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Four Quartets and Eight Legs

Rituals fortify an Appalachian Trail trek

Christine Woodside



THE THIN PAPERBACK'S COVER BENT BACK. MY FRIEND PHIL HELD it up above his head in his left hand and tipped the page toward the beam of his tiny flashlight. He lay on his back next to his wife, Cay, on the dirty wooden floor of the open-fronted shelter. Three of us stared up into the dark rafters, listening, as Phil read "Burnt Norton," the first part of T. S. Eliot's work, *Four Quartets*. "Time present and time past are both perhaps present in time future."

I lay on a flimsy sleeping pad next to my husband, Nat. Four days earlier, we had started walking the Appalachian Trail through the tree-covered mountains of northwest Georgia, four of the hundreds of middle-class American pilgrims redeeming the regrets of bad jobs or undevised ambitions. We would push ourselves through this adventure, and (we predicted) change. We would live in the present. We would walk with heavy packs for as long as we could—we hoped for 2,100 miles, through the ridges of Tennessee and North Carolina, Virginia, West Virginia, Maryland, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New York, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Vermont, New Hampshire, and Maine. We had quit those jobs and vacated our apartments. We thought that what we were doing made sense.

Burnt Norton

"Footfalls echo in the memory," Phil read. "Down the passage which we did not take/ Towards the door we never opened." My shoulder blades ached. I smelled. The soles of my feet felt smashed and bruised. And on this early night of a four-and-a-half-month slog, I strained to understand T. S. Eliot. In a few weeks, we would hardly have time to glance at the cover of the *Four Quartets* paperback. But its somber truths matched the painful march.

Nat and I had been married for almost two years, and Phil and Cay for about ten months. Phil and Nat had first met at Haverford College. Friends had introduced me to Nat when he was at Yale Divinity School and I was working as a journalist in Philadelphia. The three of us had worked as camp counselors together after that. Then, Cay had been Nat's and Phil's boss at Nature's Classroom, an outdoor education program in New Hampshire.

For two years before we stepped onto the trail, I had managed a newspaper in Westchester County, New York. I had worked 55 hours a week. It had felt

About three weeks left to go: Cay, with her roughly 42-pound pack, climbs Mount Kinsman in the White Mountains. CHRISTINE WOODSIDE

like a sweatshop. I had been miserable. The more miserable I'd felt, the harder I'd worked, thinking this would stop the feeling. It had not. No one ever had seemed happy there, no matter how hard they'd all worked. I had planned an escape; Nat was in. And he'd run downstairs to the wall phone in our apartment, dialing Phil and Cay in Boston. They were in. Nat had sold out of an infrared optics business where he and his partner had clashed. Phil had taken leave of a library job. Cay had walked away with relief from a university office where arguing had trumped productivity.

I went out to the trail for more than these obvious reasons. Something lay deep within me, unfinished. On the trail, I wanted resolution of my personality. Planning and executing a trip like this feels like a strange dream from which you wake up only after you realize you have condemned yourself to jail because you know that jail will deepen you.

The mountains of northwest Georgia and the ridge dividing North Carolina from Tennessee made me gasp. They were beautiful. But soon enough I was working so hard that I could not always see the blue-edged trees tumbling out before me. We reached a rocky overlook; we sat down and meditated on how we'd get up again in a moment. Phil and Nat had signed up for graduate school. We would have to hike 2,100 miles by early September. We left in mid-April. We would have to cover 20 miles a day throughout the South, if we possibly could.

We laughed a lot, but people laugh in jail. Phil one day performed an imitation of how Dracula would have spoken if he were Viennese. Every time he said, "Bleah" in a Viennese accent, I laughed like a hyena. Phil and I sang television theme songs from the 1960s. I had not known that I could sing all of the verses of "Green Acres." But as I did so, although I didn't appreciate the mountains the way I imagined I was supposed to, I did become someone else. I began to forget who I had been before.

Phil read "Burnt Norton" in a clear, perfectly paced, unsentimental voice that suggested he had thought about why we had come to be lying on the ground and why we would be doing so for many months.

