

BACKPACKING THE LONG TRAIL:
SACRED RITUAL IN VERMONT'S
GREEN MOUNTAINS

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For my family, friends,
and fellow hikers

I am because you are

ABSTRACT

Backpacking the Long Trail: Sacred Ritual in Vermont's Green Mountains

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In 2010 over 150 people completed their end-to-end hike on the Long Trail, a wilderness hiking trail through Vermont, bringing the official total to over 4,000 completed hikes.

The Long Trail runs 273 miles from the Massachusetts border up to Canada, traversing the ridge line of the Green Mountains. For those who have hiked the trail, why do they desire to challenge themselves in a prolonged wilderness experience? Furthermore, in what ways does a journey on the Long Trail impact hikers' lives?

In this paper, I explore the subculture of long distance backpacking on the Long Trail as religious practice in two parallel tracts. First I argue that the Long Trail is a sacred space and hiking the trail a sacred experience. Several aspects of long distance hikes on the trail are earmarks of traditional religion, including philosophical and ethical systems, rites of passage, pilgrimages, instructional and inspirational texts, and rituals.

The second part of the paper explores the ways that hiking the Long Trail impacts hikers' lives. I analyze the reasons that people decide to hike the trail and what the pilgrimage experience offers hikers. Additionally, how does hiking the Long Trail transform attitudes and worldviews, or perhaps serve as a healing experience or as the grounds of romantic bliss. I propose that long distance backpacking on the Long Trail can

not only drive an ethic of environmental conservation but also inspire a greater ethical shift, as many hikers seek to incorporate a more simplistic and non-materialistic approach to their everyday lives.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	vii
1: At The Trailhead	1
Methodology	6
2: Blazing the Trail: Boundaries of Religion and Nature-Based Spirituality	12
Lived Religion	12
Nature Religion and Nature-Based Spirituality	15
Outdoor Recreation Spirituality	18
3: A Footpath in the Wilderness	24
Hike Your Own Hike	25
Take Only Photos, Leave Only Footprints	27
Trail Names and Naming	28
“Change the world, one hiker at a time” - Angels and Magic	29
Breathing	32
Embodied Practice	33
Rituals of the Trail	35
4: The Trail Journey	38
Geography and Ecosystem	38
Pilgrimage	41
Solo or with Companions	48
5: The Journey Within	51
Why Hike?	51
Meaning Making	52

Healing	56
Significant Others	58
From the Trail to Everyday Life	61
Constructing Worldview	63
6: Hiking Out	67
Appendix A: Map of the Long Trail	73
Appendix B: Research Questionnaire	74
Appendix C: Long Trail Guidebooks	78
Bibliography	80

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1: At The Trailhead

In every walk with nature one receives far more than he seeks. ~ John Muir¹

It was day thirteen of my solo hiking journey on the Long Trail when I wrote in my journal, “I’ve been hoping for some revelations while I’m out here. Today one hit me. I’ve got wonderfully supportive friends and family. They’ve been supportive through this daunting challenge. I’ll be sure to thank them all when I’m done.” Those thoughts comforted me later that evening when I spent my first night alone in a shelter. The following two days were some of my toughest on the trail—temperatures in the low 40s and bone-chilling rain made me starkly aware of my mortality. No matter how hard I hiked with a 30+ pound pack and my rain jacket on, I could not get warm. If anything was to happen that would prevent me from walking, I could very easily be facing hypothermia. As a beacon of hope, day sixteen was a planned visit with my friends Sara and Colin in the Mad River Valley. I would be able to hang out and enjoy some time off the trail, including real meals, hot showers, and a comfortable bed. After coming down from the mountains, I spent the afternoon laying on the lawn with a bandana covering my eyes as protection from the sun that had been elusive all summer. Footsteps through the grass raised my suspicion, but before I could uncover my eyes, two of my best friends had pounced on me. Just a few days after my realization and appreciation for my friends

¹ John Muir, *Steep Trails*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1918: 128.

and family, Darius and Hilary had traveled from Buffalo and Baltimore, respectively, to surprise me during my Long Trail adventure.

This experience—my revelation, as I call it—was deeply meaningful to me, and has influenced my life every day since. And as a whole, my journey on the Long Trail was memorable and meaningful in many ways, most notably it was a quest for me to rediscover myself and rejuvenate myself during the transitional period before starting graduate studies in religion that fall. Hiking the Long Trail, as I now articulate, was a spiritual journey of meaning making. But was this experience unique for me? Do other hikers have their own meaningful journeys on the Long Trail that is religious or spiritual? I postulated that there is a great story to be told of the ways the Long Trail is a spiritually meaningful journey.

Each year over 200,000 people experience walking on the Long Trail, a 273 mile wilderness footpath in Vermont. While the vast majority will only sample a small portion of the trail, a few people will hike the trail in its entirety, walking across the ridge line of the Green Mountains from Massachusetts to Canada. In 2010, 182 people applied for and received certification of completing their end-to-end hikes adding to the total of over 4,000 certified hikers, with undoubtedly countless other unreported hikes.² Some choose to take on the physically, mentally, and spiritually challenging trail in one continuous

² The certification process requires hikers to submit a one page application form along with a copy of their hiking journal. In interviews with hikers who have completed the trail but have not submitted an end-to-end application, almost all were indifferent rather than deliberate in not submitting applications. As one hiker noted, “it doesn’t matter if my hike is ‘certified,’ I still hiked the trail.”

journey, known as a thru-hike, while others complete the trail in segments, known as section hiking.

For those without an affinity for hiking or backpacking, such a journey may seem an inconceivable length of time away from modern comforts and technology. For others, including many hikers, the challenge of hiking 273 miles across the entire state of Vermont seems daunting or impossible. But those who have hiked the trail offer very different characterizations, and their experiences offer insights into why they desire to challenge themselves in a prolonged wilderness experience.

How does a journey on the Long Trail transform hiker's lives? Many hikers report that the trail is an inspiring experience, that they are instilled with a new confidence, or that they gain deep insights into themselves or the world in which they inhabit. From my own experience, I set out on the trail to learn something (intentionally vague) and to get back to who I was after a difficult five year relationship. The Long Trail was the setting where I could be restored and where I was destined to learn something profound. It was to be a journey, a pilgrimage to Canada, in which I would define who I am. By the end of my journey, I knew that I needed hiking and nature for nourishment. The experience of the trail is what I desire—I was as hikers say 'bitten by the hiker bug'. My own experience has led me to question in what ways is hiking the Long Trail a sacred ritual or spiritual experiences for other hikers?

This paper will explore the significant religious and spiritual dimensions within the subculture of long distance hiking³ on the Long Trail. I argue that long distance backpacking on the Long Trail constitutes a form of religious experience for some and that hikers' journeys on the Long Trail can be spiritually meaningful. In respect to religious experience I find the descriptions of experiences of many who hike the Long Trail to form a loose but organized system which includes many characteristics found in traditional religion. In particular, components of philosophical and ethical systems, rites of passage, material expressions, breathing/body rituals, and other repetitive rituals are present in extended journeys on the Long Trail. On the individual level, many hikers' journeys are spiritually transformative experiences. Instances of meaning making, healing, and worldview construction characterize the spiritual significance of hiking the Long Trail. Furthermore, following their experiences on the Long Trail, hikers are often inspired to an environmental ethic of wilderness conservation and non-materialistic daily lifestyles, which many scholars argue are, for some, akin to nature spirituality or nature religion (Taylor 2001a, 2001b, 2007b, 2010, Sanford 2007, Snyder 2007).

In analyzing the spiritual and religious dimensions of long distance backpacking on the Long Trail, I hope to illuminate this deeply meaningful and important practice to scholars of religion. Some hikers explicitly consider their journeys as religious or spiritual, while others are hesitant because it falls outside their traditional understandings of religion. Yet they all head out onto the trail for a prolonged wilderness experience

³ I use the terms hiking and backpacking interchangeably, despite the latter being an advanced level of the former. For use in this paper, both will refer to long distance journeys on the trail.

seeking something. Interpreting their experiences from a religious studies perspective will contribute to the increasingly diverse and complex scholarship on understanding the ways that individuals make sense of their lives and the world in which they inhabit. Particularly, this work is both framed by and contributes to the subfields of lived religion, nature religion, and outdoor recreation spirituality. While some scholars of religion may argue that analyzing the Long Trail and its hikers as religion and spiritual practice is too far outside the academic study of religion, I concur with Whitney Sanford that if “outdoor recreationists consider their experience to be religious or spiritual suggests that scholars of Religious Studies should take these claims seriously” (2007: 892).

The terms spiritual and religious are convoluted, particularly when understanding the ways these terms are utilized and understood in common parlance and in academic circles. Many scholars have offered their insights and observations on comparisons between these two terms. While these ongoing discussions are larger than the scope of this thesis, nonetheless, especially when dealing with something as seemingly “unreligious” as hiking, I need to define these terms for how I utilize them. Chapter 2 explores the definitions I am working with, but for now I draw upon the definitions of religion and spirituality proposed by Zinnbauer et al. for this thesis. Religious and religious experience, being associated with “religious orthodoxy...organizational or institutional religion,” I use to focus on the experiences and practices related to the Long Trail as a system. Spiritual, associated with “mystical experiences...personal or experiential,” I utilize to attend to the individual and their experiences related to the Long Trail (Zinnbauer et. al., 1997: 561).

Another note on terminology, I claim the Long Trail as a ritual, rather than a practice. Clifford Geertz defines ritual as “a consecrated behavior” in which “the world as lived and the world as imagined, fused under the agency of a single set of symbolic forms, turn out to be the same world” (1973: 112). As I explore throughout this paper, the Long Trail is a sacred space for individuals who seek a refuge from their daily lives in a profane world. Hiking on the trail, and thus immersion in nature and wilderness, can put individuals in touch with something greater—be it a divine being, the biotic community, or a truer version of themselves. Furthermore, Geertz suggests, “ritual, no matter how apparently automatic or conventional, involves this symbolic fusion of ethos and world view” (1973: 113). The repetitious and embodied practice of backpacking engulfed in the both human and non-human culture of thru-hiking constructs and shapes hikers understandings and interpretations of the world which they live in.

Methodology

To understand the religious and spiritual dimensions of long distance hiking on the Long Trail, a modified ethnographic approach was most advantageous for this study. The generalization of an empirical survey tool would have missed many of spiritual aspects of hikers’ experience—many did not declare themselves initially to be spiritual or religious in interviews. The particularity of ethnography, as Spickard and Landres (2002) suggest, enabled me to look deeper and “understand a social or cultural scene in its full individuality” (2002: 3). In doing so, I was able to negotiate the barriers hikers had

against the terms ‘religion’ and ‘spirituality’ to uncover the meaningful and sacred experiences have on the Long Trail.

For this study, thirty three people were interviewed over the phone, via webcam, or in person. Participants were recruited through online communities⁴, through the Green Mountain Club’s Long Trail hiker mentoring program, and Green Mountain Club staff and volunteers. The recruitment call was put out for people that were familiar with the Long Trail, and particularly those that had hiked the trail in its entirety. There was no reference to religion or spirituality in the call, but the terms significant and spiritual were used in the pre-interview questionnaire and consent forms. In total, thirty of the thirty three interviewed had completed the entire Long Trail, twenty seven of which did it as a thru-hike. The demographics of ages from 19-72, gender, and socioeconomic status were spread across the spectrum. Religious and spiritual identity also reflected a broad diversity: reformed Jews, Catholics, Agnostics, Methodists, Southern Baptists, Neopagan, Ukrainian Orthodox, Hindus, Christian fundamentalists, Atheists, and Buddhists. No religious tradition emerged as predominant, as many reported that they did not currently practice any one religion. The most predominant demographic for this study was ethnicity: the vast majority were euroamerican, with only one interviewee reporting that she was South Asian. The topic of sexuality was not broached in this study primarily due to the overall brevity of this thesis, but would be of importance in future study because, as I suggest below, embodiment is a key theme in understanding the experiences of long distance backpackers.

⁴ Posting were made on Longtrailhiking.info, whiteblaze.net and viewsfromthetop.com. Many thanks to the individuals who voluntarily forwarded my call for participants.

Although I considered all thirty three participants responses, I selected eleven individuals' responses to illustrate throughout this report. These eleven individuals were selected because their responses demonstrated the trends I observed in several categories, and thus would allow the reader a chance to understand the complexities of these hikers' experiences. A longer work would benefit from including more, if not all, of the interviewees' experiences.

