

HIKING THROUGH



One man's journey to
peace and freedom on
the Appalachian Trail



PAUL STUTZMAN



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Author's Note

Additional photos from my Appalachian Trail adventure can be viewed at my website, www.hikingthrough.com. I hope they add to your enjoyment of this book.

In this book, I'll only be using "real" trail names if their owners have given me permission. This gives all you hikers opportunity for plausible denial when your spouse reads some of these adventures and says, "Hey, honey, that sounds like you. You did *what*?" You, my guilty trail friends, can just act innocent and say, "Nope. Not me. I would never do anything that dumb."

Prologue

Cautiously, I stepped on the narrow boards traversing the bog. Two weeks of almost constant rain had brought the water to the top of the wooden walkway, and at several points the path was completely submerged. A tenuous passage, this was the only route available through the swamp that stood between me and the peak of the mountain.

I was nearly to the top of Mt. Success in New Hampshire, and after crossing this bog and summiting the mountain, I would be less than two miles from Maine, the fourteenth and final state in my thru-hike of the Appalachian Trail.

The *click, click, click* of my hiking poles was the only sound I heard as I crossed the shimmering quagmire. Over the years, rain had accumulated here and created a primordial soup of water five feet deep, seasoned with decaying trees, vegetation, and insects. As I planted my left hiking pole on a half-submerged board, the tip of the pole slipped away and the momentum of the thirty-pound pack on my back destroyed my precarious balance. I heard my own shrill

scream of “Oh God, no!” and the bog added a weary hiker as another ingredient in its murky depth.

I sank up to my backpack in the muck. Like a drowning man flailing for a lifesaver, I scrambled to escape, grabbing the board where I’d been walking just seconds earlier, leaning forward over its steadfastness, slowly wriggling my body out of the bog’s grasp. As I lay frightened and gasping on the narrow wooden path, I saw the picture of myself covered in decaying muck and slime, and muttered, “Congratulations, Mom and Dad, it’s a boy.”

I lay there for several minutes, contemplating the journey that had brought me to this lonely spot where I was exhausted, indescribably filthy, and facing who-knows-what around every bend. I could have been warm and dry and well-fed at home. I could have been back at work, in a safe routine, productive, earning a paycheck. *Oh, wait—I gave all that up so I could be out here alone in this cold, rainy, godforsaken bog.*



The Big C

It always happens to someone else. A knock on the door late at night while parents lie in bed wondering why a child is not yet home. A call from the hospital saying a spouse is waiting in the emergency room and heart-wrenching decisions must be made. For me, it had always happened to someone else; death's bony finger had lifted people out of my sphere, but so far that grim reaper had only worked at the periphery of my life.

That all changed with one phone call.

My wife, Mary, called me at the restaurant I had managed for seventeen years. Her strained voice said, "It's malignant."

My mind raced—benign, malignant—which was good news, which was bad? I couldn't remember.

"What does that mean?"

“I have cancer.” The words jerked out between sobs. I told Mary I was coming home, hung up the phone, dropped my head into my hands, and for the first time in years, wept.

The daily calendar on my desk caught my eye. On that day, August 30, 2002, the meditation came from the lyrics of an old song I had often sung growing up in the Conservative Mennonite Church, “God of Grace and God of Glory.”

I ripped off the calendar page, thinking that I was indeed going to need the wisdom and courage spoken of in the song; but I did not know how desperately I would need help in the coming months. That page is still tucked away in my Bible.

At home, Mary and I held each other and determined to battle the disease together—my wife, with her faith and spirit, and me beside her every step of the way.

After my high school graduation in 1969, I worked as an orderly at a local hospital. Every morning, the night shift gave us reports and updates on the patients in our care. The charge nurse’s habit was to use the letter C whenever cancer was in a report, so that became our lingo, never using the actual word *cancer*.

That word strikes fear in people from all walks of life and all economic brackets. However, if caught early and given proper treatment, many types of cancer can be cured or controlled; a diagnosis of cancer today is not always a pronouncement of imminent death. For Mary, it was breast cancer, and we would soon become all too familiar with its statistics. One in eight women will be diagnosed with breast cancer. It sounds more optimistic to say that seven out of eight women will never suffer with this disease. Yet almost

everyone will surely know someone—maybe someone dear to them—diagnosed with breast cancer.

