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Steward's Story

Without cell reception—community

Devon Reynolds



TECHNOLOGY SOMETIMES SEEMS TO RUN THE WORLD. THE DINGING noises and flashing icons have urgency to them that compels communication at an ever-quickening pace. I need my cell phone to find my family picking me up at the airport. I need my email in case a professor sends me some new information right before class. I get stuck in the mentality that I will lose touch: with the world and, more important, with my friends. My generation, the millennials, functions with a rapidity that threatens to overwhelm even high-powered computers. We schedule our days down to the minute, sometimes so closely that we don't realize we've overbooked. I can't count the times a friend has texted me just before we were supposed to meet up, asking for a rain check. I am also guilty of such errors, but I imagine I regret them more than my peers because I have known the value of a different form of communication, and community:

Six sleepy bodies crowd around the staff dining table at the Adirondack Loj outside of Lake Placid. We're the 2011 Adirondack High Peaks Summit Stewards, bent over bowls of cereal and plates of Bisquick pancakes, wolfing down calories to sustain our strained existence. We take our turns telling the stories of the last two weeks; we ask the questions we've been storing up; we lay plans for the days to come. It has been half a month since we have all been together, but we laugh and groan together, a close-knit group.

When the staff meeting ends, Julia heads up to the office to attend to administrative duties as chief and commander of the crew. Gina retraces the short walk from the main Loj building to the dilapidated yurt, where we live on our days off, and climbs back into bed to enjoy her day of rest. The rest of us hoist our packs for another hike. Sam gets into her car to drive to the trailhead for Cascade Mountain, a short, steep hike off the highway twenty minutes from the Loj. The other three of us start down the old Marcy Dam trail, shrunk into a foot-wide path by its twenty-year retirement from frequent foot traffic. A quarter of a mile in, Libby heads off along the seven-mile track to Mount Marcy while Zack and I turn aside. The two of us hike together for three miles, talking when we're not panting, until our trails, too,

Devon Reynolds slogs through the Santanoni Range in New York's Adirondacks. She has hiked five miles in the rain and fallen into a waist-deep mud pit while trying to make notes about plants. SETH JONES

split. I hike toward Wright Peak where, just at treeline, I stop to watch the slide on Algonquin Peak, a large patch of exposed rock clearly visible across a ravine on the side of the mountain. I can see Zack's tan clothes and blue pack ascend the slide. When he disappears into the trees again, I turn back to my own summit and head up for another day of work.

FIVE DAYS A WEEK, FOR THREE MONTHS, I WORKED FOR EIGHT HOURS a day on top of one mountain or another in the Adirondacks, working to protect rare alpine vegetation that survives on only 100 acres of land in New York State. Wherever I stood, I knew that on the other four peaks stood four other stewards: my *dobbelgängers* swathed in sweat-stained khaki with the summit steward badge sewn on to make uniforms. I knew they were there from the voices I heard on the radio when they signed in and out each morning and night, and from the mud-stained schedule I carried.

We lived a shared and solitary life. We hiked the same trails and slept in the same tents. We borrowed recipes from one another. We talked about the peaks as if they were rooms in a house, our house, so familiar we could grope our way around them even with the lights off. We all looked for the brain-shaped rock near the Algonquin summit to reassure us that we had almost finished hiking. We all hid from the rain in the same coffin-sized space under a rock on Cascade. We all did these things, but we did them alone. One steward per peak. Staggered days off. Rotated peak assignments. And during the workweek, we each camped by ourselves, a few miles below the various peaks. I read two or three books a week and still slept twelve hours a night. Zack got lonely and hiked out to the Loj as often as possible. Sam couldn't sleep because of that trapped feeling, which we all felt at times during the summer, of being alone in the woods with only a nylon tent between her and the unknown.

Without cell phone reception or computers, we had little contact during our days on duty. Humans being social creatures, however, so we found ways to stay in touch. We waved to one another each day from our peaks, though the distance made it impossible to see the gesture. It was enough for us to know that our friends, however invisible, were remembering us when they looked across the miles of mountainous landscape. When we met hikers who were summiting two peaks, we asked them to deliver messages to each other. We left notes on each other's beds in the yurt. These tiny tokens bore us

through the isolation of our work, allowed us to commune despite separation. Most importantly, we lined the trails with stories for one another.