While ethnography is the most advantageous approach for this study, ethnography does have particular challenges and problems. Spickard and Landres identify four challenges: "the problem of subjectivity; the insider/outsider problem; the question of researcher identity; and issues of power" (2002: 5). Below I will address these four problems to identify my position as ethnographer and provide the "conceptual scaffolding" of my work.⁵

As researcher, my role was as a modified participant observer. In that I hiked the entire Long Trail in 2009, I was able to observe the place of practice for the long distance hikers. Furthermore, I participated in many of the rituals and practices that interviewees mentioned, taking away my own interpretations and ways which the trail influenced my life. Since I never actually observed any of my interviewees while practicing on the Long Trail, however, I suggest my position as participant observer was modified. Logistical difficulties would make it hard to observe participants for the duration of the journeys, or downright impossible—how can I observe a person hiking the trail solo without significantly altering their experience? Nonetheless, being an insider established

⁵ Clifford, Marcus, cited in Spickard and Landres, 9.

credibility with the hikers—I had ‘taken on the challenge myself’ and ‘knew what it was like.’ Furthermore, I was able to analyze subtle difference in experience not only between hikers but could also compare to my own observations.

Issues related to my identity—euroamerican, male, young—that might have been more of a factor in some settings, were minimized by the homogeneity of long distance hikers. Other identity markers, including my socioeconomic status (upper-middle class male) were minimized because, as one hiker stated, “the trail is the great equalizer.” Similar to historical pilgrims (Tomasi 2002), socioeconomic status did not seem to have much bearing on accessibility to hiking the Long Trail, and was almost entirely irrelevant once on the trail. In a preliminary questionnaire (see Appendix B), hikers ranged in education levels from high school diplomas and associate degrees to professional and doctoral degrees, employed in blue collar jobs at hourly wages to highly skilled research careers with six figure salaries. Admittedly sexuality was a blind spot in this research, as neither myself nor the participants made any mention of it. The absence of concern suggests that heteronormativity is either an assumption in the hiking community or a non-issue.

My subjective relationship to this research is shaped by my own spiritual experiences of hiking the Long Trail. While I view my hike as part of my spirituality, it was not until over a year after completing the trail that I considered analyzing the Long Trail from a sociological and religious studies perspective. My early research questions were shaped from my own observations and experiences, but these areas of inquiry evolved during the course of interviewing. Excluding the introduction, my own story is

absent from the rest of this paper. However it would be erroneous to claim that this project was not shaped by my own experience on the Long Trail.

Perhaps more reflective of my subjectivity, and tied to the importance of power, is my dual identity of hiker and scholar—I think that both have much to learn from each other. My scholarship in outdoor recreation spirituality may aid hikers with understanding new dimensions of spiritual experience and perhaps embracing as “acceptable” or “legitimate” religious or spiritual practices what they’ve long practiced or believed through their experiences in nature. For scholars of religion, getting to hear the significant role of long distance hiking in my fellow hikers’ lives, that they go out there for the same reasons many people turn to organized religions, that hiking is understood as part of their hybrid religious identities, and that hikers will continue to go on prolonged wilderness journeys as spiritual practice will help develop new scholarly attention based on these examples. This work, therefore, has been constructed with this dual purpose in mind. The second chapter will cover the definitional boundaries of religion, and explore nature-based and outdoor recreation spiritualities, defining the space on which this thesis is presented. The third and fourth chapters will explore the dimensions and framing of the Long Trail that represent religious experience. The third chapter covers the more objective and established practices of the trail, while the fourth covers the more subjective, although still shared, experiences on the trail. The fifth chapter explores the individual experiences and the spiritual meaning for hikers on the trail. In particular, I explore how hiking the Long Trail is meaningful for hikers and a transformative

experience. The final chapter explores considerations for further study in the religious and spiritual dimensions of long distance backpacking.

2: Blazing the Trail: Boundaries of Religion and Nature-Based Spirituality

In my exploration of long distance hiking on the Long Trail as religious experience, some might question if this form of outdoor recreation can be considered religion. There will be some elements in traditional understandings of religion that are absent—most notably the absence of a deity or superhuman being(s). The *HarperCollins Dictionary of Religion* defines religion as “a system of beliefs and practices that are relative to superhuman beings” (in Smith 1995: 893). Many other scholars have argued that a superhuman need not be present in a definition of religion, suggesting the definitional boundaries around religion are varied and contested. While entering the discussion on the definition of religion is far beyond the scope of this paper, I do want to ground the current task of studying the religious and spiritual dimensions of long distance backpacking on the Long Trail as a legitimate exploration within religious studies. I find three subfields helpful in establishing a basis for understanding long distance hiking on the Long Trail as religious experience and offer critical conceptual lenses: lived religion, nature-based spirituality, and outdoor recreation spirituality.

Lived Religion

While traditional scholarship in religion has focused on institutional and organized religion, in the last two decades scholars have worked to reconsider and modify conceptions of religion towards more inclusive understandings. Beyond the

boundaries of institutional and organized religion, David Chidester has defined religion as “that dimension of human experience engaged with sacred norms,” moving beyond the bounds of institutional, organized religion. His definition is rather ambiguous and open ended, placing a particular emphasis on the individual. It is the individual who determines what is sacred, not an external authority. Although individualistic, Chidester finds two important characteristics in what individuals understand as sacred: ultimate meaning and transcendent power (1987: 4).

Chidester draws upon Paul Tillich’s ‘ultimate concern’ for his concept of ultimate meaning. Chidester positions that some scholars have interpreted Tillich’s definition as allowing for any super human concern to pass as religion, but he finds that these interpretations have missed a crucial point:

the word *ultimate*, from the Latin *ultima*, indicates something that is last, final, or the end of a series. An ultimate concern, therefore, must come up against the absolute limits of human life. In the face of the ultimate human limit situations of birth, change, and death, religion appears as a creative response that generates a sense of meaning. In the face of the apparent limitations of human consciousness and will, religion generates a context of sacred ultimate meaning (1987: 4).

Further, Chidester finds that religions include human engagement with transcendent powers. He builds on Rudolf Otto’s *sensus numinous*—feelings of the transcendent power—to include the observable human responses to these powers, “rituals of worship, techniques of meditation, and the whole range of ethical action” (1987: 4).

Placing emphasis on individual beliefs are key components in lived religion. The term “lived religion” was long used by French sociologists of religion (Hall 1997) before it was brought to American scholarship in the 1997 anthology *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice* and indeed, was what sociology of religion was about—

how religion is lived and practiced. In the opening chapter of that volume, Robert Orsi observes the “dualism of matter and religion, sacred and profane” in traditional religious studies (1997: 8). Finding this approach insufficient, he challenges “a fundamental rethinking of what religion is and what it means to be ‘religious,’” offering that “religion comes into being in an ongoing, dynamic relationship with the realities of everyday life” (1997: 7). Concurring with Peter Berger and others, Orsi finds religion to be a meaning-making activity.

Similar to Orsi, Meredith McGuire has worked to illuminate several key factors of lived religion that are useful for this study. McGuire argues for lived religion because it “distinguishes the actual experience of religious persons from the prescribed religion of institutionally defined beliefs and practices” (2008: 12). Individuals who have found the institutionally packaged beliefs and practices insufficient and unfulfilling—more simply, that they don’t work—have ventured to construct and combine various beliefs and practices in ways that work for them and meet their spiritual needs. This bricolage of spirituality presents a particular challenge to sociologists of religion. Rather than looking for logical coherence in individuals’ spirituality, McGuire notes that observing and studying religion-as-lived requires an approach of “practical coherence” (2008: 15).

Although lived religion pays close attention to the religiousness and spirituality of the individual, it does not suggest that individual religion is isolated. Lived religion, as McGuire suggests, understands that “people construct their religious worlds together, often sharing vivid experiences of that intersubjective reality” (2008: 13). These intermingled constructions of religious belief do not remain exclusively in a cognitive

capacity, but become embodied in religious practice. “The close link between belief and practice,” McGuire emphasizes, “reminds us that individual religion is, nevertheless, fundamentally social. Its building blocks are shared meanings and experiences, learned practices, borrowed imagery, and imparted insights” (14).

Finally, embodiment is another key dimension of lived religion that McGuire raises to our attention. Traditional religion has separated the body from consideration in religious practice, identifying it with the material and profane. But all religious practices, McGuire argues, “even interior ones such as contemplation—involve people’s bodies, as well as their minds and spirits”(2008: 98) She suggests we look further into the daily embodied rituals individuals practice as part of their spirituality—ways in which people “link the material aspects of [their] lives with the spiritual”(13). Thus lived religion is “*constituted by the practice* people use to remember, share, enact, adapt, create, and combine the stories out of which they live” (98). In other words, lived religion is attuned to the ways people practice their spiritual beliefs. For the current analysis of the Long Trail, the hikers’ experiences are centered around the physical challenges of hiking the 273 miles, putting them in touch with their bodies through walking, breathing, and carrying the necessary items for survival as a few of the examples.

Nature Religion and Nature-Based Spirituality

Discussion of boundaries between the sacred and the profane is a key concept in the subgenera of nature religion or nature-based spirituality. In *Nature Religion in America: From the Algonkin Indians to the New Age*, Catherine Albanese finds the

traditional religions' sacred-profane binary problematic—and even irrelevant—in nature religion. Albanese broadly defines religion as “the way or ways that people orient themselves in the world with reference to both ordinary and extraordinary powers, meanings, and values,”⁶ where extraordinary powers, meanings, and values serve as “boundaries [and] objective realities [...] inviting [adherents] across an invisible line to a place of transcendence”(1990: 6-7). Religion orients people both inwards towards a symbolic center and outwards beyond geographic boundaries of unknown. Albanese identifies one of the symbolic centers as nature religion, with its own “cluster of beliefs, behaviors and values that encircle it” (7). Despite being a symbolic center, she holds that nature does not necessarily have to be sacred in nature religion.

Unlike Albanese, Bron Taylor argues that nature religion—or nature-based spirituality, as he suggests—requires a perception that nature is sacred in some way and worthy of reverent care (2001a). He further suggests that “feelings of belonging and connection to the earth—of being bound to and dependent upon the earth’s living systems” are essential to nature-based spirituality (2007a: 867). In adding a sacred dimension to nature-based spirituality, Taylor draws upon Chidester’s circular definition of the sacred; a move that utilizes Chidester’s open definition to allow nature to be deemed sacred and tying nature-based spirituality to more commonly accepted religions. Elsewhere, Taylor defends his position on the use of “spirituality” over “religion”, in part because those in nature religion are inclined to describe themselves as spiritual over religious, and also due to definitions of spirituality, particularly those of Peter van Ness

⁶ Of note, Albanese find that ordinary and extraordinary powers are never separated entirely.

(1992) and Anna King (1996), that “illuminate many of the meanings and perceptions [...] found among practitioners of earth-based religions” (2001a: 177).

Recently, Taylor (2010) has furthered explorations in nature-based spirituality by introducing the concept of “dark green” religion. Whereas he preferred ‘spirituality’ in discussing individuals’ nature-based beliefs and practices, Taylor utilizes ‘religion’ for the collective phenomenon of these individuals. This phenomenon is “like a phantom. It is unnamed and has no institutions officially devoted to its promotion; no single sacred text...no identified religious hierarchy or charismatic figure” (2010: ix). Dark green religion combines nature-based spirituality with a set of values that understands “all species to be intrinsically valuable, that is, valuable apart from their usefulness to human beings” (2010: 13). This value system emerged through major developments and discoveries in science—particularly Darwin’s theory of evolution, cosmology’s knowledge of humans small presence in the universe, and themes of interdependence in ecology and physics—and subsequent sentiments of kinship, humility, critiques of human superiority, and interconnection (Taylor 2010: 13).

In a combined discourse of lived religion and nature religion, Rebecca Gould explores the spiritual dimensions of the homesteading movement in the U.S. Gould draws on Orsi and Albanese to locate homesteading in religion, existing “at the crossroads of at least two stories of American culture: the turn to ‘nature’ and the extraecclesial quest for ‘the religious’” (2005: 9). She finds amongst the homesteaders meaning making in nature. Nature has offered for these ‘spiritual seekers’ what is often found and associated with traditional religions. However, traditional religion for homesteaders was considered

“stultifying tradition, bureaucratic (and often hypocritical) institutions, expensive buildings, and unchanging dogma” (6). Thus homesteading is part of a larger American cultural movement to find religion and spirituality outside of traditional institutions.

Gould summarizes her historical and ethnographic study of the homesteading movement in a way that I find accurately reflects the task of this thesis. She writes:

I am less interested in the fixed *location* of the sacred or the essential *definition* of religion and more interested in the *ways* in which problems of meaning are worked out by those who construct the sacred and the profane, the religious and the spiritual, in particular ways. I am interested in sacred space but also sacred canopies; the meaning of ritual but also the practice of ritualization; theories of religion but also the daily, lived enactment of a spiritual and ethical life. (2005: 7)

Beyond the circles of religious studies, Edward Wilson’s biophilia hypothesis is of particular note for this study. Wilson—whose formal training is in biology—defines biophilia as humans “innate tendency to focus on life and lifelike processes” (1984: 1). He finds this deeply held inclination as part of the evolutionary tract of humanity, developed during the hunter-gatherer phase of human society, continuing through the agricultural societies, and only recently challenged during the mechanized societies of the past century and a half. Wilson believes that biophilia is deeply ingrained in humanity—“our spirit is woven from it, hope rises on its currents”—that he suggests it is on the level of philosophical and religious significance (1984: 1). Being that Wilson is an empirically-trained biologist, he only suggests biophilia as a hypothesis. Whereas biological sciences focus on testing hypotheses for universal truths, even as a hypothesis biophilia is a significant conceptual tool for ethnographic study of nature religion.