Unfortunately for Mary, the diagnosis came too late. With cancer in her family history, she had been faithful in yearly checkups and mammograms. Several years before, her mammogram showed a spot, but we were told it appeared to be only a calcium deposit. In retrospect, we should have sought another opinion, but regrettably we did not. We were oblivious to the growing danger, until menopause reared its ugly head.

Mary's difficulties during menopause had become frustrating, so she sought the counsel of a doctor recommended as an expert on menopause. But the menopause nuisances suddenly became secondary when the doctor learned about the abnormality in Mary's latest mammogram. She immediately ordered another test, followed by a biopsy.

And now the results were in: that big C was written on the chart of Mary's life. My wife was now that one woman in eight.

Our children must be told. The two oldest were living at home and were soon informed. But our youngest daughter was three hours away, at college, and Mary decided to drive to western Ohio and spend the weekend with her. Realizing that mother and daughter needed the time together, I decided to stay at home.

That meant a weekend apart from my wife, and we'd been dealt a numbing blow. I found myself reverting to one of my own stress-relievers, dreaming about hiking in the woods without a care. For years, one of my favorite daydreams had been about thru-hiking the Appalachian Trail (AT). I nursed the dream tenderly, but never thought it could become reality.

Mary knew how much I loved hiking, and I had often shared my dream with her. So with my wife's blessing, I did more than daydream. While she visited our daughter, I spent my weekend at Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, the headquarters for the AT.

Harpers Ferry is where abolitionist John Brown raided the U.S. Armory in his fight against slavery. Today it is also the location of the Appalachian Trail Conservancy. The state of West Virginia has only four miles of the 2,176 that make up the Appalachian Trail, and those four miles of trail go right through this little town.

I explored a small section of trail in both directions from town. A short distance south is Jefferson Rock, a high stone outlook where Thomas Jefferson once stood and admired the view of the Potomac and Shenandoah rivers rushing together in the valley below. I walked a little farther south to where U.S. Highway 340 crosses the Shenandoah River. There, the Appalachian Trail disappears up into the surrounding hills. What was up there, around the next bend, over the next mountain? I stood for a long time, contemplating what it would be like to hike the thousand miles from Harpers Ferry to Springer Mountain, Georgia, the trail's southern terminus.

I promised myself that one day I would come hiking out of those woods and down into Harpers Ferry. I'd cross town and follow the trail across the footbridge over the Potomac River and hike along the C&O Canal Towpath northward into Maryland, exploring every bend in the trail, soaking up every scene, with my sights set on the AT's northern terminus, mighty Mt. Katahdin in Baxter State Park, Maine.

Someday.

After stopping at the Appalachian Trail Conservancy, where I picked up some valuable trail information, I wanted

to visit one more historical site. St. Peter's Roman Catholic Church, built in 1833, was the only church in Harpers Ferry to escape destruction during the Civil War. Its steeple soars above the little town, and the trail passes within several feet of the church's front door.

I'd never been inside a Catholic church in my life. But I felt compelled to enter this church to pray.

I was the only person in the sanctuary. I knelt and prayed for Mary and our family, for strength and wisdom for the journey ahead. I believed that God could heal my wife if He chose, and I pleaded with Him for that healing.

This Conservative Mennonite boy was on his knees in the old Catholic church, knowing how much we needed what only God could give.

We would fight. We determined to learn everything we could about breast cancer. We knew that the right treatment increased the survival rate for breast cancer patients. We were hopeful that would be the case for Mary. We researched, looking for the place to get the best treatment. We soon learned that health insurance coverage would define our choices.

Discussions with Mary's doctor and the insurance company determined that a mastectomy was necessary. The next week was full of meetings with staff and surgeons, one of whom was the plastic surgeon who would immediately construct a new breast, using both an implant and muscle tissue from Mary's back.

A mastectomy. Removal of the entire breast. But we discovered that the insurance company was required to pay not just for the reconstruction of a new breast, but also for any

necessary procedure to then make both breasts symmetrical. At some point, Mary could have a nip and tuck done on her other breast. My wife was delighted—rather than focusing on losing one breast, she was excited about having two new ones. That was my wife.

