

The 87 day Ice Age Trail thru hike that I recently completed came in response to transcending the limitations of having developed a debilitating chronic illness several years ago. A Mast Cell Disorder and accompanying complications left me mostly in bed or lying on the couch for much of the last few years. Prior to that I led an extremely active life centered in large part around wellness and physical fitness. When I was at the weakest and most miserable point of dis-ease I recognized a deep seated need to set a goal and commit to reaching it. I wasn't able to reconcile with being forced into a permanently sedentary life lacking in passion, creativity and movement. Frustrated by my inability to continue with high intensity exercises and artistic pursuits, I looked to my old friend, the healing power of nature, and to the possibility of someday being well enough again to undertake a thru hike. I researched long distance trails and chose to set the goal of eventually thru hiking the Ice Age Trail. I picked the IAT in part because I am originally from Wisconsin and loved and missed the green forests and waters of the land where I was born and raised.

In planning, I realized that my hike would require more considerations and adaptations than it would for the average long distance hiker. I knew it wouldn't be easy. I understood there would be many added challenges for me to contend with. Over the years I discovered a way to better manage my symptoms through eating an extremely limited diet and through taking many very specific supplements. In preparation I spent months acquiring ingredients, planning, preparing and dehydrating meals and snacks, knowing I wouldn't be able to eat any of the pre-made backpacking meals or be able to resupply at grocery stores along the trail. The post office list made available to hikers on the IATA website became an integral tool for helping to make my thru hike a possibility. At first, having a limited diet required me to carry an insanely heavy backpack with extra days worth of food. For awhile I struggled to figure out how much I needed to sustain me through each day, to better organize and to figure out where and when to have the next box of food and medicines sent. I was hesitant to seek help from volunteers in getting to post offices more frequently to pick up resupplies. I didn't want to inconvenience others. I met some very kind volunteers along the way who, along with another thru hiker I kept intersecting with, encouraged me to reach out and ask for more help. I'm so happy I listened to their advice.

In my backpack, along with the added food weight and planning, came the weight of other items crucial to managing a thru hike with a chronic illness: the heap of daily supplements, heavy liquid electrolyte concentrates vital to my survival, an alkaline water filter, extra liters of water, unscented all natural body care products and a heavier, warmer sleep system and some extra clothing items like waterproof gloves that no sane thru hiker would choose to willingly carry during the hot and humid summer months. But there it was- the reality that if I was going to be able to manage my symptoms enough to make it through the 1,100+ miles of trail, then I would have to compromise and carry the added weight in order to accommodate the demands

of my chronic illness. So that's what I did. I carried a larger, heavier pack, which aptly became named Sisyphus over the course of the first few weeks. The giant, seemingly bottomless, expandable mesh back pocket on the backpack became known as Mary Poppins.

At first I inched along the trail at a glacial pace. It was all I could do to remain upright and keep putting one foot in front of the other. And all while hauling the too-heavy but necessary load through hot and humid, mosquito clouded terrain. The heat also exacerbated my symptoms. I kept going. Miserable, and yet happy to be up and moving. Pre-existing chronic fatigue and chronic pain are no friends to a thru hiker...I would set out extra early in the mornings when possible and always set up camp late. I learned to night hike, in part to reach my destination on long, slow days because I simply couldn't travel any faster and later, in part to experience a different kind of beauty and energy in nature that appears once the sun has gone down and you're the only one of your species left on trail. Despite all of the added struggle and physical discomfort, I repeatedly recognized the sheer joy of being able to move my body again, to hike again, and the absolute pleasure and subtle healing of being immersed in, and surrounded by nature once more. I came to reside in the moment, even the painful moment and found a return to an understanding of the simplest thing: I only needed to put one foot in front of the other in order to continue on down the trail. And that's what I did. I hiked on. Some days I could only cover a few miles. Other days I was able to transcend the limitations of my condition and do so much more. People were always asking what my average mileage per day looked like. I found this inquiry a bit strange because I wasn't really paying attention to that. I was out there just to live again, to return to the living, not to measure the miles. I would always have to consider this question from others at length and realized that for me it was usually kind of all or nothing in terms of daily mileage and was dependent upon how strong my symptoms were acting up. Maybe that's why thru hiking resonates with me now. It's kind of an all or nothing endeavor. You either fully commit to the process and to completing the entire trail in one long go, day in and day out (and in my case some nights and pre-dawn mornings as well), regardless of discomfort and any challenges that may arise, or you realize it isn't for you and you quit and go home. I never even considered quitting as an option. I hiked on. Covering 6 miles or 33 in a day, I honored where I was at in the moment and continued to hike...

Some days were much harder than others. It was challenging to enjoy the natural beauty through the heat and mosquitos and along the foot punishing road walks. But that was the path I was on. I walked on. Then Autumn arrived and it was glorious! Extreme temperatures fell away alongside the advent of vibrant colors from the changing leaves. I was amazed to note how far I'd traveled and how much less severe my symptoms were overall. The healing power

of nature and movement was apparent, as I'd hoped it would be. The gratitude I'd felt from the start of my journey at getting the chance to even attempt this hike swelled and grew. It enveloped me like a hug- like the hugs and soft words I always shared with the trees and wildlife as I hiked amongst them. All of the generous and amazing people I'd met along the way continued reaching out to me in a show of support. What an added gift. The thru hike for healing that I undertook to transcend the limitations of chronic illness, unexpectedly also brought with it a renewed sense of community, friendship and support with a shared reverence for nature. What a beautiful thing the Ice Age Trail community is!

Perhaps not many would-be thru hikers cry at the beginning of their journey, but I did. I shed tears of joy and relief at the Western terminus when I first set out back on the final day of July. Just making it back to Wisconsin and to the very beginning of the trail meant overcoming great odds for me, both physical and financial. Hiking up the hill from the North campground in Interstate Park and reaching the very beginning of the trail in the early morning humidity was a feat in and of itself for me. I cried many other times along the trail, sometimes out of frustration, illness or pain, other times from sheer exhaustion, in some instances from cathartic release. And I wept emotional tears of joy one overcast Autumn morning in late October, when 87 days from the time I started, I hiked out of the enchanted forest after hugging one more tree and taking a quiet moment, to the overlook at the Eastern terminus in Potawatami State Park and placed my hands upon the stone marker.

I did it! I thru hiked the Ice Age Trail on my own, regardless of all challenges. Thank goodness for determination and a sense of adventure. Thank goodness for a love and understanding of nature and its gifts. I am grateful I kept believing in myself and grateful to all of the people along the way who helped me in so many ways.

Love and Light,

Nicole "Treehugger" Peters