

A Cup of Mountain Tea

By Jeremy Loeb

The isolation and immense nature of the mountains offer us a place to step outside our conventional lives and reconsider ourselves. Since my teenagehood I've struck out for the raw, unbounded nature of the mountains, hoping for it to reveal something equally wild and original inside myself. There is sanctity to these mountains, but it is a fragile wilderness. The Appalachians, in particular, perennially have been logged and sometimes denuded; further south they've been strip-mined, and all over they're trapped in our rising greenhouse gases and acid rains. Cell phones and GPS units are as ubiquitous as the rampant erosion of trails, and it's hard to find a New England peak where you cannot see the nearest highway and hear the rumble of trucks. Last fall, when I signed on for a season of trail work with the Randolph Mountain Club, all these human intrusions first struck me as the greatest obstacles to a sublime experience of the mountains. Yet as I settled into the backcountry, I came to find that wilderness and the sublime are not merely attributes of pristine nature, but are qualities of our own consciousness that we must cultivate. It's not a terribly esoteric practice, really, and it all begins with learning how to pay attention to the mountain. If you can look but not see, touch but not feel, or hear but not listen, so too can you hike but not really hike the mountain. Sharpening my attention, I discovered the mountains I had hiked a hundred times now showed themselves to me as if I had never really seen them.

A classic Buddhist parable tells how a learned scholar fell into a conversation with a Zen master over a cup of tea. The scholar probed the master about various teachings, trying to achieve a deeper understanding of Zen. As the scholar rambled on, the Zen master began to pour tea into the scholar's cup. He poured and poured, and soon the cup brimmed and overflowed across the table. "Stop!" cried the scholar, "Can't you see the cup is already full?" The Zen master replied, "Like this cup, your mind too is full of concepts. You must first empty your mind, and only then can I teach you anything." Curiously, it is no different with hiking. We may arrive in the mountains ready for an adventure, but our heads are too full of thoughts and plans to really learn anything. Rather than paying attention to the sensual details that put us in the here-and-now, we daydream over statistics. Figures like how fast we've hiked, how many miles and vertical feet we've mastered, how many ounces we're carrying, or how long until that summit. The rhythm of our footsteps lulls us into daydreams about our daily lives, hatching plans, or chewing on frustrations. We may snap out of our reverie only to realize that we can't

remember the trail we've just hiked. Might have well as gone to the gym.

If there is such a thing as good hiking, it has little to do with the quickness of your pace or your latest piece of gear, and everything to do with the attention you devote to the mountain. And it requires emptying your mental cup of distractions. The easiest way to learn from the mountain, to be completely receptive to its secrets, is to stop what you're doing and sit down. On trail crew, sitting down is a chance you get quite predictably. It may be to survey and scrutinize the potential variations of trail work, to rest your aching limbs, to toss down some crackers, cheese and smoked sausage and a gulp of spring water, to smoke a butt, or to enjoy 15 minutes of lethargy as prescribed by federal work regulations. It also is the time when the mind can begin to grasp a different sense of scale. Sitting down lends the opportunity to take in the intricate, ragged veins of quartz in a small rock. Or how the color of *diapensia* has shaded subtly from coniferous green to cranberry red, and the Labrador tea has a touch more pumpkin hue to its leaves.

Next time your mind begins to wander while hiking, try plunking yourself down for a spell on an inviting rock, a glade of emerald moss, or a musty bed of leaves. Shrug off any lingering impatience or distracting thoughts and take this spell to smell the air, observe the nuance of the trail, and stretch your ears for the rustle of foliage and distant birdsong. Take a bite of that sandwich you've been craving. Sweep your eyes across the contours and imagine how wind, water and snow sculpt rock, dirt, and vegetation. As your attention shifts from abstraction and self-absorption to the outer environment, it indulges in an endlessly rich display of geological and biological life, as well as how the trail itself interacts with its surroundings. Once you learn to empty yourself of distractions, the mountain is ready to teach you.

