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Hiking Hard

There are two distinct ways to approach the trail: hiking easy and hiking hard. Hiking easy is about being in the woods, while hiking hard is more about getting somewhere. A hiker can do both during a day trip, but one approach tends to outweigh the other during extended outings. This is especially true when it comes to treks lasting a week or more, when time, energy and the heavy load on one's back have a significant bearing upon how far one can go.

The average overnight hiker may be burdened with nonessentials but that doesn't matter. The weight on his/her back won't be there long. The destination isn't of much

consequence, either. In fact, overnight hikers often end up in a place different from the one they had in mind when they set forth. But a long distance backpacker—sometimes called a *thru hiker*—strips down to essentials and presses forward. No matter how relaxed the expression on his/her face may be, the thru hiker is on a mission. Everything in the pack has been carefully worked out to ounces. Food is perceived as fuel. And the destination is of utmost importance.

Most people move too fast when they're hiking. They like to go full bore down the trail leaving nothing in reserve. But seasoned thru hikers take a different approach. They pace themselves. If the average day hiker is a sprinter, then the average thru hiker is a long distance runner. There are exceptions, of course, but most sprinters don't get very far. They usually burn out after five or six days on the trail. Seasoned thru hikers, on the other hand, leave something at the end of each day so they can get up and do it again the next. They know that the hardness of a hike is more a matter of endurance than speed.

It's all for fun, right? Of course it is, but thru hikers usually have a hidden agenda. Some hike to prove to themselves that they can do it. Others hike to escape daily life and all its stresses. Still others do it to buy time enough to reinvent themselves after a job loss, a divorce, or some other life-altering trauma. Hiking hard can be a purge of sorts—a way of wiping the slate clean.



I am a woods wanderer at heart. I am happiest when meandering by myself along on a narrow path winding

through the mountains towards some remote pond, or bushwhacking the trackless wild to nowhere in particular. Hiking easy, with plenty of time for ledge sitting and streamside pondering, suits me just fine. But every once in a while, I get the urge to hike hard. And when that urge comes, I often ask a friend to join me. Exertion loves company.

Through the years, John Woodyard has been my number one go-to guy whenever I feel the urge to hike hard. We've known each other since childhood. As Boy Scouts, we learned basic backwoods skills from the same troop leader. In our teens, we went on wilderness canoeing trips along with some other friends. In our mid-twenties, we ventured into Oregon's Three Sisters Wilderness together. We've been planning and doing outings ever since. In the early 90s, we hiked hard for four days through the Adirondacks, carrying heavy packs up and over Mt. Marcy and beyond. In the late 90s, we hiked a couple sections of Vermont's Long Trail, pushing ourselves to exhaustion. Yeah, we are gluttons for punishment.

In many respects, John and I are polar opposites. I'm more outgoing socially while John is introverted. He's lanky and long-legged. I'm squat and chubby with a short gait. John is an engineer by profession with a sharp, linear mind. I'm a brooding writer with plenty of stray thoughts. Like many lifelong friends, we couldn't be more different. But we get along famously on the trail.

John was upset when I hiked Vermont's Long Trail end-to-end without him. It was just the kind of forced march he would have enjoyed. But I felt I had to do that one alone. Good thing I did. I moved very slowly at first,

so that my not-so-athletic body would hold up during that tough, 270-mile trek. If John had been with me, I probably would have overextended myself.

In 2001, we hiked New Hampshire's White Mountains together, taking on Mt. Washington and several other summits. That trek just about did me in. John's daily jogging started paying off in middle age. To be sure, he was in better shape than me for that outing. He ended up slack-packing Mt. Adams by himself while I stayed at Madison Hut with our gear, catching my breath. Even then, I had a difficult time keeping up with him on the descent back to the car. Funny thing about hiking: pace is everything.



