

Back Trails

Perspectives on People and Nature

On Top of the World

by Elie Bilmes

My father and I celebrated the summer months by going on hikes. Whether it was a relaxing walk to the crest of a hill downstate, or a full day's journey to a taller peak elsewhere, there was something exhilarating about the cheerful stillness of the woods in the summertime. On the trail, the problems and realities of the outside world lifted with the morning mist and were replaced by a serene equality. Trudging along the Appalachian Trail with a stick in my hand, I felt like just another seasoned hiker—the type I saw with the month-old beard and eyes pointed toward Katahdin.

On these trips, my father and I wouldn't say much. Instead, we conversed through nature's sweet smells and sounds, the postcard-ready sights, and the rustling of the animals we disturbed along the trail. At the summit, especially if we were the only ones there, it felt as if we had the whole world to ourselves. My father, a whiz at geography, would point out the highlights far below.

Gradually, but inevitably, the natural high of the hike would be replaced by a gentle burning in my calves. Later, sitting in the car for the ride home, the burn would turn into a steady ache. The next day, lest I forget the previous day's experiences, the soreness was still there to remind me.

As I grew older, I made less time for hiking. I was busy playing competitive tennis and maintaining a course load that I hoped would be enough to earn me admission to Cornell University. Never a fan of cold-weather hikes, I wasn't motivated to go on a single lengthy hike during my four years in wintry Ithaca.

Yet, even on days when I ran five miles or played three hours of tennis, I was never able to replicate that comforting, sore feeling in my legs that I experienced after hiking.

After college, I left the familiarity of the Northeast to join Teach For America's efforts in Saint Louis. It's been a rough start to my first year of teaching. As expected, I teach students who are far below grade level in a decrepit, crumbling building.

My first day of school was certainly hectic. I chased down students who walked out of class, addressed innumerable episodes of misbehavior, and spent the whole day on my feet. After the last class had departed, I slumped in my classroom's



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secondhand desk chair and instinctively reached down to massage my calves. Just as they had been after seven hours of hiking, after seven hours of teaching, my legs were in pain. That old, familiar feeling, not experienced since my early teens, was back.

Now, after a full day of teaching, there is something comforting about this soreness in my legs. It serves as a reminder of a simpler period in my life, before the stresses of teaching. The cacophonous voices of students are replaced by the gentler sounds of birds and the wind through the trees; the grim scenery of the inner city is replaced by the blanket of greens and browns around me.

After a long day dotted by frustrations and setbacks, this feeling reminds me of a time when, as a boy, I stood with my father on top of the world.

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