"Time past and time future/ Allow but a little consciousness./ To be conscious is not to be in time."

And this: "Neither plenitude nor vacancy. Only a flicker/ Over the strained time-ridden faces/ Distracted from distraction by distraction/ Filled with fancies and empty of meaning."

We would live with neither too much nor too little of anything—just enough to get by. Just enough food, just enough money, just enough

courage. Distractions would almost break us, again and again—whether they come in the form of stinging wasps, soaking rain, high winds, or brusque Post Office clerks.

East Coker

“East Coker,” the second poem in *Four Quartets*, refers to the village where T. S. Eliot’s ancestors lived in England before leaving for America, and where he was buried.

“In my beginning is my end,” starts this second poem. And, “In order to arrive at what you are not/You must go through the way in which you are not./ And what you do not know is the only thing you know.” And, “For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business.” It reminded me of Nat, who never flinched from pushing us along, adding miles, keeping us on schedule.

Only Nat could have walked the distance alone. The rest of us now agree on that.

On a dark June afternoon, we hiked through northern Virginia and toward the low country of Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, headquarters of the Appalachian Trail Conference. A crisis was brewing. Cay had said she hoped we could stop early enough to set up camp properly. She meant, Nat and I realized, that she wanted to surprise Phil for his birthday. We remembered she’d been hoarding a box of instant cheesecake in one of the food bags. At about 5 p.m., the four of us convened on the trail, wondering how much farther to go. Nat wanted to walk three more miles to the next shelter. Cay stood quietly, looking down. Of course she would not say out loud her birthday surprise. Just then, the forest darkened, as if someone had blotted out the light with a cloth. It was going to rain, hard, and probably thunder and lightning too. Nat stood with his hands on his hips. He insisted, “If we keep stopping early all the time, we’re never going to make it to Katahdin.”

(“Katahdin,” I thought. “Was that where we were going?”)

Cay said, softly in a quavering voice, “I’m concerned that we should set up camp before it rains.” When Cay was upset, she became ultra-polite. No one answered. We all knew what no response meant. We’d been through this before. No response meant we would keep going. Cay turned and walked forward. She held her back firm, stoically. We just kept walking. No more than 30 seconds later, the trail in front of me got even blacker, if that was possible. Fireflies started blinking as if it were sunset. Rain pelted down on us.

The wind whipped up. The four of us, saying nothing, stopped immediately, took off our packs, and mechanically started setting up camp in the middle of the trail. The raindrops plopped around like giant gumballs. Nat and I shook out our tent and slipped its single curved pole through the fabric sleeves. We would sleep smack in the middle of the hiking superhighway, and it seemed a lovely place to stop. “BOOM.” The thunderstorm landed finally. We jammed in the tent stakes, and the fabric of our tents shivered up into place. I dove into our tent while Nat adjusted the fly. He threw me my damp pack, and I just sat against it, hugging my knees. A puddle of water settled around my behind. I could hear mad rustling of fabric in the other tent. Cay was pulling out the dinner bag, sobbing.

We just sat in our tents, silent, for many minutes. The rain lightened. Cay called out, “I’m making some dinner.” In the shelter of her tent fly, she lit the stove, plopped the pot of water on top, and poured in soup mix. A few minutes later, her hand parted our tent door, handing us soup. Then I heard her spoon hitting the side of the pie pan. She was mixing the birthday cheesecake. Several minutes later, the pan, with half of the dessert left, slid into our tent. I dipped my spoon into the smooth filling.

Nat had not succeeded in keeping us to our schedule. We had stopped because of the storm. In sunshine, we would have kept going, I knew. And I think Cay knew. We would push to the limit every day. Storms meant we could stop early. Birthdays did not.

The Dry Salvages

Eliot’s third poem is named for rocks off Cape Ann, Massachusetts, which he remembered from his childhood. “And the ragged rock in the restless waters,/ Waves wash over it, fogs conceal it; . . . in the somber season/ Or the sudden fury, [it] is what it always was.” A rock, timeless in moving time, reminded me of Cay, who had a Florence Nightingale quality about her. Night after night, I slumped on the edge of some filthy shelter platform, watching Cay stand in her boots and pour noodles into the unsteady pot. She stirred, dumped cheese sauce, shook salt and pepper, sprinkled a few dried herbs. She dished dinner into our cheap plastic bowls. She handed me my bowl.