Outdoor Recreation Spirituality

Sharing commonalities with lived religion and nature religion, outdoor recreation spirituality has focused on nature- and wilderness-based activities as significant, meaning making experiences in religion and spirituality. Outdoor recreation spirituality was first described by Joseph Price (1996), who found participants in outdoor recreation activities experiencing, “a sense of wonder, awe, wholeness, harmony, ecstasy, transcendence, and solitude” (415). He outlines four categories of recreation activities: adventurous recreation, such as mountaineering, surfing, and rafting where “one confronts the *risk* of physical injury and real *threat* of death”; observational recreations, including whale-watching, sightseeing, birding, hiking, and backpacking “wherein the purpose is to be in nature, observing natural inhabitants and their behavior and identifying oneself as a participant observer connected with nature itself”⁷; blended recreations, such as fly fishing and scuba diving, “generating a sense of spirituality both from the physical responses to the activity itself [...]and from the perceptual frames of reference”, and educational recreations, typified by Outward Bound and National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS) programs. Price claims that participants in outdoor recreation often utilize language that is “poetic and invokes religious metaphors” to describe their experiences, in which they have “begun to organize their conceptions of the physical world and to render them meaningful” (1996: 417).

While Price discusses a few of the aforementioned activities, several publications since have analyzed individual outdoor recreation activities in greater depth. Kocku von

⁷ While Price later grants that hiking and backpacking have some degree of physical exercise, I believe that he severely underestimates the physical demands of backpacking along with the potential of physical injury and potential threat of death as the access to and assistance from the outside world can be severely hindered in remote locations.

Stuckrad details mountaineering as relationship between human and mountain. Climbers face the external challenges and dangers of nature and wilderness on mountains as well as the internal, where “climbing a mountain means to overcome the dangers and weaknesses inside a person, thus mountaineering is a means to transgress the borders of bodily exhaustion in order to gain a fuller awareness of one’s own psychical or spiritual capacities” (2005: 1119). Additionally, von Stuckrad suggests a deep relationship between deep ecology and mountaineering, as “a number of mountain climber-intellectuals are drawn to deep ecology because of spiritual experiences they have made outdoors, many of them being influenced by Arne Naess’ earliest environmental philosophy” (1119).

Similar to mountaineering, rock climbing shifts practitioners from a horizontal to vertical plane of experience. Greg Johnson points out the aspects of climbing that are highly ritualized: technical equipment and climbing terminology as ritual paraphernalia and speech, guide and instructional books as sacred texts, and Yosemite’s Half Dome as a pilgrimage site are a few of his examples. There is also a tight knit community in climbing, both between climbing partners who are dependent upon each other to secure the rope which holds their lives, and the climbing community at large, as Johnson noted “I am certain that I have more in common – in terms of passions, appetites, ideals – with climbers from, say, Thailand, than I do with my neighbors” (2005, 1399). Close

communities are common in outdoor recreation activities, both within specific “denominations” and across the spectrum in general.⁸

Shifting away from land-based recreations, a triad of papers in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* focused on aquatic nature religion. Whitney Sanford notes the centrality of embodied experience in whitewater kayaking. Every part of the paddler’s lower body is connected to their boat, and in their seated position, are immersed in the water. Paddlers practice mindfulness in studying the intricate and subtle flows of a river and in maneuvers such as the “combat roll [...] exemplifying the merging of self-reliance, risk, and skill, balancing tensions of spontaneity and discipline” (2007: 881) Sanford notes whitewater paddlers’ strong connection to Eastern and indigenous religious traditions as paddlers often draw “language and concepts from Asian (and sometimes indigenous) traditions to describe their experiences” (876). But she does not want to overgeneralize as many paddlers would not claim to have any religious experience while kayaking. Furthermore, paddlers expressed sentiments of a sacred dimension to paddling over a supernatural dimension.

In another form of freshwater recreation, Samuel Snyder explores the religious dimensions of fly fishing. “Anglers [...] often seek experience which represents essential

⁸ Outdoor recreation incorporates a broad range of activities that take place in nature or wilderness settings. However, the ends of this range can often appear contradictory and in opposition to each other, i.e. bird watching and game hunters. With some exception (notably fly fishing), most of the outdoor recreation activities that I--and most scholars discussed here--are referring to are where participants are observers or participants in nature settings, versus destroying or negatively impacting nature. This difference is represented symbolically in the outdoor recreation industry, both as manufactures of equipment and equipment retailers are divided into two camps, i.e. large retail chains such as Eastern Mountain Sports (EMS) and Recreational Equipment, Inc. (REI) on one end, and Bass Pro Shops, Cabela’s and Gander Mountain Sports the other.

quests for meaning in the lives of all humans,” finding such meaning in a deep connection with nature and facilitated by fly fishing (2007: 907). Anglers often recall their conversion moments, one of many instances of storytelling that fishermen share that is comparable to that of traditional religions. Instructional and inspirational texts cover practical guides on ritual technique development and to reminisce about their time in the stream. Snyder suggests the enduring quest to master casting techniques are a ritualistic practice with the fly rod as an important ritual tool. The flies that anglers tie—another material expression for anglers—are constructed based upon the anglers study of insects, and in the stream, the selection of the proper fly is dependent on the angler’s ability to connect with nature. Finally, Snyder adds that anglers create deep connections to the fish they catch: studying the waterways for where fish are, observing fish breaching and swallowing the flies, and releasing fish back into the waters.

Shifting to the oceans, Bron Taylor examines surfers’ deep connection to nature, more specifically Mother Ocean. Noting many aspects of surfing that are shared with traditional religion, Taylor argues, “my analysis spotlights a subset of the surfing community that experiences the practice in spiritual terms, deriving meaning and important life-lessons from it, even understanding it as a religion and of itself” (2007: 926). Myths regarding surfing’s origins and cultural importance for Pacific islanders, its near decimation during colonization periods, and subsequent reemergence mark strong narratives in surfing. Shaped by the 1960s, surfing’s spiritual dimension developed through surf culture events. In contemporary practice, surfers make pilgrimages to Shangri-Las in search of the perfect wave, experience a zen state while riding in the tube

of a wave, feel a deep connection and longing for the ocean, and to seek out harmonious communities in paradises of surfing. Taylor, along with Sanford and Snyder, find that each of these aquatic religions create an ethic of conservation amongst the practitioners, through their direct action as well as not-for-profit organizations founded with the explicit purpose of protecting that which these sports find sacred.

In concluding, the conceptual tools of these three subfields of religion will aid in the analysis of the Long Trail in the following chapters. Lived religion draws our focus to how hikers understand their embodied experiences on the Long Trail, how hiking on the trail is a practically coherent way for them to understand and make sense of the worlds in which they live. To what degree do some hikers hold nature and wilderness sacred or central, as nature religion suggests? Are long distance backpackers, similar to homesteaders, combining their call to nature with spiritual seeking? And as outdoor recreation spirituality suggests, what are the emotions, communities, material expressions, sacred texts, and sentiments of interconnection with nature that backpackers find on the Long Trail?

3: A Footpath in the Wilderness

The Long Trail may seem like an organic entity for many of the 200,000 people who set foot on the trail each year. Most will have only a basic knowledge of the trail—where to access it and to where they would like to hike—and give little consideration to the history and origin of trail. Melissa, a staff member for the Green Mountain Club, notes the commonly held assumption that “you think of a footpath in the wilderness as an entity that is and will be there.” Given that the Long Trail was started in 1910, people today would not be able to recall a point in their lifetime when the trail did not exist. Yet with deeper consideration, it is obvious that the Long Trail is not an organically manifesting and self-maintaining entity. “It is, and will be, there because of the work of a lot of people,” Melissa remarked. Annually, roughly 800 people volunteer to help maintain the Long Trail, in addition to countless labor hours from the Green Mountain Club, the state of Vermont, and the U.S. Forest Service. Just as much work, if not more, was put into establishing the trail itself back in the early 20th Century. But why create a “footpath in the wilderness”?

The Long Trail is the oldest long distance hiking path in the United States, conceived in 1910 and completed by 1930.⁹ James P. Taylor, a schoolmaster in for an all boys school in Vermont, was on Stratton Mountain in southern Vermont when he envisioned a footpath that would traverse the Green Mountains. His mission was to

⁹The Appalachian Trail, the most well known long distance hiking path in the United States, was first conceived by Benton Mackaye in 1921 and completed in 1937.

“make the Vermont mountains play a larger part in the life of the people” (Slayton 2009:14) Thus the trail would cross the state, running from the Massachusetts border to the Canadian border. After promoting his concept to many prominent Vermonters around the state, Taylor gathered 23 individuals on 11 March 1910 to found the Green Mountain Club with the purpose of constructing a footpath in the wilderness. Today the Green Mountain Club, with its 10,000 members, oversees the management and protection of the Long Trail, its 170+ miles of side trails, as well as all the backcountry shelters.

There are specific features of a thru-hike of the Long Trail that constitute practices and experiences that correspond to qualities and characteristics of religion. Appropriate questions might be raised that the following religious qualities of the Long Trail might be applied to a wide variety of cultural phenomena, and thus in actuality move beyond the bounds of religious studies. However, I find that since the hikers discover spiritual meaning on the Long Trail—which I discuss in the next chapter—an analysis of the framing constructed by the trail aids in understanding individual spiritual experience. Thus, this chapter specifically looks at the shared, social, and transtemporal dimensions of the Long Trail.

Hike Your Own Hike

Traveling the 273 miles of the Long Trail takes most thru-hikers between three and four weeks. Others will attempt it in two weeks or less (potentially seeking a speed record), while others will seek to fully immerse themselves over five or more weeks. In addition to the trip pace, the gear that hikers carry and use, the choices of where to and

when to re-supply, and where they camp each night are a few of the many logistics of a thru-hike that will vary between hikers. “As many as there are people on this earth, there are that many ways [to hike the trail],” as one hiker put it.

The diversity of hiking styles can, at times, become points of conflict. Thru-hiking purists and fundamentalists do not believe it is acceptable to get off the trail for a night and, more recently, object to the use of cell phones or MP3 players on the trail. Other points of contention arise between generations of hikers. A GMC staff member noted that younger hikers, focused on accomplishing something, will see how fast they can do the whole trail, whereas older hikers are focused on the experience of being in the woods.¹⁰

To deal with this diversity of approaches to hiking, most hikers embrace the phrase “hike your own hike.” This simple phrase promotes the numerous ways that any individual may hike the trail and that there is no one correct way. “Hike your own hike” is a way to respect the other hikers, to not coerce anyone, to let it be their own hike. Furthermore, as several hikers commented, hike your own hike enables hikers to make their hiking experience what they want it to be, and each hiker will take away a different experience from the next. Fred, who thru-hiked the trail in 2007, admits that he “likes to do it slightly different from most people.” For him, to hike his own hike, he starts early in the morning and travels at a moderate pace throughout the day, stopping every hour at a nice spot to have a drink and enjoy the surroundings, rather than racing along the trail from destination to destination.

¹⁰ The GMC staff member stated that many began to voice concerns to the GMC regarding all the fast hikers. According to the staff person, it was from this that the phrase “hike your own hike” started.

Take Only Photos, Leave Only Footprints

While hikers are free to enjoy the trail in the ways that suit them individually, there is a code of ethics to guide them. “Leave No Trace” is a set of 7 principles—plan ahead and prepare, travel and camp on durable surfaces, dispose of waste properly, leave what you find, minimize campfire impacts, respect wildlife, and be considerate of other visitors¹¹—which are focused on minimizing the human impact on the natural environment. In doing so, this ethic promotes stewardship and care, so that each person may encounter and enjoy natural settings without any perception of previous human activity. “Take only photos, leave only footprints,” is a phrase that hikers often closely associated with Leave No Trace.

Most hikers embraced the practices of Leave No Trace. There was some disconnect, however, between the seven principles and hikers’ actual actions. This difference was more a result of a lack of proper education and knowledge of the principles rather than deliberate disagreement and ignorance of them. For those that disagreed with or ignored the principles, it was often that their own logic and reason trumped the principles and influenced their actions. One hiker was adamant about packing out everything he packed in, but admitted that he did not consider his coffee grounds a ‘trace’—after all, he spread them on his home garden.

There was also trail etiquette, primarily concerning shelters, dogs, and the use of cell phones. These guidelines, although not part of the ethics of Leave No Trace, shared

¹¹ <http://www.lnt.org/programs/principles.php>. Accessed 4 May 2011.

the common purpose to respect other hikers on the Long Trail. Few thru-hikers objected to people carrying cell phones, but trail etiquette suggested that they would be used outside of earshot of other hikers.¹²

Trail Names and Naming

Through entering into a thru-hike of the Long Trail, hikers are frequently looking to get away from their daily lives. As I discuss later in this chapter, the trail is the great equalizer that makes hikers anonymous. Hikers detach themselves from their daily identity, suspending it in favor of creating, as one hiker put it, a wilder trail identity. An important part of the transformation of identity is the rite of passage of adopting trail names. Trail names become the primary identity for hikers on the trail, as their legal names are rarely, if ever, used.

