**Twenty life lessons of the trail**

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Traveling in a chosen mode at a pace that allows us to immerse ourselves in the surrounding environment far surpasses what we might experience as a passerby in a speeding car. We are presented with both serenity and rigors that put us in touch with our own capabilities and sensibilities. We are stimulated by scenery and inhabitants that often escape our attention. Perhaps most importantly, in addition to the scenery, serenity, stimulation, and the intrinsic rewards that come with walking, hiking, and climbing, the pathway uniquely presents life “lessons.”

The trail can be a great teacher if we allow ourselves to reflect on the nature of our experience. In fact, the trail is a perfect metaphor for life itself. Like life, the trail has its forks in the road which present us with decision points, its obstacles that slow our journey and test our resolve, its ever-changing terrain which demands that we adapt, its inclines and descents which draw on different strengths, and its fellow travelers whose relationships enrich our experience. Sometimes the trail is hidden and worn, but it is always there waiting to be rediscovered. And, like life, the trail always leads somewhere. As we set aside our trail gear and resume our normal daily routines, our memories of the trail experience can easily translate into “lessons” that lead us to a better understanding of our lives lived each day.

***1. Walking the trail requires intention.***

Trails abound. Selecting and walking the trail is not a passive activity. Whether we hike for function, conditioning, adventure, exploration or whether we seek solitude or engagement with the wonders of nature, we must intend to walk the trail. Bringing ourselves to our first steps on the pathway requires purpose and commitment. Our purposes bring meaning to our steps along the trail.

***2. Some trails must be walked from the beginning while others may be joined at any point.***

While the designated trailhead provides a clear beginning, many trails have entry points along the way. If we choose to start our journey at a point along the pathway, we must remain aware of that which may have preceded our chose beginning point and seek information that will guide our direction.

***3. There are forks in the trail.***

Rarely do we encounter a trail that is void of branches. These forks in the road are moments of decision and the direction that we take is usually determined by a variety of factors including our purposes, the surrounding conditions and our knowledge and previous experience. In deviating from the determined path we may learn and experience more or we may detract from that which lies ahead by branching off. It is important that we weigh our reasons and the consequences of selecting the fork we choose.

***4. There are obstacles in the trail.***

No trail is without obstacles. We will encounter fallen trees, flooded streams, jagged rocks and animals even on the most well groomed trails. These barriers challenge our will, stamina and ingenuity. It is nature’s way of testing our mettle and sense of purpose while providing us with an opportunity to achieve more. Obstacles can be a value-added element of our journey for, once having succeeded in traveling beyond what stands in our way, our trip will be all the more memorable.

***5. Parts of the trail are often unmarked.***

While many things point the way, the markers are not always clearly identifiable. We must deal with the uncertainty of direction by tapping into our experience, knowledge, skill, understanding and, sometimes, even our courage. Our skills and knowledge influence our decisions. Our choices guide the journey as it continues.

***6. The trail always leads somewhere.***

Every trail ultimately leads somewhere. Some pathways lead to familiar and expected destinations while others open us to new discoveries. Occasionally, either as expected or unexpectedly, the trail brings us back to where we started. Sometimes the extent of our journey is defined by what awaits at its end while, at other times, the end is marked wherever we stop. When it seems that we are on a trail to nowhere, our patience and persistence determine how far we travel.

***7. The terrain and landscape of the trail changes.***

The trail is dynamic not static. The pathway presents a variety of terrain and landscapes. Clay and stone give way to the soft cushion of moss and fallen pine needles. Sun-baked meadows may be replaced by damp soil near a forest stream. The canyon pathway ascends to a hilly trail that leads to mountains. As we continue, we must adapt to the changing character of the trail and relish what if offers.

***8. Parts of the trail are more challenging than others.***

We may encounter inclines, descents, curves, changing weather, weather extremes and other tests and obstacles of nature. Each challenge urges our active engagement with what we encounter in the environment as we chart our way. The ebb and flow of the trail’s demands remind us that life is not linear and opens us to learning more about our strengths and needs in dealing with change.

***9. The difficulty of the trail is relative.***

Some days we encounter trails that are challenging; on other days an easier path awaits. The relative difficulty of the trail is defined by both the condition of the trail and what we are able to bring to the trail. Awareness of the changing difficulty of the trail allows us to stay the course on a pathway that tests our limits as we wait for a respite. Likewise, when we begin to understand our part in determining the relative difficulty of our hike we can better appreciate how our mindset and preparation will effect the rewards we experience along the trail.

