Connective Tissue

KIM O'CONNELL

It's a pink-gray early morning, and I'm heading north on the Appalachian Trail. I can feel the sun more than I can see it, brightening behind the marbled clouds over my right shoulder. Deep as I am in the southern district of Shenandoah National Park, at this hour I have the trail all to myself. I know that's not true, not really, not on this footpath that stretches from Georgia to Maine, but it feels that way in this moment. I take a deep breath and keep going.

After a while, I begin descending along the slope of Loft Mountain. The sun is now high overhead, having broken through the hazy clouds. Bouquets of violet hepatica flowers—each with six perfect petal-like sepals surrounding a cluster of white stamens—catch my attention on the edge of the trail. Fallen logs on either side erupt with mushrooms. Leafy mountain laurel abounds, not quite a tree, but more than a shrub. As I walk, I hear nothing but the wind murmuring in the trees and my own steady breathing. Eventually I come to a small, picturesque stream. Everything seems to burst with life and energy—from the fuzzy, chartreuse moss on the tree trunks to the water burbling over and between the rocks.

There was a time when I might have been nervous to hike alone in these mountains, but not anymore. Every bend in the trail brings a new view of the seemingly endless ridges, cloaked in a kaleidoscope of greens. And yet somehow, despite its wildness, it feels familiar and comforting, too.

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In 1921, Benton MacKaye, a forester and conservationist, was grieving the loss of his wife to suicide when he conceived of the idea of a marked trail along the entire spine of the Appalachians. In a manifesto called "The Appalachian Trail: A Project in Regional Planning," MacKaye envisioned a trail that would provide

the urban denizens of the East with the same access to wild mountain vistas that people were extolling in places like Yosemite and Yellowstone. His goal was to provide access to the mountains for recreation—hiking and camping, mostly—but also for study and art and play.

"These mountains, in several ways rivaling the western scenery, are within a day's ride from centers containing more than half the population of the United States," MacKaye wrote. "The region spans the climate of New England and the cotton belt; it contains the crops and the people of the North and the South." Its wildness, MacKaye seemed to be saying, was tangible and close.

In the century since MacKaye's grand vision, the 2,200-mile Appalachian Trail has been accessible to both thru-hikers and day hikers, to solo travelers and to families and groups. Completed in 1937, the trail is managed by the National Park Service, the US Forest Service, and the nonprofit Appalachian Trail Conservancy, as well as several state agencies and untold thousands of dedicated volunteers. For the three million people who set foot on the trail each year, it's become a place for connection and community, and yet also a haven for solitude and silence. Guided by the trail's famous white blazes, AT hikers tend to discover something essential and profound—the exhilaration of freedom, an appreciation for beauty, and an awareness of their own power.

The Appalachian Trail can be experienced on two scales—one remarkably vast, the other exquisite and small. On the trail, you are walking on the crest of an ancient mountain range, one that has stood for 480 million years. These are lands where countless Indigenous peoples lived out their lives, Cherokee and Lenape and Abenaki and others, for millennia. It's where the Cherokee knew the grand Clingmans Dome in the Great Smoky Mountains as Kuwahi, and where the Abenaki called New Hampshire's Mount Washington Agiocochook. The names are different now, but the sense of walking among ancestral mountains and people remains.

And yet, on the AT, the scale shrinks, too. Your eyes focus. You notice small things. Bright white blood root, pushing up between rocks. Bear scat packed with berries, or claw marks high on a tree. An orb-weaver spider resting on its web. The trickle of a stream or a glassy pond. A woodland bog, shrouded amid the hills. The trail forces you to think about transitions as well—to consider how things change from one mile or one day or one state to the next. How forest gives way to meadow, or how a pine-needled trail becomes edgy with rocks, or how a hot and

humid morning can suddenly turn wet and cold. The wildness of the Appalachian Trail may not be as much about its remoteness but its changeability.

This experience of the wild is one that's nonetheless becoming less common for many people. Although the lure of the wild has always drawn people toward the mountains, in the last decade, the United States has lost nearly two hundred thousand acres of tree cover to pavement each year. Worldwide, wildlife population sizes have dropped by an average of 60 percent in our own lifetimes. Children in urban areas are increasingly disconnected from places where they can roam and let their imaginations soar.

With every passing year, conserving wild areas like the Appalachian Trail becomes more necessary for people, plants, and animals alike. Preserving the trail and the open space that surrounds it maintains its recreational opportunities, provides economic benefits to local communities, ensures essential habitat for many species, and provides resiliency against the effects of climate change. The Appalachians have long been an important route for migratory birds, for example. Thousands of broad-winged hawks and other raptors depend on mountain updrafts to make their way to and from their nesting grounds in South America each year. Other birds, such as the cerulean warbler, are ever more dependent on the trail for habitat as their numbers dwindle throughout their historic range. Once found in abundance along the Eastern Seaboard, the cerulean warbler population has declined by more than 70 percent over the past fifty years. Yet they still fly—and find refuge—along the AT.

I have found refuge there, too.

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I grew up in the suburbs of Washington, DC, the daughter of a single father. My parents had gone through an acrimonious divorce when I was seven, and my father had been given primary custody. Under court orders, I went back and forth between my father's house during the week and my mother's apartment every other weekend. And in between, introverted kid that I was, I spent a lot of time alone. I loved nothing more than to walk in the brambly patch of woods behind my father's house, or lie on my belly in the backyard, watching bugs go about their business in the grass. One time I brought home a box turtle shell, sad that it was empty but happy for my prize. Another time I found a toad and tied a

string to its leg, holding it captive in the hopes that it could be my pet, until my appalled father set it free.

