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What others are saying about *Hike Your Own Hike*

“*Hike Your Own Hike* is a helpful, fun book that combines everyday life with the outdoors. Walk the Appalachian Trail with Francis Tapon and learn practical insights that will get you ready for your own hike.”
—Harv Erickson, Chairperson, Continental Divide Trail Alliance

“Don’t buy this book if you just want a pure travelogue about the Appalachian Trail. *Hike Your Own Hike* is much more than that. It’s about taking the lessons from the trail and applying it to your life. It won’t just inspire and motivate you; it’ll amuse and delight you. Francis Tapon transforms the wonders and wisdom of the woods into sound, useful principles.”
— Peter Oorebeek, President, Advance Group

“The great outdoors is one of the best classrooms we’ll ever have. It overflows with life lessons, as Francis Tapon so clearly and passionately explains in this wonderful book.”
— Hal Urban, Author of *Life’s Greatest Lessons*

“*Hike Your Own Hike* delivers helpful and sage advice for life on and off the trail. It is an extremely engaging and entertaining book!”
— Bruce Ward, Executive Director, Continental Divide Trail Alliance

“As his teacher, it is tremendous to see what Francis has learned about himself and about the world around him. The great thing about working with young people is that you get to see the future through their eyes...and you get to see yourself as you once were and can be again.” — Joseph B. Lassiter III, Harvard Business School Professor of Management Practice

“Lisa Garrett, Francis Tapon’s hiking partner, will inspire women throughout the world. She exposes her frailty and emotions, but never runs away from confronting them. It’s fascinating to watch her draw deep into her incredible inner strength to overcome her fears. In some ways she’s a superwoman because she is able to walk over 2,000 miles in less than four months, but she’s also so human. Together, Lisa and Francis will motivate you to rise to a new level.” — Susan McKee, National Sales Director, Pristine Water Treatment

HIKE YOUR OWN HIKE

7 Life Lessons from Backpacking Across America

By Francis Tapon



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First Printing 2006

Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Tapon, Francis
Hike your own hike: 7 life lessons from backbacking across America / Francis Tapon
p.cm
Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.

ISBN: 0-97658-120-5

- 1. Self-actualization (Psychology) I. Title.
- 2. Hiking—Appalachian Trail.
- 3. Success—Psychological aspects.

158.1—dc22

Library of Congress Control Number: 2005904842

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To Cartwheel



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Right before the Appalachian Trail, Lisa and I did one last 80 mile backpacking trip in our favorite stomping ground: California's Sierra Nevada. It's a magical place that always put a smile on our faces.

Introduction

I woke up wondering how a mosquito could have possibly bitten my rear end. I was covered in bites, so I suppose it's not incomprehensible that one ingenious insect found its way deep into my pants.

The night before Lisa Garrett, my hiking partner, had agreed that we should camp at the summit of the mountain where the winds were strong enough to drive away the mosquitoes. We carried an 18 ounce tarp instead of a 48 ounce tent, because we didn't expect that many bugs and we were eager to save as much weight as possible. We plopped down without setting up the tarp to admire the sky and to enjoy the brisk winds that kept those infernal insects at bay. We had been hiking almost nonstop since 4:30 a.m., and so when Lisa lay down at 9 p.m. she was asleep in seconds.

I managed to stay awake for two minutes—long enough to see a flash of lightning in the dark sky. I didn't say anything to Lisa. I took a deep breath and prayed it was just my imagination. Thunder rumbled in the distance. I gulped. A minute later I felt a drop of rain explode on my forehead.

"It's coming," I mumbled to Lisa, who was as alert as a corpse.

I shook Lisa hard, "Lisa, a storm is coming! You gotta get up. We have to set up the tarp. Now!"

She woke up in disbelief. When we had been hiking up the mountain there were a few clouds around, but nothing ominous. She couldn't believe that the weather had changed so quickly. As I stumbled out of the sleeping bag, I said dryly, "Welcome to Maine."

We pitched the tarp extremely low because with the fierce winds at the summit, the rain would surely come at a nearly horizontal angle. The tarp flapped violently in the blustery weather, but we managed to set it up. We had to crawl to squeeze under it. The tarp was so low that it halted nearly all the wind. Incredibly, within minutes, the mosquitoes descended upon us. Our wind-free environment had become an oasis for these God-forsaken creatures.

I always slept barefoot and with my feet slightly elevated to help decrease the swelling from walking all day. The next morning my exposed feet were swollen for a different reason: they were covered with bites. I couldn't resist scratching them until they bled.

The truly pathetic part was that the storm never hit us. During the night it passed just a few miles north of our campsite and we didn't even get a sprinkle. The token drop that hit my forehead was just a teaser. In other words, we could have slept without the tarp and without the mosquitoes.

While I miserably scratched my butt that morning I wondered, "OK, now how is this experience going to possibly help me find the way to get more out of life?" I shook my head questioning what I was thinking when I thought backpacking 2,168 miles would bring me some wisdom.



The only difference between a rut and a grave is their dimensions. — Ellen Glasgow

Nine months before, I was stuck in a rut. I wasn't wild about my job. But I wasn't sure what to do next. The uncertainty of the future made me addicted to my daily routines—at least they were relatively comfortable. I clung tightly to the known instead of letting go and venturing into the unknown.

Part of my unwillingness to make any drastic changes was that my life really wasn't that bad. Many people struggled much more than I did. Yet deep down inside I realized that I wasn't getting the most out of life and that was bugging me. In short, I was settling for a pretty good life, but not an amazing one.

Lisa was also living on auto-pilot mode. She left behind her hometown in California's agricultural valley to pursue her dreams in Silicon Valley. However, after six years she was bored with managing commercial properties for the tech companies. Although her intelligence and strong work ethic helped her establish a successful career, she wanted to do something new, but she didn't know

what. She also realized that her life was comfortable, but not magical.

It was during this period that we began backpacking. After car camping in the majestic forests of Big Sur, California, we agreed that it would be far more interesting to camp away from all the people. That meant backpacking, which neither of us had done. Our first backpacking trip was a four day adventure deep into Yosemite National Park, far from the crowds. We were hooked. We started backpacking almost every weekend. Eventually I started investigating some of the longer backpacking trips we could take. It wasn't long before I discovered something called the Appalachian Trail.

The Appalachian Trail (AT) is 2,168 miles long and crosses 14 states on the East Coast between Maine and Georgia. It typically takes six months to traverse the entire trail or “thru-hike” it. Few succeed: for example, when we walked it, only 17 percent of our fellow “thru-hikers” finished it. To put that into perspective, those who try to summit Mount Everest have twice the success rate (34 percent via the South Col route).¹ Embarking on a thru-hike usually entails quitting your job, moving out of your home, selling many of your belongings, and convincing your friends and family that you haven't gone completely nuts.

