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The Long Way Home: Healing by Doing

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Healing by Doing

MY HUSBAND AND I WERE IN A BAD PLACE LAST SUMMER, SO WE left home and went into the mountains for three days. Our younger daughter had just graduated and left home for good. He'd lost two jobs to the bad economy in 15 months. The old ways of coping with change had led us to a brick wall. I was in despair. But I knew that we could camp.

Weighed down by loss and the constraints of old habits, we pulled the gear off the shelves. It'd been a while since we'd gone together; we found to our surprise that during a purge of his collection of old equipment, he'd given away our two-person tent. So we borrowed one. He pulled out a different old stove he'd found somewhere—I had my doubts, but I have always trusted him with the stove. I plotted our route, as I had been doing for many years; he trusted me to do that. He cleaned the water filter. I packed the food. We were used to letting each other do those things.

Of all the things he and I had done together—move five times, raise children, look for work, sit by each other's sickbeds—backpacking was the one we often did in silence. We had hiked thousands of miles together. I had hiked perhaps a thousand more without him. Of all the places we could start healing, the mountains seemed the obvious choice.

It's one thing to feel love, even selfless love, but sometimes in life, you have to just shut up and walk. Now we would do again what we once had loved to do together. And so, we parked the car and buried the keys in the pack. Talley, our little dog, sniffed the ground, and we began up the steep slope. The rocks were soaked from weeks of downpours. The mosquitoes followed in clouds. All afternoon I breathed in rhythm with Nat's trudging. We camped in a shelter down the ridge from a group of orphan boys in a state wilderness program. They ran over to meet the dog as their leaders stirred huge pots of stew.

The next morning, as I tried to organize my pack, Nat waded in with suggestions on how to load it. I lost my temper and yelled that I could not concentrate with his interruptions. He did not deserve that. I apologized. He said I did not need to apologize. I thought I did.

We scrambled up to Mount Everett and across the wet rocks of Mount Race. His muscular legs in their baggy gaiters faded in and out of fog. He picked me some blueberries at lunch. Talley climbed so strongly over the slippery treadway that Nat called her the sure-footed mountain goat. The sun began to beam through the mist.

As I walked through the afternoon, it came to me: “Be patient.”

“Become the woman you can be.”

Our second night out, we met some wonderful young hikers, some thru-hiking the Appalachian Trail, and the ridgerunner, a 26-year-old woman who rallied us all to return the picnic table to its proper position. We gathered water, lit the stove, set up the tent, and listened to each other’s trail stories. The peace of chores, which had eluded me in our little house, settled in. Much later, as man and dog slept soundly next to me, I sat up and pulled out my headlamp and notebook. As I always do when camping, I scribbled down where we lay, how the woods had looked that night, and, of course, how the two of us were doing. I could picture him earlier that day, a man I had not seen in a long time—wearing his maroon baseball cap over a bandanna protecting against the bugs, joking with the others.

And so, on the third day, we continued. We slid over the slick, worn rocks of these old mountains. The footing was more dangerous than wet granite. I knew that the rocks didn’t care. They were just rocks. They were like problems that won’t budge. When you look closely, you realize that both contain cracks and handholds. For the two of us, the future remained hidden. But I could see a way to get to it.

For weeks after we went home, when I closed my eyes, I would see the wet boulders, leaf duff, mud, streams, and cairns. I knew that I could learn to get through and around them in a way that makes sense, in the right time. The trip had marked the climb up from a low point. The way out would not take us as long as I had feared.

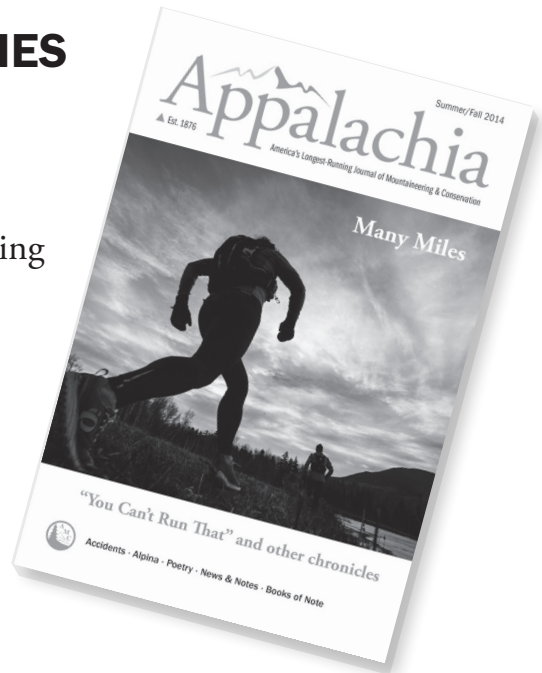
—Christine Woodside
Editor-in-Chief

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