



Walking for Sunshine

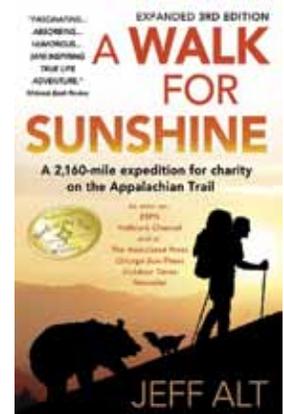
Text adapted from *A Walk for Sunshine* by Jeff Alt
 photos courtesy of author except where noted

On March 1, 1998, I began my northbound expedition along the Appalachian Trail. Four-and-a-half months later, with a new perspective on life, a few scars, a beard, and a very lean body, I climbed the final summit, fulfilling a dream that I shared with several hundred individuals with disabilities, their families and friends.

Each year, between 2,000 and 3,000 hikers attempt to hike the Appalachian Trail (AT). Only an estimated 20 percent actually complete the 2,160-mile journey. For 147 days, I put one foot in front of the other, an estimated five million times.

Everyone who decides to hike the AT does so for different reasons. I wanted to get back to a simpler life. I grew up in the computer age. These electronic wonders are supposed to simplify our lives, freeing our time and enhancing the quality of our life. Indeed, computers have simplified many tasks, but they have not simplified our lifestyles. Americans work longer than they did 20 years ago. We spend less time with our families, and we are in a constant, fast-paced routine. Fast food has become the norm for many busy families, while home-cooked meals are a thing of the past. I wondered what it would be like

to step back into an era without cars, to spend five months with my only worries being food, shelter and sleep, similar to our nomadic ancestors. I hoped to gain



a better perspective on life and improve the quality of my life at the same time. Hiking the Appalachian Trail became my goal.

My brother Aaron was born in 1973 with cerebral palsy and mental retardation. All his life, he's been dependent on others for his daily needs. Aaron lived with my family until he was 12. We all cared for him, fed him, played with him. Eventually he grew too large for us to be able to give the quality of care he needed and deserved.

When Aaron's needs outgrew our ability to meet them, we began our search for assisted care for the developmentally disabled. We found Sunshine Inc. of Northwest Ohio, which has provided Aaron the best care that he could get, and he has lived at the home for more than a decade.

In 1997, during my last semester of graduate school, I set a goal to hike the Appalachian Trail. I wanted to dedicate my journey to Aaron out of love, but I also wanted to give back to the Sunshine home for all that it has done for my brother and my family. Little did I know at the time that my hike would also inspire the adoption of a new annual fundraiser, "Walk With Sunshine."

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I began my journey at Springer Mountain, Georgia, on a clear, early March day. Despite meticulous planning, I was not immune to mistakes, such as leaving my arch supports behind, or attempting to go too far that first day. By the time I crossed into New York some three months later, I had become an experienced hiker.

On the trail in New York, I came across the Appalachian Trail Train Station. From here, you can actually take the train into New York City. A couple



hundred yards north of the train station, a sign posted along a rural highway read, "Deli, ½ mile."

Hikers burn 4,000-6,000 calories a day, the caloric equivalent of running two marathons. I could polish off a large pizza and a half gallon of ice-cream just for a snack! So, a New York sub sounded pretty good, and I pounded the gravel alongside the interstate to the deli.

Inside, I ordered two foot-long subs, one to snack on then and one for dinner when I reached the shelter. Along with the subs, I bought a pint

of ice cream, a pop and a candy bar. After eating, I shouldered my pack and headed back toward the trail with a few miles left to go. After crossing another road, the trail markers led over a stile—a small A-frame ladder used to cross barbed-wire fencing—and through a cow pasture.

Since I had entered the State of Virginia, cow pastures had become a regular fixture. I was always careful and kept the cows in sight. They would usually stare at me for minute and then



go back to grazing. Stepping in a cow pie was more of a concern than being harmed by a cow.