Lisa was initially skeptical about thru-hiking the AT. However, she concluded it might help her determine what she should do with her life. After encouraging Lisa to join me, we sold most of our belongings, and I convinced ten companies to sponsor our expedition. I romantically thought that thru-hiking the AT would help me gain profound wisdom. I yearned to uncover the fundamental Principles of getting the most out of life. I theorized that spending several months walking thousands of miles in the wilderness would help me discover these Principles. But while I was inspecting and scratching the dozens of mosquito bites all over my body, I started doubting this theory.

However, I would eventually get over the bites and many other challenges. Perhaps because of those trials, I ultimately learned



Lisa and I are goofing off on one of our training hikes in Yosemite. We had never done more than a four day backpacking trip before the AT. We both yearned for a break to recharge our spirits, get some wisdom, and have a few laughs.

what I had set out to discover, although not in the way I expected. Indeed, thru-hiking the AT was a life-changing adventure that taught me many values—especially the value of a bed, a shower, a toilet, and mosquito netting.

Wisdom in the wilderness

My idea of venturing into the wilderness to find wisdom is not original. Henry David Thoreau and John Muir both understood how communing with nature could reveal answers to the most profound questions of life. Religious figures such as Jesus, Moses, Muhammad, and the Buddha spent some of their most profound moments in the wilderness. Many who hike the AT hope that walking over 2,000 miles will reveal the answers to life's big questions. Indeed, thru-hiking is not just a long hike, it is a pilgrimage.



Pilgrimage (noun): An extended journey with a purpose.
— Webster's II Dictionary

Although your yogi may disagree, walking and sleeping in the wilderness is a form of meditation. Imagine waking up everyday before sunrise and walking up and down forested mountains until just past sunset, breaking only for meals and short rests. We walked 20 to 30 miles a day. Imagine doing that for almost four months. Many would conclude, "That's gotta suck!"

However, I quickly found myself in a groove and at peace. That state of mind allowed me to absorb lessons I might have otherwise overlooked. When I returned to civilization, I sought to summarize those insights. I distilled them into Seven Principles that not only apply to backpacking, but to life itself.



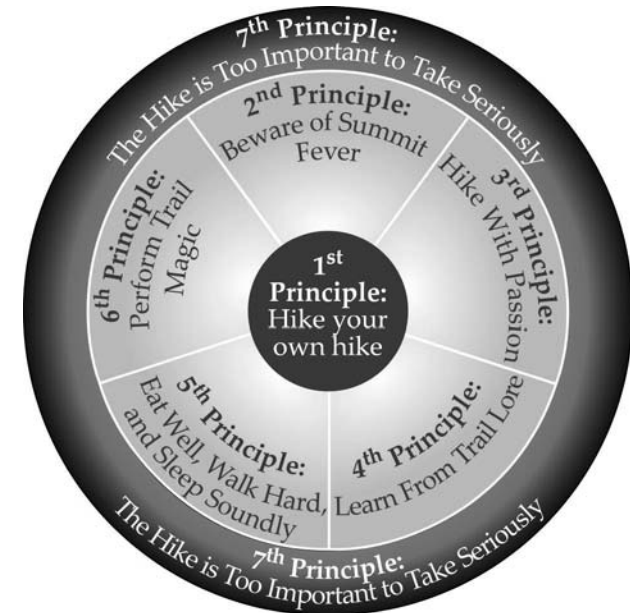
I can only meditate when I am walking. When I stop, I cease to think; my mind only works with my legs.
 — Jean-Jacques Rousseau, French philosopher & writer, 1712–1778

Overview of the Seven Principles

Each chapter will discuss a Principle in detail, but first let's see how they all interrelate.

- The First Principle, Hike Your Own Hike, is the most important one. It's simply impossible to get the most out of life if you ignore this First Principle. Therefore, it forms the core.
- Principles Two through Six explain how to achieve the First Principle. They delve into the nuts and bolts of how to enjoy life.
- Finally, the Seventh Principle, The Hike Is Too Important to Take Seriously, puts everything into context. It gives us the perspective that no other Principle gives us. Indeed, those who truly follow it are usually masters at squeezing the most out of life.

The accompanying diagram depicts how the Seven Principles interrelate. For example, it shows how the First Principle forms the core and is the foundation for all the Principles. The Seventh Principle wraps around all the other Principles, for it is one that should be sprinkled generously throughout life. Just because Principles Two through Six are not in the core or the outer edge doesn't mean that they are not essential. Each Principle is vital and should be followed if you want to optimize your life.



On the other hand, *this is not an all or nothing solution*. If you ignore one Principle, you will still get more out of life than someone who ignores five of them. If you're not prepared to make a radical change today, you can take one Principle at a time. It's better to follow one Principle than to ignore them all. The point is that each Principle you follow gets you closer to having a truly fulfilling life.

Some may argue that these timeless Principles are obvious. However, what's obvious is that most of us are not following them and are not maximizing their life. Therefore, when our lives get



off track, it's healthy to remind ourselves what the Principles are so that we can realign our priorities. Furthermore, during my pilgrimage I didn't just focus on discovering the Principles, but I also focused on finding concrete, practical, and sometimes unusual ways to abide by them. Believe me, backpacking across America gave me plenty of time to think of such things.

Lastly, I'm not the Moses of thru-hikers. I'm not saying that God gave me these Principles or even that all thru-hikers agree with them. I simply arrived at them after many months of deep contemplation. For instance, someone else might follow my footsteps and be inspired to write a book called *The 7 Principles of Proper Trail Hygiene*. And alas, that book would probably easily outsell mine.

Katahdin—the adventure begins

In Maine's Baxter State Park lies the mountain called Katahdin, the northern terminus of the Appalachian Trail. For Native Americans, Katahdin means "The Greatest Mountain." Indeed, it is the tallest mountain in Maine and the longest vertical climb on the AT. Nearly all aspiring thru-hikers start in Georgia and make Katahdin the climax of their journey. Only five percent of the thru-hikers were doing what we were doing: starting at Katahdin and heading south. Most head north on the AT because it's easier than heading south (see Appendix 1). I started in Maine partly because I'm a nonconformist and partly because I'm just a foolish masochist.

