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JESSICA CORY

When a Saunter Starts to Taunt Her: Exploring the Outdoors with Disabilities

As a young adult, not even two decades ago, all I wanted was to thru-hike the Appalachian Trail (AT). And then maybe the Pacific Crest Trail (PCT). Or the Continental Divide Trail (CDT). I scoured hiking guides, gobbled up first-person accounts online and in books, and perused the REI website to window-shop digitally. However, on my last hike two months ago, a short 3.5 miles near Deep Creek in western North Carolina with maybe 200 feet in elevation gain, my right hip throbbed with every step, my lower back was in knots, and my joints screamed. I wished I had brought my hip and knee braces and realized, with disappointment, that the trail's narrowness in certain parts would make a return trek with poles or a cane an impossibility, limiting me to walking back and forth on the wide, flat, short path I entered on and venture no further.

In the Literature and the Environment course that I teach at a nearby state university, we read Thoreau's "Walking" and I ask students to consider how Thoreau walked freely around Concord, Massachusetts after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act and a decade before the Civil War. I implore my students to consider how his walking unaccompanied might have been enabled not only by race but also by gender. Many of them seem to grasp these connections and insights easily. Then we discuss how his ability to walk on his own two legs without assistance enables Thoreau's insights and I ask students to consider how green spaces are often designed to exclude people with disabilities. That's where I'm met with push-back. Students begin to bemoan that making spaces accessible will make them less natural, as though we hadn't already covered how problematic this idea of "natural" is only weeks earlier. Their reticence regarding accessible green spaces echoes what many of us with disabilities have long known: that many people, dare I say the majority, want us disabled folks to just stay isolated indoors where we can't be a visual reminder that they too could become one of the twenty percent of folks who become disabled at some point in their lives, where we can't demand that they change harmful institutions and architectures for everyone's benefit.

Like many of my students, as a child and young adult, I often perceived myself as largely able-bodied, unknowing that chronic illnesses were brewing in my marrow, plotting their sneak attacks on my collagen, joints, thyroid, and mast cells. As I aged, I figured everyone's knees felt like dislocating when they ran, that everyone's ankles rolled multiple times during gym class, that these rolled ankles would dislocate navicular bones and cause them to fracture. At first, I

figured it was the hard surfaces I was traversing, which led me to do more hiking and less pavement pounding. The slower trail pace combined with the soft dirt under my boot soles did ease some of the pressure on my joints, and the boot height helped secure my roly-poly ankles, though after all-day jaunts, my hips hollered. Still, I trekked on, assuming the pain was because I wasn't hiking enough and that I was out of shape. It wasn't until an allergist of all people suggested I get assessed for the hypermobile type of Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome at the ripe age of thirty-five that I learned ankles and knees should be relatively stable, not rocking like barely-docked boats. The geneticist told me not to take up running. "No worries," I assured him, as I stocked up on the recommended braces for hips, knees, ankles, and wrists, and bought trekking poles as moderate hiking was still considered a "low-impact activity."

You may be wondering, however, why an allergist suggested I get checked for a disease that, in my case, primarily affects joint mobility. Hypermobile EDS is a common comorbidity of Mast Cell Activation Syndrome. While I already have a ton of the common IgE-mediated environmental allergies—grasses, weeds, molds, and the like, MCAS means I can't just take a Zyrtec and go outside like normal, semi-able-bodied people. Too much exposure to pollen can trigger not only a "normal" IgE immune response (think itchy eyes and sneezing) but can trigger my MCAS to flare, resulting in symptoms from brain fog and hives to experiencing anaphylaxis to previously-tolerated foods. One day I'll be able to eat corn chips just fine, then stress on my body from an overload of pollen, too much travel, or even extensive exercise (another reason those thru-hikes are out), and the next time I eat a corn chip I have palpitations, hives, itching in my mouth and throat, flushing, brain fog, and blood pressure issues.

While there may not be much I can do to control my pollen exposure outdoors, there are other triggers sometimes floating on the breeze as well. On that latest trip to Deep Creek, I passed a gentleman smoking a cigar; its warm bourbon aroma wafted by the light winds led my throat to tighten as I grabbed for my mask. Even outside, the smoke's heaviness lingered, causing my mast cells to go haywire, as if the springtime pollen wasn't bad enough. Yes, masks and mobility aids and more benches can help to make outdoor spaces more accessible, but over the years, my own body has made hiking, or heck, just lying in the grass on a breezy summer day, somewhat impossible.

To backtrack a bit, my love of the outdoors and especially of hiking was spawned on early Saturday morning childhood walks in Sharon Woods, a city park in Westerville, Ohio not far from my family's north Columbus apartment. While technically in the city, the park consisted of woodlands, oaks and elms creating habitats for all sorts of critters. If Mom and I arrived early enough, we could count deer. The most I recall seeing in a single visit was thirteen, though I'm sure that between cars from the nearby interstate, the park's ongoing "control program," and Chronic Wasting Disease, I'd be lucky to spot thirteen if I visited daily for an entire year.

Besides the prevalence of deer, my other major recollection about those morning saunters along the fairly-flat, seemingly easy trails at Sharon Woods is that there was a significant lack of bathrooms, a serious issue for my mother, long tormented by ulcerative colitis. She always made sure not to eat during or shortly before our visits and always packed plenty of napkins or tissues in her pocketbook in case she had to leave the trail to relieve herself, instructing me to

stand nearby to block the view of any passersby, as though my scrawny eight-year-old body would make much of a difference.

While these early experiences with my mother made me acutely aware of bathroom access (and lack thereof), I didn't develop a true understanding or appreciation of accessibility needs in outdoor spaces until I faced my own limitations in recent years. And I don't think my experience is unique. As I mentioned earlier regarding my students, many never consider the accessibility of outdoor spaces and often view nonfiction written at the intersections of disability studies and environmental literature as "inspiration porn" rather than a call for equitable change.

My mother is now in her seventies and after surviving cancer on top of her colitis, she limits her outdoor activities to planting peonies and zinnias and feeding the songbirds in her southern Ohio yard. In my late thirties, I've come to peace with the realization that I'll never thru-hike the AT, though I still consider section-hiking a possibility and wonder what training might look like, strapped to the hilt with braces and poles, climbing the steep hills of my western North Carolina home, my out-of-breath panting startling the chipmunks and squirrels.

"Why bother?" some people might wonder. "If sauntering outside requires masks and meds and braces and pacing oneself, why not just stay indoors and watch hiking films on *Netflix*?" Aside from the fact that watching *A Walk in the Woods* or *Wild* makes me crave the outdoors more, it's important to me to learn *how* to move outside again, to learn what modifications and adaptations I need to accomplish that famous AT tagline with its seemingly built-in inclusivity: hike your own hike.

JESSICA CORY teaches in the English Department at Appalachian State University and is a PhD candidate specializing in Native American, African American, and environmental literatures at the University of North Carolina, Greensboro. She is the editor of *Mountains Piled upon Mountains: Appalachian Nature Writing in the Anthropocene* (WVU Press, 2019) and the co-editor (with Laura Wright) of *Appalachian Ecocriticism and the Paradox of Place* (UGA Press, 2023). Her creative and scholarly writings have been published in the *North Carolina Literary Review*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Northern Appalachia Review*, and other fine publications. Originally from southeastern Ohio, she currently lives in western North Carolina.