

I'm not your typical long-distance hiker.

I'm a 37-year-old mom. I live in a subdivision, I drive an aging station wagon, and most days my biggest goal is to make sure the kids leave the house with lunches in their backpacks and no toothpaste streaks on their faces. Like many women, I struggle with that fine and elusive balance of taking care of my family, going above and beyond at my job, and giving back to my community.

But beneath this Midwestern Mom exterior is an A.T. junkie. Sure, I get together with other moms now and then, and I can chat it up with the best of them about clothing sales, pre-teen children, or the latest title on Oprah's book list. But when my peers start talking about their upcoming spa getaway, family cruise or Florida vacation, my mind wanders. I'm drawn to the Trail like a mouse to an A.T. shelter.

It's a love affair that's been building for a while. When our kids were babies, my husband and I hiked a little of the A.T. while passing through Virginia. I'd always been intrigued by the idea of a thru-hike, but spending six months away from my family and my job? Out of the question. It was my husband who finally said, "Okay, it's true that you're the queen, and the household would fall apart if you left for months on end—but I think I can keep things afloat for a week. Maybe even two!"

So, in 2004 I launched a mission: start at the approach trail and hike an average of two weeks a year until I finish at Katahdin.

Not everyone in my life understands the draw. What would possess this otherwise normal suburban mom to go spend time in the mountains, getting dirt under her fingernails, eating reconstituted freeze-dried chicken, and peeing in the woods? As I was preparing for my first week-long section hike, a solo trip that would take me as far as Dicks Creek Gap, certain friends and family reacted with pursed lips

and furrowed brows. "I'm sorry; I don't think I heard you right. It sounded like you said you were planning to hike alone. For seven days? You're not really going to do that, are you?" Some even quietly pulled my husband aside and, in hushed tones, asked why he was "letting" me do this. Others just gave quizzical looks and said, "Oh, the Appalachian Trail. Does it take a whole week to do that?"

Over the last few years, though, they've come around. Those close to me can now tell you how long the Trail is, why you shouldn't hike in cotton socks, and how to properly use a composting privy. My kids brag to their pals about the bear encounter I had in the Smokies last spring. My best friend routinely and smugly informs others that I once traversed 19 miles in one day over three unforgiving mountains. And nobody questions any more why my husband gives me Patagonia Capilene undies instead of stuff out of the Victoria's Secret catalog.

They get it now, because there's no mistaking the fact that the A.T. grounds me. I'd even go so far as to say it makes me a better mom, a better wife and a better person. It gives me a deeper appreciation for my world, a better understanding of the bigness of God and the smallness of me and a sense of balance that I can't easily achieve outside of the woods.

Sometimes I even bring back solutions to problems that I couldn't have possibly discovered in the bustle of my normal routine. And isn't that an amazing payoff for getting a little dirty and wearing the same sweaty clothes for days on end? I think so.

It will probably take me twelve years to finish this journey. But I'm doing it. You can too.

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