

## On the Path

On the path frequent the unwashed homeless. They are drugged up every day on opioid-like beta-endorphin-induced stimulants. They defecate in the woods and panhandle for rides to buy groceries when nearby. The tramps travel America's food deserts and, without pantries, must carry all the grub they consume and all their possessions on their backs since grocery carts are not allowed. Consequently, forced fasting ensues, followed by visions. Good Samaritans<sup>1</sup> regularly set up soup kitchens along the way. The nomads lead the lives of the reviled vagrant denizens of our cities; starving, hallucinating druggies, filthy vagabonds who crap out of doors.

Why are they treated with reverence and respect? Because, these trekkers are the politically correct, walking the Politically Correct Trail, the PCT, America's Camino de Santiago, a pilgrimage of self-sacrifice and denial. Their journey is one of self-abnegation, frugality, and discipline – a society-sanctioned Calvinist quest. The venerated eschew present satisfaction for the delayed gratification of the distant goal of walking from Mexico to Canada within a season. Quintessentially American monks, they are perceived to be the holy who seek enlightenment through solitude and nature. Unlike their city-dwelling cousins, they follow the Politically Correct Trail to the emptiness of nirvana.

More importantly, they keep moving, for if they stay in one spot for more than a couple of weeks, they join the ranks of the homeless and get busted for shameful indolence.

6,200 feet high up in the North Cascades, the excrementitious Pacific Crest Trail kisses the road at Harts Pass, Washington. From Harts, one can drive on rough dirt tracks to two other trailheads. The dusty, potholed and rutted way to the west leads a couple of miles to lovely Meadows Campground, now semi-alpine after the 21,000-acre Needles Fire of 2003 left only standing dead timber. From Meadows an even more rudimentary track heads up to a view of the abandoned Brown Bear mine and the first PCT access point north of Rainy Pass (Segment L) before Harts Pass.

Rainy Pass is on the North Cascades Highway 20. From there, for 30 miles the PCT climbs and descends up and over Granite, Cutthroat, Methow, Glacier and Grasshopper Passes and traverses the talus slopes of two south-facing semicircular ridges and forward to the Brown Bear trailhead. The Brown Bear miners, as well as many others in the vicinity, used arsenic and cyanide to leach out the trace gold from the rock, leaving behind toxic tailings.<sup>2</sup>

Here I was, in mid-September, casually sauntering by just another super fun site on the PCT. My destination was only a saddle that overlooks both forks of the Trout Creek Drainage and sports two views all the way down to the Methow River valley. There was a steep talus incline to cross, 30-mile vistas, guttural ravens and cruising Cooper's Hawks, squeaky pikas, blazing ground-hugging autumn-red bearberry and white

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1 From Trail Magic Angels.

2 The mines were abandoned in the early 1900s as new strikes were made in British Columbia and Alaska. The town of Barron (still shown on most maps) became a ghost town. The rotting log ruins can be visited today. With the access provided by the CCC road constructed in the 1930s, mining operations returned, and copper, zinc, silver and lead were also extracted. But the return of ore on ore invested was low, and mining operations ceased for good.

pasqueflower gone to seed. Montane forests of dark Englemann Spruce and Lodgepole Pine contrasted with the soft green of intermittent Mountain Larch.<sup>3</sup>

Before the Larch turned later in the month, other than long-distance backpackers, there were only a few short-distance hikers out for a stroll. Now, I can always tell a promenading, non-trekking American by their nonchalant lack of a food-heavy backpack. Not all, but some conversations are characteristically American and out of place since those who seek out the wilderness generally leave avarice behind. Unfortunately, there are those who must talk about money - accumulated wealth and possessions, and next about politics, always in that order. God save you if the topic turns to religion, in which case, if you are like me, you instinctively reach for your wallet. Hopefully, you are reassured because you locked your billfold in the car.

This day, the politics part is where it got ugly. Out of the blue, my interlocutor began by announcing that he was 'deeply conservative,' adding a provocative "What do you think about that?" My only defense was to say something about how the political spectrum is not linear but circular. How the Far Right and the wacky elitist snob Progressives both hate big corporations. I was on safe ground here. Everyone reviles big corporations. Rather, everyone disdains the labyrinthine logarithms they employ. I quoted Will Rogers who said, "A fool and his money are soon elected." But this day featured an interrogator who protested, "How about those trans-genders?" At this point, I asked myself why I left the solitude of my tent. I attempted the time-tested politically correct question in response, "Tell me when you decided to be heterosexual." To that, I was told, "Of course, no one decides because it is the natural state of things and anything else is learned."