First Telling

Well, I met a naked hiker this week.

(General astonishment, questioning)

Oh, yes, completely naked. I thought at first that he had some shorts on . . . but when I got closer I realized, no, no, he had it all hanging out.

(Shock, humor, questioning)

I told him he might want to put some clothes on since it was Fourth of July weekend and there were lots of families hiking, and he said, “Oh, it isn’t customary here?” He had some sort of accent . . . definitely not French Canadian, but I couldn’t tell what it was.

(Laughter, questioning)

Oh, yeah, no he had a backpack. And boots and socks. And he started pulling out clothes right then.

(Awe, laughter)

Retelling to Outsider

So Julia, my boss, is hiking along on the Fourth of July, pretty early ‘cause that’s, like, one of the busiest days of the whole year in the Adirondacks and she wants to be sure to beat the crowd. She sees this other hiker coming down the trail toward her, and she’s a little surprised ‘cause it’s so early and he’s already been up the peak. But as she gets closer, she notices . . . he’s not wearing any clothes. He’s got a pack on, and he’s got boots on, but no clothes. And it’s not like this is the middle of nowhere! There are like 80 hikers a day on this trail! Anyway, so she goes right up to him and tells him, “Look, it’s the Fourth of July, there are going to be lots of people hiking today, so you might want to put some clothes on.” And he’s like, “Oh, it isn’t customary here?” Like, somewhere in the world it is customary to hike naked. I mean, he did have some sort of accent, but seriously, have you ever heard of people hiking naked anywhere? I dunno, but if it had been me, and I had seen a naked man walkin’ down to trail towards me, I would have gotten the hell outta there.

Group Retelling

Seth (a veteran of the previous three summers): Yeah, and then suddenly, she just took off her shirt ... and I wasn't really sure if she knew I was there, but I was just like . . . ummmm . . . maybe I'll come back a little later.

Zack: Well, you know, Julia met a guy hiking naked once.

Seth: Yeah, I heard about that, yeah.

Zack: I just don't really understand what your logic is with that, it can't be comfortable, like, what if you fall?

Me: Well, and he was wearing a pack, too. Imagine the pack rash you would get—

Libby: And then she just went right up to him—

Me: Only Julia could walk up to a random naked dude totally calm—

Libby: Seriously, I would have died laughing.

Me: I think I just would have hidden in the woods.

Zack: Anyway, she asked him to put clothes on, and he had some with him . . . he had some weird accent, right?

Libby: Yeah, and she said he thought it was totally normal to hike naked . . .

Seth: I've definitely never heard of people hiking naked anywhere before . . .

Strange temporality took a hold of the entire stewarding crew. Every two weeks we met, at the Loj or in Lake Placid, over breakfast or ice cream cones, and recounted our news. Libby told us she dreamed she had to stop terrorists who were trying to blow up Mount Marcy. Gina described the celebratory wine and cheese that a kind couple shared with her on top of Cascade. I'd have heard some of the accounts already on shared days off, and others would be new, and some we would retell from weeks past. Our stories got tangled like too many instruments in a small room, and although we tried to straighten them into some coherent melody, we went two weeks at a stretch without being a group and our timing got lost over time. At the next meeting, Libby forgot when her dream happened and told the story a second time, having added a few embellishments to the original theme.

We did see each other one-on-one at strange, irregular intervals. Nights when we got to share a tent with another steward were a welcome relief from loneliness and fear. We would talk late into the night, uninterrupted by the

buzzing of cell phones. The silence held our conversations like gemstones; it made them clear, beautiful, precious.

I spent my days off with Libby and Gina. We roamed the local towns, driving too fast and breaking our speakers with bluegrass basses. Gina and I bought a half dozen cookies and a pint of milk for six dollars and were convinced it was the best deal ever. Libby and I had shower parties, playing music and singing terribly under the steaming streams of water that had never felt better than after five days of sweaty, muddy hiking. We lived or relived moments together, the first repetitions of the tales later told at meetings, and these shared stories were exactly what bound us so close.

Sam arrives on the fourth day of what will prove to be a week of nonstop rain. I've been pacing figure eights at the Phelps junction for so long that you can see my track in the mud. Here at treeline, there's some protection from wind and rain, but I was still so cold yesterday that I curled up on a rock and slept the day away, forgetting hunger and hypothermia. Sam's blue eyes recall sunny skies, and we play hand games for hours. On the hike out, she understands why I let out a desperate shriek when I fall ankle-deep into a puddle; she doesn't mention that my boots are already so wet that this last dunking really doesn't change anything.