Although trail names are technically supposed to be received instead of a self-naming process, about half of the hikers I interviewed gave themselves names. They did so because they preferred picking a name that they liked over potentially receiving a name that they didn't. Upon reflection during interviews, some expressed that they wished they had not chosen their own, as receiving a trail name would have been a more meaningful part of the experience. Only one person I interviewed did not receive a trail name on their thru-hike.

¹² Cell phones were often identified by interviewees as a particularly important issue. Cell phones represented what many were trying to get away from and escape by being on the trail.

For those receiving names, the naming process is organic. The names may reflect a trait of the hiker or a particular experience the hiker encounters on the trail. Kolombo and Dr. Strange pork, a couple in their twenties, adopted the names of the sandwiches they ate as their last meal before beginning their thru-hike. Hot Cheese, a medical researcher in her thirties, was named because she always added cheese to every meal. After trouble with uncomfortable boots, Feet Don't Fail Me Now was named such by fellow hikers because he repeated that mantra every morning before starting out on the trail.

“Change the world, one hiker at a time” - Angels and Magic

Thru-hiking is a challenging task, but a little help can mean a lot on the trail. Enter trail angels and trail magic. Trail magic is food or help a hiker receives while on their hike, provided by individuals known as trail angels. Angels often pick up hitchhiking thru-hikers and transport them between the trailhead and trail towns, at times offering to drive far out of their way to assist hikers. At a point south of Killington peak, a trail angel constructed a “secret shelter” on their near the trail, as nearby Governor Clement shelter was overrun by partying locals. Inside the shelter, a cooler is stocked with Long Trail Ales. At another location a short walk from a country road, a trail angel leaves a cooler full of ice-cold soda, a box of peanut butter and crackers, and a lawn chair for hikers to enjoy in passing. These examples of gifting are usually unexpected and greatly appreciated by hikers, turning around a disparaging day on the trail.



A hiker enjoys the trail magic of a soda, peanut butter crackers, and a seat on the Long Trail just south of Killington Peak. Photo courtesy Quoddy.

As religion scholar Leigh Schmidt suggests (1997), gifting is an important part of American lived religion. Gifting is prevalent in all social systems—legal, moral, religious, political, and economic—and represent important bonds between individuals and within social groups. Schmidt explores the numerous expressions of gifting within organized religion from annual rites of passage to more frequent celebrations, noting particularly for Christians celebrations such as annual events such as Easter rebirth and the weekly partaking in the communion or Eucharist. The exchange of gifts promotes familiarity, sympathy, remembrance, commitment, reciprocity, and hospitality between gift giver and gift receiver, and further representing tokens of friendship.

Whereas the majority of examples of gifting that Schmidt offers are found in established and connected relationships, trail magic as gifting on the Long Trail primarily occurs between strangers. Furthermore, the trail angels who provide the gifts may never meet the recipients: their gifts are offered to the unknown and faceless. In acts of reciprocity, hikers often leave kind words for trail angels in trail registers and send notes and photos from their journeys to the trail angels. The symbolic oasis for hikers, the Inn at Long Trail, features the many photos and notes sent by hikers by lining an entranceway into the building with them.

Lisa described her experience as a trail angel for Appalachian Trail hikers in Vermont. While her son was hiking the Appalachian Trail, he developed bad blisters on his feet which eventually became infected. After the doctors told him he would need to take a week off from hiking, the family that offered him a ride from the trail to the clinic offered for him and his hiking partner to stay at their home for a week. Lisa was so amazed at the family's generosity in taking care of her son and their desire to 'pay it forward,' that she decided she wanted to give back to the "remarkable trail community." Being that the Appalachian Trail passes down the street she lives on in Eastern Vermont, she decided that she would leave a cooler full of watermelon and homemade baked goods out for hikers every day from May through October, as well as a trail register for hikers to sign. Furthermore, she opened her doors to hikers, offering them a warm dinner, laundry, and a place to stay for the night. She beamed as she told me her motto, wanting to "change the world, one hiker at a time." The following year, during her own hike of the Long Trail, Lisa and her hiking partner were hitchhiking back to the trailhead after a stop

in a nearby town. The driver that picked them up offered to take them halfway to their destination, but after a short conversation in which he realized that he had received some of Lisa's trail magic during his own Appalachian Trail thru-hike, he went out of his way to take them all the way to their desired destination. Between receiving trail magic during her own thru-hike of the Long Trail, her son's experience on the Appalachian Trail, and the driver's repayment of her generosity, Lisa understood the importance of her role as a trail angel and took immense satisfaction from the thru-hikers she helps.

While Lisa's experience demonstrates the deep level of significance for a gift giver, gifting is also as meaningful for the recipients. Stephen and Beverly's experience of trail magic is a central part of their thru-hikes as Stephen describes:

Every time we hike, it's the little surprises that we remember the most. The goodness of people. The giving from their heart without looking for anything in return. That is the most amazing thing to experience on the trail. I speak for my wife, because we talk about this a lot. We have mostly the same feeling on this. In particular, Vermont, the people, gosh I don't know how to put this. They were just so kind. There are certain states along the AT, the people are kind. This was one of those states. The people were just generally interested to know about us and what we're doing and why were out their hiking the length of their state. They're real proud of their state. Vermont people are great.

Two things are of note here. First, the simple and genuine acts of trail magic for Stephen and Beverly shaped their perceptions of humanity and cultures. Second, the interactions with other humans is a very important part of the trail for hikers.

Breathing

The Long Trail is a physically demanding challenge for most hikers. Prolonged walking for hours a day—traversing many miles and climbing and descending several

thousand feet on a daily basis—leads to enhanced and elevated respiratory states. The basic physiology of breathing and the lack of breath would determine the comfortable pace for hikers, both consciously or unconsciously, to maintain the levels of oxygen within the body. As Will Keeping suggests in his article on *Breathwork* in the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, controlled and intensified breathing has “a strong capacity to awake insights and awareness about nature, the Earth, and the mysteries of life itself” (2005: 214).

Regarding conscious perception of breathing, some hikers noted that they were aware of their breath while backpacking. The simplicity of backpacking removed the complex clutter of everyday life to reveal “just being: breathing and moving.” Mark utilized a combination of Hindu concepts and philosophies to describe his practice of breathing on the trail.

When I was out there, I would meditate at certain spots. Try to almost draw the energy of the environment into myself. If you believe in prana energy, the energy of the air in obviously more cleaner places, it would be better for you. Just breathing deeply. I mean, literally the air is better but also the air also empowers, the air is what gives the life into your blood and into your brain. And to a degree if you breathe deeper you affect your levels of concentration. That's into yoga and yoga breathing techniques.

Deepening the consciousness of otherwise involuntary bodily function as well as manipulating his breathing created a sense of interconnection to the natural environment for Mark.

Embodied Practice

As discussed in the previous chapter, McGuire urges us to understand all religious practices as embodied. Good breathing is part of the larger embodied experience of hiking the Long Trail. In contrast to many religious practices centered around stillness and fixed spatial locations, extended walking each day frames an embodiment of movement and perpetually changing locations for hikers. Most days are spent hiking several miles along the trail, with occasional stops along the way for food or to enjoy their natural surroundings. Over the course of the journey, hikers usually develop a rhythm to their walking. For those carrying trekking poles, the upper body becomes more involved in the rhythm, with the opposite hand planting the pole a fraction of a second before the foot strikes, repeating with each step.

Hikers become more aware of their bodies and their physical capabilities, even noticing how their bodies become stronger throughout their journeys. The trail was both the strengthening and testing of individuals' physical capabilities—many remember the moment when they recognized they had their 'trail legs.' This occurred for Melissa during her ascent of the south side of Camel's Hump, one of her favorite moments of hiking the Long Trail. After some incredible trail magic the night before, she remembered how strong she felt during the climb. "It just felt really good. I felt in touch with my body, my legs had no problem carrying my pack and climbing the rocks.[...]It feels good to be strong, healthy, and out in the woods."

For some hikers, they directly correlate their experience on the Long Trail as exercise. Stephen played football through college, but had since trailed off in his physical activity. Thru-hiking for him became a new form of exercise and a lifelong skill—

endurance oriented compared to the high impact, anaerobic exercise of football—to help him get him back into shape. Furthermore, to manage back problems, Stephen started practicing yoga on the trail, and has since incorporated yoga into his life off the trail as well. Another hiker noted that “exercise gets the beta endorphins flowing which are natural chemicals that make you feel good.”

The connections between physical, mental, and spiritual wellbeing was also of importance to hikers. Being healthy in these three dimensions was important. The first two were often achieved through hiking the trail, thus creating an atmosphere for spiritual development and wellbeing. Melissa finds that the simplicity of backpacking and removal of distractions helps her to draw near to a zen-like state of “being in the moment. ‘I’m here. I’m moving.’” When combined with the “repetition of putting one foot in front of the other in front of the other. It all just comes together to make this trance.”

In part a material expression, hikers have a deep connection to their backpacks. Being that most all of a backpacker’s gear will be carried in the pack, it is critical that pack fit well. In addition to fitting around the shoulders the pack wraps around the waist on top of the hips for additional comfort. An ideal fitting pack will secure the load comfortably to the backpacker, moving with, instead of against, the backpacker’s body as they travel down the trail. A poor fitting pack will ruin, if not completely sabotage, a hike on the Long Trail.

Rituals of the Trail

There are several prominent rituals for Long Trail thru-hikers. A stay at the Inn at Long Trail is an oasis for thru-hikers, blending elements of history (the Inn was the former Green Mountain Club Clubhouse); tradition (a pint of Guinness at McGrath's Irish Pub); and practical rejuvenation, with coin laundry, hot showers, and a queen sized bed. Hikers also find instructional and inspirational texts related to their journeys. Many hikers carry one of two guidebooks¹³ or the trail map published by the Green Mountain Club, while Bill Bryson's *A Walk in the Woods* or Jeff Alt's *A Walk for Sunshine* inspire hikers to hit the trails.¹⁴

Another ritual of the trail is trail registers and shelter logs. While trail registers primarily serve the more practical purpose of tracking hikers progress and location in the event of an emergency, shelter logs serve this purpose in addition to become a 'living newspaper' of the trail. Hikers share practical information regarding the trail as well as more creative entries, most often reflecting on personal experiences on the trail or a favorite story from the day. Through reading the logs, hikers enjoy following the stories of hikers that may only be a day or two ahead of them, as well as knowing something about them should they meet.

In connection with embodiment, much of the trail experience is ritualized. A daily routine of getting up, walking, taking food breaks, walking some more, taking water

¹³ See Appendix C for photos of the Long Trail guidebooks, a glimpse into the history and evolution of hiking the Long Trail.

¹⁴ Both of these publications are about the author's experience on the Appalachian Trail. Similar books on the Long Trail, *Scraped Knees and Mac 'n Cheese: One Woman's Journey of a Thousand Miles on the Vermont Long Trail* by Sandi Pierson and *Forest Under My Fingernails: Reflections and Encounters on the Long Trail* by Walt McLaughlin, were not mentioned as frequently by hikers.

breaks, walking some more, setting up camps and evening chores, going to sleep, and waking up to do it all over again is common amongst hikers.

In addition to providing rituals, hikers are also inspired to create their own rituals for the trail. Some hikers start a journal to record their experiences, or a stretching routine to maintain their physical wellbeing. Yet more common were rituals of abstention. Tracy admits that she “reads almost as much as I breathe,” but when she hits the trails, “its the only time in my life that I don’t read.” Others elect to abstain from modern conveniences and technology as a break from normal life.

During the entirety of a 273 mile walk, nearly all hikers will have encountered these shared components of the Long Trail. More specifically, these aspects of the Long Trail are similar to many in traditional religions. The philosophy of ‘hike your own hike’, the ethics of Leave No Trace, the embodied practice of walking the trail and breathing, the naming, gifting, and numerous other rituals of the trail provide frames to hikers that are more commonly associated with traditional religions. And yet there are aspects of the Long Trail that, although still widely encountered by hikers, are more subjective.

4: The Trail Journey

While each hiker hikes their own hike, the rituals and beliefs of the Long Trail offer frames for the hikers that define their experiences. But as the philosophy of ‘hike your own hike’ suggests, the hikers are allowed to maximize their experience in the manner that they see fit. Thus there are other dimensions of the Long Trail that, while commonly held by hikers, vary in their particularities. They are the more subjective and non-standardized experiences hikers find on the Long Trail.

