

FAITH



MATTERS

Faith Matters & Trail Matters

BY THE REV.
CHRISTINE LESLIE

In 1986 I learned about the Presidential Range in the White Mountains of New Hampshire and the part of the Appalachian Trail that runs through them. I was in that awful

place that follows a nasty break-up: all alone and in need of salve for my aching heart and soul. When I learned I could not backpack overnight in Arcadia National Park in Maine, I looked at a map of New Hampshire and headed for the Appalachian Trail.

Once there, I was pleasantly surprised to discover I could stay in huts maintained by the Appalachian Mountain Club that dot the Appalachian Trail in the Presidential Range. I had a glorious and rigorous experience those 5 days, finding solace in the serenity of those high peaks and comfort in the huts.

I loved this experience so much I went back the next summer to hike the half of the range I'd missed. The day I set out for Lake-of-the-Clouds was a beautiful summer day: clear, dry, slightly windy and cool. I opted to take a trail that was straight up rather than roundabout — only to have it disappear 4 hours into my hike. I was faced with a dilemma: go back and forfeit my night at Lake-of-the-Clouds, or forge ahead and hope to find the longer, roundabout trail I had eschewed?

Well, being the frugal (and stubborn) individual that I am, I opted to keep going. I had no idea

what I was in for. The mountain was thick with tangled, wild underbrush, and I did not know which way to go. After 3 hours of fighting my way up the mountain, I was frightened, out of water, and feeling a lot of despair. It was 3pm, and I'd been on the trail more than seven hours.

like a Christmas-tree farm — a trail not visible except by walking on it. I practically ran to Lake-of-the-Clouds. I still laugh at myself when I remember feeling irritated when 6pm — strict dinnertime at the huts — passed and I realized, "Damn, I am going to miss dinner!"

I looked like I had fought a mountain lion and felt like I had been run over by a train.

Knowing I was a long way from the hut, I finally said to God, "Please help me. I don't want to die out here."

Imagine my surprise when a soft voice said, "It's up the hill and to the right, Chris." Shortly after that I heard the 'chop-chop-chop' of a helicopter. Then I remembered the conversation I'd overheard other hikers having at breakfast. They were discussing how propane tanks at each hut are swapped once each summer by helicopter; I didn't remember hearing when the swaps were scheduled. As I contemplated the sound I was hearing, I saw a helicopter fly overhead with propane tank in tow. I leapt with joy, thinking, "Today is the day for Lake-of-the-Clouds! I must be going in the right direction!" Two things flashed through my mind: "Lake-of-the-Clouds is just up and over the ridge the helicopter flew over," and "Get off my butt and go up the hill and to the right!"

As I continued my search for the trail, that soft voice kept telling me, "It's up the hill and to the right, Chris." By 5pm, I came across a 2-foot-wide trail winding its way through what looked

When I finally did arrive, the staff was glad to see me and relieved they didn't have to come looking for me. Most of all, they were exceedingly kind to me. They fed me (though it was 8pm by then), and because of the cuts and bruises all over my arms, face, and legs, they let me use their 'staff-only' shower stall.

I looked like I had fought a mountain lion and felt like I had been run over by a train. I had never known such exhaustion. However, before going to bed, I had to sit on the side of that mountain and watch the sun set. I had to because I could. I will never forget the feel of the warm rock where I sat, the sweeping glow of the sun as it ambled toward the other side of the world, or how ruffled my body felt. Most of all, I will never forget the relief I felt as I sobbed in gratitude for that soft voice that kept telling me, "It's up the hill and to the right, Chris."

Because I have lost the trail that matters so many times in my life, and the faith it takes to renew the journey, this experience has become a metaphor for my life. I cherish the fact that getting lost that day taught me to ask

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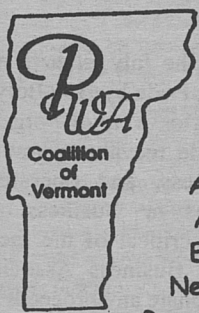
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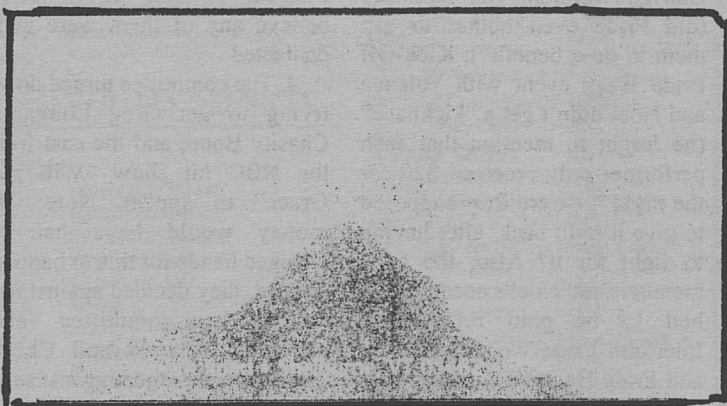
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