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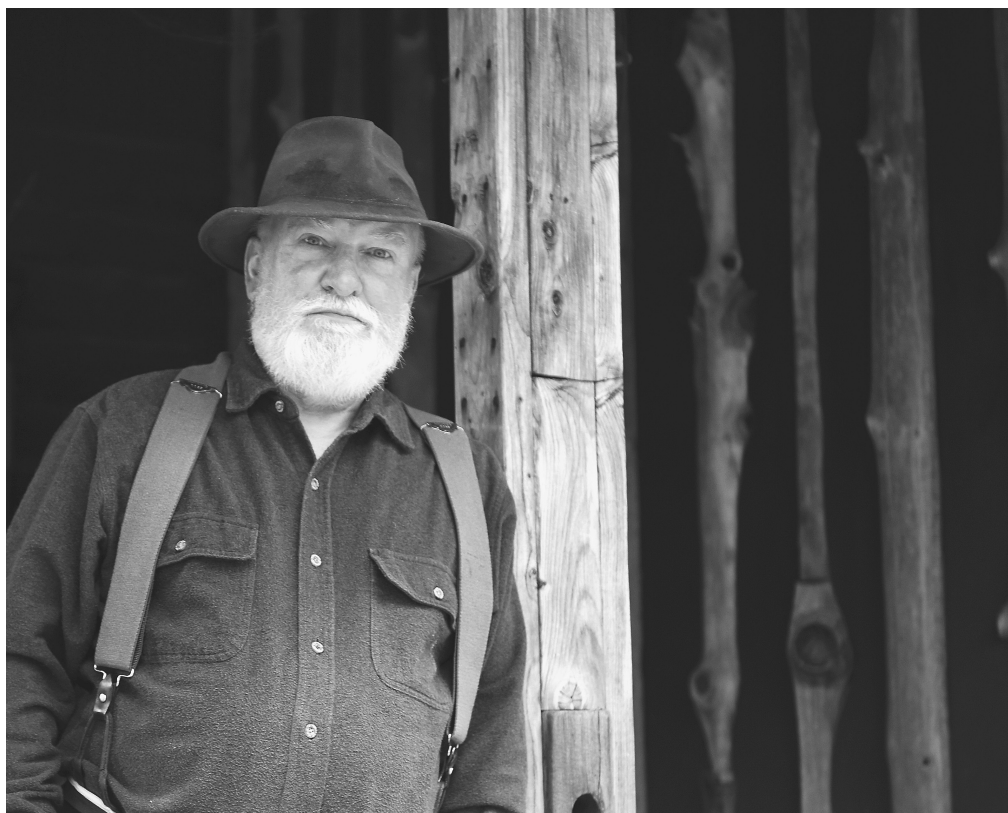
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The Gift

A father's legacy, "free man past Monday"

Michael Keck



MY FATHER TOOK ME INTO MY FIRST WILDERNESS, THE ADIRONDACKS, when I was 7 years old to learn about brook trout. It was 1957. I went with my two brothers. He also showed us how to make a set for bobcats, using a sandbank and a can of sardines. He told us stories about trapping as a child, after his own father died in a paper mill accident when he was 12. We went with him again to learn how to hunt deer in the big woods. How to take care of a deer hunting camp. How to get along with other men. In many ways, I would never leave those woods.

I would go on to fashion myself into a backpacker after reading Colin Fletcher's classic book *The Complete Walker* (Knopf, originally published in 1968). At the time, I was teaching in the Richmond, Virginia, public schools. I made Shenandoah National Park my backpacking home. There, wilderness can be less than a mile wide. While hiking the Appalachian Trail during the winter of 1979–80, there were places where I learned as much about blacktop as mountaintop.

People asked me why I was hiking the entire Appalachian Trail. I made up a glib answer that this was sort of a midterm exam for backpacking, a test of sorts, but truthfully, I had no idea. The reason had more to do with my father than I had cared to examine. The fact that I had moved back home to northern New York created a gap in my work life that allowed me to try it.

Nowadays, the question has become, "How old are you?" I still hump a pack into the mountains. I still portage into remote lakes with a solo canoe. I fish for trout. Hunt deer in big woods. Ever since my college days, I have been engaged in learning the craft of writing. I thought that I could use my time in the woods to write something about it, maybe encourage others to go there, to become engaged to rock and river.

By going alone into the woods, I have developed a great deal of self-confidence. I have had to rely on myself in the moments of adversity that wilderness settings present. I could map out my trips to coincide with only positive forecasts. Traveling with my wife or friends teaches me the same things but, alone, I learn faster. As I learned how to cope, I learned how to settle in with being alone. I got comfortable with it. I grew to rely on my own efforts.

I have had my moments. On the Appalachian Trail, I was lost for four days in blizzard-like conditions near Mount Rogers, in southwest Virginia. I kept finding the peak but could not find my way off it and back onto the trail.

A portrait of Michael Keck, by his sister. KATHLEEN KECK

After I ran out of stove fuel, I got out my compass, took a bearing south, and plunged into the white. Once I found a (still unplowed) road, I walked on it, through the night, into Damascus, where I rested for three days.

