

## *Wilderness*

By Angela Zukowski

As dusk dropped down over a sylvan Georgia hollow on my very first night on the Appalachian Trail an old man stuck his head out of his tent to greet me. "I was expecting something with a bit more wilderness," he said plaintively. I chuckled to myself as the man retreated back inside his tent and zipped it closed, preserving his illusion of solitude. I suppose I was just as naïve. When I imagined myself on the Appalachian Trail, it had always been in the context of the rugged, unyielding, and harsh beauty of New England.

As my long distance hike continued I spent much of the trail yearning for Vermont, New Hampshire, and Maine wondering why there were so many switchbacks and gentle trails and where all the rocks were hiding. Like the old man on my inaugural night, I wanted a more pure wilderness and the trail just didn't feel wild enough. Though unaware at the time, I wanted the wildness to temper me into a better version of myself. When that failed to happen it was much easier to blame the hike instead of blaming myself. It took me over a thousand miles of walking and the rugged beauty of New Hampshire and Maine to convince me to love the Appalachian Trail unconditionally. But something still felt lacking.

When my hike was completed, I felt I had tempered my inexperience on the granddaddy of all trails and was ready for the next step in my wilderness experience. I was hired as a backcountry caretaker in the summer of 2011 with the Appalachian Mountain Club. The glorious days spent on ridgelines in the White Mountains as I thru-hiked had convinced me: New Hampshire was calling. Perhaps there I'd find that hidden element at the crux of a true wilderness experience, on the trails that left even seasoned thru-hikers bruised and shaky, exhausted and humbled.

New Hampshire native and statesman Daniel Webster stated: "Men hang out their signs indicative of their respective trades; shoe makers hang out a gigantic shoe; jewelers a monster watch, and the dentist hangs out a gold tooth; but up in the Mountains of New Hampshire, God Almighty has hung out a sign to show that there He makes men." While I didn't fit the definition by gender, I had visions of becoming a hardened woodswoman, worthy of Mr. Webster's criteria. The type who didn't even break a sweat striding up slide trails or maneuvering blow-downs. Who bushwhacked before breakfast and navigated wherever she pleased. The type of person the average dayhiker would look at and instantly feel intimidated by. I would exude rugged wilderness from my very pores; the axe I was issued during my first days of training was proof of this.

Nauman Tentsite sits quietly beside Mizpah hut on a stretch of the White Mountains known as the Presidential Range. Thru-hikers and day hikers alike find themselves catching their breath on the steep ascent up Webster Cliffs. The venerable Crawford Path leads unerringly to the pleasant dome of Mt. Eisenhower before pushing onward to greater heights. The quiet patches of bog tucked away on sides of mountains and mossy byways lining elderly trails gently give way to the rock littered slopes of Washington, Jefferson, Adams and Madison. Brimming with anticipation, I

packed my backpack with ten days worth of food, my axe and various odds and ends, and staggered up the Crawford Path for the first of many times that summer.

Each night in my tent I pored over my map, tracing the segments marked Wilderness and National Forest. At first I diligently planned hikes in the most rugged sounding places I could come up with: Isolation Mountain, the Dry River Wilderness, the Great Gulf Wilderness. I tore past startled day hikers as I ran down the Crawford path, determined to make each endeavor epic. I would be faster, stronger, and bolder than all the other hikers. I would carve my own wilderness out of the centuries-old bridle path.

But it didn't work. The more I sought solitude, the more I encountered others just like me. On a beautiful balmy day you could find hikers sunning themselves on every summit, as if at the beach. From each peak I'd see a string of tiny ants crawl inexorably towards me, a flood of hikers inundating the krumholz with itineraries and enthusiasm. Hiking towards Mount Washington was akin to making your way down a crowded school corridor; dodging left and right, passing the dawdlers, edging your way past backpacks and clumps of chattering people. Mornings were punctuated with both birdsong and hollers from children; evenings closed not with silent forests, but with garrulous conversations penetrating the thin walls of my tent. If an escape from fellow man was a part of the definition of wilderness, then it certainly was not to be found on the trails of the Presidential Range.

I soon realized I wasn't becoming a modern-day Daniel Boone while living in my tent in the woods. I was instead becoming soft, less inclined to bushwhack, more likely dropping in on Mizpah hut each morning for socialization and scones, a morning ritual that defied my original purpose. I needed to get off trail, I decided. It was the trails that were ruining my wilderness experience. The trails and the huts and the tentsites: all were to blame. Easy culprits for sure, teeming with people, with no escape in sight.

And so I left the trails and struck out into the woods. I found where moose trod next to the Crawford Path. I swam in swimming holes as hikers strode past just yards away, unaware of my presence. I crouched in hidden nooks of blow-downs, woodland parlors with moss cushions, and stared out at secret views of far-off peaks. I tried to find old-growth forest, and scat, and the remains of logging camps, but still I remained disheartened, as I came to the conclusion that there would always be others who were bolder than I, more competent, more immersed in wilderness. It wasn't the location or the people surrounding me that delineated my limitations, but myself.

