

Abstract:

An aspect of long-distance hiking culture which ties hikers deeply to the hiking community is "trail magic" and "trail angels." These "angels" are everyday civilians, often former or current hikers, who provide random acts of kindness for those on the trail. In recent years, with the emerging platform of online video diaries and blogs, the inner-realities of long-distance hiking culture, and the altruism hikers experience are becoming more accessible. In March of 2019, a Google search for "thru-hiking vlogs" yields more than 300,000 results. Using Turner's theory of *communitas*, and Gordon's theory of ghostliness, I argue that community building and generosity are integral to thru-hiking culture, and form the backbone of social and emotional life on the trail.

Key words: Anthropology, hiking, long-distance hiking, altruism, Victor Turner, Avery Gordon, angels, magic, video diary, blog, memoir

Angels and Echoes:
An Analysis of Human Connection and Altruism on the Trail

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Introduction

During the summer of 2018, a hiker with the alias “Darwin” was greeted outside of a campground in southern California by a man named Rich. Rich, a resident from a town 30 miles away, was spending his evening cooking and serving free food to hikers who were passing by. Darwin, who was in the process of vlogging his 2,500-mile hike on the Pacific Crest Trail, expressed the gratitude he felt for having hot, fresh food at the end of a long day. Jokingly, he asked Rich “Why the hell do you want to feed stinky hikers?” Rich shrugged and replied, “I got the same care and feeding when I tried to do it [hike the PCT] the first time, I figured, I’m gonna give it back.” When Darwin thanked him, Rich simply said, “Oh, I get more fun out of this than you do” (Darwin on the Trail 2018).

An aspect of long-distance hiking culture which ties hikers deeply to the hiking community is “trail magic” and “trail angels.” These “angels” are everyday civilians, often former or current hikers, who provide random acts of kindness for those on the trail. From driving hikers into town to resupply, to hiding coolers of soda and snacks in the woods, to cooking full-fledged meals for those in camp, these “angels” are seen as providing “trail magic.”

Another key aspect of long-distance hiking culture is trail names. Trail names are a key component of relationship formation and bonding on the trail. Rather than selecting one’s own trail name, the nickname is assigned by other hikers they encounter on their way. Typically related to a hiker’s mannerism, behaviors, or physical appearance, the assigned trail name becomes the identity a thru-hiker operates under during their trek. Rather than using their “old” identity, they elect to go only by this newer variation which carries a representation of who they are. Thru-hikers will take the nickname on as an alias, adopting it was almost an alternate

identity for the duration of their time on the trail and, for some, even after they return from the trek. These hikers will introduce themselves by the name, and close trail friends may not even know the legal or birth names of their companions.

In recent years, with the emerging platform of online video diaries and blogs, the inner-realities of long-distance hiking culture, and the altruism hikers experience are becoming more accessible. In March of 2019, a Google search for “thru-hiking vlogs” yields more than 300,000 results. In order to craft a comprehensive image of life on the trail, I have analyzed these vlogs alongside with psychological research, ethnographies and more traditional memoirs of life on the trail.

Hikers who vlog their journey often remain relatively anonymous by vlogging under their trail-name. This name becomes their social media handle, a component of their hashtags, and something they introduce themselves by at the beginning of each video. By embodying their new identity in such a tangible and permanent way, these hikers solidify themselves as someone new, someone they were not prior to going on the trail.

Using Turner’s theory of *communitas*, and Gordon’s theory of ghostliness, I argue that community building and generosity are integral to thru-hiking culture, and form the backbone of social and emotional life on the trail.

Background

Each year, in the late winter and early spring, thousands of hikers across the United States set off to trek long-distance trails from end to end. Thru-hiking is the act of walking a long-distance trail from one end to the other in a continuous, or almost continuous, manner. These long-distance hikers, often referred to as “thru-hikers,” must plan their trip for months

and, in some cases years, before setting out. Once a thru-hiker is on the trail, the odds that they will successfully complete their journey are slim, as they will be facing harsh weather, physical exhaustion, potential for injuries, and a multitude of unexpected scenarios. Despite these challenges, thousands of hopefuls gear-up and head out each year.