Geography and Ecosystem

The Long Trail traces the spine of the Green Mountains, covering the length of the state from south to north and dividing the state into east and west bioregions. Anyone who has visited Vermont or encountered Vermonters would soon recognize the centrality of Green Mountains to the identity of the state and its people. As Edwin Bernbaum suggests, “mountains have become associated with the deepest and most central values and beliefs of culture and traditions throughout the world” (2005: 1456), a definition that accurately describe the relationship between the the Green Mountains and Vermont, and exemplified by the Long Trail.

Many hikers noted that hiking the trail gave them a greater knowledge of and intimacy with the land. Mark commented that he felt more geographically oriented in Vermont through having created his own mental maps while hiking. In addition to feeling

comfortable navigating through the state, he noted that he felt closer to the land and connected to it. Similarly Stephen related his experience as being

more of like you're a point on the earth instead of being lost inside of four walls and a ceiling. It's kind of like being on Google Earth for a little while. I definitely feel like I knew by looking up and down, left and right on the trail where things were. I can picture the mountains as they trickle on down through Vermont.

Hikers also place special emphasis on the importance of walking from one end of the state to the other. This was particularly true of hikers from Vermont, who noted that hiking the Long Trail made them feel closer to their home state, evoking a sense of pride and devotion. Through her employment with the state, Tracy worked on land protection and acquisition issues, many of which were directly related to the Long Trail. To hike the trail for Tracy meant that she would get to see her state as well as some of the accomplishments of her work. In addition to the knowledge of the geography and landmarks of the trail, hikers also noted an increased knowledge of the towns near the trail. Municipalities that were known to be favorable and accepting of hikers were given the title of 'trail towns.' Trail towns and road crossings became part of the intimacy with the land, particularly for Vermonters who discovered areas of their state that they had not known before.

After completing the entire trail, most hikers express that their favorite parts of the trail were in the more remote areas. The northern sections of the trail, particularly above route 15 near Johnson, were appreciated for a sense of less developed terrain and lower hiker traffic—an opportunity to “be alone with the trees and the wildlife” as Lisa justified. This affinity prevails despite the northern sections of the trail being widely held

as significantly more difficult than the southern sections shared with the Appalachian Trail—both factors that would accordingly lead to generally less usage by hikers.

Also noted for their remote feel, the section of trail known as the Monroe Skyline — stretching from Lincoln Gap to the Winooski River—and Camel’s Hump in particular were popular with hikers. As Bernbaum points out the importance of the height of mountains, much of this section consists of high ridge line walks and summits three 4,000 foot peaks. Camel’s Hump was noted by hikers for being above the tree line, offering hikers unrestricted views from Vermont’s third highest peak. Being on the summit of Camel’s Hump gave Mark the feeling of being on a “Mediterranean Isle, hanging out on an island and looking down.” Furthermore Camel’s Hump was the only 4,000 foot peak that was completely undeveloped, free from the ski slopes and broadcasting towers that are found on Camel’s Hump’s larger siblings, and this was important to hikers.

It is not surprising, however, that Mount Mansfield, the tallest peak in Vermont, was not individually noted as a favorite by hikers. Despite Mansfield’s height, alpine vegetation, and over a mile of the Long Trail above tree line, the mountain also features communication towers, an auto road for tourists to drive up the mountain and park within a few hundred vertical feet of the summit, and ski slopes on its eastern face. Although the impact of development certainly influenced the thru-hikers experience on the mountain, only a few outright objected to the development. Most hikers expressed feelings of tolerance and acceptance, embracing the fact that, in particular, the auto road enabled people who would otherwise be unable to climb to the top to enjoy the experience of being on top of a mountain. Melissa framed it as “I don’t have any more of a right to be

on the mountain than [the people who drive up] do. And if it can instill some appreciation, then I think that's worth it." Fred suggested that "99% of people that have been to the top of Mansfield would never go up there if it wasn't for the road. So I guess that's good." Regarding the development of ski trails on mountains, many hikers noted that skiing was an outdoor recreation just as their own activity is, and an important part of Vermont's tourism-based economy. Some even appreciated the open view that a ski trail offered. Despite this tolerance, however, hikers did want to preserve some mountains from development and maintain a more natural, wilderness experience.

Pilgrimage

Many scholars would be inclined to consider a 273 mile, several week journey on foot as a pilgrimage. As Luigi Tomasi defines, pilgrimage is "a journey undertaken for religious purposes that culminates in a visit to a place considered to be the site or manifestation of the supernatural—a place where it is easier to obtain divine help" (2002). Yet this term did not resonate with many thru-hikers, who suggested that the term did not fit because of the lack of a sacred destination. Instead, more common were the terms journey, adventure, and quest. Those that did consider their hike as a pilgrimage also expressed sentiments of sacredness about the journey. Mark thought of his thru-hike as "doing something that is relatively pure, and it can be a purifying experience, almost as if it is a pilgrimage to purify yourself." Yet he also used the terms quest and journey as frequently, the former reflecting his initial concern for reaching the end and the latter understanding the hike as the continuous experience, "a journey outward and a journey

inward,” over simply reaching the end. Another hiker objected to the use of pilgrimage, finding it too religious.

Although hikers do not widely purport their experiences as pilgrimages, it is still a useful term for analyzing the experience of hiking the Long Trail. Thru-hikers place much more emphasis on the journey itself rather than the destination. It was the experiences throughout the journey that were important and meaningful, and as I detail in the next chapter, served as spiritually transformative and nourishing.

Somewhat different from traditional understandings of religious pilgrimage, such as Tomasi’s, there was no sacred destination at the Massachusetts or Canadian borders that would be deeply meaningful, and indeed, scholars are reporting many pilgrimages have no sacred destination, but rather it is the journey that is sacred or spiritual. Sacred sites for the Long Trail pilgrimage were along the route, including mountain peaks, famous shelters, the Inn at Long Trail, Devil’s Gulch, fire towers, and ponds. Ironically, most hikers described the experience of arriving at the terminus of their hiking experience as being anti-climatic and filled with mixed emotions. While there was a certain joy in finishing the hike, many wished that their journey wasn’t over and that they wanted to continue hiking. Thru-hikers were not necessarily looking forward to returning to the complex, frantic, and stressful life of civilization.¹⁵

Hikers also remarked about the arbitrary nature of either terminus, both coming at political boundaries rather than a geographic end. For those arriving at the Massachusetts border, a sign designates the boundary, but the trail continues with the white blazes of the

¹⁵ Civilization had a more negative connotation amongst hikers.

Appalachian Trail. Arriving at the Canadian border offers a similar experience. Melissa described it as “sort of weird. You reach the border, look east and look west, see the big swath. You’ve reached your destination, but you’re still out in the middle of nowhere.” Another hiker commented that it did not feel right when he arrived at the end. He objected to the illogical end of the trail when more mountains lie ahead.

Making connections to the past, some hikers also considered the hikers that have taken the same journey before them. Chelsea recalled:

When I was hiking by myself and I was thinking about some other person that had just, be it a few hours ago, day or years ago, had been walking in that exact same spot. And wondering—or everybody that thru-hikes, its some sort of journey, some sort of impactful experience—just kind of interesting thinking about how many other feet have passed over those exact same spots, who they belong to, what kind of experience they were having.

Chelsea’s rumination about fellow hikers that have shared in the same journey gave her a sense of interconnectedness to the historical community of hikers. In addition to a historical sense of community, hikers will also experience a lived community on the trail.

Trail Immersion and Community

Thru-hiking the Long Trail is a major cultural frame shift for most hikers from their normal lives. Much of this is rooted in the very practice of backpacking. All the material possessions a hiker needs and wants for their survival and enjoyment must be carried on their back. Conveniences of civilization which are otherwise overlooked and taken for granted are immediately disrupted and become concerns of survival. A prime example is the access to potable water. Instead of getting water from a faucet, hikers must treat any water they find with a chemical mixture, mechanical filters, or boiling, and they

must plan ahead to ensure that they have enough water, including carrying it.¹⁶ Overall, hikers must carry the basic necessities of a sleep system, adequate clothing, food, stove for cooking, basic toiletries, first aid kit, and lighting. Hikers may elect to carry a tent or other shelter, or depend on communal shelters and lodges located every six to eight miles along the trail. Given that all these items must be carried in the backpack, weight is paramount for thru-hikers and may affect what items they elect to bring.

The equipment that each hiker brings are the material expressions of thru-hiking the Long Trail. Within each category of gear a plethora of options allows hikers to pick items that meet their needs, including the option to not take a particular category of gear at all. The selection of gear carried by each hiker in their backpack and over the length of 273 miles on the trail usually reflects a hiker's style and personality: "gearheads" carry in their packs the latest-and-thought-to-be-greatest equipment, ultra-lighters carry as little as they can and modify or create gear to shave precious ounces, nature hikers carry guidebooks on flora and fauna or regional wildlife and binoculars, and comfort campers will endure carrying extra weight to enjoy a morning espresso or luxury pillow at night. One hiker received his trail name, Peak Geek, because he carried a GPS to help him "bag"¹⁷ peaks near the Long Trail.

¹⁶ No organization that oversees the hiking trails (Green Mountain Club, U.S. Forest Service, State of Vermont) will certify any water source as safe, advising all hikers to take one of these measure to treat any water source. While hiking redefines understandings of access to potable water, in a converse way hikers also may experience water in a different manner. While people not on the trail purchase spring water in plastic bottles, hikers, if they so chose, can drink water straight from one of several springs that the trail crosses.

¹⁷ "Bagging peaks" or "peak baggers" are hikers who focus on successfully summiting as many mountains as they can. They usually target the highest mountains in a geographic region.

Thru-hikers on the Long Trail, by definition, immerse themselves in nature. Every day is marked by walking an unpaved—yet still humanmade—path through dense boreal forest, at times referred to as a “long green tunnel.”¹⁸ The hikers are nourished by the trail. The water they drink is collected from natural sources along the trail, as well as plants that offer berries for eating. Each evening, hikers will camp either in tents they carry or in the numerous backcountry shelters located along the trail. For those electing to tent, with the exception of a few layers of nylon and foam, hikers are sleeping on the ground, no longer elevated above it. For those staying in the shelters, many shelters feature only three walls and thus are not fully enclosed. Although some security is offered by these structures, hikers do not block out the natural world entirely. Hikers will also often develop a deeper knowledge of the weather, being attuned to changes in the atmosphere to anticipate forthcoming rain or sun.

While hiking the Long Trail is deep immersion in nature, it is also an experience of trail community. Many hikers note that a very important part of their experience is “about the people.” First, between thru-hikers, a deep camaraderie emerges over their shared interest in the trail. Hikers find themselves in a non-competitive atmosphere—bolstered by hike your own hike—as each individual faces their own challenges during their journey, yet there are others with similar experiences and challenges, willing to offer support. Furthermore, a sentiment of solidarity emerges from the trail being the great equalizer. Distinctions of non-trail life are nullified: class, gender, occupation, age, race,

¹⁸ From my own experience, this phrase is more commonly used with the Appalachian Trail. Given the shared 100 miles between the Long and Appalachian trails in Vermont, and that the biome remains the same throughout the majority of the Long Trail, extending the term to the Long Trail I suggest is appropriate.

ethnicity, nationality, and to some extent, ability.¹⁹ “The bottom line is everybody has got to get up the next day and put one foot in front of the other” as Tracy stated. “It doesn't matter whether they're a dishwasher in life, or the head of a corporation, or the governor of Vermont. It's irrelevant.” As with most small communities, thru-hikers have an unspoken bond and trust amongst them to watch out for each other's safety.

One of the celebrated features of the Long Trail is the 50+ shelters. Many hikers choose to stay at shelter sites which offer hikers a primitive structure to set up camp for the night, a nearby reliable water source, and a basic privy. Beyond the very practical functions that shelters serve, they also serve a very symbolic role in fostering community. Tracy summarizes the unique community aspect of the shelters:

Particularly on days that you have not seen another soul on the trail, there is something exciting or welcoming of getting to a shelter and there are already people starting to eat, and hang up their clothes, and there's laundry, and someone's handing you something, asking where you've been, where you're from and where you're going and how long you've been out there. All of a sudden you're enveloped by this community of people for that finite period of time. You tell stories, some of them are funny. It does give you sense of being a part of something larger than your individual self. For whatever reason and from whatever walks of life, we've all chosen this particular activity that sets us apart. It's not your everyday thing to do. That alone is kind of worth it.

¹⁹ Of particular note is disability. It is a highly complex and intricate topic that deserves much attention, albeit at another time as it falls outside the scope of this paper. But a few things should be noted here. First, the phrase itself is not a frame of inclusivity. Second, the trail deconstructs the term disability, as able people may fail to complete the trail and disabled people have also completed the trail. Third, the most contended question would be of the accessibility of the trail. It is of interesting note that for all new privies constructed on federal land, that the privies must be handicapped accessible.



Butler Lodge,, located just south of Mount Mansfield, is one of the more deluxe shelters on the trail. Photo: S. Masters

The unspoken trust in the community is also evident in that hikers will share bunks in the shelters with the people they meet only hours previous. The transient essence of the community was widely acknowledged by hikers.