We approached her surgery, which was scheduled for the first week of October, with optimism. Mary was convinced everything would be fine and refused to even use the word *cancer*. The surgery seemed to go well. We sat in her hospital room afterward, waiting for her oncologist and hoping that the worst was behind us.

The doctor arrived and took a seat by Mary's bed. The surgery had gone well, he reported, but they had also removed numerous lymph nodes.

Then the doctor got up, walked across the room, and closed the door. Dread washed over me.

The cancer had metastasized to Mary's liver. The prognosis was not good. The cancer was already stage IV, the final, extreme, worst stage of development. There would be no cure, no stopping the disease. The only thing that could be done was to contain it as long as possible.

Did I even want to know? Regardless, I had to ask. "How much time do we have?"

We were stunned by the reply: several months, maybe several years, depending on Mary's response to treatment.

The bottom dropped out of our lives.

The doctor discussed treatments and then left us alone to hold each other and cry. But later that night in her hospital bed, Mary awoke to a feeling she described as the hand of

God, reaching down and holding her. She was filled with incredible peace, and she was convinced God was going to heal her.

Through years of surgeries and setbacks, my wife never wavered from that belief. Chemotherapy left her sick and humiliated at the loss of all her hair. Countless blood tests and treatments made it increasingly difficult to locate good veins in her arms, so one surgery installed a port in her shoulder to allow insertion of a needle. But the port only worked temporarily, so another surgery removed it. Then there was an infection around her implant and another surgery removed that. Every setback that occurred was met with “All will be well” from Mary, and I marveled at her positive attitude.

Over several years, we adjusted to new routines. Our life was now built around chemotherapy, hospital trips, and blood tests. My wife had many good friends who helped out by driving her to tests and treatments, and sometimes life even felt almost normal.

But early in 2006, we knew that the battle was not going well. Mary’s weight kept dropping, and she was growing weaker. It was gut-wrenching for me, a healthy man, to watch the girl I dated, fell in love with, and married, now weakening, fading away, shriveling. I begged God to either heal Mary, as we felt He had promised, or take her home. Mary never lost her faith in God or her belief that she would be healed. How I admired her courage.

The day came when the doctor called our family into his office and advised that it was time to consider hospice care. And wow! What a reaction from Mary! She informed us all that it was *not* going to happen, since hospice care was for people who were dying. Not until the final week of her life

did she relent, and even then she declared *she* did not need it, but if *we* needed help, then she would allow it.

The first week of September 2006 was so very painful, as one by one, friends and relatives came to say their good-byes. Thursday evening, September 7, surrounded by myself and our three children, Mary took her last breath and then was gone from our lives.

What a harsh reality. My wife of thirty-two years was no longer alive. It had happened, but I almost couldn't comprehend the reality of it. I had watched her body deteriorate, but always I clung to the hope that God would heal her, that her dying and leaving us would never actually happen.

As our family sat and cried together, waiting for the funeral home to pick up Mary's body, I could not help but wonder what glorious things she was seeing. As a Christian, I believed that she was finally at rest, totally healed, seeing things and experiencing a life that my mind could not comprehend or imagine.

The following days were filled with the decisions we all postpone thinking about: choosing a coffin, finding a gravesite, writing an obituary, setting details about visitation and the funeral service. To make these decisions before your own passing is a great consideration for those you leave behind, who must deal with all those details at a time when thinking is numbed.

My family was on autopilot, moving through the days and decisions because we had to. Friends, family, and church surrounded us with care. On Sunday, September 10, we held a graveside service, followed by a memorial for Mary. It was an emotional time, and I realized how important the church

family was to us and how fortunate we were to have a pastor and his wife who cared for their flock.

Reality hit that evening, after everyone had left my house. I knew then I was alone—completely, utterly alone. I had depended so much on my wife, and already I missed her terribly. In despair, I went to God. I knelt by my bed and thanked God for giving me thirty-two years with Mary. I asked for wisdom as I went on alone. And I prayed I could help others facing similar sadness and grief.

I did not know then what direction God would take me in. I only hurt.

But when I finished my prayer, the seed of an idea had been planted along the edge of my mind. That seed held the small beginnings of a plan.



The Plan

It seems to me that women handle grief better than men do. Perhaps women are more community-minded; they have a wider circle of friends and are willing to speak more openly about their emotions. Unfortunately, when pain descends upon us men we react as we've been taught: keep emotions in check and solve the problem.