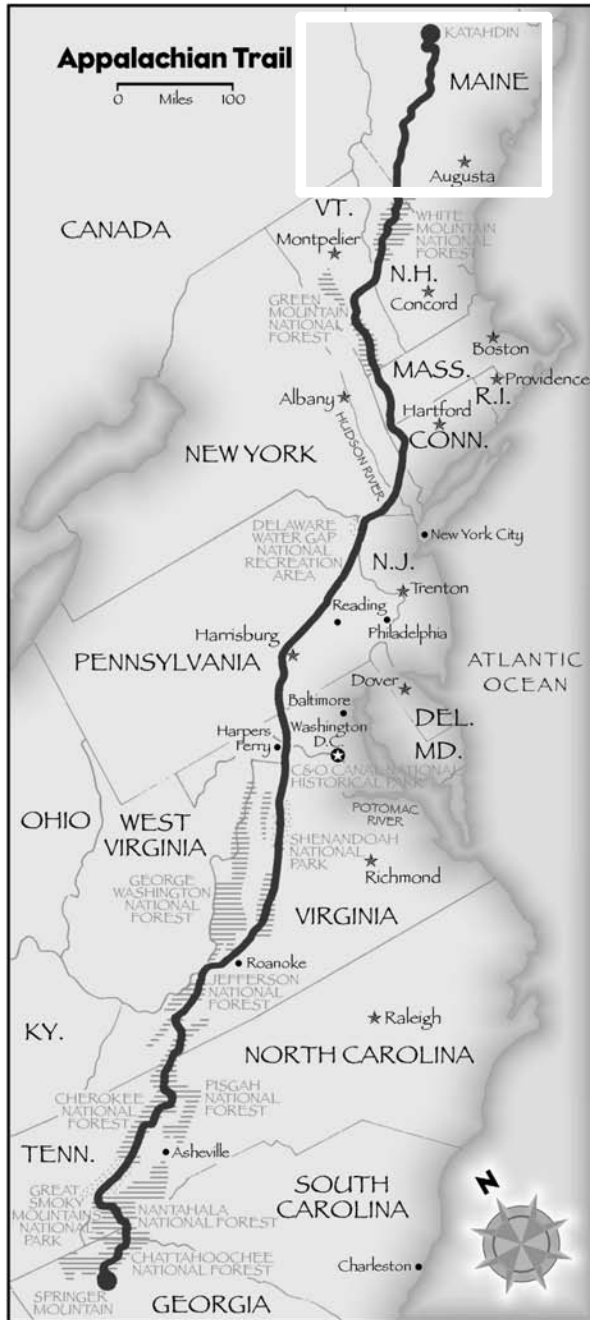


It is only in adventure that some people succeed in knowing themselves—in finding themselves.
— André Gide, *Journals*, Oct 26, 1924

Katahdin represented a key Inflection Point in my life. Inflection Points are moments where one trend stops and a new trend begins. An Inflection Point represents a radical change from the way things have been going. Ask yourself:

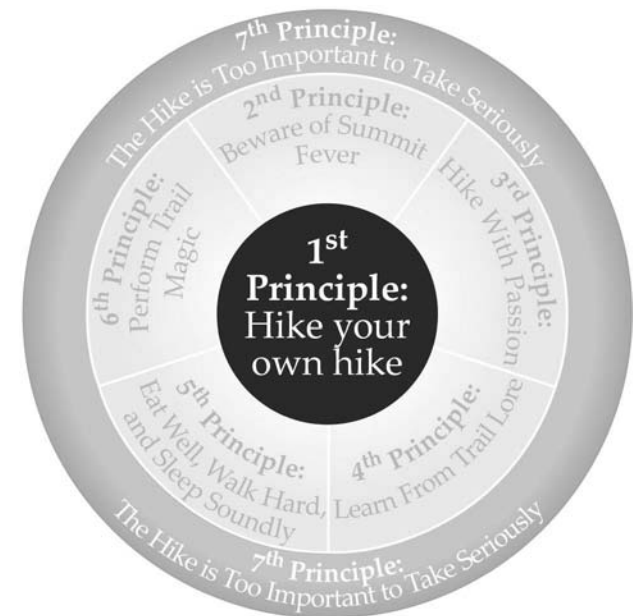
- Do you feel like your life is stagnant?
- Do you feel like you're going nowhere?
- Are you content with life, but not thrilled?
- Do you really believe that you're getting the most out of life?

Whether you feel like your life is just fine, or whether it is rapidly spiraling downward, you need a positive Inflection Point in your life. That's what I hope this book becomes for you. It's that catalyst that gets you out of a rut and onto the ridge. It's that kick in the pants that sometimes we all need to get us off a moribund trend and onto a new trend line—one that soars to the sky like Mount Katahdin.



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Chapter 1: Hike Your Own Hike



Standing on top of Mount Katahdin, the start of my Appalachian Trail adventure, I strained to see Springer Mountain, 2,168 miles away in Georgia. Of course I was kidding myself, but I tried anyway. I couldn't fathom walking across the entire Appalachian mountain range to get there. It sure would be easier to just take Greyhound.

It was June 26, there was not a cloud in the sky, scarcely a breeze, and the temperature was warm. There was so little wind on Katahdin's summit that there were several bugs flying about. This was almost unheard of, and a stark contrast with what most northbound thru-hikers experience when they reach the end of their journey. *Northbounders*, as we called them, or more simply, *Nobos*, leave Georgia in March or April and typically arrive in Maine in late September or early October. At that time of year the temperatures are below freezing on Katahdin and ominous clouds usually obscure the spectacular view. Even the lucky ones who have a clear day cannot linger long at the top because strong cold winds chill you to the bone.

On the other hand, *Southbounders*, or *Sobos*, don't end their journey in a tropical paradise either. Before they reach Georgia in November or December, Sobos usually get hammered with frosty weather too.



I shaved my head for the start of our thru-hike, while Lisa braided hers. On June 26th, we started our hike on Mt. Katahdin, the tallest mountain in Maine, and the northern terminus of the AT. The weather was warm and we were bursting with energy. We hiked 27 miles on the first day. Of course, it helped that mosquitoes were chasing us the whole way.

However, while I was standing on the tallest mountain in Maine, I wasn't worried about the weather conditions that I would face at the end of my pilgrimage. I assumed that I would simply walk hard, get to Georgia in October, and avoid the lousy weather. Little did I know that the AT had other plans.

Nevertheless, on that day the perfect conditions on Katahdin let me easily see over fifty miles in every direction. I suddenly realized that even if I could walk to the furthest point I could see, I would have only walked about two percent of the trail. I knew I needed some time to think, but this might be a bit much.

In any case, I touched the magical trailhead, the northern terminus of the Appalachian Trail, took a deep breath, and started methodically walking south.



Wherever we go in the mountains we find more than we seek. — John Muir, US naturalist, 1838–1914

Discovering the First Principle

I met my first Nobo on my second day on the trail. He was a bearded, disheveled man resting by a lake. His resolute eyes hinted that he had walked from Georgia. His intense odor confirmed it.

He said that about six other Nobos had already completed their thru-hikes. They had all left snowy Georgia in January and slogged their way to Maine by the end of June.

He asked, "So how was Katahdin?"

"Tough," I replied, "But it helps if you leave most of your gear at the ranger station. After all, you have to return to the station on your way back down, so you might as well carry only what you need for the hard climb."

"No way," he said, shaking his head, "I've carried my pack and all my gear from Georgia, and you better believe I'm going to take it

to the top of Katahdin.”

What a stubborn, impractical man, I thought.

As if he had read my mind, he added, “Hey, you gotta hike your own hike.”

He hoisted his backpack, smiled, and took off.

That statement puzzled me. In time, I would hear it over and over again. Clearly, this was a core belief of the AT pilgrims. What did it really mean and did it have any implications for life off the trail?

