



It is so easy to want to hang on to the way things have always been, isn't it? Even if we don't realize that we are doing it. I don't know about you, but I find comfort in routine, in predictability.

I am an avid backpacker. I love getting away to the back country for days – no internet, nothing extraneous, all day long hiking in spectacular beauty, breathing fresh air, drinking only water, eating only what the body needs to resupply for the journey, sleeping under the stars. For me, it is magical. Now, to hear that you might

be led think that I'm some rugged adventurer. Which, in part, is true. But not completely.

The thing is, my backpacking has almost entirely been in the High Sierra of California – an area which has trails, maps, rangers, and for the most part, well maintained markings along the way. You don't actually have to be able to use a compass, though of course it is always recommended. You do need to be able to read the topographical map to know when to expect access to water, potential river crossings, and possible flat areas to camp. But, the thing is, there is a trail. For the most part, you follow the trail. There is no mystery as to where you are going – you are going that way.

It was not until one such backpacking adventure, when my traveling companions wanted to investigate a local peak that was definitely not on the trail that I realized – I am actually not as badass as I thought. Because, as soon as we began to hike off trail – going toward a very obvious landmark that would be hard to lose sight of – I felt a bit of a shift in my breathing. A shortness of breath. A bit of fear, even. I realized, it was the fear of going 'off trail.' The thing is, we were in a valley with a small peak – it was really quite obvious where we were

headed, and how to get back to the trail from which we had come. This was not some blizzard situation, where we couldn't see in front of us and were fighting for our lives. It was just a short jaunt off trail to see if we could get a nice view from a bit more altitude.

What I realized that day was how much I had come to rely on the trail. How much I had come to rely on knowing where we were going. On knowing that there was a path, a plan, and that our job was to simply follow the path. As soon as I was 'off trail' all of a sudden all of that security melted and I felt vulnerable, a bit afraid if I were to admit it, and as though I were losing my sense of orientation. The adventure was fun as long as it seemed safe and somewhat controlled. As long as there was some sort of predictability, some sort of knowing what lay ahead.

Off trail all of a sudden there were no guarantees, no assurances, no idea where to place the next step, no idea how long the journey would take or how we would get back to the normalcy of the trail. I found that it did not feel liberating, but rather on some level, terrifying. So much for the badass back country backpacker that I thought I was.

I wonder if these strange times that we find ourselves in are not similar...? We find ourselves just 'wanting to get back on the path' – to pick up where we left off, and to continue on the journey that we thought we were on. There is a longing to go back to normal. To get things back to the way they were, back to the way they should be. A desire to find the trail and get back to business.

But I wonder, what if the new normal is that there is no trail? What if the journey we are heading into is one that requires new skills, different skills, a different way of being in the world? What might that look like? What might that invite us into? What might we need to learn, like a hiker learning to use the compass, learning to read the landscape, to gain a deeper sense of knowing than simply walking the trail required?

Of course, we don't have answers to these questions. We don't know where this journey is leading us, individually, and collectively. Perhaps

there will be some sort of return to normal, whatever that is. But even in the midst of that, what changes will have happened within us, that will lead us into a different way of being in this new world?

It can be so easy to want to cling to what was. To grasp for something that feels familiar, that feels known. To find the routine of the old days, the old ways, that we might be missing. I wonder, instead of grasping, instead of clinging, if what might be required of us is instead to let go, so that we might receive...?