In the United States, a thru-hike is most commonly associated with the three longest trails found in the contiguous states- the Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail, the Continental Divide National Scenic Trail, and the Appalachian National Scenic Trail. A typical trek takes around six months to complete, with hikers beginning in the early spring and hoping to finish before first snowfall the following winter.

The Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail (PCT), is on the western coast of the United States and extends from Mexico to Canada through the states of California, Oregon, and Washington. In its entirety, the trail is 2,653 miles long. Though only officially established in 1993, the trail has been in the process of formation since the early half of the 20th century (Hill et al. 2014). In 2018, 4,967 PCT thru-hiking permits were issued to thru-hike hopefuls (PCT Association 2019).

The Continental Divide National Scenic Trail (CDT), follows the continental divide of the United States along the Rocky Mountains. This trail also extends from Mexico to Canada, and crosses through the states of Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, Colorado, and New Mexico. At 3,100 miles long, the trail is considered mostly complete, though interspersed throughout the dedicated trailways are small side roads which are utilized to bridge gaps between completed trails. Individuals who thru-hike the CDT acquire permits for particular states and parks throughout their journey, but are not required to have a thru-hiking permit for the full-span of the

trail. As such, a specific number of how many thru-hikers attempt the CDT each year is not readily calculable.

The Appalachian National Scenic Trail (AT), is located in the eastern United States. This long-distance trail is the only one of the core three thru-hiking trails which does not span from Mexico to Canada. The trail reaches from Springer Mountain in Georgia to Mount Katahdin in Maine. Over the course of its 2,200 miles, it crosses through a total of 14 states. In 2017, 4,224 AT thru-hiking permits were granted to hikers (Appalachian Mountain 2017).

Primarily, thru-hikers set out to walk one of these trails alone. The 2018 annual survey of PCT thru-hikers found that 65% of hikers set out alone. Of those who set out with the intent of thru-hiking, 43% were women, 56% were men, and 0.2% were genderqueer (Halfway Anywhere 2018). A similar gender breakdown was found by the 2018 AT survey, with 54% male, 44% female, and 1.6% non-binary individuals. The average thru-hiker age on both surveys was 28 years old, though hikers as young as 18 and as old as 74 were represented in the data (Appalachian Mountain 2017). Over the course of a hiker's trek, they will meet and befriend many other hikers, but due to differences in walking pace, rest days, and other factors, they will likely separate from anyone they meet. In this way, the trail is both a social and independent space.

Literature Review

Those rejecting society for the sake of a more “fulfilling” life are having their stories of hiking and natural exploration magnified through books and films. Of the three trails, the most research and peer-reviewed content about thru-hikers focus on the Appalachian Trail (Berg 2015; Ketterer 2010; Moor 2016). In recent years, the Pacific Crest Trail has received some attention as

well. This attention has likely been sparked by the publication of Cheryl Strayed's autobiography *Wild*, which details her journey on the Pacific Crest Trail. The biography was turned into a major motion picture, and therefore brought thru-hiking and the Pacific Crest Trail into the mainstream media. The Continental Divide Trail has not enjoyed much attention, either from academic sources or from the media. Perhaps this is due to its incompleteness or its terrain's similarity to the more "glamorous" Pacific Crest Trail.

As the first of the three major trails to receive hundreds of attempting thru-hikers each spring, much of the research on thru-hiking in the United States that was published prior to the 21st century addresses the Appalachian Trail. The prevalence of literature focused on the Appalachian Trail follows an uptick during the early 1970s of activity on the trail. The Appalachian Trail was established in the late 1930s, but it did not see an increase in popularity until just over thirty years later, at the beginning of the 1970s. While the reason for this sudden increase in the general interest is not completely clear, Adam Berg postulates that thru-hiking rose in prominence as a desire to separate oneself from the restraints of society and undergo a search for personal authenticity (Berg 2015).

In an effort to understand the "why" of these hikes, Berg explores various testimonies on the decision to thru-hike. In keeping with the idea that the decision was brought about by a dissatisfaction with society, thru-hiker Jim Fixx described his motivations as, "Having lost faith in much of society, government, business, marriage, the church and so on, we seemed to have turned to ourselves, putting what faith we can muster into our own minds and bodies" (Berg 2015). If this is the case, that such dissatisfaction has made many individuals turn to themselves

for renewed faith and understanding, does the compassion and humanity experienced on the trail redeem the hiker's perception of society?

