

At Play in the Woods of New England

By Arthur Brownstein, M.D., M.P.H.

At the end of my first year at Jefferson Medical School in Philadelphia, I spent the night before summer vacation making a cardboard sign that said “Maine.” I intended to hold this sign by the side of the road while hitchhiking, as I had planned a two- week solo outing to the woods of Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont to celebrate the successful completion of my inaugural year in med school. My initial destination was Katahdin, sacred Mountain of the aboriginal Penobscot peoples, northernmost point of the Appalachian Trail, and the first place where the sun hits the East Coast on its daily transit of America.

I grew up in Southern California, and Maine was the furthest away point in the Lower 48 States. Remote places fascinated me and now that I was living on the East Coast, I was going to satisfy this longstanding calling.

I took a bus from Philadelphia to Boston, then held out my “Maine” sign, displaying it awkwardly by the side of the road, hoping that people would not be frightened by my bearded face, but rather, would take heart and give me a ride. After successfully finishing the first and most difficult year in medical school, I was eager to experience some outdoor adventure. It was difficult to hide my enthusiasm.

Like all things, there is a real art and science to hitchhiking. Body language says it all. Overconfidence, to the point of expecting everyone to stop and pick you up, generally turns people off, whereas, if you do not put out any effort

whatsoever, and appear to be unconcerned about reaching your destination, or whether or not you even have a destination, is also not a very successful strategy, because it tends to make people question your motives for being on the side of the road in the first place, and can easily frighten them.

From a hitchhiker's perspective, it is always interesting to meet and study the different kinds of people who will pick you up. For the most part, it is a reminder of the kindness that is still present in the hearts of most people that allows them to render assistance to a complete stranger. However, I still believe a cardboard sign helps, because at least it declares your intention to travel to a specific destination.

Although hitchhiking can be dangerous, looking back on the entire trip, I'd have to say that my journey was fairly smooth. I did have a few anxious moments, however, as when I got stuck on the Mass turnpike, where I later found out that hitchhiking was against the law, and ended up waiting for six hours before I finally got a ride out of there, well after dark.

After several rides, while still in Massachusetts, a Cherokee Native American picked me up. We had a heartwarming conversation while he was on his way to the Rez in New Brunswick, Canada, to visit relatives. He ended up presenting me with his beautiful prayer book called, 24 Hours a Day, from his twelve step Alcoholics Anonymous recovery group. This inspired to read "Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee," and deeply acquainted me with the plight of the Native Americans.

After almost twenty-four hours of continuous hitchhiking and traveling from Philadelphia, I stumbled into Baxter State Park in Maine at about four in the morning. Miraculously, I had reached my final destination.

Groggily, I began to unpack my gear and set up my tent as I quickly attempted to get my bedding ready. The two gentlemen who gave me my final ride to the park ended up camping with me, and quickly set up a fire. After sitting around the campfire briefly, and getting to know each other a little better, I wandered out under the starry sky and beheld a wondrous sight.

The Maine sky was black, star-studded, moonless, and completely clear, except for the top of Mt. Katahdin, which had somehow attracted a cloud at its summit. This was the only cloud in the entire sky, and it looked very strange, as it hovered low and blanketed the entire top of the mountain like a mystical shroud. Inside the cloud, lightening bolts flashed off and on like a strobe light, illuminating the top of mountain. This magnificent light show was accompanied by the sounds of muffled thunder that echoed in the distance. It was a majestic and magical introduction to Maine, and I gave thanks to “whatever God may be” for not only getting me here safely, but, more importantly, seeing me through my first year in medical school.

I drifted off to sleep in a spirit of anticipation and excitement over the next day’s coming events.

When daylight broke, we headed out for the mountain together. It was several hours of trail walking just to reach the base of Katahdin.

From the base, we took the Cathedral Trail, a full-on scrambling affair that required both our arms and legs to drag ourselves over huge boulders that were strewn along the path, climbing straight up the side of the mountain for four straight hours.

I had decided to clean out my system when I left Philadelphia, and my food reserves consisted of only a dozen lemons, five pounds of Tupelo honey, and a packet of bee pollen. Adding to this I planned on drinking the fabulous fresh, icy cold spring water that ran off from the New England winter snowmelt and flowed through the backwoods streams of the countryside.

Leaving my supplies back at our camp except for the bee pollen and water, I began to feel weak halfway up the mountain. When I reached for the bee pollen, and tried to chew it and digest it, it was too much for my system to handle and I became nauseous and lightheaded. But because I had a mission to accomplish, I struggled on, making it to the top on sheer willpower alone.

At the summit of Katahdin, I was feeling too nauseous and light-headed to appreciate the panoramic view of the surrounding marshes and lowlands; my vision was distorted and everything looked fuzzy. Fortunately someone came along, saw my decrepit state, and offered me an old-fashioned peanut butter and jelly sandwich on white bread, which I gladly accepted.