Men may treat bereavement as just another of life's problems. We need to devise a solution—the sooner the better—and end the pain. And the solution for many men appears to be finding another woman to replace the lost loved one. (I'm convinced there are men who use the memorial service for their spouse as a screening tool for potential candidates.) Find another wife, re-create the life that has been lost, problem solved. Grief gone.

But stoicism and all our problem-solving skills cannot bring real recovery from grief. Until and unless we live through

and understand our pain, we will never be a good partner to anyone in the future.

Good old Webster defines grief as “intense emotional suffering caused by loss.” Right as he may be, it doesn’t sound much like he’s experienced that suffering. Here’s my description, born of living through it:

grief (grēf) 1. helplessness and hopelessness 2. an elevator that only goes down 3. a black hole of emotions that traps one in its vortex 4. stepping out of an airplane without a parachute, welcoming impact as relief from the pain 5. desperately wanting to have life return to what it once was.

Two voices clamor through the cloud of grief. One still believes that by some miraculous intervention of God, life might yet return to normal; the other voice replies that everything has been irrevocably changed forever. The road to recovery opens only after these two voices can be reconciled.

For me, as for everyone, that road to recovery wound through a landscape of regret. Reflecting on the years Mary and I had together, I mourned the time we had wasted on silly disagreements and lamented that I had spent too much time at work, leaving the task of raising our children to my wife. I sorrowed that I had, indeed, taken Mary and our life together for granted.

On my path through the pain, I read several books on grief, determined to understand what grief was, why we grieve, and how to recover. I also joined a grief recovery group at our church; I highly recommend such support to anyone who has lost a loved one.

Healing came in other ways as well. In the fall after Mary’s death, my cousin joined me for two days of hiking in Utah’s

Zion Canyon. I once again experienced the soothing and healing power of nature. I realized how helpful it was to discuss my feelings of loss and regret with another male and to trust another person with my thoughts and feelings. As I worked my way up the narrow but exhilarating Angels Landing Trail, I reflected on my marriage and how easily I had slipped into taking my wife for granted. I wondered how I would have been different as a husband if I had known that our days together would be over too soon.

On the flight home, I considered the balm brought by just two days of hiking and wondered if a much longer hike might translate into continued healing. And I wanted to somehow link such a hike to my new message for men: *don't take your spouse and family for granted.*

The plan was starting to take root.

One of the first lessons in Grief 101 is a caution against making any big, life-changing decisions for at least one year. That includes buying or selling your home, quitting or changing jobs, or getting remarried. Making major choices while your emotions are all jumbled up and you're unable to think clearly is opening the door to disaster. If you're fortunate enough to have some assets built up, there may be children, grandchildren, heirs, in-laws, outlaws, ruffians, and assorted vultures circling, eyeing a hoped-for endowment. Fortunately, I was not cursed with a great deal of money, so there were no grief groupies hanging around. I had three children who loved me, a church family that cared for me, and a good job. At least part of my life was still intact.

My job took on new meaning. No longer just a means to pay for house, cars, and college tuition, my work at the restaurant became the environment where I most felt a sense of normalcy. I had lost my spouse, but I still had a reason to get up each morning. Day by day, week by week, time dragged by; but the job routine was safe and predictable.

The route to work passed the cemetery where we had buried my wife. For several months, I thought of Mary as soon as that hillside came into view. One day, I realized I was a mile beyond the cemetery; I'd passed it and not felt my eyes drawn there. As the weeks went by, the one mile stretched to two, then three, until finally there were nights I drove all the way home without thinking about the gravesite on the hill. Those increasing distances seemed to measure my progress on the path toward recovery.

As the one-year anniversary of Mary's death approached, a road trip seemed like a good idea. Thinking I could leave the safety of my work environment, I planned a solo trip to New Orleans. But my timing was terrible. I left on the eve of the anniversary of Mary's death, and by the time I was sixty miles from home, loneliness hijacked all my plans. Memories flooded back, and driving away from my home and safe routine of work, I realized again how alone I was. Emotions overwhelmed me and the tears started to roll. I wasn't ready to be *this* alone. Crying like a baby, I turned the car around and went back home.

Yes, there had been much healing in a year, yet that one-year anniversary was a brutal reminder of all that I'd lost.