Second, hikers also experience incredible community with people off the trail. Most hikers note the friendliness of Vermonters in the most common form of trail magic: hitchhiking. Melissa recalled that a well-dressed older gentleman in a fancy car offered a hitch into town despite that she and her hiking partner were dirty and wet. Beyond his memories of trail magic on the Long Trail, Stephen found Vermonters to be opening and genuine, wanting to know how their trip was going.

Solo hikers, who desire and appreciate the solitude of hiking alone, frequently enjoy the social aspects of the trail. Chelsea's story illustrates this well. She set out on her 2010 solo thru-hike anticipating that she would stargaze at night, taking advantage of the minimal light pollution surrounding the Green Mountains. Once she began her journey, however, she soon realized that she was going to bed before it got completely dark out. Refusing to relinquish her goal, Chelsea decided that she would make the effort on the last night hiking to stay at the aptly named Shooting Star shelter for stargazing. Despite her hope that she would have the evening to herself, a father and his young son had set up their camp when she arrived. After the "Oh, there's another person here," reaction and disappointment of a spoiled night of solitude, Chelsea and the other two hikers eventually warmed up to each other. Chelsea and her new acquaintances sat out on the rocks that evening and enjoyed some twenty shooting stars. "In retrospect," she said, "even though I initially wanted to have the night to myself, it was that much more meaningful that I shared it with somebody, even though it was someone that just came into my life for a few hours."

Solo or with Companions

The decision to hike the Long Trail solo or with others raises two interesting considerations. First, how do women perceive hiking on the trail by themselves? Most female hikers report that they felt comfortable hiking by themselves on the trail, reporting only a few instances of feeling uncomfortable. The trail community made them feel relatively safe, with the incidents involving people that were not thru-hikers. When

mentoring young female hikers, Tracy often fields questions from concerned parents wondering if it is safe for their daughter to hike alone. She conveys that she has no reservation in recommending to young women that they will be safe hiking solo, citing her own experience hiking the trail three times and hearing of very little, if any, crime on the trail. Furthermore, she suggests that solo hikers still run into plenty of people and can attach themselves to other groups of hikers if they desire. Another female hiker commented that most solo female hikers are older as younger females usually hike with other people.²⁰

Second, how does hiking with other people or solo change the experience of hiking the trail? Aside from the logistical difference, those I talked with indicated that hiking solo benefitted from more freedom and not having to consider and consult others, as well as more opportunity for solitude. Those hiking in groups benefitted from collective decision making and more intimate camaraderie, as well as the enjoyment of sharing the journey with others. Yet those hiking with others often experienced perceived moments of solitude during their hikes. Melissa described hiking with a partner as “this organic way to travel, with time together and alone time too.” The hike was fluid between moments of conversation with her partner, as well as moments of silence both hiking together and when one or the other would get further ahead on the trail. She noted her preference for the silence, because “I’m not a huge talker anyways, but especially when you’re out on the trail. You approach this zen like state where there’s no need to talk. Just take it in and be in the moment.” Stephen and Beverly have similar experiences while

²⁰ I was unable to track down any data regarding hiker safety on the trail.

hiking. While the couple always travels together, never getting “more than 50 feet apart,” they enjoy the fluidity between moments of conversation and silence. Although they hike together, Stephen noted that they preferred to not hike with others.

These more subjective dimensions of the Long Trail, although categorically shared by hikers, reflect the particularities of hikers as they maximize their experience on the trail. It is in these dimensions that we begin to notice the nuanced characteristics of religious studies subfields. The familiarities and affinities for natural and wilderness settings aligns with nature religion’s sentiments of interconnectedness and a sacred reverence for the nonhuman world. Additionally, seeking a prolonged experience of walking in nature as a means to rejuvenate or purify oneself further reflects both nature religion and the meaning making of lived religion. And just as lived religion focuses on individual practice, it does not neglect that these practices are still fundamentally social. Lastly, the collective experiences and communities present on the Long Trail reflect similar characteristics of many outdoor recreations, a shared sense of experience and meaning.

5: The Journey Within

Thus far I have explored the dimensions of the Long Trail that resemble religious practice. But are these dimensions worthy of the title religion as I have claimed? Is my claim merely a projection? Undoubtedly the more substantive reason that religious studies should give attention to the Long Trail is that hikers on the trail find significant spiritual meaning in their journeys. While the terms religion and spirituality are not frequently used by the people I interviewed, I found strong themes of meaning making, healing experiences, and romantic relationships in which the Long Trail has played a significant role, and worldview construction amongst hikers.

Why Hike?

For those outside the thru-hiking community, undoubtedly one of the fundamental question is why would someone decide to give up the comforts of civilization for the grueling challenge of hiking 273 miles along unforgiving mountains-voluntarily?

Several themes emerged from hikers. First, many people chose to hike the Long Trail during transitional periods of their lives. As Chidester suggests that religions emerge during transitional periods in peoples lives, hikers take to the trail in situations of change to find meaning. A vast majority of hikers went after finishing an education degree, in between jobs, on furlough from their current employment, or after they retired. The hikers sought out a prolonged wilderness experience during these transition points. A second theme was hikers who were inspired to attempt the Long Trail because of other

hikes. Many expressed a love for hiking and backpacking and several had already completed other long distance trails. Some were inspired by close friends and relatives who had completed long distance hikes, expressing sentiments of curiosity, intrigue, and hints of jealousy. They wanted to have their own adventure or quest on the trail.

Hikers also desired to find out if they were capable of the challenge of thru-hiking. Akin to mountaineers, thru-hikers faced the external challenges of nature and the difficulty of the trail testing them physically as well as the internal challenges of self doubt, fear, and weakness “to transgress the borders of bodily exhaustion in order to gain a fuller awareness of one’s own psychical or spiritual capacities” (von Stuckrad 2005: 1119). Finally, hikers also expressed a desire to get to know Vermont better by traveling it on foot. This was true particularly for Vermonters, as well as non-residents who expressed a deep affinity for the state. Beyond her work on land protection for the state, Tracy also considered her other reasons for hiking her home state: “Because Vermont is beautiful. Just the opportunity to see all of it. And to get from one end of the state to the other by foot, that was a real appeal. Just to see it all, and get the experience of being out there.”

Meaning Making

What about long distance backpacking on the Long Trail attracts individuals, particularly during the transitional periods of their lives? What is the trail offering them? Hikers widely framed the trail as a way to get away from the negative aspects of their daily lives: society was overly stressful, moving too fast, caught up in superficial things,

constantly bombarding them with stimulation, and “all that other BS.” The Long Trail to thru-hikers is a way to unplug, to get to know yourself, a chance to deconstruct daily life and “get back to what really matters.” In a dualistic manner, the trail was framed as the answer for hikers, providing something missing from the rest of their lives. The rat race of society was considered in a profane manner, whereas the trail was sacred and fulfilling, offering a meaningful contrast to everyday life and existence.

This notion for many hikers was very much embedded in the very material expressions of backpacking. Getting back to what really matters meant for thru-hikers the simple processes and needs of life: eating, walking, sleeping, and being in nature. Tracy describes her experience in her three hikes of the Long Trail:

You’re carrying everything. The necessity of carrying it in and carrying it out. The importance of getting it down to the absolute basic minimum. In a world where everything is speeded up and plugged in, it’s nice to be in a place where there aren’t things to plug in. I think that’s always an attraction, especially if you have a busy life and a lot of things going on. It’s nice to pull yourself back and say ‘look, what happens if I just listen to what’s going on in my head instead of everything that’s being imputed into it?’ That’s a real nice thing to do.

The simplicity of backpacking and thus removed from distractions in their daily lives provided hikers the opportunity to spend time thinking. This held true for those that hiked with others: “Even though my wife and I talk when we’re out there, it’s a time that I process things, a time that I have hanging out with myself and enjoying who I am,” Stephen explained.

The sacred simplicity of the trail combined with the purifying dimensions of nature led many hikers to claim their trail experience as spiritually meaningful. Phrases such as ‘the woods are my church’ and ‘I worship in the sanctuary of the big blue dome’

positioned their experiences on the trail as equivalent to those of traditional Christianity, despite many drawing on Eastern traditions for the actual experiences and practices they interpreted on the trail. Melissa credited her ability to enter a state of zen to the simplicity of the trail. “You're living for your necessities. You need to eat, drink, sleep. You don't have all the other BS.” She was able to detach herself from stresses related to finishing up college that year and her job, which started her towards achieving a zen state. When combined with the rhythmic movement of walking, “it just all comes together to make this trance. You're in this other place.” In connecting to moments of meditation where he would draw on prana energy, Mark viewed his deep breathing practices as a form of yoga breathing techniques. Furthermore, he understood his time in the wilderness as a purifying experience. After retiring, Fred wanted to attempt the Long Trail for the dual purpose of the mental challenge and his love of backpacking. In particular, he enjoys taking to the trails by himself. “It gives you a lot of time to think,” he claimed, “I can just be with my thoughts in a great atmosphere.”

Influenced by living in Southwest Virginia, Stephen closely compared his hiking experiences to religious Christian churchgoers. “My wife and I are not religious,” he claimed, “but we definitely have a belief in something greater. That is our connection to that, going outdoors.” Going to nature through backpacking allows Stephen to “get rid of all the stimulus around me. Be right in the woods with nature, where I'm familiar with everything. I don't feel harassed by the town noises. I love that life is simplified. I love that everything I need is on my back. There's just a few items.” For he and his wife, they found spiritual clarity in the outdoors—“that's our church, when we go out there. That's

our letting go of everything that might be superficial and then we're faced with everything that's real. A more clear mirror of ourselves." He further describes the spiritual nourishment he finds in nature:

It's a calming. It's a relaxing feeling. It's a comforting feeling. Kinda feel like you're being surrounded by wildlife, by nature. Just cleansed. Really puts things in perspective. I don't know how many times I've gone for a walk in the woods and come back and had more clarity on whatever situation I was facing. It's time to be with myself. Even though my wife and I talk when we're out there, it's a time that I process things, a time that I have hanging out with myself and enjoying who I am. It's real important to me. I can almost see it as essential. That's the same thing, that when I was part of a church, it's those feelings, but I feel them on a more constant basis. Whereas with church it was fleeting, it was moments that I felt like that. Of course being around people, that stimulus, takes me right away from that. That's why church didn't work for me.

Stephen further expressed hiking as essential, "it almost became my need. I needed my hiking fix."

Beyond understanding his spiritual practice of hiking in relation to Christianity, Stephen also began practices of yoga stretching and meditation through hiking. Practicing yoga on the trail served as practical embodied practice that has continued into his daily life. Also incorporated in his daily life from hiking is Stephen's meditation, which he calls his daily affirmation that helps him to focus on an aspect of his life which he seeks to improve. He finds by saying his affirmation aloud, "it makes it more real." Additionally, Stephen and Beverly walk with their two dogs every day, keeping them physically in shape for their next journey and keeping them connected to their spiritual nourishment in the outdoors.

Finally, Robert explains how the simplicity of the trail creates space for spiritual nourishment:

When things are that simple, I'm listening to myself. I am paying attention to my conversations. Most of my conversations are with me. So that reconnection in itself is important. But it gives me time to think about priority and to feel grateful to be alive, to feel grateful that the part of the planet I'm on is relatively healthy. That the trees are doing their things, that the whole cycle of earth, air, water, and sunlight, the holy foursome that I think about a lot. Maybe its five, earth, air, water, sun, and the life. Those four underlie the life, and interact with the life, and flow through the life. To be out there benefiting from it and being part of it, there's that acute awareness that existence is a blessing and to be a part of it is a blessing. To act in a way that embraces it and affirms it and furthers it and participates in it. To me, that's spiritual. I want to use the word love to describe that. I don't think that [spiritual] is a word that enters my mind usually when I'm thinking about it. Its blessed and blessing that I think of at the time.

The simplicity of backpacking combined with an immersion in nature provides Robert a very deep sense of interconnection, to seeing the ultimate in what he calls “the life.”

Furthermore, his feeling of blessing is deeply related to life altering events covered in the next section.

Healing

Thru-hiking the Long Trail for some individuals was viewed as part of their healing process from life threatening illnesses. In 1999, Robert offered his soon-to-be thirteen year-old son the opportunity to go anywhere on the East Coast for his birthday. The two decided to hike the hundred mile wilderness in Maine, a section of the Appalachian Trail south of Mt. Katahdin. The following year, the two did another 150 mile section of the AT in Maine. However in May 2001, Robert was diagnosed with parathyroid cancer, preventing him from taking a long distance hiking trip that summer. When he was able to go on his next backpacking trip—albeit only a 3 day trip—Robert recalls a “joyous feeling” that came over him: “That’s when I felt, ‘I’m back. I’m alive.

I'm here.'” At the end of another backpacking trip in New Hampshire, Robert described his walk down a mountainside singing James Brown’s “I Feel Good” as another celebratory moment of “I’m alive. I’m here in the world.” After a long backpacking trip on the Appalachian Trail through New Hampshire in 2003, Robert began planning his thru-hike of the Long Trail in 2004.

