

Appalachia

Volume 67
Number 1 *Winter/Spring 2016: Commitment*

Article 6

2016

Distance: How Far Have You Come?

Elissa Ely

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.dartmouth.edu/appalachia>



Part of the [Nonfiction Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ely, Elissa (2016) "Distance: How Far Have You Come?," *Appalachia*: Vol. 67: No. 1, Article 6.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.dartmouth.edu/appalachia/vol67/iss1/6>

This In This Issue is brought to you for free and open access by Dartmouth Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Appalachia by an authorized editor of Dartmouth Digital Commons. For more information, please contact dartmouthdigitalcommons@groups.dartmouth.edu.

Distance

How far have you come?

Elissa Ely



WE WATCHED THE JULY STORM FROM INSIDE MIZPAH SPRING Hut, passing sociable helpings of gingerbread down the plank table—no one asked for the recipe because the croo never shares it—and feeling adept for having beaten the clouds to dinner, when a small group appeared at the kitchen door. One diner recognized them and whispered through his dessert. A mile or so away on the trail, an hour or so earlier, he had exchanged passing questions with them—the usual variety of questions. The answers had been unusual. These weren't hikers; they were imperial hikers, Appalachian Trail thru-hikers, up from Georgia and heading ever north.

There were three of them. The first man through the door was tubby from layers of clothing under his raincoat. A woman following him wore nose studs. When the bony last folded his hood back, he looked like an ascetic, hovering in some Himalayan cave, pared down to essence on a diet of air.

They stood, dripping and silent (maybe having said all they needed to in the preceding 1,840 miles), waiting for us to finish our dinners. These were not paying customers like us, meandering down from Mount Eisenhower or Mount Pierce for the night, covered with local sweat. They had carried their dust across months, cross-pollinating states.

Some of us preoccupy ourselves with distance. I ask everyone I meet the same biologically driven question—that is, driven by my own biology. I regret as soon as I ask, yet never fail to do so: how far have *you* come, and how much farther do *I* have to go?

Distance should have nothing to do with personal worth. A longer hike is not supposed to mean a superior species of hiker, and a shorter hike is not supposed to mean a failure of character. Still, if an end point exists (and one always does), am I only half-accomplished until I reach it? If you have gone farther than I, are you more accomplished?

NOW, ON THE OTHER SIDE OF AN INVISIBLE CORD STRUNG ACROSS the kitchen entrance, it looked as though the thru-hikers were bartering with the croo. The multilayered man gestured to trays of food, and I imagined he was negotiating for leftovers, maybe in exchange for dishwashing. Diplomacy seemed relaxed. He hoisted himself onto a counter, the cook leaned against it,

Appalachian Trail thru-hiker "Treebeard," whose name off trail is Julian Cranberg, waits his turn for leftovers at Mizpah Spring Hut, August 2015. JAMES WRIGLEY

both laughed, and by the time we had finished our dessert, it was clear they had finished their arrangement.

Carrying plates of food, they walked into the dining room, past the chalkboard with current weather conditions and the dinner menu, past a bookcase with copies of *Appalachia* going back half a century, past lingering diners, and sat at the far end of a table. They were facing a wall of windows in dimming light, but not looking out to the view.

The woman had brought nothing but a small bowl of salad, which she deconstructed delicately, one lettuce leaf at a time. This was odd because she should have been starving. I worried about her fortitude and heard my stomach growl. The man, who might have been her husband—they wore similar left-hand rings—hoisted forkfuls of chicken parmigiana to his mouth as if he were loading a truck. The yogic third sat apart from them, serenely eating a double portion of the same chicken. All of them still wore raincoats.

After dinner, the majority of us read by headlamp, played cards, and bought shirts from the hut volunteer. We were at leisure. The three of them brought their plates back to the oversize sink and started to wash dishes to a degree of cleanliness they had probably not themselves known in months.

When we woke, the rain was gone, and the croo was singing an a cappella rendition of “Oh, Shenandoah.” On our way to the bathrooms, we tiptoed past two of the travelers under a dining room table. The third had disappeared into his sleeping bag on the grass outside. No head was visible, but a pair of crossed hiking poles poked up beside his knapsack, like a mailbox for his current cave.

They left half an hour later without bartering for breakfast, while we passed frittata, coffee cake, and tea bags down the tables. We were heading back. They were going on.

Taking the Crawford Path down, we ran into an older, portly man. He wore a white ponytail and one feather earring in exuberant combination, and was using his sticks for canes. There was a time, he told us, leaning on them, when he had hiked all 48 4,000-footers in all four seasons. He knew the trails by rock and root. But those days were gone. He was just out for a stroll.

“How much farther?” I asked reflexively.

“Wrong question,” he said, though did not seem annoyed. He had been up and down all these mountains, and was an expert in distances. But at this moment, he was only measuring the great worth of the day.

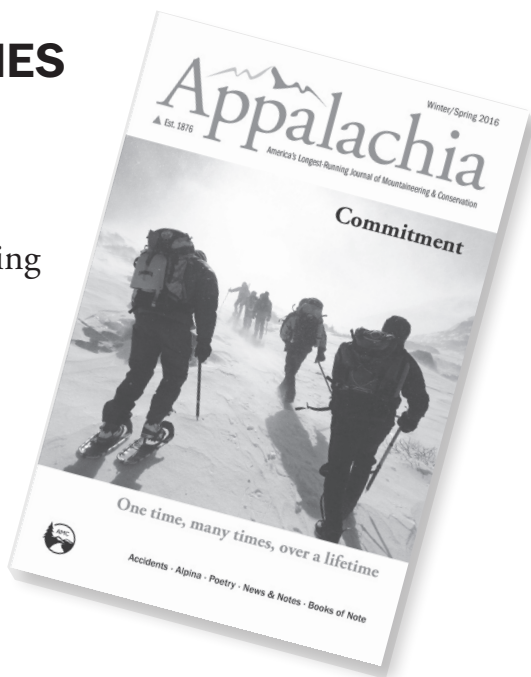
ELISSA ELY is a Boston-based psychiatrist and writer.

"I started reading Appalachia for the accident reports, but I kept reading for the great features."—Mohamed Ellozy, subscriber

SUPPORT THE STORIES YOU LOVE!

Start or renew your *Appalachia* subscription today, and keep reading America's longest-running journal of mountaineering and conservation.

Visit **outdoors.org/appalachia** for a special offer: 36% off the journal's cover price. That's three years of *Appalachia* (6 issues) for only \$42. Or choose a one-year subscription (2 issues) for \$18—18% off the cover price.



Inside every issue, you'll find:

- inspired writing on mountain exploration, adventurers, ecology, and conservation
- up-to-date news and notes on international expeditions
- analysis of recent Northeastern mountaineering accidents
- book reviews, poetry, and much more

Subscribe today at **outdoors.org/appalachia** or call 800-372-1758.



Subscription prices valid as of September 2021. Prices and offers subject to change without notice. For the most up-to-date info, visit outdoors.org.