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See One, Do One, Teach One

The path branches a lot

Elissa Ely



WE HAD NEVER BEEN TO PRAIRIE MOUNTAIN. FOR THAT MATTER, we had never been to Canada. The traffic signs leading west out of Calgary were rich with restraint and politeness: “Important Intersection Ahead,” read one. With the same calm manners, a herd of cattle watched us from behind their fence. This was unhurried country, where one could contemplate important intersections and exactly what made them so.

Prairie Mountain stands outside of Bragg Creek, in the Kananaskis wilderness of Alberta. It’s 7,253 feet high—although, to be honest, Bragg Creek’s elevation is 4,266 feet, so if you’re jetlagged and altitude-confused, you’re ahead before you begin. Our guidebook described it as a “starter trail.” Actually, there are steep switchbacks, and sometimes—even worse—no switchbacks. Much of the way is scree. The rest is plain dirt. Canadians are not only very polite; apparently, they are also very fit.

There appeared to be no real trailhead, just a parking lot across from Elbow River Falls and a mess of unidentified but intersecting paths that seemed to know where they were going. I thought I might meet a colony of gigantic ants scurrying industriously up and down.

We took the Buddhist way, along one of the middle paths. It offered no guarantee of leading anywhere and, at first, headed discouragingly down, toward what sounded like a river below. Then it began to ascend, in a courtly and gentle way, as if it were looking over its shoulder to make sure we could keep up. After a minute or two, it rose more swiftly, until, around a corner, it abandoned its manners altogether.

Now we were scrambling at an angle, digging hiking poles into dust. In an opening between trees, the Elbow River looked up from a long way down, and the Kananaskis peaks looked down from a long way up. They took away what breath we had.

Rivulets of paths led right and left. For no particular reasons, we followed one then another; choosing X, abandoning Y. A struggle ought to have its clear reward, a hike its clear destination, but we had none. This can be intriguing for the intrepid. Not for us.

Fatigue, jetlag, doubt, incipient despair. After about an hour, a man in camouflage came swinging briskly down from above. He was like a descending god, with his water bottle clipped to backpack loops and an army knife strapped to his belt. I could have embraced him, but it might have

Up switchbacks and through steep dusty stretches, and then, behold, a calm woman.

JEFFREY JOSEPH

overstepped national protocol. He nodded to us and started to pass, crab-walking rapidly along the steepness. He assumed that we, like he, knew where we were.

—Is this Prairie Mountain? I asked.

—Prairie Mountain? he said, stopping and balancing.

—We're heading to the top of Prairie Mountain, I said, and rephrased foolishly—Are we on it?

Now he recognized us: two panting beginners were from a different country. He nodded.

—You're sure? I asked. Certainty at these moments is imperative.

—The path branches a lot, he said—but it comes together again, eh? All roads here lead to Rome.

He assumed that we, like he, knew where we were.

We had never been to Rome. But the words gave reassurance where reassurance was required. Developmental psychologists like to talk about the fixed temperaments infants begin life with. Why should hikers be any different? If you are someone who needs to know exactly where you are and where you're going, maplessness is the best route to panic. Tell me where I stand, and you behold a calm woman before you.

It was only another hour or so up after that, past more steep switchbacks and dust-scrambling. But now our boots had little Canadian wings. We knew an Important Intersection was ahead.

The final grade was suddenly gentle, through a field of alpine flowers. (They had no idea what efforts it had taken to reach them.) Prairie Mountain's summit was crowded: families lying in sunshine, fathers belly-up with their shirts off, little kids haggling over juice boxes, wagging dogs. In front of a flag, an elderly couple posed while someone snapped pictures. It was a village filled with citizens who knew the address—and now, we were among them.

Coming down was straightforward, as it usually is. The route to follow was perfectly clear. When we had gone about halfway, a laboring couple stopped us. They were heading up, and I recognized their looks.

—We're a little lost, the man said.

My husband gazed at him with sympathy and a hint of satisfaction.

—The path branches, he said—but all roads lead to Rome.

I was reminded of a much-overused phrase from medical school: “See one, do one, teach one.” If we couldn’t remember the branches of the facial nerve or hear a heart murmur, we could always fall back on this. The concept is nothing but hubris, of course; no one can become a master so quickly. And yet, when reassurance has been given to you, it is a civic duty—the only polite thing—to pass it along.

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