

Becoming Quiet

Finding strength in solitude at Shenandoah National Park

By Kim O'Connell

On a clear early-fall morning, I am standing at the Jewell Hollow Overlook in Shenandoah National Park, contemplating my fate. The patchwork quilt of the Shenandoah Valley, ribboned by the Shenandoah River, is far below. Overhead, red-tailed hawks circle each other against the blue sky, hanging about like they are waiting for my decision. I could stay here forever, I think—out in the open, where there are interpretive markers and way finders and mileposts along Skyline Drive. This is what normal life is like—scheduled, understood, organized, planned. Instead, I take a deep breath and plunge into the sun-dappled woods, heading north on the Appalachian Trail toward Mary's Rock with my heart pounding in my chest.

I have been an avid hiker all my life, but I have almost never hiked alone, and not ever so far from home. I've hiked with friends and lovers, talking and laughing, pointing things out to each other, sharing water bottles and trail mix. Making *noise*. My husband even proposed to me on a trail in Shenandoah. Yet this feels much different. I'm here for a two-week solitary sojourn in the park, to soak up the beauty of Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains and to discern what has brought generations of people here since the 19th century. What I hadn't counted on was being scared.

To prepare for my trip, I'd purchased trail maps and guides, as well as the very last can of bear spray available from my local outdoor retailer. (The empty bear spray shelves made me wonder what percentage of those purchased cans has actually been used.) I laughed nervously at the drawing of a roaring grizzly bear on the front of the can. Although there are no grizzlies in Virginia, the park boasts hundreds of black bears, a species that has been known to attack when surprised or provoked. Although

no one has ever been injured by a black bear in Shenandoah's long history, I wasn't keen on becoming a groundbreaking statistic.

That wasn't all. I've lived in and near the city my whole life. It's a place where I feel comfortable, but it engenders a certain wariness about the world. I grew up in a lower-middle-class Maryland suburb of Washington, D.C., where blue collar workers lived next to college professors. Racial tensions ran high at my high school, and fist fights were common. I learned the hard way that I needed to pay attention and protect myself. When I was 15, a friend and I were chased down a footpath near my house by a strange man wearing rubber gloves. We escaped harm, but not long after that, a young woman was strangled on that same trail, and the perpetrator was never caught. I was robbed at gunpoint at my urban college. After graduation, I moved to downtown Washington, living on my own for the first time. When I fell into conversation with a man in my local grocery store, making the mistake of telling him where I worked, he ended up stalking me for months. Another time a drunken man refused to let me move past him on the Metro subway train, hurling salacious comments at me while my fellow riders stared at their shoes.

I started carrying pepper spray when I left my house. More than that, I began to wear the armor of the urban citizen, the don't-talk-to-me mantle of self-protection.

Now in my forties, I have settled into a comfortable life in a close-in Virginia suburb of Washington. Most of the time, I feel perfectly safe, but I am still wary. I don't walk alone at night, and certainly not in the woods. I don't tend to talk to strange men. I stay in my comfort zone.

The Appalachian Trail, at this moment, is out of my comfort zone. As I hike alone on the AT, I am spooked by the prospect of meeting a creature intent on bringing me harm (whether of the ursine or human variety), so I start making noise. I bang my hiking staff against boulders as I walk past. I yell out "Hey bear!" and "Yo bear!" as I go around curves. When I hear a rustling noise in the trees a few yards off the trail, I unholster my bear spray and start belting out show tunes. The one that sticks in my head is

called "Broadway, Here I Come." Strangely, the lyrics seem to apply to my situation: "I'm standing on the ledge/the view from here is pretty/and I step off the edge." I am quiet only when I come to an outcropping that gives me a panoramic view of successive waves of green mountains. I am breathless from the activity and the awe. But when I start hiking again, the anxiety returns.

I eventually reach Byrd's Nest #3, one of several picturesque and historic stone shelters along the AT. I sit down on a picnic table with my back to the shelter and take a drink of water. As I start to catch my breath, a man bursts into the clearing from the same direction from which I came, startling me. Had he been walking behind me? Did he hear me singing? Is he a lunatic?

"Hi," he says, as he walks past me.

"Hi," I say to his back as he continues on the trail.

Despite the innocuousness of the exchange, I feel nervous about following him in the direction of Mary's Rock, so I turn back. I speed-hike back to the trailhead and wonder if my fear will ever abate.