After I had consumed the sandwich, my head cleared in fifteen minutes, and my full strength returned in twenty. It was amazing to see how much of an impact a little food can have on the body's processes. Ironically, I almost refused

the sandwich, because this was at a time in my development when I normally ate only whole grain bread.

Being fanatical, even in matters as important as diet and health, is often not practical. Since this experience, I have never turned down another white bread sandwich, especially if it was served with love, and I was hungry.

Now that my head was clear, and I was feeling better, I could appreciate the beautiful view of the surrounding Maine countryside from the top of Mt. Katahdin. With my strength renewed, we ventured out onto a ridge off to the side of the mountain, which turned into a precarious precipice known as “The Knife’s Edge.” a thin sliver of rock with a three thousand foot straight vertical drop. As if this wasn’t dangerous enough, powerful winds blew across this edge, as you struggled to search for secure footing and maintain your balance while negotiating your way across the narrow ridge. The secret was to not look down, and to lean slightly into the wind, hoping that it would not let up as you did so.

Twelve hours later, we were back in camp, tired, hungry, and satisfied, as only adventurers who has accepted a challenge and successfully met it can feel. After climbing Katahdin, I could feel the spirit of Nature beginning to take possession of my soul.

The next day I went moose hunting with my camera while flying in a small plane that flew low level over the marshes, ponds, and waterways surrounding the base of the mountain. We spotted several moose, and even though my photos didn’t come out so clear, I was still deeply impressed with the power and majesty of this beautiful animal!

The following day, my new friends and I parted company, as I headed south for Mt. Tumbledown, on the recommendation of Steve, my classmate and best friend at Jefferson. Steve had told me about this little-known mountain, and how he used to visit it regularly when he hiked in Maine as a teenager.

Tumbledown is an unusual mountain, where a small, clear lake now sits on top of a hollowed out crater that filled in with water over millennia. The lake acts like a mirrored reflecting surface, and at night provides superior optics for some of the best star gazing in the world.

With map and thumb, I was able to get rides that took me to within walking distance of Mt. Tumbledown. As I began to climb the mountain, I saw that there was no one else around but me. Following a faint trailhead, I managed to reach the top before the sun had set.

I pitched my tent, backtracking to a small, relatively flat spot, on the edge of a rock outcropping, high along the side of a ridge. Looking northward I gazed out over a magnificent panorama of pine trees that stretched as far as the eye could see, right into Canada. There wasn't a sign of civilization anywhere. Somehow, this reassured me. As the sun set, and it became dark, I waited for the star show to begin, as the evening temperatures dropped below 30 degrees Fahrenheit, almost unheard of for summer weather where I came from in California. As I was not dressed for such cold weather, this definitely put a chill on the extended stay I had planned at Mt. Tumbledown.

The stars came out in a magnificent display of celestial beauty, and despite the cold, they did not disappoint. There is something wonderful and magical

about looking up into a cloudless, night sky, with no moon, and gazing up into the heavens. One feels tiny and insignificant, yet at the same time, one feels connected to all of life. It is a funny paradox, yet somehow, in that moment, it all makes perfect sense.

The next morning, I packed my gear and headed down the mountain. Even though Tumbledown was incredibly and beautiful, I wasn't dressed for the weather, and didn't want to go through another chilly evening. At this point in my trip, I was alone and enjoying the solitude of the wilderness. I wrote poems that arose spontaneously from the joy of being surrounded by the relaxed, quiet beauty of Mother Nature.

Throughout this time, I continued my fast of fresh lemons, mountain spring water and honey, and emerged from the woods a week later with my white carpenter pants that had now turned a scruffy, mud-stained brown. Although I was feeling exceptionally clean and pure on the inside, my outer appearance was unkempt, essentially unfit for any civilized appearance, and my rapidly-growing beard made me look more like an escaped prisoner or a crazed mountain man than a future doctor who wanted to be a servant of humanity.

As I haphazardly made a new sign bearing the name "New Hampshire," I once again took up my familiar place alongside of the nearest roadway and stuck out my thumb. Within a minutes, I was picked by a businessman in a three piece suit who was driving an expensive-looking sedan.

This kind gentleman took me across the border of Maine into the backcountry of New Hampshire, introduced me to his friends, and even showed me his secret

fishing hole. Without any transportation of my own, and essentially a stranger in a strange land, I appreciated his open-hearted hospitality and the rare, behind-the-scenes look at the hidden beauty of all the places he had frequented as a youth, which were so near and dear to him. His personalized, guided tour of the New England countryside took us along a route that included scenic farms, pristine rural meadows and quiet, serene valleys, tucked away deep in the hinterland of New Hampshire. I was sure that no other tourist had had the red carpet rolled out for them the way it had been for me.

His generosity knew no bounds, and he even paid for my motel room when we stopped off at a little inn at nighttime. I made quick use of a hot shower, a luxury in stark contrast to the frigid streams that I had been bathing in in the woods. We shared a meal together at the home of one of his childhood friends.