The interest in turning one's back on traditional societal expectations that bloomed in the 1970s was not a new concept, but it is one which has certainly risen in media representation over the past few decades. With individuals such as Christopher McCandless, (Krakauer 1997) who turned his back on university to roam North America and connect with individuals along his journey, to Cheryl Strayed, who used tragedy in her personal life as a motivating force in conducting a thru-hike of the PCT, individuals seeking to long-distance walk now have role models. In turn, those who daydream about an alternative way of life now have tangible individuals to idolize.

A study by William Ketterer (2010) on the psychological changes experienced by thru-hikers of the Appalachian trail found that there were three prominent themes which came up in all of the interviews he conducted. Each hiker mentioned that they felt certain they had experienced a psychological change as a result of their time on the trail, they expressed that their relationships and connections to other hikers and individuals on the trail was the most meaningful aspect of their trek, and hikers felt that their hike had shifted their overall outlook on humanity. Of note is that hikers found their interactions with other hikers to be the most essential part of their journey. On a solo journal which is nature-centric, it is intriguing that individuals would feel most changed not by the triumphs and challenges of the trail, but by their social interactions. This speaks to the accepting and understanding culture of life on the trail.

As thru-hiker traffic on all trails has steadily increased for the past 5 years, the towns located just off of the trail have shifted to accommodate them. Bed and breakfasts and hotels

have added in bunk beds specifically designed to be low-cost options for hikers looking to shower and resupply. Volunteer agencies and churches have begun providing free or donation-based housing for those who come into town from the trail. In her study of the physical and social environment of the trail, Bratton (2012) concluded that, “Today’s hiker has a support network and knowledgeable guidance present along the entire route.”. Sites such as WhiteBlaze provide information on everything from published trail guides, to lists of overnight accommodations, to commentary on towns along the trail that are particularly hiker friendly. There are even accounts of trail angels who allow hikers to stay in their homes and do laundry. Thru-hiker “Dixie,” who posts video logs of her hikes, recorded an experience in which a married couple picked her and a friend up from the trailhead, drove them home, provided them with food, laundry access, and overnight accommodations (Homemade Wanderlust 2019).

Theory

In this study, I use Victor Turner’s theory of symbolic anthropology to understand trail magic and trail angels. In his analysis of Ndembu Ritual, Turner defines a ritual as something which is outside of one’s daily routine, which makes reference to magical powers or beings. He argues that a symbol serves as physical evidence of the ritual occurring and that its presence can be seen as recalling something grander than oneself (Erickson et al 2001). Using the framework of this theory, trail magic is the symbol of the kindness and altruism experienced by hikers as they move through the trail. A cooler or a tent with a grill pitched underneath becomes symbolic evidence of trail angels nearby. Hikers often reference the way trail magic seems to happen just when they need it most. For instance, they come across a water cache on the day their bottle broke, or an angel appears to pick up those walking into town just before a massive storm hits.

While these hikers see the symbols of their magical beliefs on a regular basis, and can logically discern that they are everyday people and not holy entities, there remains a level of reverence in the language hikers employ that speaks to the idea of power outside of oneself.

In order to understand the meaning of these symbols, I employed Geertz's idea of interpreting culture "that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning" (Britannica 2018) It is this interpretive search for meaning among the acts of kindness on the trail which drove this research forward.

Further, by including the word "trail" before all symbolic references, the hikers seem to imply that this kind of compassion and "magic" could not happen anywhere else. Quite easily, the terms could have simply been magic and angels, or "stranger magic" or hikers could have even referred to them as acts of kindness. By using the very specific language of "trail magic" and "trail angels" hikers imply that perhaps it is the mystique of the trail itself which brings them such compassionate treatment. "The trail" functions as much more than simply the pathway which the hikers use to navigate the forest. The trail in this capacity becomes not only a physical space, but a metaphorical place where magic readily occurs.

An ethnographic account of thru-hikers on the Appalachian Trail explored this web of significance which thru-hikers become woven into. David Terry and colleagues concluded that thru-hiking is a form of performance art and that while the act itself does not seek to educate or argue anything beyond its own existence, its presence speaks to the conditions of a larger society. That is to say, thru-hiking is a performance whose very existence turns our attention to

the societal and material conditions which resulted in its coming to be (Terry et al. 2013). While the act of hiking in and of itself does not seek to perform, there is something greater than simply the self which takes place along the trail. This intangible “something” is rooted in the presence of the trail and results in the magical and angelic acts which occur along it.

