

“A Sabbatical Journey on the Appalachian Trail”

By David A. Hoffman

[Reprinted with permission from *ACResolution, the Quarterly Magazine of the Association for Conflict Resolution*, Spring 2002]

In June 2000, I took a six-month sabbatical to walk the Appalachian Trail (AT) with my son, Jacob. He and I got hooked on hiking when he was a Cub Scout and we began exploring the White Mountains in New Hampshire. There we frequently met “thru-hikers” – people who start at one end of the AT and follow the trail’s rectangular white blazes to the other end. We were impressed by the doggedness and quiet self-possession of these hikers and began to fantasize about doing it ourselves. For several years, Jake and I read about the trail and hiked pieces of it. We left Mt. Katahdin in Maine (the northern end of the trail) on June 13 and arrived at Springer Mountain in Georgia (the southern end) on November 29, 2000.

The hike was a physically daunting experience. I wore ankle braces to keep my wobbly ankles from buckling, and took glucosamine to control knee pain. I cobbled together a foam rubber pad to protect my 53-year-old back from my 43-pound pack. However, along with the challenges – black flies in Maine, relentless rain and mud in Vermont and Massachusetts, horrific mosquitoes in New Jersey, and bone-chilling cold in North Carolina and Tennessee – came gorgeous views and an unsurpassed opportunity for reflection.

One of the surprises for me was the social aspect of the hike: the intense feeling of connection that develops among hikers on the AT, and the outpouring of love and support from “trail angels” along the way. I feel enormous gratitude to them, as well as to my wife and daughter (who sent us pre-packed boxes of food to post offices just off the trail), and to my law firm, which allowed me to take a sabbatical. It was a life-changing experience – the lessons taught by prolonged isolation from the outside world and the hardships of life in the woods will be with me forever.

Chief among the lessons was that while immersion in nature can evoke breathtaking moments of transcendence, what I was seeking on the trail can also be found at home. I discovered that pain is inevitable, but suffering is not (this bit of Zen wisdom was particularly helpful when hiking in sub-freezing temperatures). I learned that I can get by with far fewer possessions (and less money) than I thought I needed. Finally, I discovered that while we may be

stronger than we know, we also need to learn how to accept with grace the help offered by others.

Finally, here are the answers to our most frequently asked questions:

1. Two bears, lots of deer, a few moose, an ostrich (!), and quite a few snakes.
2. 2,167 miles.
3. The other hikers didn't mind because they hadn't taken showers either.
4. Pasta, rice and beans, PB&J, and lots of granola bars.
5. We used a small plastic shovel.
6. Yes, Jake and I are still talking to each other.

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