What had this nut upset was the training involved; that there was some evil cabal out to change not only the gender preference(s) of adolescents but also train them to alter their sex organs. In big Blue cities, radical, anti-fascist ANTIFA was offering advanced degrees in sexual re-engineering. Apparently, to covet pudenda is not for auto-didacts. By now, I wished I had talked about Jesus. Surreptitiously, I rolled my eyes to the heavens, but eyelids were there to keep out the bright light. Better yet, I glanced over to the "stone of heaven" (Azurite Peak,) which is what I was there to see anyway.

Now, there was a lull in the conversation. English speakers dread silence. Filling the void, I heard, "You know, I'm packing heat." A casual lift of a shirttail revealed a 10 mm revolver tucked in the belt, pointing to the groin area. I exclaimed, "Aren't you worried about shooting your dick off?" The response: "I'm terrified of bears." "That little pistol isn't going to stop a bear," I answered. He said, "Oh yeah, I'm a crack shot. Want me to show you?" Mercifully, I was blessed by the approach of a politically correct trail *runner*, fresh from Mexico and only 33 easy, tortuous miles to the Canadian border. With him, I was able to change the topic of the conversation.

Trekkers do not carry guns. They don't lug bear dinner bells. All excess was discarded some 2,500 miles ago. All these backpackers have with them are wisps of microfiber tent, rain gear and bedroll. Everyone wears a hat and carries hiking sticks. All have a satellite-enabled text-capable GPS clipped on the front strap of their packs. Big Tech always needs to know your whereabouts, even where you are pooping in the

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<sup>3</sup> The Tamarack is the only conifer in the state of Washington that drops its needles in Autumn. It grows above 1,600 feet and as high as 7,900. The tree is prevalent along the PCT in the North Cascades. Witness the eponymous Tamarack Mountain, the slope of which the path switchbacks. To the inhabitants of the Evergreen State, starved of deciduous tree fall color, the needle leaves of the Hackmatack in Autumn offer glorious respite, turning golden yellow before they are dropped in favor of naked winter in a ritual known locally as Larch Madness.

wilderness. Not always going in a caliginous morning fog, your location will find its way to the 'Cloud' anyway.

The 2,650-mile PCT journey travels the high country along the length of California and the breadths of Oregon and Washington, only stealth-stepping across the borders of the lesser two of Los Tres Amigos. The path attempts to follow the crest of the chain of ranges linking the lower desert hills and mountains of the Sierra Madre to the sometimes sparsely treed<sup>4</sup> granitic high mountain Sierra Nevada<sup>5</sup> (snowy mountains) of California, to the lushly verdant Vulcan forests of Cascadia. Since it is impossible to build a trail that summits the pinnacles all along the crests of ranges, the path is cut high into the steep slopes of mountainsides, alternately spanning the ridge tops and crossing from side to side at the saddles. The often-treacherous trail notches sharp rock loose rock slopes, intermittently fragmented by scree and follows craggy, serrated hogback chins or is blasted into sheer rock faces. Two notorious transits for the intrepid in Washington's Goat Rock Wilderness are the Kendall Catwalk and the Knife-edge. Highwater stream crossings in the Spring can be deadly. Perilous ice patches and avalanches are prevalent in the Sierra. Late-season crusaders encounter Washington State trails obliterated by snow.

To complete the interminable course within a year requires a south-to-north route. The start must be no sooner than mid-April or no later than early May. At any later date, the desert is not only too hot but absent water sources. The snow is too deep till July to begin in the north and often too heavy in the southern Sierra to arrive there before June. In the desert, night walks are preferred. Sleep is in cool culverts. If one leaves Mexico at Campo, California, on the first of May and arrives in Canada five months later on the first of October, one must average better than 17 miles a day. That is without counting on detours for resupply or recuperation.<sup>6</sup> Who can resist climbing the highest mountain - Whitney or stopping at Yosemite or Lake Tahoe or Crater Lake or close-by Mts. Hood or Adams or any of the other myriad attractions that are the charms of a lifetime?

Come September's approach to the equinox the rains that arrive in Oregon and then more intensely in Washington, portend Autumn snows, and the rush for Canada is on. One must figure 120 actual full trail days and an average of 22 miles a day.<sup>7</sup> Blessed are trail-closing wildfires with their motorized detours around entire trail segments. The dedicated can return to the fire-blocked sections to finish the quest later in the fall or in the next year; more often, not. Depending on the conditions, of the 700 to 800 who attempt the journey each year, only 15% to 35% finish, not that many without a detour. The average age of the closers is 34, the youngest a mature 18 and the oldest a hardy 70. More people have summited Mt. Everest than have through-hiked the PCT, start to finish, without hop-scotching, within a year.