***10. Sometimes the trail doubles back so that we can reach higher ground.***

Often the trail is not linear, a straight line between two points. Sometimes the trail curves and even doubles back on itself. The zigzag pattern of the trail keeps us from being discouraged by an incline that is too steep to conquer all at once. By following the side-to-side pathway, we are able to maintain our resolve to carry on to higher ground and, perhaps, the summit.

***11. Descending may be more rigorous than climbing.***

Parts of the trail may descend rather than rise. We sometimes resist a trail that declines, as it seems counter to reaching higher ground or the summit. However, such descents serve as a respite from the continual climb and provide the reserve we need for the long haul. The valleys, canyons, meadows and streams that lay at the end of the descent provide an enriching new perspective. Each descent conditions our bodies and minds for each new decline that we encounter and refreshes us to climb higher.

***12. We will meet others along the trail.***

Invariably we will encounter others along the trail. Most contact is likely to be in passing and greetings may be perfunctory. Remaining open to those occasional instances where contact and conversation are more expansive will only serve to enrich your trail experience. Directly or indirectly you have shared an experience with those you meet along a mutually traveled path. In doing so you have become part of each other’s trail experience that will only be remembered if you are present to these contacts when they occur.

***13. Some trails should not be walked alone.***

The trail offers a fulfilling solitude to those who choose the singular stroll. However, treacherous trails and those that are known to be inhabited by predators are best traveled with a companion. A traveling companion provides the counsel and protection that ensures our safety or survival. While hiking alone offers its own rewards, companionship becomes essential along a threatening pathway.

***14. Resting along the trail allows one to complete the journey.***

Each step of our trail walk brings sensory rewards and the feeling of something accomplished that often motivates us to press on. Fatigue, that often comes on suddenly and unexpectedly can ultimately prevent us from concluding our walk. It is only through thoughtful selection of planned rest stops that we can retain the strength and reserve that will allow us to carry on. By carefully monitoring the demands that the trail is placing on our body and allowing for purposeful rest in the short-term, we can preserve a long-term and continuing experience on the trail.

***15. Walking the trail requires nourishment.***

Even the most conditioned and seasoned hiker will require nourishment along the way. While water and food seem the most obvious form of nourishment, resting along the way to enjoy or photograph the view, journaling our experience, conversing or soaking our feet in a stream can also sustain us. Most importantly we must consciously seek and provide ourselves with opportunities for nourishment.

***16. The trail and its surroundings are one.***

The pathway is but a part of a larger and intertwined environment. Like most ecosystems each individual part affects and relies on all of the other parts for survival and life. No single element of this interdependent system can change without impacting the other parts. While we are visitors to this world when walking the trail, we must remember that when entering the pathway we become a living part of the of the trail’s ecosystem and travel respectfully.

***17. The trail is always there.***

Trails may be well groomed and clearly marked. But, sometimes the trail is washed away by a storm or covered by snow. It may be hidden by the overgrowth of brush or strewn with debris. The trail may become faint from disuse. Once a trail is blazed it is always there waiting to be re-discovered. We might have to work a little harder to find it, but the hidden trail always waits as a pathway to our destination.

***18. The trail is multi-sensory.***

The movement of our body against the trail and the sights we see predominate our experience. We feel the elements against our skin. We smell the wildflowers or pine needles on the trail bed. We hear the sounds of water and wildlife. Even silence catches our attention. We must use all of our senses to appreciate the full impact of the trail.

***19. Walking the trail mindfully is often more rewarding than hurrying to the finish.***

It is easy to get caught up in the notion that completing the trail is the overriding goal of our efforts. Our motivation to achieve the finish may close us off from many rich and rewarding experiences and images along the way. Our memories of the trail are significantly enriched when we remain mindful and attentive to all that the surrounds our every step of the journey.

***20. The trail becomes more memorable through reflection.***

Each trail we complete, even if walked before, provides a unique life experience. In order to give each trail experience a lasting place in our memory, we must actively and consciously reflect on its meaning. What new sights, sounds, challenges and people did we encounter? What did we learn about the trail? What did we learn about ourselves? Finding time to reflect through journaling, cataloging images and sharing with others will help create lasting memories of our trail experience.

As we follow our trail through urban, rural or wilderness settings, paying close attention to the “messages” inherent in our chosen pathway can enrich our experience. Reflecting each day on the unique “lessons” of our trail experience helps us better understand ourselves, each other and promotes appreciation for our world. The trail has been, and will continue to be a great teacher.

*“Each day is a journey, and the journey itself is home.”- Matsuo Basho, Haiku Master*