Turner’s theory of social drama was also pivotal to this research, as it offered a concrete means through which to understand why hikers would “abandon” or pause their previous life to embark on this journey. Considering broader American society as the realm in which this social drama occurs, one can understand the emotional journey of thru-hiking.

Turner theorizes that a social drama occurs in four parts. The first part is a breach. An underlying issue creates tension in the lives of those around it. In the case of thru-hiking, this could be anything from financial or emotional stressors to general dissatisfaction with modern society on the whole. A crisis then occurs, functioning as a precipitating event which brings into the light the underlying flaws. Perhaps the soon-to-be hiker loses their job or a loved one. Perhaps the crisis stage is more subtle, and the hiker is exhausted by the monotony of everyday individualistic society, and they desire to set out on their own. The third component of social drama is the redress of action. In this period of time, actions occur which heal the damage of the crisis and return those involved in the social drama back to stability. In this case of thru-hiking, I argue that this redress of action is the kindness and sense of community experienced on the trail.

As Ketterer found, individuals who once felt isolated or dissatisfied feel their perspective on humanity positively shift during their time on the trail. The final phase of a social drama is a permanent schism or reintegration. This can be seen in hikers who turn their careers into vlogging or writing about their hikes. In this way, they are able to break off from a traditional

American way of life and “become” a full-time thru-hiker. All hikers who return to their daily life at the end of the thru-hike and resume their jobs, revisit the friends they had prior to hiking, and so on, reintegrate with the society they’d moved away from.

This process of social drama can be explored alongside Turner’s theory of *communitas*. While exploring the idea of social change, Turner considered the role of common or shared beliefs in creating and building up a social group. He explored the role of unstructured communities, those in which all participants have the same social status, in order to consider how individuals process and adjust to change. Turner theorized that when individuals are provided the opportunity to connect and engage with one another once social status and obligations are set aside, deep bonds can form between individuals who would perhaps not otherwise connect.

The trail is an ideal form of Turner’s liminal space, the period between what “was” and what is “next.” In this space, individuals can shed their past selves and exist on a new and even playing field. On the trail, individuals are bonded together by their deep connection to nature. Concerns and physical needs are narrowed down to the more simple basics of food, water, and shelter. However, since there is no foraging or food acquisition on the trail itself, there is no competitive element to these desires. In this way, individuals can freely interact and experience nature with those they encounter, without the threat of survival or status impeding their potential connection. The community on the trail then becomes inherently supportive. Individuals who cannot physically hike themselves become angels, providing compassion, resources, and favors for those who do a hike. The kindness of these angels seems virtually unlimited, and thru-hikers do not compete for generosity. Hikers encourage one another to

continue on, as they all share a similar dream, as well as understand the difficulties of achieving it.

Graburn's theory on the anthropology of tourism has also been utilized as a framework through which personal growth of thru-hikers can be contemplated. Considering thru-hiking behavior to be, in any sense of the word, a form of tourism allows for an exploration of Graburn's "tourism is a spiritual journey" argument. Graburn (1977) states that tourism is a process of recreation and reinvention which allows the participants to remove themselves from their day to day lives in order to eventually return to the workplace feeling refreshed and changed "for the better." This change, in the context of thru-hiking, might mean that insight which is gained on the trail can impact one's perception of presence in the world, and reframe their understanding of transcendence.

In much of Western society, morality has become attached to the concept of work. Those who work hard and are dedicated to their assigned tasks are perceived as "good." As Max Weber explores in his writings on the spirit of capitalism, capitalist societies consider productivity and work to be moral values. Therefore, removing oneself from the traditional career track to thru-hike becomes a violation of moral principles. Turning one's back on the expectations of society is, in many ways, a political statement. However, once the symbolic, magico-religious language utilized by hikers comes into play, the political statement becomes entangled in the concept of spiritualism. This idea is coupled with the thought that interspersed between these periods of long work will be short periods of relaxation and tourism. Thru-hikers step outside of this norm when they engage in prolonged periods of travel. If even these shorter

ventures have an impact on the tourist by broadening their world view, then the psychological impact on hikers would understandably be drastic.