Gina and I weed Seth's garden in the high heat at three. We bask in the drone of the bees and weave wildflowers into each other's hair. Later, we sit on the porch of a farm stall munching grapes and strawberries with relish that only the semi-starvation from months of daily hikes can garner. A car pulls into the lot, and its driver sidles up to us, clicking a picture with her camera under the pretext of chatting with us. She doesn't ask permission, just points, shoots, and walks away. We glance at each other skeptically, and only then realize that we, skin tanned in odd stripes from work, hair braided messily with wilting blossoms, have become, as they say, local color.

Zack stirs his pot of pasta while I start chowing down on my own dinner. I babble in frustration about a hiker who told me how surprised he was to find a woman steward up on Marcy. "I just mean that hiking's way easier for men," he told me, ignoring my presented evidence that five of the six summit stewards are women this summer. Zack listens to my rant and finally responds, "You know, I think at some point you

just have to realize that people like that aren't gonna change, so I just ignore them 'cause they're idiots," taking me off guard as usual with his simple, perfect wisdom.

The Odyssey has a tendency to repeat itself, which feels heavy-handed to the high schooler forced to read it cover to cover. It's a remnant of the epic's time as a purely vocal document, a history remembered through the spoken word. The repeated passages gave singers time to organize the upcoming sections, to pick points of emphasis and change tonalities to suit the audience at hand. For a crowd that loved blood and gore, they could draw out the battle scenes, or mostly skip them for gentler sensibilities. They could weave a different tale in each recital, while conveying the same message, the same great themes.

So when the stewards left the meeting table and returned to leaving notes and waving invisibly, we carried with us each other's stories. I carried Gina screaming in the dark tent at the Algonquin campsite, waking Libby with the terror of her nightmare. I carried Julia's partner kneeling on the Marcy summit in a suit, asking her to marry him as she threw her head back in laughter. I carried Sam sitting just above a short rock face on Cascade, laughing to herself as parents flustered and panicked, and their kids scampered up the face like it was made for climbing. Told and retold, these moments became an oral history. We formed bonds through storytelling that no longer exist in quite the same way in the world of texting and social media. The wilderness, empty of email and cell phones, gave us a chance to remember other ways of communication and communion.

At my college, where students give themselves scoliosis carrying their laptops around, even though their phones can serve as computer, GPS, and video game system all at once, it can feel as though community depends on technology. Invitations to parties go out by email. I find out about panels and workshops through Facebook. Texts inform me where to meet my partners for a group project. Remembering my time in the Adirondacks, however, also reminds me that love need not ride radio waves and friendship does not travel by fiberglass.

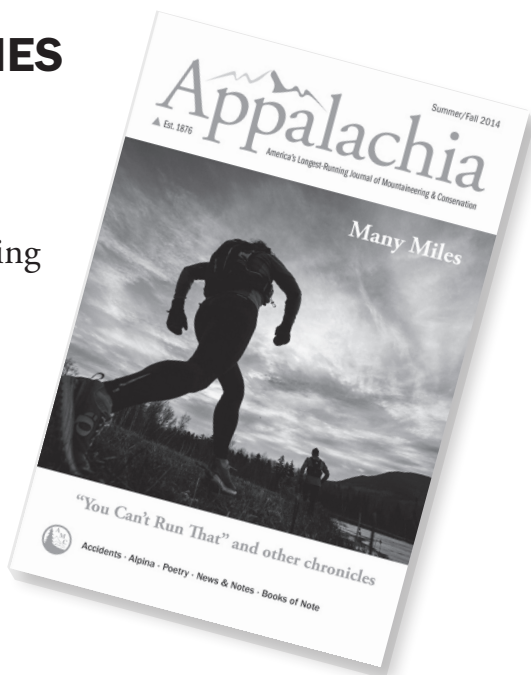
DEVON REYNOLDS spent the past year finishing her degree in Africana studies at Brown University. After graduation, she returned to her beloved Adirondacks for another summer. This essay was runner-up in the annual contest *Appalachia* sponsors with the Waterman Fund.

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