The next day, I decide to climb to the summit of Hawksbill Mountain, the highest peak in the park at 4,050 feet. There are a couple ways to get there, and I choose the shortest but steepest route. The sun is on the other side of the mountain, so I am often hiking in shadow. Once again, I call out at intervals and bang my staff against the rocks as I climb, making noise and declaiming my presence. After a while, though, the noise feels obscene. I'm the visitor here, I think. I'm the one who is disruptive, bringing my urban anxiety and infernal racket to a place that is perfect without it. I force myself to hike in silence, but it's an uncomfortable one. At one point, I pass through a thick patch of mountain laurel that stops me in my tracks. The gnarly branches are impenetrable and otherworldly, like something out of a Brothers Grimm tale. I notice other things, too, like the delicate asters along the path and the yellow-green moss growing at the base of the trees. I begin to pay more attention to my surroundings and less to the thudding of my heart.

When I get to the top, which features a stone platform and a truly magnificent 360-degree view, I see two men there. They nod politely but leave me alone when I sit on a nearby rock to take some notes. They leave the summit first, and after a while I begin my descent too. With their head start, I am surprised to come across them again only a few yards down the path, puzzling over a map. I take a deep breath.

“Hi,” I say. “Do you all need help?”

“Yes,” one of them says. “We’re trying to figure out which way we came up.”

We discuss it for a while and realize that we all came up the same path. I contemplate choosing a different trail to hike alone versus walking with these two men, who clearly outnumber me. I take my chances and ask whether I could walk with them. “Sure,” they say. We fall into easy conversation. I learn that one is a 50-something divorcé trying to get in shape through hiking; the other is a recent college graduate visiting as many national parks as he can before entering the workforce. They were strangers before they met just this morning, as I am to both of them, but we are friends by the time we reach the trailhead. In this moment, at least, I am bound to these people by our common desire to be here in these mountains. It reminds me that we are all different in this world, but the path we are walking on is very often the same.

And so it goes. I hike every day during my time in Shenandoah. I stroll among bucks and butterflies in Big Meadows. I hike down to Lewis Falls and to Camp Rapidan, and I scramble up the rocks at Bearfence Mountain. I feel my lungs, my legs, and my will growing stronger. I remember a quote from the writer Cheryl Strayed—that fear is born from a story you tell yourself. I decide that my story will be one in which I am powerful and brave. I can handle anything or anyone that crosses my path. After five days, I find myself actually longing to see a bear. When I finally do, the bear—a cub—bounds away as

soon as he sees me. In the coming days, I will see five more bears, mostly from my car or some other safe vantage point. They pay far less attention to me than I do to them.

Every day I make less noise. And as I become quiet, I hear more. When you are silent, everything else is magnified—every sound, every view, every thought and feeling. I hear katydids calling to each other as night falls. Dragonflies buzzing at Big Meadows. Woodpeckers thrumming on a tree trunk. The rhythmic sound of my breathing, always. It makes for a glorious symphony that I didn't notice at first, but is now my constant, welcome companion. I realize that there is a difference between what is scary and what is simply unknown. So as I hike, I am determined to know more, to distinguish between a monarch and a swallowtail and limestone versus granite. I even come to recognize bear scat, usually full of berry seeds. All of it matters so much more than the story of fear I was telling myself before, a story that wasn't protecting me so much as it was keeping me from fully living in the world.

On the last sunny day I spend in Shenandoah, I hike the Riprap Trail to Chimney Rock. This is a short, scenic hike near the southern terminus of the park, a winding ramble that begins on the AT and heads toward a rocky outcropping with sheer drop-offs on three sides. The hike is a geologist's dream, taking me past a rocky talus slope and the quartzite boulders known as the Calvary Rocks. All around me, the autumn forest is jeweled with red and orange leaves. I reach my destination and find a perch on Chimney Rock, which offers me a far-reaching view of Trayfoot Mountain to the north and the valley beyond. I feel grateful for the mysterious forces that have conspired to bring me here, from the ancient geologic dynamism that built these mountains to whatever caprice led me to hike to this very spot today. As I ponder the sweeping story being told here, I am glad for my own small place in it.

After a time, I hear voices in the distance. Eventually a young man and woman emerge from the trail and approach my vantage point. I say hello. They greet me warmly and instinctively put their arms around each other in the way of young couples. The woman tells me that they took a long route up from their campsite at the foot of the mountain, outside the park boundary. She confides with a giggle that

they went skinny-dipping in a pond they spotted along on the way. I smile. "Sounds fun," I say. I tell the woman that I'll clear out to give them some time on the rock.

A look of concern crosses her face as I shoulder my daypack and pick up my staff. "Are you hiking alone?"

"Yes," I say.

"Well, be careful out there."

I'm not afraid, I think to myself. "Thanks," I tell her. "I will."

As I head back down the trail, those are the last words I'll say all day.

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