But I had survived a year, with its ups and downs, the hurt and the healing. I had survived the first year.

I had worked in food service for almost twenty-five years. There had been great satisfactions in those years, some simply from successful management of a busy place, but many also from relationships on the job. We often employed younger people, inexperienced and working their first jobs. I had the opportunity to be not only a boss, but also a mentor to young adults learning how to function in a workplace. One day, while I waited in a hospital with Mary, a young intern entered the room with Mary's oncologist. "Paul, what are *you* doing here?" the intern exclaimed. She was a young lady who had worked her very first job at my restaurant, and that day in the hospital she thanked me for encouraging her to pursue her dream of becoming a doctor.

But the years had also brought frustrating changes to the hospitality industry. Workplace issues arose that I had never imagined earlier in my career. We had to deal with tattoos, body piercings, sexual harassment, sexual identity crises, anorexia, bulimia, and those ever-present necessities for kids, cell phones and iPods. It was a whole new ballgame. "What do you mean *rules*? You expect me to work without talking on my cell phone?" And these kids were becoming legal scholars: they came to work with more metal protruding from their bodies than most modern cars, and couldn't understand a manager who insisted on following a silly employee manual. "You will hear from my dad's attorney," I was told more than once.

Customers were also becoming more demanding. It's the manager's job to handle unhappy customers. Most of those situations can be easily handled, and of course there are always a few legitimate complaints. But as most restaurant managers will attest, there are customers who visit your

establishment with only one goal: a free meal. After long years in the business, I knew most of their tricks. The manager must be the arbiter of what is fact and what is fiction. After twenty-five years, customer complaints and employee issues had taken a toll.

The beginning of the end for me came on a Friday night, shortly after my aborted trip to New Orleans.

One of my servers informed me that we had an irate customer. He had ordered our largest chicken dinner, and—sure enough—that very last piece did not look good to him. I had observed his many trips to the salad bar, and I knew there was nothing wrong with his meal. I approached his booth and immediately recognized Trouble. Years of being in the people business had turned me into something of a self-made psychologist. (While my employees were becoming self-made attorneys, I was becoming the restaurant shrink.)

It is with mingled shame and pride that I admit to completely mishandling the situation. I sized him up. My problem was a vertically challenged, steroid-pumped weight lifter. Please note that I have no problem with weight lifting, bodybuilding, or any attempts to improve one's body. But this guy was obviously addicted to his bodybuilding. You know the type—short in stature with a protruding chest, above which his neck had somehow melted into his shoulders. He should have worn a sign: "I need attention. I am very insecure."

"What's the problem?" I asked.

That little head swiveled on the steroid-enhanced shoulders, face livid, veins bulging. And Trouble informed me his chicken was "no good." I made him aware that I knew of his many trips to the salad bar, and I was also certain there

was nothing wrong with his chicken, especially since he had already eaten most of it.

Not the response he wanted. He unhinged. Swollen arms flailed. In a rage, he cursed and screamed, “Are you calling me a liar?”

Yes, I agreed with him, he was a liar. Must have pushed the wrong button there too, because then he offered to kill me. By then, every Christian tenet I had ever been taught (such as *love thy enemy*) had left me, and I was savoring the idea of tearing him apart, limb by overinflated limb. But I thought better of it, since he could have squeezed the life out of me like a boa constrictor.

He hurled more invectives, went through another round of profanities, and then left, shouting to the entire dining room that he would *never* come back to this restaurant. I assured him that never would be too soon.

Later in the evening, my own rage past, I reflected on my new approach to handling customer complaints. My response was the result of years of cumulative stress. The whole scene had been like a final pounding of the gavel that told me, “It’s time to leave.”

That night as I passed the cemetery I looked toward Mary’s grave and whispered, “I think it’s time.”

Mary and I had always thought we would work hard, get out of debt, retire early, and then enjoy doing some mission project to benefit others. In May of 2006, I made our last house payment. I took the envelope with the final payment to the hospital where Mary lay.

“This is it, Mary. No more debt.”

“That’s wonderful!” she replied.