Hiking your own hike on the AT

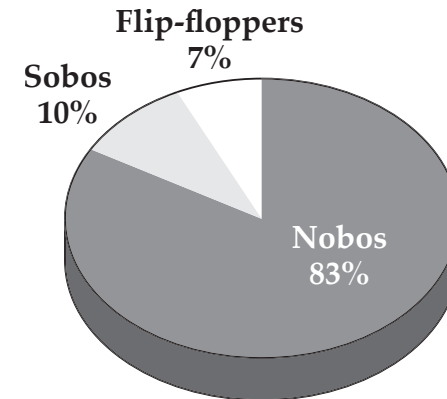
Hike your own hike means that you should hike the trail in the manner that you enjoy, and not the way somebody tells you to hike it. Although you should ponder the advice of others, ultimately make your own decision and focus on having fun! For example:

- Some thru-hikers love to walk 30 miles a day and finish in three months, while others prefer to walk six miles a day and take 12 months.
- Some prefer carrying 70 pounds; others enjoy carrying less than 15.
- Some insist on eating at every possible restaurant along the way, while others contemplate the nutritional value of the bugs crawling in the mud.

Hike your own hike also means that you can backpack in any direction you want. Most hiked north, a small fraction went south, and others “flip flopped.” A *Flip Flopper* might hike north from Georgia to Virginia, then flip up to Maine and walk back down south to Virginia. In the end, Flip Floppers covered the same 2,168 miles that the linear hikers did, but just in a different way.

In many cases, hiking your own hike may mean quitting the hike. Over 80 percent of the hikers who intend to hike the entire AT in one season quit. Some of them return the next season(s) to com-

Who hikes the entire AT in one season?



Source: Appalachian Trail Conservancy

plete the sections they missed; thus, they become *Section Hikers*. However, many who quit never return because the hike wasn't fun for them. After all, digging a hole in the dirt and squatting can get old after a while.



If at first you don't succeed, try, try again. Then quit. There's no point in being a damn fool about it.
— W. C. Fields

Whether you quit after 20 miles or you go the entire distance, the AT teaches you the same lesson: hike your own hike. All the hikers focused on having fun. Consider what Bramble and Bushwack, a married couple, wrote at the end of their 2001 AT hike:



Some things you just can't escape, but this trip was a chance to do something few people get to do. We got away from many of the hassles and aggravations of 'normal' life and it was so nice. Life on the trail was much simpler, more spontaneous and a wonderful time for introspection. And our marriage survived! Not that we didn't have our moments (or hours), but it was nice to actually spend some real time together. The good times outweighed the bad 100 to 1. — Bramble and Bushwack²

Trail Names

Nearly every thru-hiker assumes a trail name that she either invents or another hiker gives her. Some adopt trail names like Swift or Strider; one couple chose the names Slow and Steady. Some name themselves after animals, such as Bear, Wolf, or Tortoise. Finally, some just have whimsical names such as Toll Booth Willy, Bloody Stumps, Doodle Bug, Krispy Kritter, and Happy Feet.

Trail names usually have a story behind it. For instance, in New Hampshire a thru-hiker named Blood gave Lisa her trail name. He anointed her “Cartwheel” because her pack was so light (less than 10 pounds) that he thought she should be doing cartwheels up the mountains!

Before I set off on my pilgrimage my friends named me “Mr. Magoo” due to my unusual amount of dumb luck!

Thru-hikers adopt trail names to symbolically shed their identity and adopt a new one for the trail. This represents the transformative power of a thru-hike.

Hiking your own hike off the AT

Although the AT’s basic credo worked for thru-hikers, I wasn’t sure if it applied to life off the trail. However, after enough backpacking and deep thinking, I soon realized that it did. In fact, the pilgrims applied the hike your own hike belief before and after their journey. For example, Aloha! Ann describes how the AT created an Inflection Point in her life. She finally summoned the courage to hike her own hike:



November 6, 2000: Cruise Missile Support Activity;
Camp Smith, Hawaii

“What is this?” my boss demanded.

“Without looking at it, I would guess that it’s my resignation,” I replied.

“What do you mean you’re quitting?”

“I mean that I’m not going to work here much longer.”

“Who do you have a job with?”

“I don’t have a job with anyone.”

“Of course you do! No one quits without a job waiting.”

“Oh... well, I guess you just met the first person that did.”

“That’s ridiculous. Where are you going?”

“For a walk.”

“A walk?”

“Yeah... a walk.”

April 1, 2001: Fredericksburg, VA (Four days prior to my “walk”)

That was my conversation with my employer the day I turned in my resignation. Eleven years on the job, 21 years with the government and I was “going for a walk.” It does sound crazy, doesn’t it? What person in their right mind walks away from a good job, a decent retirement (when of age), and moves from a state that they truly love—to “go for a walk”? No one in his or her right mind for sure! But then again... what person remains in a job where they’re unfulfilled, bored, frustrated, and truly dislikes being there? No one in his or her right mind for sure!

Upon finding out about my plans, friends, family and coworkers all asked that simple question—why? They’re still asking it. Not why I quit my job or moved (well, many people ask why I moved from Hawaii but they’re all from Virginia) but why am I going to attempt to walk across 14 states and 2168 miles. That’s a hard question to answer. It’s only hard because the answer is “because I want to and I can.” Again, that’s not looking very stable is it? But... it’s the truth.

One day, a couple of years back I looked up only to find that I had been drawn into a Dilbert cartoon. I was sedately enmeshed in a job that I had limited to no interest in, working in a Dilbert-type cubicle, with coworkers that seemed to be unfulfilled and frustrated. However did this happen? Boredom ruled! It was obvious I needed a change, I needed a big change and I needed it soon!

— Aloha! Ann³

Aloha! Ann realized that she was not enjoying the hike she was on (her job), and that she could not afford to put off enjoying it any longer. She decided to create an Inflection Point in her life. The first step on her new hike was the AT.

Thru-hikers don't blindly do what people tell them they should do, they do what they know gives them pleasure. Those who just do what society expects them to do, thereby ignoring their inner voice, are missing the point of life. A pilgrim's purpose is to enjoy life now and not to put it off for retirement.



We are here on Earth to fart around. Don't let anyone tell you any different! — Kurt Vonnegut

Many agree that the purpose of life is to enjoy it and will shout, "And it took you walking 2,168 miles to figure that out? C'mon, I figured that out this morning when I was doing the laundry!"

Yet for all those who agree, there are so few who fully enjoy it. Therefore, the challenge isn't understanding the concept, it's executing it.

Are you hiking your own hike?

The rest of this book will go into the *how* of hiking your own hike. But for now let's figure out (1) if you're enjoying life, (2) when to take action if you're not enjoying life, and (3) what it will take for you to enjoy life. Let's start with #1: Are you enjoying life? Some people know the answer immediately. For others, it's less clear and they should take a quick quiz. Just answer these questions with a simple YES or NO:

- 1. When you wake up the in morning, do you look forward to the new day?
- 2. Do you love your job?



