

Lara Pagel Thousand Miler thoughts 10/28/2023

Trails can be terrifying. In hindsight, for me this journey was about facing fears, some I didn't know I had.

Heights are not something that used to bother me, but like many people I have talked to, it developed sometime in my adult years. Experienced enough to know that falls hurt, perhaps? The segments that challenged me the most are Gilbraltor Rock, where you really are walking the edge, Devil's staircase, which has such narrow, steep steps that I can still feel the devil in that particular staircase, and Straight River. Portions of the Straight River segment are on a steep hillside, which many are, but the tread was so narrow and tipped that I kept my head down, eyes on the trail, and tried to get through that portion as fast and safely as I could. I tried to stop and enjoy the views, but getting that portion over with worked better for me.

I also learned that I am afraid of getting lost. I have been lost at times in my life and it isn't a feeling I enjoy, like heights. Over decades I hiked all the trails in Portage and Waupaca Counties as out and backs. I learned them one step at a time using paper maps to guide me. But I would find when I set foot on an unknown trail or segment, there was always trepidation, where does it lead, am I prepared for the challenges it may pose and what if I get lost? My hike of the Ice Age Trail helped me work through this fear I had never acknowledged or even thought about until a friend brought it up recently. Fear of the Trail. Yes, that is me. The Ice Age Trail is well marked with yellow blazes. Once you trust in the blazes there is a sense of calm and assuredness. The apps are brilliant. FarOut doesn't always get it right, but between the blazes and the app I felt fairly confident in where I was. I got very lost a few times in Kettlebowl due to yellow leaves and allowing myself to be misguided by ATV signage. This was also early on in my journey and I allowed my mind to wander too far from the trail so I didn't pay enough attention to the blazes. Using the app I was able to figure out the best way to connect back up with where I was supposed to be. I am much better at looking for blazes now so I will do that hike again one day and I am confident I will not get lost. As much as my body hurt though I never panicked, but maybe did say a bad word or two. I also was lost one day between Madison and Cross Plains simply because I left my phone in the car and had left my paper maps for my husband. This is horrible because I was doing lots of little segments joined by connection roads, which aren't blazed. But, I had researched enough ahead of time I remembered the general direction to head and did end up asking people along the way if they knew where my next segment was. It worked out with the only bad words coming from my waiting husband.

Another fear I know I have is of people. That came from too many years working in a regulatory field where personal attacks are far too common. People can be the worst. I really thought that I would do this trail twice the first time – all as out and backs and I would never meet another hiker. I was about 250 miles in and realized I was really 500 miles in. That was frustrating. I also realized how far away the trail was becoming. I joined the Get Off the Couch group and found them incredibly friendly and encouraging. Next, I joined Ken Heling, who formed a monthly hiking group to help himself get the

trail done, but that also helped several of us also get closer to our goal. He was an excellent planner, had a quiet manner, wonderful sense of humor and I found his hikes very enjoyable. When he was done, I met up with some other people that I had either hiked with through GOTC or Ken's group, and then had the courage to post a hike or two of my own that helped me meet more wonderful people. I have made friends with similar interests, which I haven't had in my lifetime. That companionship made potential scary things like beaver dam and river crossings much more fun.

I am now 1215 miles richer, in better shape than I have been in decades, open for new challenges and over two of my fears. The fear of heights will be with me forever but it doesn't rule my life. Some views are worth a few nightmares.