As humans, we live fairly concretely in three dimensions, but have more trouble navigating the fourth one – time. Sometimes we are daydreaming in the past or the future, other times we're focused on some abstract thought. A perspective on time's flow, however minute or vast, cyclical or sequential, is one of the mountain's best lessons. Shattered rocks speak of the geologic saga here, where hundreds of millions of years ago the young peaks once were taller than the Himalayas. Each Ice Age, the power of mile-thick glaciers ground against their slopes, turning bedrock into debris. Quarrying alpine rock, I wonder just how many centuries it has laid in its exact position, and from what heights it once tumbled as the rhythm of the glaciers scraped against its edifice. Even the lichen covering the rocks that we browse through for potential cairn-pieces have arrived, struggled, bloomed or vanished over the liquid

slow pace of decades and centuries, changing visibly only in scales of time-lapse photography. The human mind has always sought some touchstone to understand cosmic scales of time and space. Hindu and Buddhist traditions measure cosmological time in *kalpas*, or the time it takes a bird, grazing the side of the Himalayas and knocking loose a single rock each year, to reduce that mountain to rubble. Perhaps we find an innate spirituality to geological time, as its grandeur cannot help but remind us of our own puny, transient existence. The geology of the Whites is testament to a scale of time that lets you feel the calcium in your bones just waiting to return to rock, and your heartbeat pulses like a hummingbird.

Mountains, like rivers, are never the same place twice. An endless symphony of environmental changes conducts life in the alpine zone. There is the *staccato* of a birdsong and the *adagio* as hawks gyre upon updrafts. As we lay trail, we watch the sun and the moon pendulum across the sky, and the constellations spin *allegretto* around the polestar. We measure time by shadows on the rocks, by the quality of light on the summits, by the level of water in our Nalgene, and on rare occasions by a wristwatch. Our happiest timepiece, the unit by which we really measure ourselves, is the stretch of trail that we work. Our caravan of clippers and pick mattocks moves upwards, transforming a little more of the trail each day. We rearrange another stretch of the path, move and improve cairns, build scree walls and scrutinize their form and function, or tame another swath of overgrown brush. Constantly the mountain changes, and we change the mountain.

In our own time, too, these mountains are about to witness a profound series of ecological changes. Take climate change, for one. Having read books by Bill McKibben, Al Gore, and E.O. Wilson back-to-back, I've been feeling more than a little alarmed. According to a recent article, New England could completely lose all of its alpine zones in the next fifty years due to global warming (*Backpacker*, August 2007). Warmer years will encourage milder winters and the encroachment on the part of down-slope krummholz and coniferous forests. With increasingly erratic rainfall, flooding turns trails into rivers, exacerbating the already epic problem of erosion. Augmented periods of drought could parch the mountains, ruining the spectacular foliage and pushing trees like sugar maple farther north. Severe temperature shifts could even bring the mountain ecosystems to a collapse, as ill-suited species die out before new species have a chance to migrate in to fill their niche. A slight shift in climate may doom the alpine meadows of sedge and wildflowers that have made these places so unique, which so many people have committed to conserve. But how can they be protected from forces as insidious as global warming? As I sit in the air of a still autumn morning, I wonder how our rockwork will look in a hundred

years, hidden under a riot of new sub-alpine flora. It will be a different mountain, as it always is each moment.

Even as burning fossil fuels changes the climate of these mountains, the fact that our planet is slowly running out of these fuels will be just as drastic for hikers. Our access of remote areas like the White mountains means, for most of us, a full tank of gas. In the last decade, the price of a barrel of oil has surged exponentially from around \$10 in 1999 to over \$120 in 2008 as this essay goes to print, and global production shows signs of peaking. Although the factors determining oil scarcity and price are complex and contested, this much is certain: as petroleum becomes increasingly scarce, the price at the pump will continue to climb indefinitely. Ignoring the more widespread economic impacts of expensive oil, simply consider how many of us will drive from Boston or Montreal to the Whites, when gas rises to \$5, \$10, \$20 or more per gallon? The first casualties will be probably the largest segment of the New England hiking population, the weekend warriors who drive long and far to enjoy a coveted few days on the trail. Unless we rapidly develop alternative forms of transportation, the mountains may be a great deal wilder in the coming century for lack of visitors. It is a future that may be difficult for us to imagine, but again the history of the mountains instruct. After all, they have surges of trail building and logging, only to quickly reclaim these intrusions with opportunistic saplings and undergrowth. The quick hand of nature is in fact the main reason trail crews are necessary in the Whites – we are the renegade gardeners, pruning back the trail corridor from its urge to vanish. If the hiking community shrinks precipitously, these trails may become the most transient of routes, a brief scurry of activity between the centuries of isolation and the tidal movement of glaciers.

As I began to appreciate these immensities of time, I similarly began to pay more attention to the present moment. If every act of mine was so ephemeral, I could also look through the other end of the telescope and see it as incredibly large. Every upward step, every breath, every rock I moved – I started to devote endless attention to it, taking in details I'd never noticed. In the mountains it's easier to realize that the present moment can be as large and as rich as you want it to be. Every act, even one as simple as finding the perfect rock for your cairn, can take on seemingly infinite importance. Some might call it obsessive behavior, brought about by prolonged isolation and a deficit of serious, real-world tasks to attend to. Others might call it the art of craftsmanship, of using all of yourself to shape the world around you.