- 3. Would most people who know you well describe you as a happy person?
- 4. Do you smile more often than you frown?
- 5. Can you look back on the last 12 months and say that you have no major regrets?
- 6. Do you feel like you have everything you need to be truly happy?
- 7. When you look at yourself in the mirror, do you feel good?
- 8. Would most people say that you're a giving and generous person?
- 9. Can you easily brush off the small irritations in life?
- 10. Do you go to bed eager to get up the next day?

Scoring: Give yourself 10 points for every YES. If your score is 70 or less, you need to make some changes to create an Inflection Point and start squeezing the most out of life. The rest of this book will show you how. If you scored 100, then go easy on the Prozac.

When should you take action?

Ideally, you should make every moment enjoyable. Don't sacrifice four years of your life to go to medical school if you don't enjoy school. Don't spend years in a lousy relationship. Don't hike the AT for six months if you can't handle eating the same unappealing dehydrated food everyday.

On the other hand, you can take this argument to an extreme; for example, someone might argue that she didn't enjoy medical school for the past two days, so she's dropping out. Another might say that his wife was being difficult last week, so he's filing for divorce. Clearly, these reactions are bit extreme, but it raises the issue: when you're down, when do you say, "Enough is enough"? I



contemplated this going over Maine's Sugarloaf Mountain where, sadly, there were no sugarloaves.

Major Trails vs. Minor Trails

The first step you should take is to separate Major Trails from Minor Trails. A *Major Trail*, like the Appalachian Trail, is a long-term activity, such as a marriage, a job, or a home. It's a situation that usually lasts for years. A *Minor Trail*, like a section of the AT, is a short-term activity, such as a night out on the town, a football game, a trade show, a concert, a vacation, a picnic, a class, or a meeting with your mother-in-law.

Major Trails

Major Trails are more important than Minor Trails, so let's deal with them first. Here's the rule of thumb you should use on Major Trails: *if you're generally not enjoying a Major Trail for over four months, then create an Inflection Point by getting out of or changing that situation immediately so you can enjoy life again.*

Although it's not a perfect rule, it helps remind you that:

- You're going to have to put up with some bad times occasionally.
- You should not have to put up with them for long.

For instance, it's not a big deal if you have a bad day at work every couple weeks, but if you've been miserable at your job almost everyday for more than six months, you need change. Yes, you need the income because you have bills to pay, but don't succumb to Frog Psychology (see sidebar). *Instead, create an Inflection Point.* How? First, look around your company to see if there are any other jobs you would prefer to do. Talk with your boss or human resources to see what you can do to transition into the new position. Perhaps you will need more training, but many companies will provide it. They have already invested in you, so they would rather keep you happy because happy employees are more effective than disgruntled ones. Just ask Homer Simpson. If nothing

Frog Psychology

Scientists inadvertently learned something about frog psychology when they conducted two experiments.

In the first experiment, they threw a frog into a pot of boiling water, and it immediately jumped out.

In the second experiment they put the frog into a pot of cold water, and then slowly began to raise the temperature. As the temperature went up the frog showed discomfort but stayed in the pot. Eventually, the water hit a rolling boil. The frog never moved and died a horrible death.

Are you suffering from Frog Psychology?

Are you (or someone you love) in a situation that is progressively getting worse, and yet is doing nothing about it? Lousy Major Trails are sneaky because they usually don't get that way overnight; instead, the process can be a slow and steady decline. And like the frog, before you know it, you're dead.

Get out of that boiling water now!

works, then immediately start looking for a job elsewhere as discussed in Chapter 3.

One of the most challenging Major Trails is a declining relationship. Frog Psychology easily sets in when you've been with someone for a long time. After the initial honeymoon period, couples revert to their normal behavior patterns. In many cases, couples patterns are not compatible over the long haul. Nevertheless, couples have a tendency to become complacent with the moribund situation. Instead, they should either:

- a) Create an Inflection Point and repair or radically improve the relationship.
- b) Break up.

Those are your only two intelligent options. Most don't take either action because they, like the frog in the steadily warming pot, suffer from inertia. Isaac Newton described inertia: matter stays at

rest or continues going in the direction it was traveling unless another force is applied. *Although Newton's principle on inertia focused on the physical realm, the same is true for the spiritual realm.* Your relationship will continue going the way it's going unless you exert a force against it. *Inflection Points happen because a force is applied; they don't happen on their own.* The effort to make a change may seem monumental—for who likes rocking the boat? However, you must realize that unless something changes, you will find it difficult to enjoy the relationship. And remember, unless you're Hugh Hefner, the dating scene only gets worse with age.

The reason you must limit miserable Major Trails to four months is that it allows for the normal ups and downs of life, but it compels you to reject extended down periods. By setting a limit of four months, you force yourself to put together a plan of getting out of it. Perhaps you want to make your own rule as short as two months or as long as six, but be strict about it. The most common excuse for not acting on a declining Major Trail is that we think we're experiencing unusual circumstances: "Oh, my husband has been having a few tough months at work," or "Her uncle died three years ago and she's still coping," or "He accidentally flushed his rubber ducky down the toilet."

However, bad news happens to all of us. Yes, some get it more than others, but there is always an excuse to be miserable if you're looking for one. If morose people are in a good situation, then they look back to their childhood to find something that didn't go quite right there and then get depressed about that. At some point you have to realize that you can't change the past and that you have only two choices:

- a) Continue feeling sorry for yourself.
- b) Get over it and move on.

Most people get over it, but some take more time than others. Chapter Seven discusses techniques on how to quickly get over misfortune and move on. For now, realize that you can either get over it today, or you can get over it in two months, or two years. Take your pick.



Any fool can criticize, condemn and complain—and most fools do. — Dale Carnegie

As people age, there is a tendency to become complacent. Children, for instance, are always experimenting and look at the world with eyes of wonder and fascination. Adults, on the other hand, can get stuck in a tedious routine and accept it. You must commit to getting out of your rut and onto the ridge. If you don't want to make this pact with yourself, don't worry, even grumpy old men find something to be happy about a couple of times a year.

Minor Trails

A good rule of thumb for dealing with unpleasant Minor Trails is: *if you're not enjoying a particular Minor Trail, get out of it immediately if the repercussions are insignificant.* For example, if you're not enjoying a movie, then don't just keep watching it if it's not getting any better. Just discreetly leave. If you're watching it at home, it's easy to hit the off switch. Besides, maybe something more interesting is on TV, like Jerry Springer.

On the other hand, if the repercussions of escaping an unpleasant Minor Trail are significant, then tough it out; after all, Minor Trails pass quickly. The most common type of negative Minor Trail that is worth putting up with is one that's an investment for the future. Examples abound:

- Studying hard for a class you hate in order to get the good grades you need to get into a good graduate school or get a good job.
- Doing an undesirable project for work may be worth it to make your boss happy and get a promotion at a company you normally enjoy working for.
- Watching an uninteresting sports event with your boyfriend in order to keep your relationship healthy.