The word wilderness derives from the concept of "wildness"—that which is not controllable by humans; however the presence of people does not disqualify an area from being wilderness. Slowly I began to accept that but I still struggled with letting go of this almost mystical vision. My idealized version of wilderness was something I still yearned for, yet could not articulate.

Wilderness has been an inscrutable algorithm to me. One that I longed to solve in hopes that it would mold me into a better person. A stronger-willed, more knowledgeable, capable human being. It

evolved into a Holy Grail personified by vast expanses of land devoid of humanity. It loomed in the distance, attainable only by those who threw themselves at its harsh mercy. It attracted a certain kind of person, a strange elite exemplified by hardiness, endurance, solitude and stoic suffering.

I strained after this rare breed, restrained by my suburban upbringing, ignorance, excuses and an occasional dash of laziness. Sitting in my damp chilly canvas tent with the hoots of garrulous evening hiking festivities punctuating my summer evenings, I pored over books I'd thumbed through many times before. In most of them, the protagonists were men. In my eyes they had achieved the rarified glory of accomplishing things that few others were hardened enough to suffer through. They had penetrated wilderness and made it their own. Wilderness was untamed by humanity, likewise these men. They summited mountains, lived off the land, survived unthinkable hardships and endured the fickle accidents that nature tended to throw at random in the paths of men: avalanches, storms, hypothermia, altitude sickness. If I could thrive in this sort of harsh environment that most of the civilized world shunned or was afraid of, I would accomplish something tangibly better than my current existence. There was some sort of vague equation in my mind that went something like: landscape untouched by man plus epic deed equals true wilderness equals a valid self. And yet all summer as I read I secretly knew that this would never be me.

I might never venture to a vast tract of land untouched by man. I was perhaps slightly more knowledgeable than the average hiker, thanks to my training for this job as a caretaker and many months of living outdoors, but I was never going to magically turn into one of those heroic characters who struck off on their own and accomplished bold things in places like the Yukon or Hindustan. At the rate I was going, I wasn't even going to accomplish bold things in New England. Wilderness had become a loaded term for me, one heavy with personal meaning. My vision of it was inextricably linked with my own capability in the natural world. It was so much easier for me to capitulate to insecurity and self-criticism by creating an impossible definition for wilderness and competency. Deep down though, I was tired of yearning for something that was out of my reach.

I finally acknowledged that there was no button I could press that would instantly mold me into a rugged explorer and I accepted the fact that perhaps the mountains of New Hampshire and Maine were the only form of wilderness I'd encounter for much of my life. I realized that this wasn't necessarily a bad thing. I let go of any notion that epic accomplishments were what mattered in the wilderness and I began instead to appreciate what I truly was skilled at doing outdoors: observing. Maybe, just maybe, in spite of my weakness for baked goods and my amateur skill with an axe, I was good enough. I was worthy of this environment and it deserved

my full appreciation. There was no need to conquer or dominate or achieve anything other than that.

Now there are memories that flood me with peace and that still, even today, cause me to catch my breath. Recollections that can sweep me back to a place and make me feel as though my feet are still planted on that earth in that moment, though it may have passed months ago. There are sensations and emotions triggered not by events or people but by sky and sun, clouds and wind, trees, moss, lichen. A smile triggered by a raven arcing through a chalcedony blue winter sky, cawing indifferently as I watch below from my perch on an icy outcropping. A quiet moment of peace just moments away from a busy White Mountain tentsite, standing in a perfect circular hollow of moss. Reveling in the singular beauty of a sunrise in the White Mountains, bold rich color viewed through the starkly delineated dark silhouettes of trees just below an alpine summit. Hiking up the well-trafficked Crawford Path on a foggy dreary day and not encountering a single soul, the quiet magnified by the deep cushions of damp moss surrounding you. Watching droplets of water converge and swell as they trace the lines of hobble bush leaves after a rainy morning. Walking outside on a night where temperatures are plummeting below zero and staring up at the sky, wondering why the cold seems to make the silent star-filled sky seem impossibly crystalline clear, almost on the verge of shattering. Breathing in the scent of evergreen needles and listening to the thrum of grouse wings as birds take flight. Soaking in sunlight in the krumholz, napping on an unyielding ancient granite surface. These things are what truly matter and I was foolish to ever dismiss them in pursuit of bigger and bolder things. If I ~~only~~ want wilderness untouched by man, all I need to do is marvel at a tiny pebble or a lace doily of lichen on a boulder; the enduring existence of both in the rugged White Mountains far exceeds the scope of mankind.

We can't all escape to a truly pristine landscape devoid of humanity. But we can open our eyes to what is around us. We can shed some of our more civilized urges and needs and desires and embrace ones that are a little more primitive. We can celebrate the wild joy that floods the heart when you discover and embrace the wilderness in your surroundings. I am reminded of the old man I met at the beginning of my journey. If I could go back in time, I would say to him: "This is it. Look where you are. The wilderness is all around you." Though it took many miles, I finally found that wilderness had been there all along, waiting to be joyfully shared.