Earlier in our journey, one awful cloudy, May dusk, Cay and I said goodbye to Nat and Phil. They raced ahead, as much as two men can race while wearing gigantic packs. It was almost 6 P.M. and we would cover seven more miles that night. The sun would set before we got to camp. *Don’t talk,*

I thought. The air faded grayer and grayer. I dragged myself into a lumbering gallop behind Cay's fast trot. She obviously had calculated that we ought to make about four miles an hour if we wanted to see. I only knew that I must follow her.

The trail twisted one way and then another down one mountain. It meandered up and around the next. Cay would pause only long enough to look back. As soon as she'd see me catching up, she'd take off again. We reached the bottom of the last hill just before the sun made its final dip behind the trees. Cay reached for the guidebook; we had two miles more, up one final treed mountain. I nodded miserably. We squatted to rest. I left my pack on, of course. Cay took hers off only so she could pull out the gallon Ziploc bag of breakfast raisins. We grabbed fistfuls. Cay could see I was holding on but barely. She knew better than to engage me in talk. I just silently hated everything.

Then Cay gently nudged me into the lead. She knew I was strong on the uphills. She knew I had a way of igniting out of my doldrums at odd times. The trail slanted upward and I marched. I kept thinking, "I can still see. I can see." The light dissipated into blotches. We knew that if we got out our flashlights, our night vision would bleach out. So we kept on. The only noises were our boots dully slapping against the dirt and our panting.

Near the crest, I stopped and turned around. "Is this still the trail?" Cay stepped ahead, pulled off her pack for a second, got out her flashlight, and before we could focus on the beam, we heard voices—strange men's voices, Nat's and Phil's voices, and a dog barking. I was afraid of dogs. The animal bounded up to us. Cay reached her hand down and tamed the beast. Suddenly I felt really good.

Little Gidding

The final chapter in *Four Quartets* examines suffering as the way to new life. It's named for an English village where an Anglican commune lived in the 1600s, but the group scattered during the mid-century English Civil War. This poem made me think of myself. Hiking the trail had been my idea, and I was the weakest of the four. I cried when I was hungry. I cried when I was tired. I felt that complaining was the way to happiness. And everyone just ignored me.

We were hiking through a downpour in central Virginia near Dismal Swamp. The rain and fog had started around lunchtime and poured down



The evening shelter routine began with Cay, left, searching for the dinner bag, Phil pumping water through the purifier, and Chris, right, standing like a zombie eating popcorn. NAT EDDY

for about three hours. The trail followed roads here. Everything was asphalt and fast cars swishing puddles, sending giant waves onto us. We wobbled along a narrow concrete edging of a one-lane bridge under construction. My feet were decomposing (I thought). A thick layer of calluses had absorbed so much of that water that they were rubbery. Underneath these, giant blisters formed, one on the ball of each foot. It hurt so much to walk that I cried out with each step. By late afternoon, at Nat's suggestion, I switched from my sodden leather boots to the light Adidas I usually wore in camp at night. I was no less soaked, but I could feel a tiny bit more of my dead feet this way.

A pathway of bog bridges—two split logs resting flat side up—lay across the wet terrain through here. I stepped onto the wet wood; tingly pains blasted from my feet up into my legs. I screamed. Once Nat looked back at me with a look of slight disgust. The rain was slowing down now, into a misty, chilly cloud.

The clearing for the Wapiti I Shelter barely went beyond the buildings and the mushy-looking fire pit in front of it. The inside wasn't too horribly wet. I eased myself to the edge, groaning as I sat down and pulled off those running shoes.

"Chris, why don't you cook dinner?" Nat asked.

I never cooked dinner. Well, I'd done it twice before. Usually Cay in her quiet way started cooking when we reached camp, but that night, they all wanted me to do it. On some level, they understood that I needed rehabilitation.