Born and raised in the Midwest, my father loved the outdoors. He was a canoeist and hiker; he read me stories from *The Call of the Wild* and *Paddle-to-the-Sea*. One day, my father told me about the trail that ran along the Appalachians, and how people hiked the entire route. Maybe he had an article about the AT from *National Geographic* or some other magazine; I can't remember. But from that moment, the Appalachian Trail loomed large in my imagination. I wondered what it would be like to hike the entire length of the trail, or what even possessed people to do so. It took on an almost mythical quality in my mind—a primeval path from another time, like something out of Narnia—a realm for other souls more adventurous than me. I was a shy, quiet girl who rarely spoke up in class. I didn't think of myself as brave. The trail seemed too long, too remote, and too hard to have relevance to me.

I couldn't foresee there might ever be a time when I would be drawn to this trail myself. Or that, just as the path creates a kind of cartilage or connective tissue for the Appalachian Mountains, it would do the same for me—offering a way to strengthen my body and mind, and be reminded of all the forces at work in the universe that were greater than myself.

As an adult, I had put away childish things. I no longer lay in the grass and studied the bugs. I did what the world expected me to do. I developed a career and bought a house and started a family. I paid my bills and fed my cats and put out the recycling. For a while, the Appalachian Trail remained as mythical and distant to me as it had ever been.

Then, my father died, in the house where I'd first discovered the natural world. The big-hearted adventurer who had read me stories was gone. In my grief, I realized that I needed to start carving space for myself again, to reclaim a bit of the wanderer and dreamer I had been as a child. And so the Appalachians beckoned me. I started hiking solo whenever I could, taking on sections of the Appalachian Trail here and there. Although I hiked many different trails in other places, I always came back to the AT. Maybe because I had built it up in my mind as a child, every time I stepped onto the trail and saw one of those iconic white blazes for the first time, I felt a thrill, a sense that I was exactly where I belonged. Hiking on the AT gives me the space to breathe, to think, and to move in ways that my everyday

life does not. Perhaps most importantly, it allows me to remember the man who raised me, the stories he told, and the person he helped me to be.

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Continuing my hike, I pass boulders as large as SUVs and trees as tall as office buildings—maples, hickories, and ash. Each time I pass a white blaze, it feels like a beacon, an arrow—telling me to keep going. Traversing the largest uninterrupted forest corridor on the East Coast, the AT acts as a bulwark against the effects of carbon dioxide emissions and climate change. Trees act as carbon sinks, capturing as much as forty-eight pounds of carbon dioxide per tree per year, according to some estimates, while sequestering carbon for the duration of the tree's lifespan. Trees also give the AT its "green tunnel" effect, luring us into the woods. I have hiked through bare woods in winter, where everything is brown and gray. I've hiked in late spring when the tulip poplars are in a bloom of yellow and orange. I've hiked in summer when trees are sometimes charred black from lightning and fire. And I've hiked in the fall when the deciduous leaves turn riotous and most conifers drop their cones. On the Appalachian Trail and elsewhere, I find that everything comes back to earth.

And yet, the experience of the Appalachian Trail also includes the wild sky. Because of artificial lighting, the earth is becoming brighter at a rate of about 2 percent each year. Light pollution disrupts internal circadian rhythms and disturbs the normal activities of nocturnal wildlife. It also prevents our engagement with the sky our ancestors knew, one where the glittering light from thousands of stars was enough to fill us with awe and show us where to go. Camping at one of the AT's famous shelters or in a tent under a dome of sparkling stars, or stopping at a mountain overlook after sunset, we can still find places to experience the wonder and thrill of true natural darkness. I'm not quite brave enough to hike the AT in the dark, but I know people who do, and I envy them. For now, it's enough for me to know the possibility is there.

So, I keep coming back to the trail to hike sections, mostly in Virginia, Maryland, and Pennsylvania. Sometimes, I've hiked the AT with friends and family, but most of the time I have walked alone. To date, more than twenty thousand intrepid souls have completed the trail either in sections or in one trip, according to the Appalachian Trail Conservancy. It doesn't bother me that I've never thru-hiked it and have no plans to do so; the trail doesn't judge. But unlike when I was a child,

I think I finally understand now why people do it—why they take six months out of their lives and carry what they need on their backs like a box turtle, why they throw in their lot with strangers they pass on the trail, bound together in a common purpose.

"The trail itself is merely a means of access," MacKaye once said of the trail that would form his legacy. "When this is done, the real job can commence: indeed it need not wait on this—it can begin with the building of the trail. The real job is to develop a particular environment in each particular wilderness area penetrated by the trail." This has happened, in every mountain town that has benefited from the trail, in every habitat that has been protected, and in the trailheads that lure people to take the first step.

In these wild and welcoming mountains and valleys, I like to imagine other solo hikers who are out there on this green trail, each of us like a star in the wild sky, a constellation stretching from Georgia to Maine. When each of us walks alone, we are together still, supporting each other by claiming our time in the woods as a fundamental right, a necessity for living, and a reason for being. With every new section of trail I hike, every rock scramble, every stand of serviceberry trees or mountain laurel, every open vista stacked with Appalachian ridges almost glowing beneath the sun, I find myself feeling stronger and braver. Like the leaves and cones and petals, like feathers and berries and dew, I return to the earth again. ✦

About This Story

Kim O'Connell was brought to the trail by grief, just as Benton MacKaye, the so-called father of the Appalachian Trail, had been more than a century ago. After the death of her father, Kim was drawn to the very trail he had once told her about. Her frequent visits to hike sections of the trail connected her to the identity forged with her father—as an intrepid explorer, dreamer, and lover of the outdoors. Intended or not, the legacy of grief continues to resonate across generations of people who are walking off, or walking toward, some version of themselves on the trail. "The trail," Kim reminds us, "doesn't judge."