- Walking 20 miles on the AT even though you're tired, because you want to make it to the post office before it closes for the weekend.
- Doing the laundry so you have clean underwear tomorrow.

Whenever you feel yourself in a dreadful Minor Trail, ask yourself: "What would probably happen if I got myself out of this situation?" Then figure out if you can live with that outcome. In so doing you will identify if this Minor Trail is connected to a larger goal that you are pursuing. And if it isn't, then run away like a thru-hiker being pursued by a gang of mosquitoes.

Miserable Minor Trails on the AT

Most people find the AT thru-hike to be a miserable Major Trail. That's why over 80 percent don't finish it.

Those who do finish it will tell you that it was a *wonderful* Major Trail that was filled with a variety of *awful* Minor Trails!

Here are just a few trying Minor Trails that we experienced: being so dehydrated that we had to drink water with "floaties" in it; getting rained on for four days straight; walking 20 miles with blisters; living without a shower for five days during a humid heat wave; eating uncooked oatmeal; and sleeping on the grass near a venomous snake!

We couldn't get out of these Minor Trails without jeopardizing our hike. We had to press on. Had we taken a day off each time things got uncomfortable, a snowy winter would have halted our expedition. Yet despite all those arduous situations, hiking the AT was one of the most magnificent Major Trails I have ever experienced.

As Comer, a 64-year-old thru-hiker, put it: "It was the hardest thing we have ever tried but the most enjoyable and rewarding."

It's strange but sometimes the best Major Trails are littered with lousy Minor Trails. If you don't believe me, just watch *Behind the Music* on VH1.



Some sadistic trail designer made these trails. In Maine we often had to pull ourselves up the trail by grabbing the roots of trees. We could barely cover one mile per hour. This was particularly tough when swarms of bugs were constantly on our butts. Notice all the mosquito bites on Lisa's back.

Follow the Fun Compass

When in doubt, *let the Fun Compass guide you*. The Fun Compass tells you which direction is the most fun. We all carry a Fun Compass, but many of us ignore it. We settle for having a few enjoyable moments. Make a habit of frequently asking, "Am I having fun? Am I enjoying this activity?" If not, (1) look at the Fun Compass, (2) identify if it's a Major or Minor Trail, and (3) take the appropriate action. Don't linger in tedious situations. Get out of them as soon as possible. *Few people go overboard with enjoying life, most people put up with more hardship than they need to.*

What does it take to enjoy life?

If your hike is not fun, then you need to figure out what has to happen for you to enjoy your hike. There are many things that people think they need to be happy and to enjoy life. Go through this exercise:

● Write a list of things that have to happen or you need to acquire for you to enjoy life.



● If you're already enjoying life, then write down how much you could afford to lose before you would no longer enjoy life. In other words, how many things could someone take away from you until you are no longer happy?

You might have mentioned that you need a comfortable amount of money, a good education, personal freedom, equality, favorable social status, health, and other factors.⁴ Even though you probably didn't mention all these, several might have made your list.

Take a step back

Now look at that list you just wrote and really ask yourself, are you paring it down to the minimum? When I was in El Salvador I met a woman who had a tiny dirty store in a humble pueblo called Suchitoto. This small Central American country has experienced nothing but misery for over thirty years. Yet this woman, who lived so modestly, was incredibly positive and happy. She was enjoying life despite having so little.

She knew what was going on around the world and how others lived. She had been to the United States. She was happy with her place, despite the erratic electricity and the poverty. She wisely realized that she did not need a \$1,000 Aeron chair to feel good about life. Her wooden stool worked just great. Similarly, thru-hikers were perfectly content to eat their meals just sitting in the mud!



Happiness depends upon ourselves.
— Aristotle

In a broad study, two psychologists found that only 30 percent of those surveyed were “very happy.” What was fascinating is that the percentage of those who said they were “very happy” or “fair-



ly satisfied with life” was the same whether the person was black, white, Hispanic, Asian, male or female. Even more telling was that the percentages stayed the same over four decades of economic growth. In 1957 having a car was still somewhat of a luxury. Today in America, cars outnumber drivers. Compared to 1957, we now have microwave ovens, color TVs, TiVo, air conditioners, answering machines, cell phones, and spam both in a can and on our computers. So are we happier than we were in 1957? Not according to the survey. Still not convinced that you control your happiness? Consider that a year after winning the lottery, most winners are no happier than they were before.⁵

Simple Pleasures Deliver a Big Impact

Hiking your own hike, or following your Fun Compass, can have profound health benefits. Consider:

- ✓ A study showed that patients listening to Brahms in the operating room needed only half the sedative as those who listened to nothing.
- ✓ Looking at an aquarium lowered the blood pressure of patients suffering from hypertension.
- ✓ German research discovered that students who took daily saunas had less than half as many colds over six months as a group that did not take the saunas.
- ✓ Venturing outside can relieve depression.
- ✓ Research demonstrated that patients who were recuperating from a gallbladder operation got out of the hospital one day earlier, had fewer complications, and needed fewer pain relievers when they were given a room with a view of trees rather than a brick wall.
- ✓ You can steady somebody's heart rate by just touching them.

Therefore, improve your health by simply hiking your own hike and following your Fun Compass!

(Source: John Volmer, “The Balanced Life,” Men's Health Handbook, Rodale Press, 1994, p. 71.)



Millions of Americans, who have one of the highest standards of living in the world, are not as happy as a poor woman in El Salvador. What's wrong?

How to compare yourself with others

When someone asks, "Are you happy?" we tend to look around at our peers and see how they are living. If we're better off than our peers, it's likely that we decide to be happy. *Therefore, one of the tricks of being happy is to change the group we compare ourselves to.*

Silicon Valley gossip columns enjoy pointing out that Oracle's software titan Larry Ellison, whose \$14 billion net worth makes him one of the top 10 richest people in America, is not the happiest guy around, mainly because he always compares himself to Bill Gates. Meanwhile, back on the AT, some thru-hikers would feel smug because they got a spot in a shelter (which only has three walls and frequently has rodents nearby), whereas the latecomers had to set up their tent in the rain. For some reason most thru-hikers coveted the spots in the shelters, and preferred cramming next to snoring neighbors than setting up their tent. I suppose if we put Larry Ellison on the AT, he might feel better about himself if we somehow made sure that he always got to stay in one of the shelters (and Bill Gates had to sleep outside under a shoddy tarp).



Oh Happiness! Our being's end and aim.
— Alexander Pope (1688-1744) in *Essay on Man*

Imagine I walk into a shelter and give you and your four friends an envelope. You open yours and it says that you get a free pizza at the next town. If you're like most thru-hikers, you'd do a somersault with your backpack on!

Clearly, you would be ecstatic: most thru-hikers value fresh food more than anything on the trail. Indeed, you might think that thru-hikers spend most of their time thinking deep thoughts during their long days of hiking in the wilderness. You might imagine

that they are gathering the wisdom off every branch and every stream. On the contrary, most spend their time fantasizing about grilled cheese sandwiches, fries, shakes, and ice cream.