In the morning it was time to say our goodbyes. He dropped me off at a convenient location near a highway where I could catch another ride, and my journey continued.

Standing alone by the side of another anonymous roadway, I was then picked up by an old man in a beat-up ancient truck who took me to the swimming hole where he and his wife went skinny dipping the day before they were married some 45 years ago. In those days, it was a rather bold thing to do, and I got the feeling that he hadn't told too many people about it.

After New Hampshire, I visited the Green Mountains of Vermont, hiking and camping on beautiful Burke Mountain, where the U.S. Olympic Ski Team trained during the winters. In the summers, it was open to mountain bikers and hikers. I

ended up staying with a young couple in St. Johnsbury, one of the larger towns in Vermont, which is a beautiful state, full of mountains and valleys and lots of greenery, at least in the summertime.

On my way back from Vermont, I was determined not to have to go through New York City, as I didn't want to chance an unpleasant experience and get stuck there for days on end, waiting for a ride, as I had been told could happen. I made a detour of two hundred and fifty miles in my travels in order to avoid New York City.

After several rides, I was now in Rhode Island, and found myself standing wobbly-legged near a main road at 4:00 in the morning, extremely tired. At this time, there was hardly any traffic, so when a VW van passed, I got all excited. He must have not seen me, however, because he kept right on going. My spirits plunged.

About a quarter mile down the road, however, he put on his brakes, and then backed up to let me in. The driver was a young man named Paul, a schoolteacher and musician returning from an overnight trip. I remembered thinking how kind he was to have picked me up at such an unreasonable hour, when usually only undesirable characters and derelicts were up and about.

We drove to a nearby early morning diner where we ate muffins and drank coffee. I shared my brief life's story with him, and told him where I was headed. We had a very spirited, philosophical discussion while he drove me out of his way until he could figure out where to drop me off for the final leg of my journey

back to Philadelphia. He decided that it would be best for me if I took the bus. The only problem was I didn't have any money.

As the muffins and coffee cost me the last of my pocket change, Paul gave me money for a bus ride from the point where he let me off back to Philadelphia. This unsolicited gesture of kindness was gratefully accepted, as I was anxious to conclude the last leg of my journey without further struggle. In all honesty, I was growing weary of hitchhiking, especially in the congested metropolitan areas that I would soon be passing through.

To my amazement, I found out that the routing of this bus took me right through the middle of New York City, where I had to transfer to another bus. No matter how hard I tried to avoid New York City, it seemed to want to catch me, like a magnet. On the East Coast of America, as it is for Rome, all roads lead to NYC.

On the bus trip back to Philadelphia, I reflected on images from the New England woods, and recalled the tranquil scene while sitting on Mt. Tumbledown, gazing off into Canada past miles and miles of virgin forests and wilderness, and the contented feeling of freedom that came over me while being with Nature.

Looking out the bus window as we drove through the congested cities of the East, this image was in stark contrast to the bustle of all the people I saw walking and driving around in a hurry. They appeared to be in a state of constant tension, struggling, pushing, shoving, and, when behind the wheel, angrily blasting their horns at each other while stuck in rush hour traffic, living like animals in a cage that was not big enough for everyone. Where is the joy and

gratitude of life under these circumstances? I still can't unravel the mystery of why man chooses to live in this unnatural way.

As a result of this experience, I vowed to one day live in the country, and I'm happy to report that this has come to pass for me in rural Hawaii. Here the air is clean and fresh, and I can sit barefoot and watch the stars at night. Because our neighborhood is spread out and not crowded, we have the opportunity to appreciate the beauty of our individual beings. In these quiet settings, Nature is held in high esteem, and daily life seems to take on a more meaningful purpose.

The lessons I learned about people through my brief career in hitchhiking have been invaluable. The individuals who picked me up hitchhiking, taught me not to judge others. If we look at someone and think, "Well, that person will never stop and give me a ride," then we are not giving life the opportunity to teach us something new. People will pleasantly surprise you every time, if you give them a chance. As a future physician, this was a critical lesson for me to learn.

Two weeks in the wilderness gave me the opportunity I needed to explore my soul, and to confront many of my childhood fears. It also helped me discover that, although sometimes moody, Nature is benevolent, wise, and kind. In this process of self-discovery, and attempting to understand my relationship to Nature, I started to become faintly aware of the fact that my essence was and is in harmony with that of Nature's. In fact, if one is to study the issue, keenly, one will find no actual distinction between Nature and the soul of man.

Going into the wilderness alone is not a crazy notion. Many cultures, from the Australian Aborigines to Native American have advocated this as a form of initiation into adulthood, and have even praised it as a therapeutic way to prevent mental illness in the individual, and restore sanity to the society.

*“I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately,
to front only the essential facts of life,
and see if I could not learn what it had to teach and not,
when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.”*

– Henry David Thoreau