On Valentine’s Day, 2004, Robert joined friends on a long snowshoe through the southern portion of New Hampshire’s Presidential Range. After returning home that evening, he fell asleep exhausted from the exposure to wind and cold. In the early hours of the next morning a house fire broke out. The rest of Robert’s family escaped without injury, however Robert suffered life threatening burns all over his body. Doctors gave him only a fifty percent chance of survival. He would spend the next two months in a medically induced coma and have major skin grafts to repair his body, followed by a month of rehabilitation.

Despite his injuries, Robert was “stubbornly determined” to get back on the trails. In July 2005, seventeen months after the fire and only fourteen months after rehab, he started his southbound hike of the Long Trail. He was overzealous in his ambition, and feared in the days leading up to his hike that his body might not withstand the grueling challenges of thru-hiking. On the second day of his hike he climbed up 3,858 foot Jay Peak. He recalled,

I was coming up that hill, sweating, grunting, thinking 'I'm such an idiot for thinking I could do this so soon.' Sort of just cursing and bitching about the whole, the heat, the elevation gain, etc. I guess it was probably somewhere around the first crossings of the ski slope—where I could see into New York and into New Hampshire, just great vistas—coming up and thinking 'Wow!' This is pretty much how I was feeling on the treadmill when I was walking a mile an hour on

the treadmill a year ago and I was looking out into the parking lot of the rehab hospital. [On the mountain I was] feeling how far I had come, and how amazing it was to be breathing mountain air and not recycled, conditioned hospital air, looking at this great vista instead of a parking lot. And to be never self sufficient, but to have everything I need on my back and I'm out here on my own, instead of people needing to watch out for me, needing to hand a fresh jar to my wife to twist off the top. That was a pretty blissful experience that colored much of the trip.

This is one of several “I’m here. I’m alive” moments that Robert recalled from his hike that were an important part in his healing process. In fact, he described backpacking as a “motivation for me to working hard in recovery. It was a reward for having recovered. And it’s a celebration of recovery. It’s healing, motivation to heal, and celebration of healing. A lot of people have said this, but there is something about being out in the mountains that heals.”

Hiking the Long Trail became a critical portion of Robert’s healing experience. Since then he has gone on long distance hikes every summer, including two hikes of the Long Trail in 2007 and 2010. He plans to return every few years, as the Long Trail is “kind of a celebration and was also a milestone of my recovery. In the mountains, I have access to that sense of bliss, that sense of love in the world and being blessed by it.” In addition to Robert, two other hikers reported that hiking the Long Trail played an important part in their healing process from serious illnesses. More specifically, both individuals reported that the hiking represented the final stage in their recovery.

Significant Others

Thru-hikers found two capacities of meaning making in their relationship with significant others. First, those that hiked the Long Trail with their significant others

reported that their experience helped develop and strengthen their relationship with their significant other. Mike and Sandy, a retired couple who spend their summers in Vermont, thru-hiked the trail together in 2003. Sandy commented that hiking the trail with her husband of 32 years allowed her to see Mike as a provider and protector that she had not seen previously. Since completing their hike, they have hiked portions of the trail every summer since.

Second, some hikers met their significant others while hiking the trail. The shared passion for long distance backpacking was of the utmost importance to these couples. Noelle had finished graduate school in the spring of 2004 and decided that she wanted to do the Long Trail with two friends that summer. After their first resupply in Manchester Center, Noelle and her friends stopped at Bromley shelter where they met Dane. “He didn’t seem like an AT thru-hiker,” she recalled, “he was carrying way too much.” Dane was polite, offering Noelle and her friends food, and relatively quiet. Over the next few days, Noelle and Dane leapfrogged each other on the trail, and Noelle began to take interest in Dane. In an instance of fate, Noelle and Dane were able to exchange phone numbers on the summit of Killington before the Appalachian and Long Trails would split in just a few miles. After she completed the Long Trail, she made arrangements with Dane that they would do some hiking in Maine together after he completed the Appalachian Trail. “And so we did. We met up and spent the next 24 days hiking and backpacking together. It was a 24-day first date.”

After getting married Noelle and Dane have since hiked the Appalachian and John Muir Trails, and plan to do other long distance trails in the future. Beyond the symbolic

role that the Long Trail played in her relationship with Dane, Noelle firmly believed that she and Dane would have never met if it was not for their common interest in long distance backpacking. “On paper, Dane and I are complete opposites.” She describes herself as white collar, liberal, Democrat, atheist from India; and Dane as conservative, blue collar, Republican, Catholic euroamerican. But the trail was the “great equalizer” and removed these societal classifications to reveal their common love for the outdoors, family, and desire to help others.

Stephen and Beverly have a similar story. They met while hiking the Appalachian Trail in 2003, and since then, thru-hiking is central to their relationship. “That's just what we do, we do thru-hikes. That's what we save our money for,” Stephen stated, noting they hiked the John Muir Trail in 2008, the Long Trail in 2010, and are planning to do the Colorado Trail in 2012. “We love it, wouldn't have it any other way. It's good companionship. I love hiking together with her.” He continues:

[Being on the trail is] really getting rid of the clutter out of the everyday life. I don't mean clutter like everyday stuff, like material stuff. I mean thoughts, stresses, and frustration. And that stuff just goes out the window when you're out in the woods. Like I said, we're not bullshitters, it's not like we're not able to bullshit each other. It's just more. It's put in perspective a lot better, our relationship when we're out there. I think it helps us to enjoy each other a lot more, brings us back to our roots, when we met [on the Appalachian Trail].

Beyond the benefit for their relationship, Stephen and Beverly find spiritual nourishment in the outdoors. “We definitely have a belief in something greater. That is our connection to that, going outdoors. That's our church, when we go out there. That's our letting go of everything that might be superficial and then we're faced with everything that's real, a more clear mirror of ourselves.”

For both relationships, hiking became the ultimate concern. Thru-hiking emerged during the transitional periods of their lives, framed the hikers' true identity and values, has remained at the core of the relationships, and continues to nourish the hikers in spiritually meaningful ways.

From the Trail to Everyday Life

A 273 mile journey on foot through the Green Mountains spanning the course of several weeks may seem to many a unique vacation experience. The argument can certainly be made that any individual who spends several weeks away from their daily lifestyle and routines in a vacation type experience would express feeling nourished and rejuvenated. But those that hike the Long Trail find deeper meaning in their journeys over that of a vacation experience. Beyond the Long Trail as religious practice and the spiritually meaningful experience that hikers have on the trail, thru-hikers often find dimensions of their trail life and experience translating back into their everyday lives.

Hikers often noted how their self-perceptions and feelings were altered after completing the Long Trail. Given that many approached the trail for a physical, mental, and spiritual challenge, it is not surprising that many express a sense of accomplishment and the confidence to take on any challenge. Melissa expressed that on the trail she would look at the summit of the next mountain she would climb and think "holy shit, I'm never gonna make it," or when she reached a false summit, "that's not the summit, the summit is over there. Oh shit." By completing the trail, she realized that she need not let herself "get psyched out," and should approach any challenge with a positive attitude. As she

phrased it: “‘yes I can, *one foot at a time.*’ I do that all the time in my life,” incorporating her regard for the trance like state created by the repetition of hiking—a more embodied and lived meaning to a common idiom. In addition to an internal sense of accomplishment, another Vermont hiker noted that she received more recognition for completing the Long Trail from co-workers than anything she had accomplished at her job of 15 years.

A deep sense of calmness was another dominant feeling hikers expressed. Similar to Stephen’s description covered earlier in this chapter, Tracy found that she returned from the Long Trail calmer because the trail enables her to “be who I am.” She claimed that being on the trail “living in a totally different setting with a different mindset. That helps you live in a better way.” Moreover, Tracy and other Vermonters expressed a deepened sense of pride having hiked their home state.

Many hikers also incorporated their embodied experiences on the Long Trail into their everyday lives. Stephen now practices yoga and his verbal affirmations from hiking daily, and together with his wife walk with their dogs daily for the physical and spiritual gains. Bathing became an important ritual for Melissa on the trail. She was cautious to ensure that her sleeping bag and camp clothes stayed dry and as clean as possible so that she would be comfortable each night, and thus made an extra effort to wash up in the nearby stream at the end of each day. Twelve years after completing her hike, Melissa still finds bathing very important to her.

But perhaps the most important sentiment hikers returned from the trail with was an appreciation and desire for a simple and non-materialistic lifestyle. Returning to

everyday life, the majority of hikers were concerned, unhappy, or even distressed regarding how much ‘stuff’ they had. As Chelsea described it, thru-hiking the Long Trail

definitely made me want to become more of a minimalist. Just that whole idea of being able to account for all my stuff and carry it with me. That, in combination with spending that fall abroad living out of suitcases. It was just recently, maybe a month ago, that I moved into an apartment and unpacked all this stuff that had been in storage in various places over the past six months. I was thinking 'I don't need any of this.' I mean I still have a lot of stuff. But I do feel like it gave me that sense that I don't need as much as I have.

While many thru-hikers expressed similar sentiments to Chelsea, some were further inspired to take action. With their deep concerns over environmental and conservation issues, their appreciation for the simple and non-material ways of backpacking, and their love for “being out [in nature] for a long period of time,” Stephen and Beverly want to downsize from their 1,400 square foot home “so that we'll spend more time outside” on a daily basis.

Tracy also found that her experience of thru-hiking and backpacking put into perspective her own material consumption. She reminds people that on the trail “you're carrying everything. The necessity of carrying it in and carrying it out. The importance of getting it down to the absolute basic minimum, that carries over. It does for me. I'm very conscientious about what I use and how much I use, and reusing things over and over again.” Tracy and Stephen’s desires and actions to live less materialistic lifestyles directly connected to their views on environmental degradation as explored in the next section.

Constructing Worldview

Hiking on the trail directly shaped and affirmed worldviews for many hikers. Tracy and Stephen found that their views and concerns over environmental issues were related to and influenced by their experiences in hiking the Long Trail. Stephen asserted that he and Beverly were highly concerned on issues of climate change and conservation. Beverly works for the local soil and water conservation district where she works with local agricultural and commercial businesses. Stephen is a health and physical education teacher in the local school district, where he focuses on helping students develop healthy lifelong practices. Despite being “much more liberal in our views than we can be in our jobs” in southwest Virginia, Stephen and Beverly find ways to promote conservation issues. Each year they take sixth grade students to the Appalachian Trail which passes only a short distance from where they live, in an effort to help inspire children to pursue hiking as positive physical activity that also connects them to the natural world and a desire to conserve it.

In their personal practices, “we do everything possible to be conservative in our everyday lives,” Stephen claimed—a claim supported by the small, and soon to be smaller, home they occupy. Such strong concerns for conservation are undoubtedly linked to their feelings of connectedness and appreciation of nature while hiking. “We definitely have a belief in something greater. That is our connection to that: going outdoors.” When asked if he finds the presence of something sacred in nature, Stephen responded: “I feel like I’m part of something whole. I feel like I’m more part of whatever it is—the greater picture. I feel like I’m a part of it.”

Tracy expressed similar concerns over environmental destruction and a deep sense of connection in nature. In her own life, she is very conscious of how much she consumes after realizing on the trail “the importance of getting it down to the absolute basic minimum.” But beyond her own personal changes, she finds the redefining wants versus needs is “a valuable part of the experience, because that makes you realize how important it is and how fragile it is. If you're not concerned how the planet is going to survive, you're in the wrong place.” Although she does not attribute the terms sacred or spiritual to her time in nature, Tracy does suggest that nature serves as

big blank spaces to let your mind wander and to get at peace with yourself. Sacred seems to freight the outdoors a little more than I think is appropriate. But that's me. I think it gets painted around a lot. It definitely offers a solace that you don't get from everyday life. What someone like me is looking for, some solace, some downtime, an opportunity to let my mind wander and to think about my place in the universe, whatever that might be. I don't have any grand theories or strong beliefs about how we all got here. But definitely when I'm out there I feel more connected in a sense, both to the human and the natural world. It's one big planet. You don't necessarily get that sitting in an urban environment.

Both Tracy and Stephen's deep feelings of connection to the universe and whole in combination with their strong convictions for the protection of the nature and the planet are strong examples of Taylor's nature-based spirituality (2007a, 2010) or of Chidester's ultimate concerns (1987). Indeed, many hikers I interviewed fit Taylor's definition well—that nature is sacred in some way and worthy of reverent care—albeit with some degree of variation in their beliefs and convictions. Mark tapped into prana energy while on the Long Trail, connecting him to the energy of the environment. His deep concerns over resource consumption and environmental degradation—which he conveyed with deeply ominous tones—were incorporated into his Long Trail experience.

Understanding current practices as unsustainable and destroying the earth, hiking for Mark was a glimpse into a more sustainable future. Self-powered transportation, in particular walking, over fossil fuel based transportation was what he envisioned as required in the future, either as fossil fuel sources will be entirely depleted or as necessary for a sustainable future.