Therefore, if I were to ask you if you were happy about getting a free pizza, you would shout emphatically, "Yes! Woo-hoo!" But now imagine that your friends finish opening their envelopes and not only do they all get a free pizza, but they get to stay at the Ritz Carlton, have a foot and back massage, stay in the deluxe suite with a Jacuzzi, and have all their laundry done for them.

Now, all of a sudden, you don't feel so good anymore. You went from a state of exhilaration to one of melancholy. From a purely rational perspective, if you were happy before, you should still be happy now. After all, you still get your free pizza, and that's what got you so excited in the first place. I didn't take that away from you, so you should still be happy. However, when we're trying to decide how happy we are, we tend to look at how other people are doing to help us make that decision. This is natural and it's hard to fight this primal tendency.



Happiness, n. An agreeable sensation arising from contemplating the misery of others. — Ambrose Bierce

Use the urge to compare yourself with others in a positive way. *Instead of trying to stop comparing yourself to anyone, just change whom you compare yourself to.* If you want to instantly make yourself feel depressed, think about all the people who have much better lives than you. Conversely, if you want to make yourself instantly feel happy, compare your state to those less fortunate than you.

Moreover, don't just compare yourself with those less fortunate than you, take it a step further—compare yourself with people who are less fortunate than you *and who are happier than you.* It is at that moment that you will realize that you have no excuse. It's all in your head. What else can explain why so many thru-hikers, who effectively live like bums in absolute squalor, are happy and fulfilled?



One who is content with what one has is always happy.
— Chinese Proverb

The implication of this Chinese proverb is that the fewer desires you have, the easier it will be to satisfy them and be happy. Confucius reinforced this philosophy when he praised his favorite disciple, Yan Hui: “A bowlful of rice to eat, a gourdful of water to drink, and living in a mean dwelling; all this is a hardship others would find intolerable, but Hui does not allow this to affect his joy. How admirable Hui is!”⁶ Clearly, this is proof that Confucius would have admired thru-hikers. Then again, it could also be used to prove that he would have respected participants in the TV show “Survivor.”



Most folks are about as happy as they make up their minds to be. — Abraham Lincoln

Next time you feel like you’re being short-changed on something, compare yourself to the following:

- **Wealth:** We’ve all met plenty of poor people who are happy. In case you haven’t, just ask yourself if Gandhi or Mother Teresa were happy.
- **Education:** You don’t need to have access to encyclopedic knowledge or a Ph.D. to be happy. There is a reason that we say, “Ignorance is bliss!” There are tribes in the world, such as the Aborigines, that have little access to the Internet, TV, newspapers, books, and other sources of knowledge. Are they despondent?
- **Personal freedom:** In every repressive regime there have been plenty of happy people. *The Diary of Anne Frank* demonstrates how a Jewish family in Nazi Germany enjoyed the simple moments of life even under the most confining of situations.
- **Equality:** South Africa’s racist laws were extremely

unequal. Yet many of its citizens did not let that be an excuse for being miserable and depressed.

- **Health:** Stephen Hawking, the famous theoretical physicist, seems to enjoy every day of his life despite being confined to a wheelchair and living with ALS. Magic Johnson still maintains his ever present smile, even though he is HIV positive. Lance Armstrong kept a positive spirit in the face of cancer.
- **Social position:** Order takers at McDonalds aren’t the pinnacle of the social ladder, but try to find an unhappy one among those who were selected to represent McDonalds in Utah’s 2002 Olympic Games. McDonalds picked their most service oriented employees from all over the world and flew them in for that world event.
- **Life-events:** Some of us get big lucky breaks (e.g., winning the lottery), others get big unlucky breaks (e.g., getting paralyzed from a car accident). However, just like there are unhappy millionaires, there are happy paraplegics. A tragedy does not force you to be unhappy for the rest of your life.

I’m not suggesting that you learn to be happy living the monastic life. Nor am I saying that people who live in challenging conditions have no right to complain or to try to improve their situation. I’m simply suggesting that it is possible to enjoy life without all the things that we typically think of as basic requirements. Too many people think, “I’ll be able to start enjoying life once I get _____.” Don’t put it off for tomorrow or next month. Even though there is some correlation between having the above things and enjoying life, they are not necessary to enjoy life. Just ask anyone who has thru-hiked the Appalachian Trail.



Happiness doesn’t depend on outward conditions. It depends on inner conditions. — Dale Carnegie

Common criticisms

A few might disagree with the *hike your own hike* philosophy. After all, declaring that we should follow our Fun Compass seems hedonistic. It seems to forget morals. What about helping others? Or bettering yourself? Or raising a family? Does that mean we shouldn't feel guilty for stealing a hotel's towels?

In short, it may seem like an irresponsible credo. To indulge the skeptics among us, let's think about it.

But what about morals?

Being moral and enjoying life are not mutually exclusive. Following your Fun Compass does not give you the right to be immoral or unethical. Just because you didn't get a raise, you don't have a right to go postal.

But what about self-sacrifice?

At Amherst College I majored in religion and studied a variety of faiths. The Bible and other religious texts frequently portray sin-

Morals on the Trail

Many people fear the AT. "Don't you carry a gun?" they ask. "Aren't you afraid some crazy person might attack you in the middle of nowhere?"

I tell them that I have those thoughts when I'm walking the streets of a major city, not when I'm in the woods!

A married couple that call themselves Bear and Honey run a hostel for hikers in Andover, Maine. Bear told me that for over 10 years he has left his wallet lying around the hostel, and even though hundreds of hikers have come through, no one has ever stolen any money from it. In fact, he gives his truck's keys to any hiker who needs to run an errand in town. He's never had a bad incident.

The AT's moral code is remarkable.

ners as pleasure-seekers. This leads some to conclude that a good moral life must be the opposite. But is that true?

Did God punish Moses for smiling when he saw the land of Caanan? Did Muhammad not enjoy reflecting in a cave on Mount Hira? Did the Buddha not take pleasure in his walks through the wilderness? Does God frown on Christians who enjoy singing? Did Confucius not extol his followers to pursue happiness in this life?

Religions aren't about making you miserable. They're about loving God, loving life, and being a good person.



Beer is proof that God loves us and wants us to be happy.
— Benjamin Franklin

Thru-hikers are akin to religious disciples: they suffer tremendously at times, but overall they enjoy the experience. Their purpose isn't to suffer, but to be happy and fulfilled. Sure it's tough backpacking the entire AT in one season. We would walk from sunrise to sunset up and over steep mountains with a pack on our backs. We would walk over 20 miles a day in the rain and the mud with an entourage of mosquitoes whining in our ears. We had to ignore our dehydrated throats and our ravenous stomachs. As one successful thru-hiker and retired Lutheran pastor named George Ziegenfuss told me, "There is no amount of money that you could pay me to work that hard." Yet George did it for free; in fact, a couple of years later, while in his late sixties, he attempted to hike the AT again! Incredibly, George has only one lung! Clearly, this was hard work, but he enjoyed it. This former pastor did it because he knew that accomplishing his goal would make him so happy that it would make it all worthwhile. If nothing else, at least it got him out of the house.