Avery Gordon is a sociologist whose work focuses on the ways in which we construct social realities. In her book, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, Gordon (2008) argues that in order to “study social life one must confront the ghostly aspects of it.” By this, Gordon seems to imply that understanding society is about understanding what is not immediately perceptible, as much as what is. By searching for the information that is provided in the space between what is seen and what is known, we can identify what is “ghostly.” In the sense of the trail, this may speak to the acts of kindness which are conducted by previous hikers. As one walks through a place of solitude, among them is the ghostly reminder of those who have engaged in the same acts of solitude before them. Contained herein is also a ghostly reminder of “non-productive” labor. When the hiker removes oneself from the traditional life track, they are granted visibility to the acts of pure altruism which remain hidden in the capitalist, non-ghostly world. The trail, in and of itself is a ghostly mechanism. A path of solitude which is carved out by the presence of others. Each thru-hiker walks where hikers have for years, exchanges stories of angels and magic with other hikers, and has the potential to become an angel themselves later on.

Methodology

In order to find genuine, authentic accounts of life on the trail I explored a multitude of media platforms. I began my research watching Youtube video logs, and reading online blogs published in a more traditional blogging format. I then moved into more specific realms, finding Instagram accounts designed to record one’s hiking experience on a daily or weekly basis. I

searched up any terms which were used as hashtags on these posts, in order to identify further Instagram accounts or Twitter postings with similar content.

In order to establish a general knowledge base of challenges and hopes on the trail, I viewed 48 video diaries spanning an average of 20 minutes each. The vast majority of these vlogs were from two unaffiliated thru-hikers who used the trail names “Darwin” and “Dixie.” Having established an understanding of general social ethics and language on the trail based primarily on observations from video logs, I moved into an exploration of more scientific and quantitative data on thru-hiking. In this way, I was able to apply theoretical concepts to behavioral motifs I had observed. The initial interaction with the data came in a variety of mediums ranging from three full-length memoirs to thirty-one blog postings, and the 48 video logs of the experience. Much of the background understanding of life on the trail has been derived from these resources.

Data was collected through analysis of thru-hikers firsthand accounts. A primary component of this process was an exploration of trail terminology, as this allowed for a deeper understanding of the performative components of a trail hike. In order to understand trail terminology, during the process of vlog observation, I recorded all terms which seemed to be specific to hiking or the trail. If the terms were used in at least two unaffiliated first-hand accounts, I deemed them to be part of trail terminology. In addition to primary resources, I also utilized Moor (2016), Maclennan (2005), and Bratton (2012). These three works were published accounts of individuals who had once thru-hiked themselves and later went on to study and analyze trail culture.

Once the total collection of terms had been assembled, it was sorted through in order to identify the more terms which were more symbolic. In order for a term to be considered as such, it needed to possess one of the following traits (the below-stated terms will be defined in a glossary on the following page):

- 1) It was a term which granted someone with a new or alternate identity. Terms which fell into this category were “trail angels,” “triple crowners,” trail names, “hiker trash,” and “flip-floppers.”
- 2) It was a term which spoke to an element of faith or trust in a force beyond oneself. Terms which fell into this category were “trail magic,” the sentiment “the trail provides,” and “cairns” and “yogi-ing.” I have also elected to include the general concept of “the trail” itself in this category, as it is often spoken about with reverence or respect, and referred to often as a concept and not as a physical entity.
- 3) It was a term which was community-building in nature. Terms in this category grouped together certain types of hikers and were used as identifiers in order for hikers to find those similar to them. Included in this category were the terms, “NoBo,” “SoBo,” “Tramily,” and “2,000 miler.”

Trail Term Glossary

Definitions from:

Kathleen. "50 Thru-Hiking Terms Every Hiker Should Know." Kathleen Loves Yoga. February 03, 2019. Accessed April 04, 2019.

Cross-referenced with:

McLane, Kristin. "Thru-hiking: A Glossary of Terms • Outdoor Women's Alliance." Outdoor Women's Alliance®. May 26, 2018. Accessed April 04, 2019.

Cairn: A small tower of rocks used as a trail marker in areas where trees are scarce or used sentimentally as a monument.

Flip-flopper: One who hikes a large portion of a trail and then “flips up” to another location and hike back to where the first portion ended. This can be done to ensure the best weather along certain stretches of a trail or to avoid large groups of other hikers.

