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## Mutual Worrying: What the Mountain and the Pool Pavement Have in Common

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# Mutual Worrying

*What the mountain and the pool pavement have in common*

**Elissa Ely**



**I**N HER CHILDHOOD, MY ONLY CHILD DID NOT LIKE TO HIKE. SHE SAW NO sense in trudging up hills in the New England humidity. Why, when she could be in a pool, instead? During the growing years, I never worried about the edges of cliffs, but I worried constantly about the edges of diving boards. A mother worries in one location or another; there is something pleasurable and proprietary about it.

A decade later, a college classmate introduced my girl to the joy of heights and lengths in the Colorado Rockies—and after joy hit, she hiked in Colorado, Utah, Maine, and California—everywhere she could. I admit I envied the friend who had inspired her, and when she returned to New England, we planned a short trip: two nights in an Appalachian Mountain Club lodge, one day climbing Mount Eisenhower and the next going up Mount Moosilauke. For her, it would be preparation for backpacking more than 30 miles on the Pemigewasset Loop a week later. For me, it would be quite enough.

**T**HEN ORTHOPEDIC INJURY INTERVENED IN THE FORM OF UNRELIABLE VISION and a misstep, unyielding sidewalk, foot pain difficult to ignore after weeks of determined effort, the reluctant consultation. Who knew what havoc a metatarsal bone could wreak? On with a despised boot for six weeks, off with the mountain plans and hiking for the rest of the season.

Life comes with injuries in every dimension, and we want to be models of acceptance for our children. This is possible, though only sometimes. So we modified our short trip. We stayed in the Appalachian Mountain Club's airy Highland Center, eating meals a table away from hikers who had actually earned them, drinking a little wine, talking a little about life, quibbling a little over the use of gender identity terms, reading on rocking chairs. The boot had come off shortly beforehand, but discomfort and poor balance persisted.

On our first day, we managed all 2,557 feet of modest Mount Pemigewasset. One of us did so with difficulty. The other vaulted along, pausing at intervals for medical updates. It was poor training for the Pemi Loop.

On the second day, because we could not exercise ourselves, we decided to exercise the car on the Mount Washington Auto Road. As the Subaru circled up, I thought but did not ask the following questions about her backpacking trip: Do you have duct tape? The Ten Essentials? Extra weather layers? A Red in the Shed compass? A hikeSafe card? Fresh headlamp batteries? White

*The field of rocks between the Mount Washington Auto Road and the Alpine Garden made the author pause and take her own advice.* MENA SCHMID/AMC PHOTO CONTEST 2010

Mountain-knowledgeable friends (after all, the editor of this very journal once remarked: “The White Mountains make cowboys quake”)? Moleskin and Motrin? High peaks weather report access? And, the definitive maternal question: Do you have enough food?

I kept all this to myself, a worrying community of one. It’s what a mother does—though naturally, worrying about a 26-year-old isn’t the same as worrying about a 7-year-old. For one thing, she has mountain competency far beyond mine, now. For another, it’s not my right to make the rules anymore and not her obligation to follow them. She can run on wet pavement and jump into the pool right after eating her snack if she chooses. If she chooses, she can jump into the pool *while* eating her snack. I’ll never know.

At the 6-mile marker—the car staggering a little—there is a turnout on the right and, across the road, the top of Huntington Ravine Trail leads down to the Alpine Garden. The Alpine Garden itself is flat, though the 0.3 miles it takes to reach it are not: There are boulders, jagged steps, and no assurance of landing steadily. In absolute terms, the distance is a walk around the block, and I wanted to take it. Yet I also did not want to take it. Some of us don’t like to acknowledge vulnerability.

Ahead of me, she led with ease. Watching her balance on each rock was like watching modern dance. Not far from an intersection, she glanced back. The Alpine Garden was in clear view. My situation was also clearly in view. To her credit (and unlike a mother) she did not set a rule. Instead, she spoke mildly, lightly, humorously, with just the slightest affectionate reproof, as one might to a child racing toward the pool edge.

“I think I don’t want to carry an injured person back to the car,” she said. “You let me know anytime you’re ready to turn around.”

Immediately, I stopped running on the wet pool pavement. “I’m ready to turn around,” I said.

It’s a sad thing, admitting that a walk around the block has met the limitations of the moment. But the way it happened was also a thing of beauty. Half of a proper worry is the worrying itself. The other half is the comfort of being worried over. When you are used to worrying about someone you love, it’s a complicated joy to realize that now they are worrying about you.

I wish this joy for you someday.

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ELISSA ELY is a writer and community psychiatrist who lives in Massachusetts.

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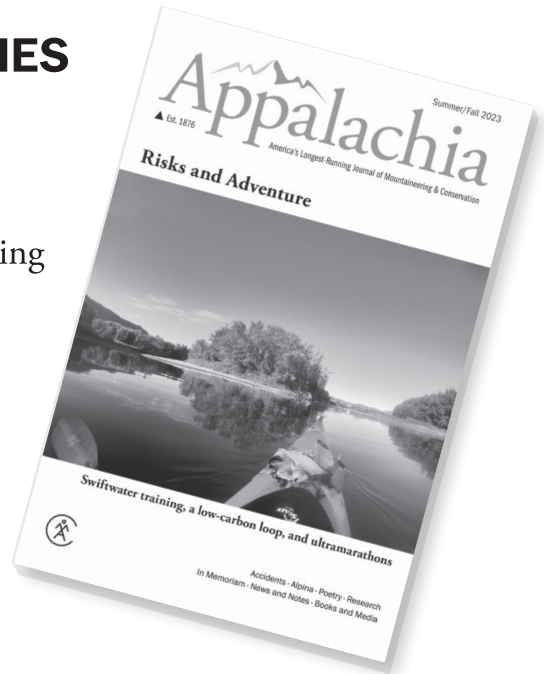
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