The lost people are usually found within blocks of their daily routines, but they are profoundly lost.

He says that hikers lost in the desert act differently than do those lost in the woods.

Why? The desert is so much more inhospitable, offering somewhere to go but hard to navigate and nowhere to hide. In the heat of the day, mirages haunt and taunt the mind, and logic becomes jumbled. People lost here think, "If I abandon my clothes and extra weight, I won't drink my water so fast. I can go farther and faster." They forget that night gets bitterly cold and the days get swelteringly hot.

People who have children with them act differently than those wandering solo. I wonder why this is so. I guess if I had children or companions with me, I would worry about their comfort and safety, keeping them warm and alive. Perhaps I would be quicker to find shelter or build a fire.

Most hikers fear the wrong things. People are terrified of bears, mountain lions, rattlesnakes, scorpions, spiders, and wolves, yet the probability of encountering one, let alone getting attacked, is minuscule. Dramatic, unexpected changes in the weather and water crossings are much bigger dangers. Getting lost in the mountains is where people get in the most trouble, because finding the route is complicated by the rippling landscape. The best thing to do, according to Koester, is to backtrack until you know where you are. Follow a creek downstream.

I HEARD SOMEONE DESCRIBE THE TRICK OF BEING ABLE TO HOLD TWO opposing thoughts at once as being like an epistemological car crash. To give texture and definition to life, you must embrace death. So, if heaven is here now, then perhaps hell is here too?

I want to transcend the formulaic ideals and eclipse the romantic dream of living close to nature. If I am searching, it's for what is hidden and just beyond reach. Within, they say, is where you will find answers to what this is all about. But first I must go outside, must become lost.

I slowly climb down from my perch in the juniper, and my legs hit the ground like a sack of bricks. I hold on to the tree for support until the blood returns and I can stand again. I walk, mostly blind, with my arms out in front of me. I still can't see how deep, fast, or wide the stream is moving. But I hear the creek's music rushing along.

Finally, after what feels like eternity passes, the marigold moon rises high enough to see. I shake my head and walk to the creek. It's literally a hop, skip, and a jump across. I pick up the trail on the other side and follow it down a mile to my tent. For the last few remaining hours of the night, I lie there thinking and listening to the solace outside.

BENJAMIN ALVA POLLEY lives in Whitefish, Montana. He worked for more than a decade as a trail worker, fire lookout, wildlife observer, and ranger for the National Park Service, mostly in Glacier National Park. His writing has appeared in *Esquire*, *Sierra*, *Bugle*, *Canoe & Kayak*, and other publications. He is senior editor of the *Whitefish Review* and is writing a book about the sense of place.