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The Retired Fire Warden: On Finding Purpose

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The Retired Fire Warden

On finding purpose

Elissa Ely



WHEN YOU HAVE BEEN INDOORS ALL WINTER, THE FIRST HIKE OF spring can tax self-esteem severely. Small August slopes rise into April peaks, as if some great ladder had hoisted them hundreds of feet higher on purpose.

Our first hike was a starter, just an appetizer. It was like an amuse-bouche: nothing more than 2,030 feet, quick and tasty, along the Red Hill Trail, overlooking Squam Lake in central New Hampshire. The route should have disappeared in two bites.

Instead, it took much of the morning. The trail began easily, yet soon we were breathing harder. It was the slope. It was the backpack. It was the wind. It was the new shoes. Certainly it was not the age.

A steady hiking pace is helpful for big-project planning. Back in the living room at home (the room that had encouraged such pleasant inactivity all winter), I had been reading a book about life stages. Its retirement chapter did not beat around the bush; advice was specific. When entering this life stage, one grapples with an existential dilemma: Who will I be, if not who I have been? The book said we know ourselves only through meaningful activity. But the book did not say what meaningful activity was.

On top of a final clearing, we came to a fire tower. Its rusting stairs looked little used, although a small flag hung from a window. I climbed the flights—just for the sake of technical completeness—and came to a trap door. Uncertain of protocol, I knocked.

“Come in,” a voice said, and the floor, which was also a ceiling, flew up.

There were windows all around; a radio, set low to some talk station; the day’s weather report taped to a window; a captain’s chair with a dented cushion; a lunch box. Its owner was large and bronze. I had walked into his living room, his kitchen, and his cave. I felt I ought to guarantee I was not a solicitor.

But he was a genial host, accustomed to questions he must have heard hundreds of times, like an astronaut facing one more child: Where is the bathroom? Are there any pets? No mini-fridge? He didn’t mind.

—*Ask me anything*, he said expansively. —*All these questions are old to me, but new to you.*

Because there was only one chair, we stood. He swept his hand across the vista. For 27 years, he said, he had worked as the fire warden in this room; it

Standing one’s own company, on the top of a fire tower. (This one is in Ludington, Vermont.) JERRY AND MARCY MONKMAN/ECOPHOTOGRAPHY

was one of 16 lookouts from below Canada to above Nashua still manned. By now, he was a specialist; he knew where there should be smoke and where there should not. It's easy to spot a fire, he explained, but almost impossible to spot a fire-setter. He also knew, when a new warden started, whether he would last years or days. It had to do with standing one's own company.

He pointed at the flag. When he was younger, it used to fly from the roof, but he couldn't climb the extra 15 feet safely anymore, so he raised it out of the window instead. Summer inside the station was hot, over 100 degrees Fahrenheit. There was no fan and no electricity. For the first two decades, he had lugged up a 42-pound propane tank from the trailhead. These days he cheated and used an ATV. But each day, he still climbed with a lunch box.

We were well into the visit, past the facts, when he said there was a bit more to the story. After 27 years, he had retired. But the truth was, the view had never grown old; he had never stopped loving it, and—destiny colluded, here—there weren't enough volunteers to staff the tower in his absence. So recently he had came back to work, like a kind of substitute teacher, until the town voted money to support him. They needed him. But at the same time, it turned out he couldn't stay away.

My book on life stages had plenty of advice about endings. But it had no chapter on the joys of non-endings. For the lucky, intentionally or otherwise, the person you have meaningfully been is the one you will continue to be.

First hike of the season: a little arduous on the way up, a little revelatory at the top. Coming down was straightforward but full of thought. Who will I be, if not who I have been?

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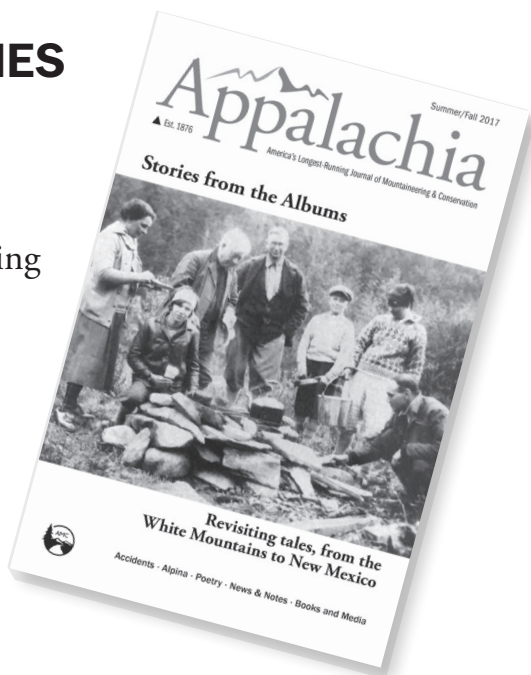
Editor's note: Fire towers are coming back. To read about how Pennsylvania is reintroducing mountain fire towers, see Darrin Youker's article from the January/February 2016 issue of AMC Outdoors: outdoors.org/firetower.

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