

Straight and flat, the boring parts

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On long backpacking hikes in my twenties, we passed the time going up and down mountains by cataloguing the ways we were struggling. Going up, we were breathless and our muscles were shaky; going down, knees and ankles, different muscles. One wasn't really better or worse than the other, just hard in different ways. We never said much about the hike itself on the few flat portions of trail.

I find myself doing this in the rest of life. I spend a lot of time hoping for and anticipating the uphill sections—the family vacation planned for July, the next kiln opening, finishing the project, beating my mile swim time—and a lot of time dreading and trying to just make it through the downhill sections—sickness, cleaning the bathroom, meetings and reports, uncomfortable conversations with difficult people. I'm realizing lately that I have underappreciated the occasional straight, flat parts of “the trail.”

Hiking in April after a sluggish and inactive winter, we were on a well-groomed trail with small, intermittent flat stretches built into the switchbacks. Going up, I used those stretches to straighten up and catch my breath and gather my wits and steam for the next uphill bit. Going down, I relaxed and felt relief from the joint-pounding, muscle-quivering descent. These seemingly boring straight flat parts saved me—in both directions.

As with many spiritual breakthroughs, my own weakness and vulnerability on that first hike of the season allowed me to see and appreciate something I've been missing. And needing. Those usually unheralded flat parts had a beauty of their own. I didn't have to concentrate so hard or push myself or hold myself back. I could just let them take me to the next up or down. They were absolutely necessary for both recovery and gearing up.

The parts (on the trail, in life) that are easily overlooked, the flat reprieves where nothing much happens and we aren't engaged in heroic measures or managing failures, are as necessary as up and down to get where we are going. It's easier to

see this on the trail than in the midst of life. When my panting slows on a flat path after a steep rise or my knees stop barking after a sharp descent, if I'm paying enough attention I can see the need for something flat and straight and just boring enough to give me a moment. In life off the trail, it seems harder.

This summer, I'm trying to slow myself down enough to appreciate the relative flatness but it's taking great intention, like pulling on the reins of wild horses. So I'm remembering April's hike and the unexpected savoring I did on those flat parts of the trail. I know the uphill and downhill of the academic year (and the rest of life) are coming but for right now the path is clear, flat, and straight. I'm catching my breath, offering thanks for this blessedly boring stretch, and letting it take me where it will.

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