One of Buddhism's central beliefs is that much of life is about suffering, but Buddhists monks are taught to transcend the suffering. In conclusion, the most deeply religious people are the most likely

to understand that the purpose of life is to enjoy it. It's no coincidence that the Dalai Lama himself wrote a book entitled *The Art of Happiness: A Handbook for Living* where the first sentence is: "I believe that the very purpose of our life is to seek happiness. That is clear."

But what about dreams?

Confucius advises us to have a few desires, but what about having big dreams? Isn't it important to dream ambitious dreams if we ever want to accomplish anything in life? If you don't want anything, doesn't that mean you won't achieve anything?

Dreaming and having big goals is extremely important. *The key is not making your happiness dependent on achieving those dreams.* For example, before starting the AT, most thru-hikers imagine finishing it. It's important to visualize it. But at the same time, don't tell yourself that you won't be happy unless you achieve it. No matter how much we dream and plan, things don't always turn out the way we expect. Have simple enough expectations that nearly anything will make you happy. Set up various scenarios in your mind and imagine being happy with all of them. Just have one ideal scenario that keeps you motivated; for instance, completing the hike without getting mauled by a bear.



I've been lucky enough to win an Oscar, write a bestseller... my other dream would be to have a painting in the Louvre. The only way that's going to happen is if I paint a dirty one on the wall of the gentlemen's lavatory.
—David Niven

Summary

Let's recap some of the important points of this chapter:

- Aim to make every waking moment enjoyable by following your Fun Compass.
- When life is not enjoyable, use the Major Trail vs. Minor Trail analysis to help you decide what to do.



- Identify when you're succumbing to Frog Psychology and quickly create an Inflection Point to overcome it.
- When you feel unhappy, stop comparing yourself to those more fortunate than you, and start comparing yourself to those less fortunate (and happier) than you.
- Realize that it takes far less than you think to enjoy life.

I'm reminded of my feelings when we crossed the state line of Maine into New Hampshire. We turned around to read the sign: "WELCOME TO MAINE: THE WAY LIFE SHOULD BE." Lisa and I looked at each other and burst out laughing.

Maine was some of the hardest hiking we had ever done in our lives. In preparation for the AT, we had hiked over 500 miles of trail in rugged California, whose peaks make Maine's mountains look like molehills. We thought we were prepared. We were the cocky hikers believing that we could easily conquer Maine's diminutive peaks. We learned the hard lesson that a mountain's height is one thing, but the way the trail goes up it is another. Whereas California's trails are nicely graded for pack animals and have plenty of switchbacks, we encountered only two switchbacks in our first 400 miles of trail (the folks in New Hampshire don't understand the concept of "switchback" either).



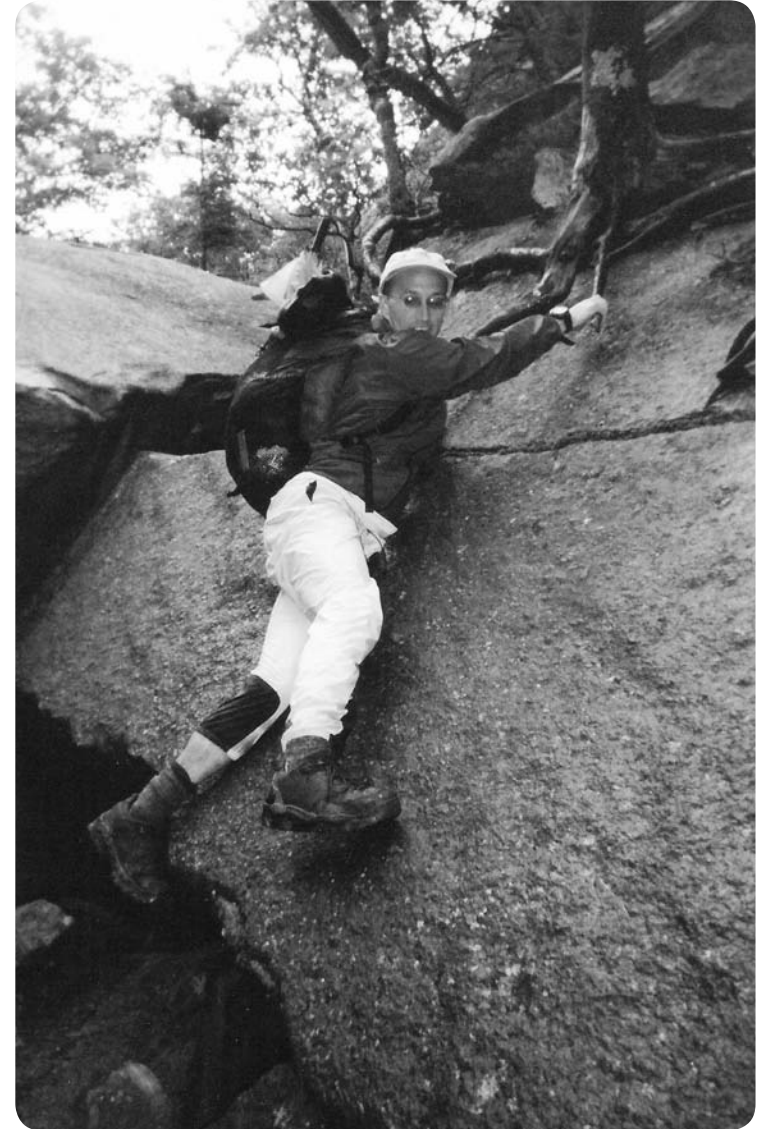
Uh, I'm in Maine. I've been walking to Maine, and now I'm here. I had butterflies in my stomach all morning about 'the sign' and the Trail ending, etc. But after I got over it I started slipping on wet rocks and falling down and cursing and loving Maine and, well, I'm here.
— Mary Poppins, Nobo, August 22, 2001 Trail Journal

We were relieved to have finished the 284 miles in Maine in less than two weeks. Our pace was grueling, but we did it because we enjoyed pushing ourselves. We knew that Maine was the toughest state on the AT. Therefore, we knew that if we could get through Maine, there wasn't a state on the AT that we couldn't do.



It's a similar case here: once you truly grasp the concept of hiking your own hike, then all else follows easily. The key is not simply to say, "Yeah, yeah, yeah 'hike your own hike', OK so what's the next point?" First, you must truly want to change your perspective and habits. Second, you must let that notion permeate all levels of your life. *Commit to following your Fun Compass so you can hike your own hike.*

We've taken the first step on this epic journey by learning the most important Principle to getting the most out of life. However, if you disagree with this Principle, perhaps you might prefer the wisdom of Groucho Marx, who said, "The secret of life is honesty and fair dealing. If you can fake that, you've got it made."



Although Maine's mountains are short, the trail is steep. I accidentally got a few feet off the trail and had to take a big step to get back on it.