In an outburst of contrariness reminiscent of Thoreau, I could argue that racing through the woods is a fool's game completely missing the point of being outdoors, that an unhealthy urban mindset drives us to it. But that would be dishonest of me. Truth is, I enjoy a hard hike every once in a while, the longer and tougher the better, even if it does distract me from the more subtle aspects of the natural world. Sometimes the best way to experience the rawness of wild nature is to strip down to bare essentials and walk until you can't walk any more. The process purges the many demons that lurk within—temporarily, at least.

“Walking is the great adventure, the first meditation, a practice of heartiness and soul primary to humankind,” Gary Snyder wrote in his book, *The Practice of the Wild*. I couldn't agree more. That's why, every once in a while, I like to push myself to the limit, walking for days on end



Into the Cosmos

On a cool September evening, while pulling the caps from my telescope and pointing it towards the night sky, I fought back an urge to genuflect and make the sign of the cross. With red light and star maps in hand, I braced myself for a journey deep into the cosmos. I gazed at the starry vault overhead. Then I looked down the eyepiece of my telescope, venturing beyond the Milky Way. The stars of the home galaxy were merely blemishes on my window into deep space. What I was looking for existed beyond them. I was galaxy hunting. I half expected to see the eye of God staring down the telescope, right back at me. It's like that when you're half mad with cosmology, when you're wild enough to challenge your own cherished beliefs with the simplest, most natural facts.

The secrets of the universe are hidden in plain sight. On a clear, moonless night in a place unpolluted by artificial lights, five thousand stars are visible to the unaided eye.

With a pair of binoculars, one can easily see ten times that many. With a small telescope, a hundred times more. Among the stars there are nebulous objects that have tormented inquisitive minds from Galileo's day until modern times. For centuries scientists wondered what they were. Now we know. Some of them are stellar nurseries. Others are the remnants of spent stars. And some of them are entire universes unto themselves—galaxies holding a hundred billion stars or more.

Galaxies, or “island universes” as they were once called, are so far away that the distances between them and us are difficult to comprehend. The earliest ape-man did not even exist when the light that now enters my eye left Andromeda Galaxy. And on the cosmic scale of things, Andromeda is our next-door neighbor. A little farther out, we encounter images of galaxies as they were in the time of the dinosaurs. The night sky challenges our pedestrian notions of space and time, turning the most intelligent men and women among us into babbling fools. Clearly, at this point in our evolution, we don't have the brainpower necessary to fully grasp the cosmic realities set before us. It is too much. Whenever we come close to understanding the sheer magnitude of the universe, our heads explode.

For many years I had only a casual interest in astronomy, rarely going further than the occasional book on the subject. But I learned enough to realize that the key to understanding the relationship between God, nature, and humankind existed *out there*, well beyond our earth-bound preconceptions. All I needed was the courage to look deep into the night sky and accept what is apparent there.

Nature, on the grand scale that is the cosmos, may be more than most people can handle, but any philosophical or religious discussion that ignores it is a waste of time. If we are serious about making sense of the world in which we live, then our metaphysics has to be rooted in astrophysics. It has to be rooted in the factual realities of our home planet, the other planets, and all the stars. But that's a dangerous affair, isn't it?

“What trouble we get into when we identify God with Nature!” the naturalist John Burroughs wrote in his book, *Accepting the Universe*, “And what trouble we get into when we refuse to identify the two!” As someone who has flirted with pantheism his entire adult life, I couldn't agree more. But we have no choice. A super-natural God is no god at all. Divorced from nature, God is no more substantial than the ghosts and goblins that terrify children, or the superstitions of our distant ancestors. What sense is there in building a worldview upon any of that?



Nearly a decade ago I stared at a tiny orange light in the night sky that, according to scientists, was the planet Mars coming close to Earth. Something stirred deep within me at that moment. The abstract idea of the Red Planet that I had nurtured the better part of my life did not sync with the glowing object before me. A couple months later, while channel surfing the television, I landed on a show about astrobiology. Some fellow was talking about how certain chemicals—hydrogen, oxygen, carbon and so forth—combine in such ways inside nebulae to make simple proteins possible out there. I laughed long and hard