Wonderful, indeed, but what price had we paid? Within four months, my wife was dead. All those things we were going to do together were now impossible. We had spent a lifetime working toward that distant goal, making promises to ourselves that now we could never fulfill. Sure, it’s important to plan for the future, but think about this: You’ve had the gift of yesterday and you are living today with its choices and opportunities, but who knows if you will have tomorrow? You’ve heard it time and again, but I will tell you—and I know it’s true, because the painful lesson is etched into my yesterday—no one has a guarantee of tomorrow. That’s why it is so important *today* to tell our spouses and loved ones what they mean to us.

On the night the enraged weight lifter faced the equally enraged restaurant manager, I took a look at my life. If I was serious about taking each day that God gave me and utilizing that day to help other people, then I would need to make a very difficult decision.

Driving to work the next morning, I asked God for a sign, some confirmation that it was time to leave the restaurant.

Early in my shift, I was called to the front desk. This time, the complainant was a middle-aged man delivering another profanity-laced tirade about the quality of our bacon. I curtly told him I would see what could be done about improving the lifestyle of the sacrificial hogs, and I walked away, shaking my head in disbelief that with all the problems facing humanity, I was dealing with a temper tantrum over pig fat!

In two consecutive shifts, I’d encountered the two most difficult customers of my restaurant career. *God, I know I asked You for a sign. But did You have to go this far? Of*

course, in my case, the shock treatment was probably necessary, because my fear of the unknown was greater than any discomfort in the present. It's why we often stay in jobs we don't find fulfilling and why people stay in abusive situations; we are frozen in place, unable to give up our known misery even for the promise of a happier tomorrow.

There was no doubt that I needed to step away from my position, but I also realized how important my job was. It was my identity and my safety net. I knew by then that my unknown tomorrow would involve hiking the Appalachian Trail. What would people think of my giving up a good job to go hiking in the woods?

The two customer encounters had brought everything into sharp focus for me, but there were also gentler pushes.

I'm at the age where I read obituaries. Beyond checking to see who is gone, I find the content of obituaries fascinating. What did people accomplish in their allotted years? What was important in their lives? Those long lists of organizations and activities—are people truly living, or just filling their schedules?

One day, with the two terror customers still raw in my memory, I finished reading that day's obituaries and pictured someone reading a column about my own demise in the hopefully distant future. What did I want those lines to say? That I worked all my life and was found dead in my office chair, done in by some crazed weight lifter? No, I wanted something much more interesting—both for me in life and for the readers of my history—something like: "After a successful restaurant career, Mr. S retired early and followed his dream of thru-hiking the Appalachian Trail and writing a book about everything he learned."

I once again asked God about the wisdom of leaving my job. I was still debating, but a question waved in my mind, a quiet, gentle question that I'm convinced came from God. *Would you give up your job if you knew I wanted you to?*

Of course I'd do it, was the automatic reply in my head. *It's time. Go. I will be there with you.*

The internal debate was over. I finally had the peace I needed to make this life-changing decision. I would quit my job. I would hike the AT. I would use the walk to deliver a message to men: *Don't take your spouse and family for granted. Enjoy today fully. Don't assume you have tomorrow to tell your loved ones what they mean to you.*

I would deliver the message whenever I could. But I had no way of knowing that on the trail God would deliver an even greater message to me.

One thing remained: my letter of resignation. Until this letter was written and sent, I could back away from this crazy idea. Even my dad, eighty-three years old and still working every day, questioned the wisdom of my decision.

I wanted to begin my hike by the end of March, and my company required a two-month notice to have an orderly transition of management. I waited until the last possible day, and wrote the letter.

I was convinced this decision was right; why was it still so difficult? I sat at my desk, the email to my boss composed, waiting on the computer screen in front of me. Fear and doubt paralyzed me; I could not hit that send button.

Instead, I wandered through the restaurant on a pilgrimage of memories through every department: bakery, kitchen, banquet rooms, dining rooms, wait stations, dish room, hostess

station, and even the Dumpster room. Long hours, customer complaints, and employee issues no longer filled my mind. Now I was reliving good times spent with great employees and wonderful customers. How could I survive without them? What was my life, if not the restaurant?

I can't quit.

You must quit.

Can't.

Must.

For several hours I vacillated. During my years of managing this place, my decisions had always been predicated on what was best for the restaurant. Now at last the question was: What is right for me? With tears streaming down my face, I sat down at my desk once again and hit *send*.