Hiker Trash: A term sometimes directed as an insult, but is usually taken as a compliment. Hiker trash is used to describe thru-hikers affectionately who have abandoned certain social norms and expectations, such as taking a shower, wearing deodorant, shaving and cleaning their clothes, causing them to become disheveled in appearance. Thru-hikers often closely resemble vagrants or homeless people at town stops along a long-distance hike and are frequently looking for a ride to/from town, beer, WIFI, and electrical outlets.

NoBo: Short for “northbound.” A northbound thru-hiker starting at the southern terminus of a long-distance trail and heading north. On the PCT, from Mexico to Canada or on the AT, from Georgia to Maine.

SoBo: Short for “southbound.” A southbound thru-hiker starting at the northern terminus of a long-distance trail and heading south. On the PCT, from Canada to Mexico on the AT, from Maine to Georgia.

The Trail Provides: A phrase and belief that when a hiker needs something the most, whether it be an emergency or during a difficult situation, the trail will provide the hiker with whatever it is they need when they need it. It’s the easiest way for hikers to explain why all of the random acts of kindness happen to them on the trail.

Trail Angels: Someone who provides trail magic for thru-hikers by offering a place to stay, a ride to/from town, cold drinks, food and/or replenishing water caches on the trail. Trail angels provide trail magic for the sake of helping other thru-hikers without expecting anything in return.

Trail Family (Tramily): The people thru-hikers meet on the trail and grow to love like family along their hike. Often these people become lifelong friends long after the long-distance hike has been completed.

Trail Magic: When a trail angel provides random acts of kindness to thru-hikers in the form of food, water, soda, beer, chairs to sit on, transportation, lodging, and gear.

Trail Name: A nickname or alias a thru-hiker earns on the trail. A trail name is often given to a hiker by another hiker because of a particularly memorable experience and there’s usually an interesting backstory. Most thru-hikers use a trail name along their long-distance hike.

Triple Crowner: A thru-hiker who completes hiking all three major US hiking trails: The Pacific Crest Trail (PCT), The Appalachian Trail (AT), and The Continental Divide Trail (CDT.)

Yogi-ing: When a thru-hiker is able to drop hints, charm, persuade, or otherwise convince strangers and/or day hikers to provide trail magic for them like giving food or drinks or getting a

ride into town without directly asking for it. The concept comes from Yogi the Bear who managed to obtain picnic baskets from unsuspecting campers.

2,000 Miler: Any individual who has hiked the entire Appalachian Trail, regardless of time spent doing so, and regardless of the AT's exact length upon completion.

Once I had established a general knowledge of hiking language through the process of constructing a glossary, I began transcribing the Youtube videos in order to put all of the data into Dedoose, a program designed to allow for qualitative data to be understood and analyzed in a quantitative sense. My goal in this process was to see the prevalence of certain terms across thru-hiking testimonies.

All of the experiences of trail magic noted in the blogs, vlogs, and social media postings were coded for three categories; the emotional response of the hiker, a statement from a trail angel, and the presence of trail magic. Within the category of trail magic, I coded for five sub-categories, food, water, shelter, transportation, and miscellaneous acts of kindness.

Analysis

My primary "informant" on trail culture was a thru-hiker who went by the name "Darwin." Darwin is a bit of an unusual case, as he made the decision not to return to society after completing his thru-hike. In 2014 Darwin and his wife, who is only identified by her own trail name, "Snuggles," both quit their jobs, sold nearly everything that they owned, and left. On why they did so, Darwin said that he and his wife, "left our home town for good in search of adventure, culture, and the true meaning of happiness" (DarwinOnTheTrail 2016).

Darwin's content provided a deep look into life on the trail. Along with videos discussing gear and things every hiker should know, Darwin has created almost television series-esque content of his thru-hikes. He completed the PCT in the summer of 2018 and posted 15-20 minute

episodes each week of his progress and experience on the trail. These included many instances of trail magic. While this research was being conducted, Darwin has been in the process of thru-hiking a shorter trail in the continental United States, the Arizona Trail (AT). Similar to how he cataloged life on the PCT, Darwin has uploaded a video each week. These videos are comprised of daily experiences, challenges, trail magic, and hikers Darwin meets through his travels.