I roused myself and stopped blubbering. I rummaged through my pack for the first-aid kit. I pulled out the needle and matches from the red nylon pouch. Somehow I had to pop those gigantic blisters. I perched on the damp platform with one foot on my other knee, jabbed the needle through the dead white flesh, felt nothing. The pus seeped out and I wiped it with my bandanna and unwrapped a bandage. Nat handed me my hiking boots; they were sort of dry, while the Adidas now were soaked. I pushed my numb feet back into the boots and left the laces dangling. I stood up, leaning at the edge of the shelter floor. Tomorrow we would go into Pearisburg, Virginia. So we could eat anything out of the packs now; there would be plenty of time to replenish the stocks. Now it was my job to creatively use up what we had left. I took a second-long inventory, and then began cooking the last of the dried sliced potatoes. When they softened in the liquid, I dumped the mashed-potato flakes into them. Next, I boiled some rice and mixed in more water and Knorr leek and potato soup as a sauce.

My feet screamed as I stood mixing and stirring the all-potato meal, but something gentled my complaints. I had to pay attention to that stove. I started to joke around, pretending I was an Italian chef and I kept saying, "Mangia, mangia." Then I'd giggle hysterically. By the time I handed the glop to my companions, the responsibility of feeding them had quieted my breathing.

Eliot wrote, "If you came this way,/ Taking any route, starting from anywhere,/ At any time or at any season,/ It would always be the same: you would have to put off/ Sense and notion. You are not here to verify,/ Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity/ Or carry report. You are here to kneel/ Where prayer has been valid."

I was stumbling in prayer. I remember the afternoon, a few weeks earlier, when I had realized that I had chosen a life of walking through a tunnel of brown leaves. That's really what hiking the Appalachian Trail is. Oh yes, there are open ridges, but mostly you're in the leaves on the way up and on the way down. On that day of recognition, we had gotten over a ridge of grassy-topped mountains on the Tennessee–North Carolina border and in mid-afternoon we'd crossed North Carolina Route 226 at Iron Mountain Gap.



The Eight-Legged Thing outside the tiny Post Office in Caratunk, Maine, from left, Chris, Cay, Phil, Nat. CHRISTINE WOODSIDE COLLECTION, PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

The asphalt held onto the sun to mock us. I wanted to scream. I focused on the painted lines pointing to civilization miles away, out of reach. I stepped up the rock steps leading from the road back into the woods. The swath of leaves stretched away into the forest. Someone said something like, “Only six miles to go.” Only six miles. I gulped. My chest lurched. The leaves blurred, and I was sobbing. I was walking on ruined feet on endless runners of dead leaves. Nothing would change. It would never feel better, I was still too proud to give up, and I was going to have to hate every second. There was no talking to me. I waved off every advance from Nat and Phil and Cay. The leaves and tree trunks canopied a horrible highway down which I must march without seeing past it. Crying had once cleansed me. Now I kept crying and didn’t feel any better. I felt worse. I had given up my job and my life and dragged my husband and our friends onto this trail. And I didn’t want to do it anymore. I hated every step. I hated my pack. I hated the guidebook, the cheery hiker registers with jaunty remarks like, “Goin’ all the way!!!” I hated the slimy pepperoni on crumbling crackers. I hated the stale instant coffee. The only thing I wanted was to get out of there. But no. I didn’t want to give up. And yet I might have to. I couldn’t hike, even. Pains shot through my feet and toes.

My knees ached all the time. My shoulder blades stung where the pack straps rubbed. I felt exhausted.

I sat on the edge of a shelter that evening, not seeing my boots, unlacing them, tears draining. A man about our age, out with his father, asked me, "I'm interested to know—is it hard to enjoy the trail when you are trying to hike the whole thing?"

I don't know why I held back, but I just said, "This is not the best time to ask me that. I've had a bad day today." I sat there. Cay stirred the dinner, Phil ran water through the hand pump for tomorrow's supply. Nat got out the sleeping bags.