Each itinerant walks with a stoop under a pack bearing massive amounts of food - yes, glorious calorie-rich, protein-intense and never enough saturated fat and sugar-infused aliments. And water. When resupply roads are blocked by fires or lingering snows, and in dry areas with scarce water sources or on extremely hot days, gallons of water must be found and filtered on or near the trail, and in the high Sierra, snow is melted.

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4 Multitudes of conifers are in the lower elevations.

5 At an aerie 13,187 feet of altitude, Forester Pass in California is the highest point on the trail.

6 In trail parlance, "to take a zero" is any day that does not chip away at the mileage necessary to complete the hike.

7 By mid-state, in supreme condition, almost all the hikers challenge themselves for distance on a stay-up-all-night "see how many miles you can do in 24 hours" marathon. The achievement of 80 miles is common.

None will ever eat hydrated potato flakes again. All would carry bear pepper spray to flavor their food but even the much lighter flakes are superfluous to the ravenous. They may be hungry but they are gloriously free.

The anthropologist David Graebner relates in his ambitiously-named book *The Dawn of Everything* that for the much longer and *better* part of human existence our forebears embraced and valued freedom above all other ideals. Simply put, humans did not want to be told what to do. Instruction always came from hierarchies, and humans kept to small bands to avoid them. Graebner's polemic contradicts the current, operable pablum that argues that there was little to no culture before the fixed-place cultivation of seeds and that agronomy arose from large gatherings of workers that needed to be organized. In other words, told what to do. The story goes that from the gathering together of subservient labor arose the affluence that allowed for the arts, the sciences and monotheism; all that is culture (ultimately leading to the surveillance capitalist world in which we find ourselves today.) Inherent to this dogma is the notion that for all of human history before the glorious flowering of riches, for scores of thousands of years, nomadic people were pretty much stupid. Somehow, genius sprang suddenly from post-peregrine sedentism. (Sedentism is a big word that anthropologists use to describe showing up for work on time and taking orders and otherwise sitting on your ass and watching TV, since supplanted by staring at your current 'device' of choice.) What rot!

The human brain was not just some flabby mass that people carried around for scores of millennia like a useless 8-pound bowling ball between their shoulders just waiting for it to do something thoughtful. Not to mention the women who endured the consequent pain of large-cranium vaginal births. (*Homo neanderthalensis* had bigger brains than us.) These nomadic peoples invented language, which philologists tell us *is* culture. They managed the most revolutionary technology that changed our bodies - facial structure (mandibles) and digestive organs - fire.

With the Cro-Magnons came the remarkable descent of the larynx which enabled more complex<sup>8</sup> speech. Identical in form to the humans of today, our distant forebears spoke an agglutinative Turkic set of languages and dialects we could call *Old European*, supplanted after the Ice Age by the Indo-European used today.<sup>9</sup> They memorized ballads and recited tales. The Cro-Magnons and their cousin Neanderthals were smart enough (in modern terms) to kill off all other big mammal predators. They knew every plant was not just for sustenance or beauty but contained medicinal properties that we use today. They sewed garments from refined flax, which they grew, spun, and dyed to make the cloth - the linen that we wear today.

Most clans understood that Springtime post-diluvia brought rich soils for planting and harvesting food, and they gathered in considerable numbers to trade, communicate and enrich their genes with hybrid vigor by mating with distant tribes. Nevertheless, they were wary of the oppressive influences of organizational hierarchy. Once the fruited seed-bearing plant foods were harvested and consumed, these wizards of the wilderness retreated to their preferred states of living in small groups from which they enjoyed the freedom to leave at will. And, most remarkably, they changed their names.

Our Cro-Magnon forebears reverted to their true names from the fictional appellations used for the assemblies necessary to temporal agronomy. They feared being treated as those who could be told what to do and when and how to do it.

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<sup>8</sup> Non-nasal, non-squeaky, almost unlimited.

<sup>9</sup> Agglutination in linguistics means combining word elements to express compound ideas.

Beyond the reach of the mundane, free to go and come as they please, without restraint or schedule or mandate or command, every PCT thru-hiker also chooses for himself a one or two or three-syllable trail name - spontaneously embraced by every novice, done naturally, early on, unprepossessing. PCT nomads walk apart from their prior life, where they had to 'show up for work on time and take orders and otherwise sit on their asses and watch TV, now supplanted by staring at the current 'device' of choice.' "Please," they cry out, "Do not confuse me with that automaton of my old, conforming life," bound to the mind-numbing grind.