Building trail becomes a vehicle for cultivating this kind of submersion in the present moment, a type of emptying oneself that is admittedly a bit different than casual hiking. It's like how, building a house, you become intimate with every twist of wood, every nook and joint of the structure, in a way that the person living in the house might never notice. But you don't need to build trail to appreciate the mountain, any more than you need to build your own house to appreciate a good one, or write your own verse to appreciate poetry. Yet try building a house, or writing a poem, and I guarantee you will know the true meaning of intimacy, struggle, and satisfaction. So too with trailwork, and you may learn a thing or two about hiking from its craft.

A good trail, like a good poem, is captivating without being constraining. It compels the hiker to follow the proper route, while supporting the illusion that they are inside untouched wilderness. It enlists a palette of natural materials – rock, wood, duff – to build durable structures that inhibit trespassing into fragile vegetation, and points the way during snow-filled months. A good trail can radiate creativity and craftsmanship – a particularly gracious curve, a startlingly unique cairn capstone, a beautifully placed rock step, or a merciful staircase in lieu of rocky crags.

A well-made rock structure not only guides hikers and withstands the elements, but possesses a quality of sculptural art in the style of Andy Goldsworthy. It is an aesthetic that seeks to blend in with the background so as not to call attention to the human hand, yet paradoxically catches the hiker's eye so that they are compelled to follow the right path. It must appear hidden yet obvious, natural yet unnatural. A scree wall, made of stacked rock or rubble, is a minimalist structure that still effectively prevents the hiker from leaving the trail. Few hikers enjoy feeling that they are hiking alongside the Great Wall of China (unless of course they are in China), and so our goal in trailwork is to make the hiker notice the trail, not the wall.

Cairns, on the other hand, must necessarily draw attention to themselves if they are to be useful, and so the inverse psychology applies. These pyramids rise and lean inwards towards the center so that the final top rocks become the structural keystones. The cairn should first catch the hiker's eye, then blend into the aesthetic of the mountain as part of its natural order. A well-made cairn can direct even the most radical or oblivious hiker to the meter-wide swath of trail that is sacrificed to hiking boots. Given that the alpine zone appears littered with endless piles of rubble, however, it's difficult to make the average cairn stand out. A triangular shape tends to catch the eye's predilection for ordered

forms, and on our trail we set white quartz on the pinnacle to contrast against the backdrop of grey schist. A second type of architecture, which I dub the Stonehenge technique, employs gigantic or sufficiently unique-looking rocks that stand out against the rubble. For both styles, though, symmetry enforces rather than detracts from the seeming naturalness of the cairn. A jagged and lopsided cairn calls attention to its lack of craftsmanship, and the eye catches this disparity between natural chaos and human-built chaos. A well-wrought cairn, on the other hand, seems to redirect its beauty onto the rest of the landscape.

Rockwork weaves magnitudes of time into a single work. We lift each rock from its millennial resting place to a new location and set it into position by calculating on the friction potential that our brains and nervous systems calculate in nanoseconds. Our fingertips and our ears listen to the crystalline microstructure of the granite schist, rotating this way and that way to find its optimal fit. Millimeters of rotation can mean the difference between a rock that quickly destabilizes the entire structure, or lasts centuries before the blast of wind and rain. A series of split-second actions build a cairn that could last over a century, maybe until the next ice age. Working in mountain time, the worker becomes transparent, the rock alone is real. Absorbed in my work, I would often forget myself and be conscious of only the mountain.

One of the strangest effects of the backcountry on its travelers is how it transforms ordinary experience into the extraordinary. That sunset – unparalleled! The syrup on those pancakes – nectar of the gods! That joke, that song, that line of poetry you couldn't get out of your head and had to share – such brilliance! There's a fresh, indescribable quality to these moments that hooks us. Perhaps it is a natural sublimity that we tap into. Or perhaps it's because we've emptied ourselves of our conventions, and are ready to drink up the present moment. On trail crew, that clarity reigns. When the thought of a nap, a beer, or a burrito loaded with avocados and sour cream makes you deliriously happy with anticipation, you apprehend that true happiness is not a faraway goal, but a famished appreciation of the ordinary. Perhaps that, for us hikers, is what seeking the sublime really means. A reorienting of yourself time and space, a focusing of attention, an emptying of distractions, and a discovering that the seemingly mundane world is secretly wild and ready to teach you.