"And what you thought you came for/ Is only a shell, a husk of meaning," Eliot wrote, "From which the purpose breaks only when it is fulfilled/ If at all. Either you had no purpose/ Or the purpose is beyond the end you figured/ And is altered in fulfilment."

I knew then that I could not do anything alone. I could not do anything without a strong inner sense of purpose, either.

The days, weeks, and months compressed into a string of repeated rituals that started with the early morning sound of Phil dipping the dishes in boiling water and Nat stirring cereal mash in the giant aluminum pot. By 7 A.M. we snaked up the path, arms crossed in front of us, gigantic packs swaying behind. "You should see these guys," our friend Jim told someone. "They're an eight-legged thing." And so, months into it, we had our trail name. In "thing" formation, Cay led, Phil and I went in the middle because both of us have bad hearing, and Nat, pushing us on with his invisible cattle prod, went last.

A typical day went: five miles, then snack of six Duplex Creme cookies; five miles, then crumbling saltines with peanut butter for lunch; five miles, more Duplex Cremes; five miles, stop for the night. Cay made dinner, the men pumped water through our filter for the next day; we ate; I washed the dishes wearing my flashlight on its cord around my forehead. Late at night, I awoke, wrote a few sentences in my notebook, and planned our itineraries for the coming days. Each day, we again covered more ground than we felt really capable of. Each day's hardships pulled me through by their rituals. In rituals, I broke away from my former, dead life of wrong obligations. In rituals on the trail, in crying through those rituals at times, I came to a new sense of the life that lay before us and me.

"There are three conditions which often look alike/ Yet differ completely, flourish in the same hedgerow," T. S. Eliot wrote in that last poem, "Little

Gidding.” “Attachment to self and to things and to persons, detachment/ From self and from things and from persons; and, growing between them, indifference.” Maybe not quite indifference. One day I thought to myself that I was just a hiker, just another pilgrim in life. Knowing that, I swallowed the disappointments and pushed on, covering too many miles. One afternoon at 5 P.M., I stood on the beach of a completely remote, wilderness lake called Lower Jo-Mary Lake, deep in Maine’s 100-Mile Wilderness. I tilted my filthy face toward the late-day golden sun. I wanted to stop, lie down, and camp there for a week. In the background, I heard Nat call my name. And I turned and walked forward, the last few miles of another day.

AT THE END, IT WAS TIME TO GO FIND MY TRUE VOICE, AND MY children’s voices in my coming motherhood. I could not picture myself entering that stage before, because I had labored in overwork and false duties. The trail gave me “a condition of complete simplicity costing not less than everything.” I could see the cost of leading life from a sense of inner light, instead of doing what everybody else seemed to want me to do. I saw that in order to say yes, I must say no often—no to debilitating jobs for unpleasant bosses, no to unreasonable demands.

I would provide my own sense of satisfaction. I could not get it from others. But I knew that a full life is one lived in community, where each member contributes a skill, and all of them accept one another even if they are driving them crazy.

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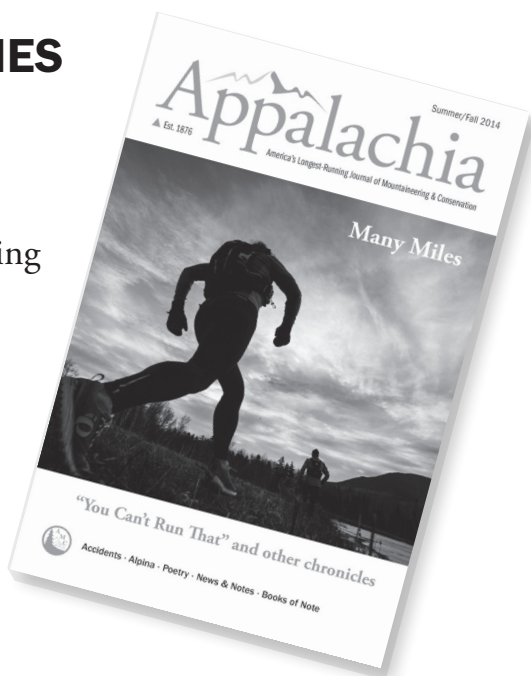
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