The Golden Path finishes in the North Cascades Pasayten Wilderness, named by French-speaking fur trappers the *Pays du Satan*, The land of the Devil. By now the righteous have seen Yahweh and Satan, halcyon and tempest, having braved the hell of deserts and the bone-crushing cold of snow-drifted high mountain passes. Yet Hyperborea is yet to come. In Washington, the through-hikers bunch up in September to finish the marathon before path-blocking October snows.

My four trips up to the trail area at Harts Pass were from post-Labor Day September through the cusp of October and ended a fortnight later. I did not plan to see long-distance trekkers.

I met the full panoply of trail finishers, from strong early closers (or those who had skipped the Sierra snows planning to return yet later this season;) in the middle, the regular, determined, steadfast scritcheling snoovers<sup>10</sup> to the straggling late-season confident, who flit about and play along the way, then dare the autumnal snows to stop their progress. Many who complete the trail hail from Northern Europe, or 'down under.' (One must be careful not to confuse a New Zealander with an Australian, lest one incur the wrath of the Kiwi.) There were more from the U.K. than France: Germans and Dutch, Danes and Swedes, but no Norwegians and Finns.

In awe of the trekkers and with stimulated curiosity, I talked to maybe thirty. I always asked if I could share something they might need. By then, they were proudly self-reliant and had what they needed. Except for a cold beer.

I enjoyed playing Studs Terkel in interviews with those I encountered. Unguarded and open, they were free of the artifice necessary to urban life, receptive to conversation even in a rush to get to camp or meet a pre-arranged ride. I met trekkers on my short jaunts on the trail. I drove hitchhikers to and from Mazama in the Methow Valley. I amicably confronted trekkers at the trailhead campgrounds enjoying a campsite with an enclosed pit toilet or a meal with the luxury of a picnic table, those who were expecting a friend, or in Mazama waiting for the regularly scheduled TranGo (Transit for greater Okanagan County) bus. I saw those who had finished, forlorn, emptied of emotion, bewildered and lost. What could they do for an encore? How would they possibly return to the Walter Mitty world of their former lives?

What I gleaned from my conversations follows. The great winnowing out occurs in the first 500 miles. The unglamorous desert reveals that all is not a glorious alpine meadow, as shown on YouTube. Miles are spent walking monotonously flat and straight roads, many paved with high-speed traffic. Under culverts and down storm drains, the trail goes. Thirst, heat exhaustion and boredom take an enormous toll. Hell could be transformed into heaven if there was a cold, ripe watermelon to be found every mile. The sun is not your friend. Numerous carry parasols. The inattentive are struck by rattlesnakes. No one wanders off-trail.

After the desert comes the high country of the Sierra Nevada. Serious elevation gain and loss are encountered. Dehydration and electrolyte depletion present serious health problems. They drink an excess of

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<sup>10</sup> You've got to love the English language. From the Oxford English Dictionary: scritchel, adj. That wanders; snoove, v. intransitive. To move or advance steadily, or with a steady pace; to glide.

water to ward off hypoxic headaches. Electrolyte powders ward off fatigue. Hearts, lungs and blood require acclimatization. Muscle pain is a constant companion. Those who succeed have practiced before their odyssey on multi-day backpacking trips and are physically trained. Even so, a sprained ankle, twisted knee or pulled hamstring wreck many an excursion. Sickness rides in on horseback and leaves on foot. Many fall hopelessly behind. Some have too much fun at summer resorts along the way and abandon the grind.

High mountain snow fields defeat many groups. The well-prepared carry snow shoes and crampons but the extra weight can be a killer. Those with the resources purchase the proper gear, wait weeks for the snow and ice to melt or compromise, skipping whole sections.

Anaphylactic shock from stinging insects requires urgent attention. Without strong breezes, bombinating mosquitoes and biting flies persist for days. No one can possibly carry adequate medical supplies. To be rescued is to be humiliated. Inclement weather of all sorts is well-known: tent fabric-ripping winds; snow, sleet and endless rain; deafening hail-producing torments; the horror of close lightning strikes. One learns that it is not the snow<sup>11</sup> but the ice, never the cold but the wind.

In the beginning, everyone craves food, dreams day and night about food, lives, smells and unceasingly thinks about food. Everyone tells a story about the food they envisioned. One example: big juicy cheeseburgers followed by deep-dish pizza with unimaginable dessert Sundae concoctions washed down by gallons of lager beer or root beer floats. Wine is not on the menu, even for the one Parisian woman I meet on the trail. Food envy eventually quiets down to a dull and steady hunger. Bodies convince minds that calories and fat are needed; gourmand, not gourmet.<sup>12</sup> Freeze-dried, high in calories and light in weight.

