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Steepness Ends: Considering the Will to Live

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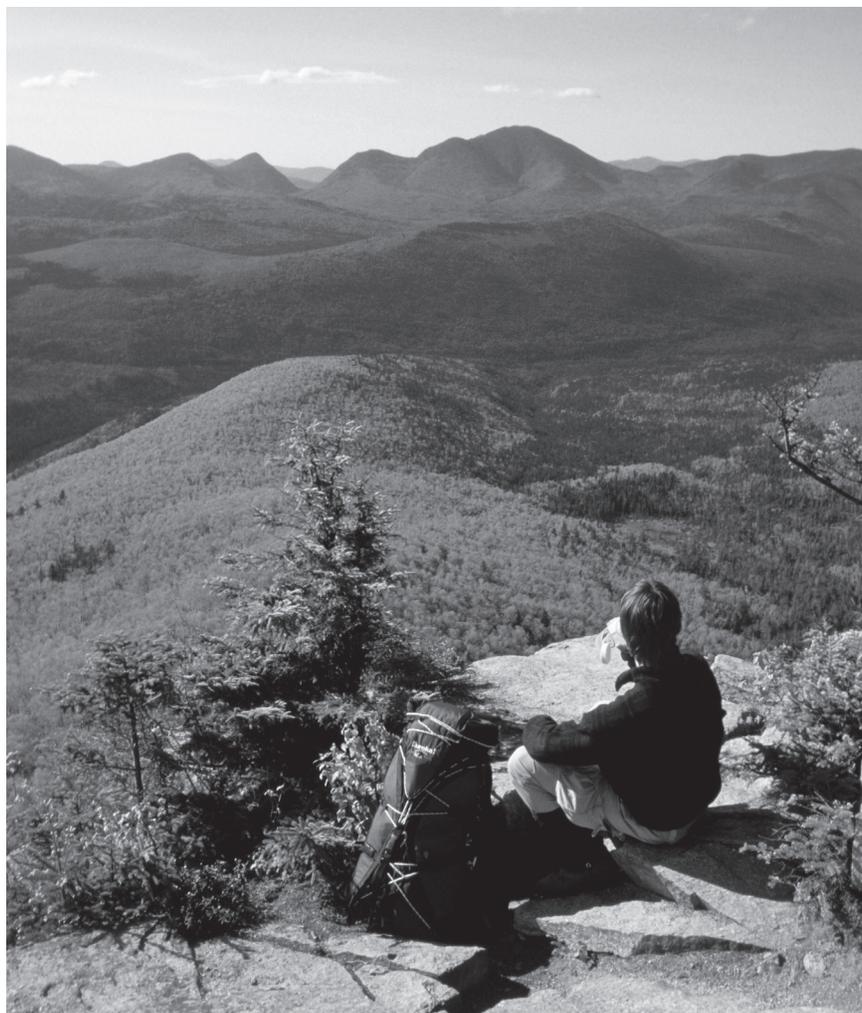
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Steepness Ends

Considering the will to live

Elissa Ely



FROM GALEHEAD HUT TO SOUTH TWIN MOUNTAIN, EVERY STEP requires an act of intelligence. The rocks are tall and wet; the lichens are slides; there's no time for preoccupations.

And yet, climbing, we were preoccupied. A few days before, someone we knew had almost died, deliberately. She had not succeeded, but only because luck intervened. Instead of watching our steps, we were wondering what could cause her to want to live.

One forgets in the midst of despair or discomfort how quickly circumstances change. Hours earlier, a mile or two into the Gale River Trail, we had passed a couple heading out.

—Nice hike? I asked the patriarch.

—For *us*, he said. —But WE'RE going *down*. YOU'RE going *up*.

The woman only shook her head and flattened herself as she passed. She looked like she had seen a ghost.

A tough, tough stretch lay ahead, the man explained. We were going to need to save our energy. It would take everything.

—Look for the sign, he added, with the dark satisfaction of one whose hard times are behind him. Then he hurried to catch up with his silent, flattened wife.

We hike earnestly but not powerfully. After the second water crossing, the route grew rapidly steeper. Stone converted to boulder. Breath became wind. The ascent seemed to go on and on with no sign in sight. Our dread grew because the man had told us this was only the beginning.

Finally, we reached the sign: Galehead Hut, 0.6 miles—the impossible stretch. A little more than half a mile but, as per a stranger's warning, the end of us. We ate a quantity of trail mix.

Yet instead of growing impossible, the slope grew more gradual as the trees shortened. Soon we found ourselves walking levelly. We had expected undoing, but when the hut curved into view, we stood upright and mostly full of air.

All this time, fearing worse ahead, we had actually been passing through it. The sign (we had misunderstood) marked for steepness ENDING.

We signed into the hut, found our bunks, and dropped our packs beside the last piece of applesauce cake for a dollar. As I ate it, I leafed through the

The Pemigewasset Wilderness, seen from Zeacliff. "It resembled an answer that had found us, instead of the other way around." JERRY AND MARCY MONKMAN

guest log. “There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground,” someone had written on 7/31/15—someone who clearly liked life very much.

Then, like many who arrive at a hut without feeling they haven’t climbed quite high enough, we were struggling beyond it, up the Twinway to South Twin Mountain, for the view—“Yeah, that’s crazy fun!” a young man with muscles, coming down, said—and hoping another sign soon would signal another misunderstanding. But we remained preoccupied with the question of someone who had no use for life. She had no desire to kneel and kiss the ground. She didn’t believe steepness would end.

Many boulders later, the Pemigewasset Wilderness fanned out underneath us. It resembled an answer that had found us, instead of the other way around. Nature as salvation: how simple, we told each other. What if the hopeless were sent huffing to the tops of mountains? What if she were here, looking at this?

We turned back. Dinner, a great satisfaction of the hut, would begin promptly at 6. We hurried a little, which is never an act of intelligence.

THAT NIGHT, ON MY WAY TO BRUSH TEETH, I PASSED THE LOG AGAIN and took up reading backward where I had left off. I leafed past hiker trail names (“Chickpea” was popular), mileages, weather reports, food reviews, and family histories incomprehensible to anyone but other family members. I stopped at one unsigned entry on 7/1/15. I read it a few times, to be sure I got it right; a reminder that the wish to live, and its opposite as well, are never as simple as a single vista:

“Despite these hikes,” someone had written, “I am still afraid of dying.”

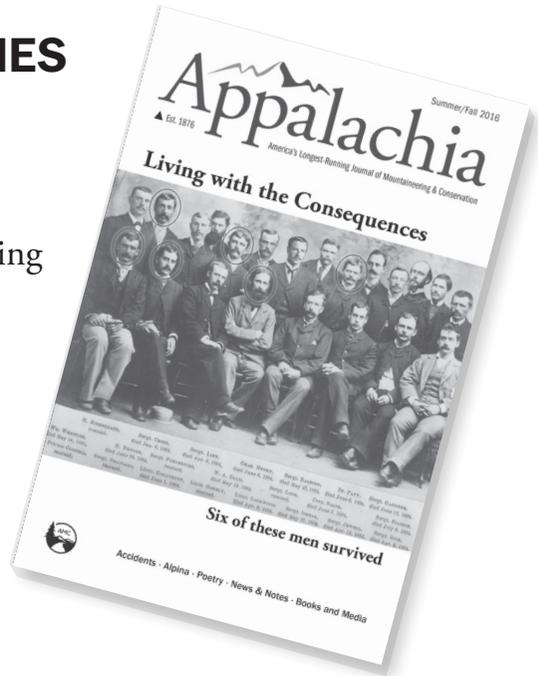
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