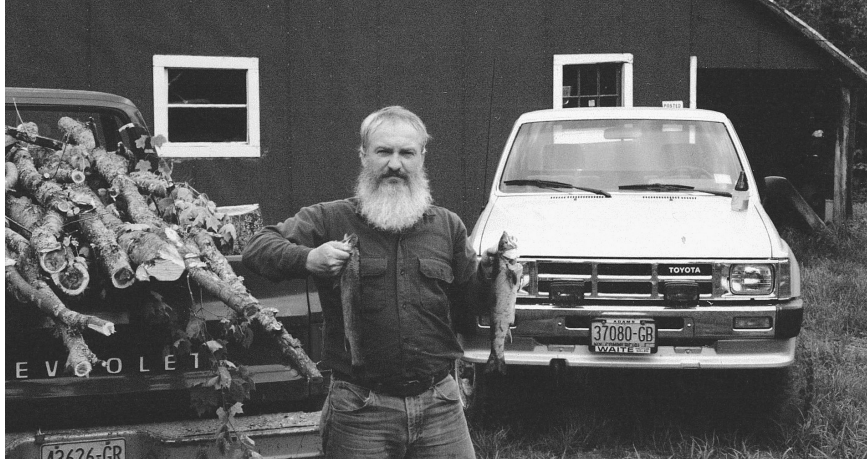
On another trip into the Adirondacks one spring, looking for ice-out trout, my Alaskan malamute Sydney and I backed away from two bear cubs and a mother doing her job. I raised my hiking stick over my head to appear larger and began speaking softly to Syd, to calm her, as we backed up. When I am alone, I find that I can control my actions through my experience. I used this same thinking to serve me well in the work I did after the trail, helping those who live with physical and intellectual disabilities. And now, my solo hiking skills help me face retirement.

Any woods, even my backyard, can support me for an overnight or a weekend trip. I still enjoy the woods for the opportunity to see myself in a different setting. Part of this fights the tedium of living anywhere longer than a few years. Another part of the allure may be fundamental to the human spirit. That of traveling. I like the process of planning and pulling off a hiking trip. Rather than going to the woods to find myself, doing so has helped me create a new self.

Here in the Northeast, our wild lands are vaster than many think. Other than a few big bridges, looking east from New York State through New England and into Canada, I can still find places where I can step off for a week or longer without ever finding the track of another person. These areas claim people's lives. Many of those who perish in the eastern backcountry probably underestimated the eastern mountains. They might not understand wet snow.

Exploring this vastness of the East has created a persona for me that I call "a free man past Monday." By this, I mean staying out past Sunday. Once Tuesday rolls around, I know what the food left really means. I recall the wisdom that says a backpacker is more likely to fall at the end of the day, going downhill toward a campsite, than at any other time. I get to understanding time differently as I slow down to a pace directed by the weather, my load going through it, and how I found the land that day. There is less clutter in my pack and my life.

Spending my time in the woods and on mountains has helped me pay better attention. It is not just about looking around more but about understanding what it is that I am looking at. Take weather. Traveling in the wild lands, I am constantly noting the time, conditions, wind direction, and how much light is left. I measure these against my drinking water, the food in my stomach, and a hot spot on my heel. I pause to "catch myself" before taking



Michael Keck after a fishing trip in the 1990s. COURTESY OF MICHAEL KECK

the first step down a long hill. I stop for another drink. Even on a wilderness canoe trip, I still practice Fletcher's rule of ten minutes off for every hour. It clears my head. I worry about the wind more than I do if I will be wet in it. After checking for branches that could fall overnight, I make my camp with the wind in mind, not just the evening one but how the morning will greet me.

Wilderness is a great teacher. Good gear can only go so far to create a margin of safety in wild lands. The experience from common sense, from having been there before, is the real value of going back, over and over. I have seen a six-foot-tall rock cairn pass out of view in blowing snow above treeline in the Presidentials of New Hampshire's White Mountains. I have erected my tent in blowing snow near Mount Guyot. I have learned to let go of my ego.

When I left the Appalachian Trail in 1980, I established a goal of going on 10 wilderness trips each year. Since then, I've taken between 6 and 22 per year. Statistically speaking, I might need a rescue some year. Going alone and at 65 years old can only add to this prediction. But I like how wildness has gnawed at me. I like finding chickadees next to my campsite.

My father left when I was 11 years old. I would spend the rest of my life looking for him and the relationship we never had by traveling in wild lands. Hiking on the Appalachian Trail in winter and alone was not the first aspect of that quest for him. I once told my grandmother that the only gift my father ever gave me was the woods. It has been enough.

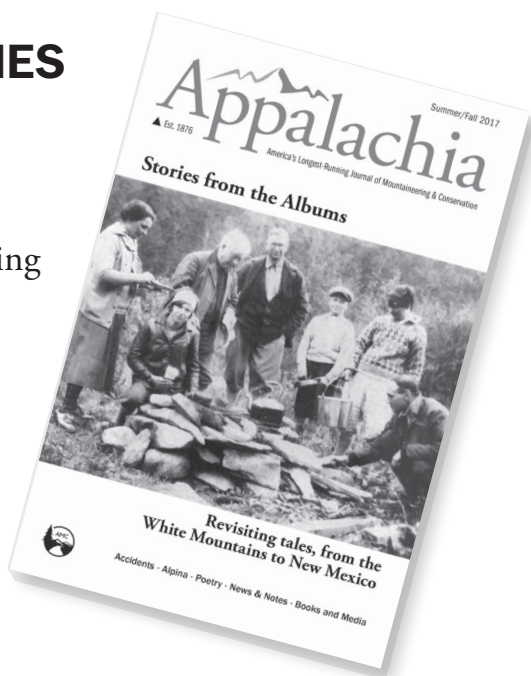
MICHAEL KECK is a writer who lives in Black River, New York. He worked for many years as a teacher. He spends much of his time in wild places.

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