Sudden exposure-induced fear and terror is a rational response. To dread a tightrope walk over a deep chasm is not acrophobia. A hiker can be calmly tromping through the woods and come upon a bear or a mountain lion. Wake up to a rodent in your tent at night? Earbuds ward off the ominous sounds of the night. Solitude is not always your friend. The lonely, the homesick, those missing close friends and relatives endure their loss or sink into depression.

Endless days of viewless tree canopy, or worse, extensive fire burn areas, test patience. I asked what sections the travelers liked most. Some say that after the desert they will never see anything as beautiful as King's Canyon again. But then comes the part where John Muir trekked. For many the very best scenery is in the Goat Rocks Wilderness of Washington. Also, the scariest. Those who found the Goat Rocks in fog, it is the crowded Alpine Lakes Wilderness from Snoqualmie to Stevens Pass. And of course, the worst is the desert. No one would do the trail again and include the first 700 miles until Kennedy Meadows.

The lucky have feet that survive. After all, the trail is all about walking, hiking, perambulating, marching, trudging, tramping, treading, ambling, roaming, stepping, rambling and traipsing and hoofing – whatever you can possibly do to move forward on your feet. I see several with their shoes off, airing out their feet. Every pair misses a toenail. Leathered-up foot soles are ubiquitous, corned and calloused, deeply vesicated, and layered with blisters upon blisters. The worst have cornballs under callouses, like trapped marbles. An itinerant pedicurist could make a fortune. Likewise, to ward off months of smelly body odors, a perfumier or aromatherapist - there is only so much one can do with wildflower-laced garlands. To make the entire circuit four pairs of shoes are necessary. Thin socks under thicker ones help. Shin splints, tendinitis and plantar fasciitis. Out here IT means iliotibial band syndrome. The finisher's shoes tend to be wide and light,

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<sup>11</sup> Except when 'post-holing through deep snows. Yet, to glissade is divine.

<sup>12</sup> Meical researchers at Duke University relate that the limits of human endurance are governed by the ability of the digestive system to process calories.

below the ankles for weight and comfort. Waffled soles for traction, yes, but none of the thick Vibram or heavy lug soles of hunters for the thru-hiker. Many wear light fabric gators.

Always in flat Oregon,<sup>13</sup> the fit and the zealous gain their trail legs and spring up and bound down the mountains. And discover each other, herd up, and form close communities with brethren. They find that human contact and friendship are what they cherish most. Anyone that they meet has earned respect.

*Imeros* meets *Anteros*. Satyr finds Aphrodite. Free as their distant pre-sedentary forebears, free to leave the tribe at will, free to seduce and debauch and swive, free to copulate: months-long celibacy ends in sated orgies.

Self-excluded are the solitary 60-day-wonder uber-ultra-marathoners who breeze by carrying eight lb. packs. The sprinters carry no stoves because they cook no food and only munch Nyjer-sunflower-safflower seed balls molded in lard and electrolyte-injected cashews. Hydration is by enema, done on the run. They poop out ping-pong ball-sized pellets that can be redigested in a pinch. The unshod wonders prefer the leathery suppleness of bare feet, discarding superfluous weight. They don net jerseys webbed at the armpits so as to para-glide steep downhill sections. Skin is their outerwear. Sleep is in the fetal position, snatched for four hours ensconced in 4-ounce 96-gallon plastic garbage bags. Avoiding campsites, the trail moths hang themselves cocoon-style from tree limbs or rock outcrops. They swear they would sleep in spiderwebs if they were big enough. That is, they would swear if they were to spare breath on speech. Exhalations are 90% carbon dioxide. With resting heart rates below 30 and body mass indexes under 12, these extremists run without hiking sticks, GPS, or underwear and shave hair and trim nails to the quick to drop the odd ounce or two. The fiends ghost by in an instant. The normal thru-hiker exclaims, “What was that?”

So, there you have it, the ultimate, sworn-to-mute, pleasure-denying, self-abnegating, uber-frugal, hyper-disciplined, indefatigably-diligent, ascetic-introverted, pain-loving, goal-oriented Calvinist Politically Correct Trail runner.

Whew! I think that I will de-camp to a bar, maybe a strip club, hopefully with a poker table and a greasy spoon attached. Want to join me?

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<sup>13</sup> Bracketed by the high country of California and the steep up and down of Washington, and although the Cascades there have some of the greatest volcanic peaks, Oregon is considered flat. Surprisingly. The trail lacks the continuous climbs and descents of the Sierra Nevada and the “little Alps” Cascades in Washington.