

2022

## The Long Way Home: Time as an Iron Hand Versus Time as a Shifting Wind

Christine Woodside

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



Part of the [Nonfiction Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Woodside, Christine (2022) "The Long Way Home: Time as an Iron Hand Versus Time as a Shifting Wind," *Appalachia*: Vol. 73: No. 2, Article 2.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.dartmouth.edu/appalachia/vol73/iss2/2>

This Editor's Column 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](mailto:dartmouthdigitalcommons@groups.dartmouth.edu).

# Time as an iron hand versus time as a shifting wind

**I**N REGULAR LIFE, DOWN IN THE VALLEYS, I UNDERSTAND LITTLE ABOUT time, struggling to identify how long it takes to get anywhere. I have been known to arrive late to my dentist—he’s down the hall from my office. I have never truly learned how long it takes to walk there or drive to a place where someone is waiting for me. In the valleys, I rush. Time stresses me. But in the mountains, time seems to expand; it feels like my soul, and the days seem twice as long. I rarely feel rushed in the same way I do at home.

I have idly thought that I don’t belong in the Western world, this appointment-driven society where I have lived my whole life and where if you’re five minutes, ten minutes, fifteen minutes late, you have inconvenienced someone else, frayed a relationship. The good side of deadline pressure is that without it I might not do much work.

This year I discovered the ideas of anthropologist Edward T. Hall, who compared differing approaches to time in North America with those in Latin America and the Middle East. He noted in his 1976 book *Beyond Culture* (Anchor Press/Doubleday) that time and space interrelate. Moving through a landscape, whether on foot or on some motorized thing, defines time. At least where cooperating with others is concerned.

Hall labeled the way Americans manage their lives as “monochronic time,” which “emphasizes schedules, segmentation, and promptness.” Hall wrote how irritated Americans get when they go to another country that does not adhere firmly to appointments and deadlines. He named the way people in many non-Western cultures function in “polychronic time,” in which many activities go on at the same time. People focus on their relationships as they complete their transactions with each other instead of “adherence to preset schedules.”

Hall said that not every activity in America runs that way. Some jobs in my home country inherently go against the norm of monochronic time. For example, he said, the city editor of a newspaper’s job is inherently “polychronic.”

At a news outlet's city desk, everything is about reacting to unpredictable events outside. One must be ready to change course. I know about that. I worked as a city editor at a daily paper. I sat by the police scanner. I routinely jumped up and, say, pulled a reporter off one story and sent her out to a fire. I was in sync.

TAKING A CUE FROM HALL, I WONDER IF BACKPACKING IS INHERENTLY polychronic. You don't need a watch, but you must watch the sky.

Storms roll in. Surprises await: ledges, high streams, reaching camp to find it filled with people. I sink like a mist into that kind of life, dealing with unexpected conditions and threats. Moving through the land, I don't feel rushed. I am not letting anyone down. I wonder if people who hate mountain climbing dislike this lack of structure.

The pinnacle of my wilderness life, so far, was a solo trip I made around the Pemi Loop in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. My counter-clockwise loop followed Lincoln Woods Trail to the Bond Range, the Twins and Mount Garfield, and finally across the Franconia Range. I took four days (three nights out) to do this loop. Some people run it in a day. Others take even longer. My four days gave me an abundance of time. That doesn't mean I didn't have to rush sometimes. My first day I trudged fast over the Bonds near sunset, too cold from a wet, windblown raincoat.

On my third day of that trip, I walked in a soft, steady rain on the Franconia Ridge. I encountered a family heading the other way, perhaps to Greenleaf Hut. The man, leading a woman and two children, had a set jaw and held his body erect, sort of nervously cheery. Maybe his family had never done this before. Maybe he thought they should have gone faster earlier. I don't know. After I said hello and we passed each other, and I continued on to Liberty Springs Tentsite alone, I suddenly felt very free. Time was mine, rain or not.

I do not know why I struggle so with time out of the mountains. Is it a false sense of power over distance because I own a car and phone, always measuring distance by how long it will take? Am I chasing too much in the valley? Am I filling in my days with unnecessary tasks where they are not required?

I think I'll go to the mountains for a few days to figure this out.

—*Christine Woodside*  
*Editor-in-Chief*

---

---

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

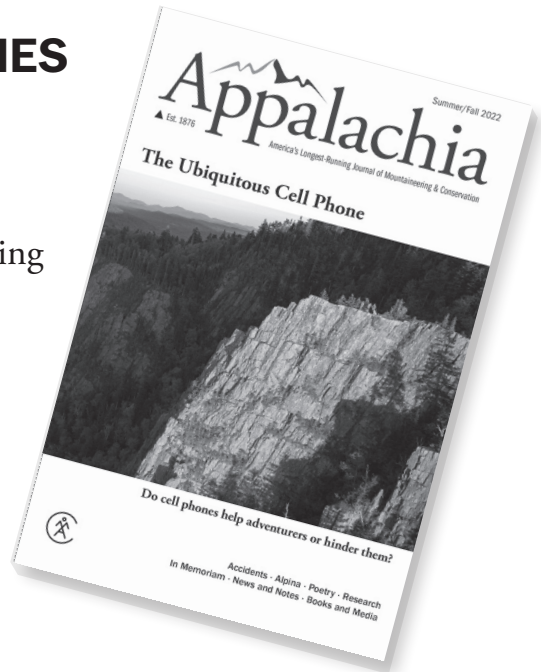
---

---

## 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](https://www.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](https://www.outdoors.org/appalachia) or call 800-372-1758.



Subscription prices valid as of June 2022. Prices and offers subject to change without notice. For the most up-to-date information, visit [outdoors.org](https://www.outdoors.org).