	Emotional	Trail Angel	Trail Magic	Act of Kind	Food	Shelter	Transport	Water
Vlog 5	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
Vlog 4	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Vlog 3	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	0
Vlog 2	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0
Vlog 1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Blog 9	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0
Blog 8	0	1	0	1	1	0	0	0
Blog 7	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Blog 6	1	0	0	0	1	0	1	1
Blog 5	1	0	0	1	1	0	1	0
Blog 4	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0
Blog 3	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0
Blog 2	0	0	1	1	1	0	1	1
Blog 10	0	0	0	1	1	0	1	0
Blog 1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0

A total of 15 thru-hiker accounts were transcribed and coded in Dedoose. Five of the accounts were in the form of video logs, and the remaining ten were published blog postings. The posts were selected at random, and all of them were created during or shortly after the 2018 thru-hike season. Of all the postings, only one did not make reference to trail magic or trail angels in any capacity. Food was mentioned a total of ten times. Random acts of kindness in any form were mentioned a total of eight times. Six trail angels directly spoke to the content creators and explained why they engage in trail magic. Emotional responses to the kindness and the general concept of trail magic were each mentioned four times, and water and shelter were each

mentioned as received forms of trail magic twice.

Interestingly enough, time and time again across these accounts the hikers would address how they did not think that they could complete the journey without the presence of trail angels. The presence of trail angels seems to be what allows thru-hikers to reconcile their relationship with society. They experience act of compassion after act of compassion, and these acts allow them to fulfill their dream. This is a behavior which does not occur on such a frequent or grand scale in traditional American society. In a capitalist society where productive labor is equated with moral value, the trail offers thru-hikers the option to explore morality in this limitless and far more generous capacity. A thru-hiker completing the PCT in the summer of 2018 explained it, “The beauty of life on trail is that you can be having the worst day, and then you round a corner to find a smiling stranger telling you you’re awesome and handing you a cold soda. Everyone on trail has a fond memory of an especially kind trail angel, or of a trail magic encounter that was particularly clutch. Trail angels make the thru-hiker world go ‘round’ (Eller 2018).

In analyzing these testimonies, I found that thru-hikers become deeply grateful for even the smallest acts of kindness. Perhaps this is what allows them to view kind strangers as magical beings. In a lifestyle where there is no extravagance, where every item you carry is carefully calculated to provide you just enough to get into the next resupply town, a simple candy bar handed out by a stranger in a trailside parking lot can be the greatest of meals. One blogger described his new attachment to minutiae as follows, “As I indulged in their food I found myself suddenly emotional at the gravity of it all — starting the trail, being treated like royalty by these kind strangers at camp, etc. — and turned away to control the involuntary tears that were starting

to well up. Want to make a thru-hiker cry? Give them a boiled egg and a cold domestic beer” (Eller, 2018). The powerful emotions evoked by simple kindness show how feeling seen and cared for on the trail takes on a different and more intense meaning than it does at “home.”

A natural bond forms between the individuals who opt into such a long-term and exhausting affair. As they hike and meet others with the same dream of making it to the trail’s end, hikers will become inaugurated into the thru-hiking subculture. Every step they take is on the path of those who dreamed before them, and those they walk with have a similar goal of completing a most difficult journey. A trail is a place of trials and hopes, and faith in the idea that with the help of a little “magic” and a few “angels,” their dream of completion can be realized.

Conclusion

Ultimately, it seems that the kindness of strangers is integral to life on the trail. As a hiker moves through the trail, they walk through a realm which is created by others. The path beneath their feet exists because of those who walked before them. It is not solely nature which buoys them, but the kindness and compassion of strangers. In a multitude of ways, the trail is the liminal space between bitterness and renewed faith.

As the data from video logs and blogs showed, trail magic influences a hiker’s experience on the trail. The magic provided by these angels renews the hope that hikers had lost in society. In a capitalist world, where a person’s worth is frequently defined by their level of productivity, the trail offers an alternative pathway. One person’s success does not hinder the chance of another’s, and individuals are able to root for one another without competition for resources. Much of what makes this egalitarian, liminal space possible is the presence of this magic. With

the echoes of past hikers paving the steps forward, and angels rooting each thru-hiker on, an impossible journey becomes feasible.

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