



**"I BEQUEATH MYSELF TO
THE DIRT TO GROW FROM
THE GRASS I LOVE.
IF YOU WANT ME AGAIN
LOOK FOR ME UNDER
YOUR BOOT-SOLES"**

Walt Whitman ~*A Song of Myself*

ON APRIL 1, 2003, I STOOD ON SPRINGER Mountain, Georgia, my eyes gazing north toward Katahdin. The morning was frigid, and I, at age 53, was to begin my hike of the Appalachian Trail. Approaching the first white blaze, the Trail marker atop of Springer Mountain, I saw two young hikers writing their first Trail journal entries. I could see their heartfelt efforts, telling of aspirations for the upcoming adventure they were about to depart on. Trail journals line the entire Appalachian Trail from Georgia to Maine. They are found in every shelter, every Trail town restaurant, and every hiker outfitter store. These journals traditionally have been a form of hiker communication; letting hikers behind you know when you have passed, what you have seen, and what you are feeling. These journal entries are usually creative, often illustrated, and fun to read. They become part of the history of the Appalachian Trail.

During my career as a dentist, I took notes and made patient chart entries on a daily basis. I dreaded the thought of Trail journals but I also wanted to participate in the tradition. I was trying to think of a rational compromise while waiting for the young hikers to finish expressing themselves and it came to me. While standing there in the brisk mountain air of Georgia, I struck upon an idea that I would carry out for the whole length of the Trail. Throughout my life I have been a fan of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. I especially like his poem "Song of the Open Road," which begins, "Afoot and light-hearted I take to the open road." I decided right then and there to use this line as my journal entry. I used this single entry in every

journal I wrote in over the next 2,000-plus miles.

On July 4, 2003, I stood on Bear Mountain in New York overlooking the Hudson River. I had hiked 1,394 miles since leaving Springer Mountain. It had been a very wet and long hike to this point. One of the more interesting sections on the A.T. is the walk through the Bear Mountain State Park Zoo. This zoo is located at the base of Bear Mountain and the A.T. hiker can enjoy a change of pace by following the white blaze through the zoo, passing the bears, the wild cats, and the monkeys. A favorite of all hikers is buying an ice cream sandwich from one of the zoo vendors. The Trail eventually exits the zoo and the hiker begins a scenic crossing of the Hudson River.

I was one of the first visitors that morning and I could not help but reflect on the ultimate freedom I felt while hiking the Appalachian Mountains. During my walk through the zoo, I looked up and unexpectedly found myself standing before a wonderful statue of Walt Whitman, entitled, *Song of the Open Road*. I was stunned. I had a lump in my throat and mist in my eyes. As I carefully read the very weathered inscription on the statue, I could make out the very words that carried me along on the Appalachian Trail: "Afoot and light-hearted I take to the open road."

When I arrived at the Ranger Station in Baxter Park on September 11, 2003, about to climb Katahdin, I made my final journal entry: "Afoot and light-hearted ..." ▲

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"As I See It" is a monthly column from guest contributors representing the full range of ATC partners, members, and volunteers. To submit a column for consideration, please email journeys@appalachiantrail.org or write to Editor/As I See It, Appalachian Trail Conservancy, P.O. Box 807, Harpers Ferry, WV 25425.