This time, things were a little different. A small herd of Holstein dairy cows were grazing off the left-hand side of the trail. Shortly after I crossed the stile into the pasture, two rather large bulls with menacing horns began ambling toward me. Bulls usually were not mixed in with the cattle—at least that had been my experience in other pastures. As they approached, I figured I could scare them off. I yelled, "Back,

back!” They moved closer. Was my red backpack drawing their attention? Now all I needed were some matador skills and I would be all set! Unfortunately, I felt instead as if I were a rodeo clown.

One of the bulls got within 10 feet. I held one of my hiking poles toward his nose and again yelled, “Back, back!” This just seemed to make him mad. He blew air out of his snout and charged. I was 50 yards from the other side of the pasture. My only option was going back the way I came. Wondering if I could outrun a bull, I turned and ran as fast as I could. As soon as my feet hit the stile steps, I jumped, leaping into the air. Bam! I smacked the ground face first on the other side of the fence, my heavy pack landing on top of me.

As I lay there, thankful that I made it out of the pasture alive, I heard laughter. A gold Honda had pulled off the road, across from where I sprawled. A family of four saw the whole event and thought it was hysterical. The man driving the car yelled out the window, “Are you all right?” “Yeah,” I replied, dusting myself off. Still laughing, the man said, “You shouldn’t have looked at the heifers.” Real funny, I thought.

I wondered to myself: “How the heck do I get around this pasture?” As I started walking, I noticed blue blazes indicating an old section of the trail that eventually linked back to the current route. A few miles of climbing up away from the road led me to a shelter. After rolling out my sleeping bag, I dug out my sandwich, which just happened to be roast beef. I savored every bite with vengeful pleasure.

During my time on the trail, I couldn’t help but think that society has a way of building up one’s mental armor to protect you from getting hurt. Benton McKaye, the visionary of the Appalachian Trail, believed in the power of the wilderness to provide a rejuvenating escape for people weary from the hustle and bustle of modern life.



Hikers pass numerous cow pastures along the Appalachian Trail.



I found that the longer I was removed from domestic living, the more I grew to trust my surroundings. My life had been simplified to that of a nomad. I was alone most of the time on the trail; my social life was limited to brief chats with hikers and townsfolk during my weekly supply visits to small towns along the way. One day, I came across a man out for an early evening jog. As he passed, I said hello. He didn't wave; instead he kept running, clutching a can of mace at the ready. I guess I did look like a vagrant. (As a rule of thumb, stand upwind from a thru-hiker!) My unkempt beard probably didn't help my appearance. The encounter reminded me that, true to McKaye's vision, I had shed my protective societal shell over the last 1,400 miles.

For me, the AT was a great opportunity to boil life down to its simplest

form, allowing me to filter out unwanted distractions. I learned that life is as simple or as complicated as you make it.

I also learned that the American spirit is alive and well. Steeped in history, the trail blazes through many of the original colonies. I walked the same wilderness footpaths where our country's founders marched off to battle in pursuit of freedom. Along the trail, many people offered rides, lodging, food and water. This country was founded on patriotism, survival, kindness, trust and integrity, all of which were very much alive during my journey. To me, the AT is just as much a part of the American spirit as baseball and apple pie.

Though my AT adventure has ended, I have taken on a new adventure: raising children. Children are the key to wilderness preservation. I believe taking my family on outdoor adventures will

develop strong, healthy, well-rounded kids who will grow up to preserve our nation's great trails.

I hope that one day my children will reach their own Mount Katahdins. In the meantime, we continue to visit various sections of the Appalachian Trail, Benton McKaye-style, to escape from the hustle and bustle of everyday life... if only for a little while.

Jeff Alt is an expert hiker, speaker, teacher, speech-language pathologist and freelance writer. He lives with his wife and two children in Cincinnati, Ohio and continues to host the annual 5k Walk With Sunshine inspired by his Appalachian Trail journey, which has raised more than \$225,000. Visit www.jeffalt.com for more information.



Hiking has become a family affair for the author and his family.