Whereas the previous chapters have outlined the religious dimensions of the Long Trail, this chapter has focused on the spirituality of hikers on the trail. In doing so, I have justified interpreting the communal practices and experiences of the Long Trail as religion. But more importantly I have illuminated the “practically coherent” spiritual practices utilized by hikers on the Long Trail (McGuire 2008: 15). It is the trail that emerges to hikers during the transitional periods of their lives to offer them a chance to get away from their daily lives. On the trail hikers get back to “what really matters” and find meaning and nourishment in their experience on the trail. For some this goes even further. As nature religion suggests there is a healing restoring capacity in nature, and thus for some hikers the Long Trail is a critical part of their healing. Within romantic relationships it is the trail that is the focal point—their ultimate concern—to start or nourish the relationships. Finally, as both nature religion and outdoor recreation spirituality have suggested, hikers report feeling a sense of interconnection with the larger whole, the planet and thus are oriented by their experience on the Long Trail. And just as importantly hikers are inspired to an ethic of conservation and, in certain cases, desire a less materialistic lifestyle.

6: Hiking Out

This thesis has worked to sketch the religious and spiritual dimensions of hiking on the Long Trail. But as the research that has supported this paper has shown, my efforts to outline these various dimensions have blended together. This is not necessarily a bad thing. Rather, it is reflective of the complex, intertwined, and practically coherent ways that long distance backpackers make sense of their worlds. As Chidester reminds us, it is the individual who determines what is sacred, not an external authority. Therefore scholars of religion should seriously consider the spiritual and religious dimensions of long distance backpacking on the Long Trail. Furthermore, it is when we observe the “dynamic relationship with everyday life” as Orsi suggests (1997: 7), that we discover the beliefs and practices that are the most meaningful for people.

The frames of a long distance hiking experience on the Long Trail provide a ritualized experience for hikers that transcend the otherwise temporal and idiosyncratic tendencies. The trail embraces a philosophy and ethical system that desires to maximize the experience of each hiker that they may go out seeking what they want from a footpath in the wilderness and return with meaningful insights and understandings. The more subjective yet still communal experiences of the trail further suggest that no two hikes are alike, even for those hiking with others. And although there is so much uniqueness and individuality on the trail, as McGuire notes, this lived religion is still fundamentally social. As many might assume that a thru-hike of the Long Trail would be about getting out in nature, there is a very important dimension for hikers that the experience is as

much about the people. It is about community. It is about sharing a rather unique activity in nature, and a worldview. It's about watching the stars with someone you only met a few hours ago. "It does give you sense of being a part of something larger than your individual self. For whatever reason and from whatever walks of life, we've all chose this particular activity that sets us apart. It's not your everyday thing to do. That alone is kind of worth it," Tracy succinctly stated.

It is to nature, and to the physical, mental, and spiritual challenge that the Long Trail presents that hikers turn to understand and learn. Particularly when faced with big changes in life as Chidester suggests, it is the trail that beckons to provide hikers the opportunity to make sense of their worlds. They are freed from what they see as the superficiality of daily life to reconnect with what really matters and spend time in their own head and getting to know themselves better. They are reconnected to something larger than themselves, and grateful to be a part of the community in the broadest understanding. And it is to the trail which they return when they need to be nourished again. The Green Mountains are the sacred backdrop for their experience. And yet the hikers take back more than they might expect from their journey on the Long Trail. It is the rituals hikers create on the trails that subtly connect them back to their hiking life and identity. The simple lifestyle, focused on meeting the basic needs, makes hikers reconsider the material expressions and possessions of their everyday lives. While many are inspired, others decide to act to reduce their materialistic ways. In other words, the experience of the trail provides an ethical framework.

As this paper was grounded in lived religion, nature-based spirituality, and outdoor recreation spirituality, it also contributes back to these fields. For lived religion, I have demonstrated what would otherwise be considered a vacation experience or leisure activity is very much a rich and meaningful spiritual practice for hikers. This paper has reflected and supported the “feelings of belonging and connection to the earth—of being bound to and dependent upon the earth’s living systems” that Taylor (2007a: 867) suggested as part of nature religion, as well as the “innate tendency to focus on life and lifelike process” that Wilson (1984:1 1) proposed, albeit from a new perspective of modern day adventurers on the hiking trail. Finally, whereas other study in outdoor recreation has focused on activities that take place in a single day or over a couple of days, I have explored a practice that occurs over a long period of time, where hikers are more readily able to detach themselves from their daily experience without a re-entry foreseen in the near future—a research topic on the effect of prolonged experience would be of great interest. Furthermore, studying how a prolonged experience can motivate individuals to a non-materialistic lifestyle in addition to an ethic of conservation would also add to the literature on outdoor recreation spirituality.

While I have focused this paper on the Long Trail, the experiences of long distance backpackers are not isolated to this trail alone, as suggested by the numerous instances where other trails were referenced by hikers I interviewed. Indeed, there are a number of long distance hiking trails, both within the United States and around the world. The triple crown of trails in the United States are the Appalachian, Pacific Crest, and Continental Divide Trails. The Long Trail, Colorado Trail, and John Muir trail are

consider the triple gem trails—each of these shorter trails shares a large part with a triple crown trail and are regarded to highlight some of the best sections of the triple crown trails. Within just these trails in the U.S., how does each trail shape each hikers experience? What effect does the different bioregions in which each trail exists change the meanings for hikers? How do the triple gem trails, shorter in their overall journey, affect hikers differently from the triple crown trails, on average four to five times the distance and time to complete? For those that have hiked multiple trails, how do they perceive the differences in their experiences? Furthermore, as some of my research suggested, what is the draw for some to hike so many different trails?

Yet even within my own research on the Long Trail there are many stones left unturned. While I considered the Long Trail as religion and spiritually meaningful through lived religion, I did not take the opportunity to understand what role the Long Trail plays in the larger picture of an individual's religious and spiritual practices and beliefs. How significant is it for hikers in their broader spiritual lives? How heavily do we weigh the investment of a Long Trail hike against what hikers reap from other experiences, particularly in comparison to other spiritual practices? Additionally, I did not explore demographic difference in any significant detail. The two demographics that provided enough variety in a rather homogenous group of hikers were gender and class, which might change with a larger number of participants over a variety of trails, and more might reveal patterns indiscernible in a smaller sample

Beyond comparisons within hiking, how does the hikers' non-materialistic appreciations and practices compare to the asceticism and reclusivity of the monastic

traditions? While it is unlikely that many hikers would find such a comparison useful, given the finite status of a hiking journey and their disinclination for associating with organized religion, the many folklore stories that hikers shared with me suggested that there are people whom hiking is their life might be more apt for this comparison. Perhaps a revised perspective is in order: these modern day foot travelers spend their lives on the trail, only entering society to support their life on the trail.

Finally, in future work I hope to explore the Long Trail within the culture and society of Vermont. The trail is an important part of the identity of Vermont, in a reciprocal shaping process. Further discourse, particularly in historical context, might suggest how deep the relationship is. For example, the Green Mountain Club was one of the leading opponents to the proposition of the Green Mountain Parkway—a proposed highway similar to the Blue Ridge Parkway in the southern Appalachian mountains—and helped to defeat it. But the trail seemingly has deep meaning for Vermonters, as evident through hiker testimony. This is also validated by the more popular expressions, including Long Trail Ale and that former Vermont governor Howard Dean has hiked the entire trail.

In concluding, I hope to have shed light on the unique subculture of long distance backpacking on the Long Trail, and how the religious aspects of the trail serve as important meaning making journeys for many long distance hikers. Given that hikers will continue to hit the trails and find their experiences spiritually meaningful, and that more

hikers are attempting long distance hikes than ever before²¹ suggests that scholars of religion should attend to this increasingly popular practice. Particularly with regard to environmental concerns, understanding how long distance backpacking may prove an important option and fundamental shift for a more sustainable future.

²¹ From http://www.appalachiantrail.org/site/c.mqLTIYOwGIF/b.4805579/k.DA92/2000Milers_Facts_and_Statistics.htm. The last decade alone doubled the number of hikers who have completed the entire Appalachian Trail.

Appendix A: Map of the Long Trail



Appendix B: Research Questionnaire

Not every question was asked in every interview.

What is your experience with the Long Trail? How much have you hiked on the Long Trail? How often do you hike the trail? Have you completed the entire long trail? What are the duration of your trips on the trail?

When did you complete your hike of the Long Trail? Who did you hike the trail with? What were your favorite memories from the Long Trail?

What other backpacking experiences and trips have you done? Why do you enjoy hiking and backpacking?

Why did you decide to hike the trail? Were there other significant life events that coincided or led to you to want to hike the trail?

What was your trail name? How did you receive your trail name?

How much wildlife did you encounter on the trail? What are your memories of these encounters?

Which were your favorite geographic features of the trail? Memorable peaks, climbs, valleys, etc? Did any feature have a deep meaning for you i.e. feelings of reverence, appreciation for nature?

What is your general impression of the Long Trail?

Do you consider yourself a practicing member of a religious tradition? What are your religious beliefs? Are your religious beliefs different from what you were raised? What do you consider your religious/spiritual practices?

Do you consider hiking and or backpacking to be spiritual or religious? Does your religious beliefs or community consider backpacking or spending time in nature a acceptable spiritual practice?

What impact has hiking the Long Trail had on your life? Would you hike the trail again?

Are you involved at all with the Green Mountain Club? What is your level of participation? Do you volunteer at all with the Green Mountain Club or other outdoor recreation club?

What are your views on the environment? Do you consider yourself an environmentally conscious person? Do you volunteer with or donate money to any environmental organizations?

Do you participate in other outdoor recreation activities? Which ones? How frequently?

Did you consider your hike on the Long Trail as a healing experience? How was a hike healing? Why were you seeking healing?

Are you familiar with trail magic and trail angels? Did you receive any trail magic? Why do you think trail angels desire to give thru-hikers?

Are you familiar with the term 'hike your own hike'? What do you think the term means? What does it mean to you?

Did you have any habits, routines, or rituals from the trail? Anything related to the weather, injury, superstition, Inn at Long Trail, journaling, end-to-end badge?

Do you feel that hiking or being outdoors is something important that should be passed on to the next generations?

Is there anything that you have brought back from your hike on the Long Trail? Anything that carried over into your daily life?

Did you feel stronger through hiking on the Long Trail? Did you remember a point when you felt stronger on the trail? Do you remember getting your trail legs?

Did hiking the trail give you a feeling of a deeper closeness or intimacy with the land or Vermont?

Were there any taboos or dos and don'ts on the trail? Were there rules? Are you familiar with Leave No Trace? What are your thoughts on Leave No Trace? Was there any etiquette on the trail?

What did you enjoy the most about being on the Long Trail? What do you enjoy about backpacking? Did you enjoy the feelings of self reliance or minimalist lifestyle?

Did hiking the trail change your perceptions of people or nature? Did it affirm any of your perceptions?

Did you carry the guidebook, end-to-enders guide, or the map while on the trail?

The Long Trail is described as an important resource for Vermont. What does this mean?
How is it a resource?

Did you have a sense of the history of the trail while hiking? For example, how
geographic features, shelters, etc, were named for certain people.

Did you have a sense of the people who have walked the trail before you, yesterday, last
week, last year, decades ago?

Do you think there are hiking purists? What is a hiking purist? What is the 'pure' way of
hiking? How did you differ from the 'pure' view? Why did you or did you not follow the
'purist' way?

Did you read or write in the trail logs at the trailhead or the shelters? What did people
write in the trail logs? What would you write in the trail logs? Why did people write more
personal or expressive entries into the logs?

Preliminary Questionnaire

Distributed prior to interviews to collect demographic data.

Please indicate all that apply (you may highlight or bold that apply to you, or delete
options that do not apply leaving on the ones which describe you).

Name (with Prefix and Suffix):

Currently Reside:

Born (Location):

Sex:

Age:

18-22	23-29	30-39	40-49	50-59
60-69	70-70	80+		

Marital Status:

Single	Married	Civil Union	Divorced
Widowed	Remarried	Other	

Children (ages and gender):

Race:

Hispanic or Latina/o White or Euroamerican
 Asian American Black or African American
 Native American or Alaska Native
 Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander Other _____

Education Level:

Some High School	HS Diploma/GED/Equivalent	Some College
Associates Degree	Vocation/Technical School	Bachelors Degree
Masters Degree	PhD Degree	Professional Degree

Occupation:

Income:

Less than \$10,000	\$10,000-24,999	\$25,000-34,999
\$35,000-44,999	\$45,000-\$54,999	\$55,000-64,999
\$65,000-74,999	\$75,000-84,999	\$85,000-94,999
\$95,000-104,999	\$105,000+	

Religious Affiliation: What religious tradition were you raised? What is your current religious or spiritual practice? How frequently?

Have you hiked the Long Trail in its entirety? If yes, was it a thru-hike or section hike?

What were the dates of your hike (approximations are fine)?

Did you hike solo or with someone else?

Trail name(s):

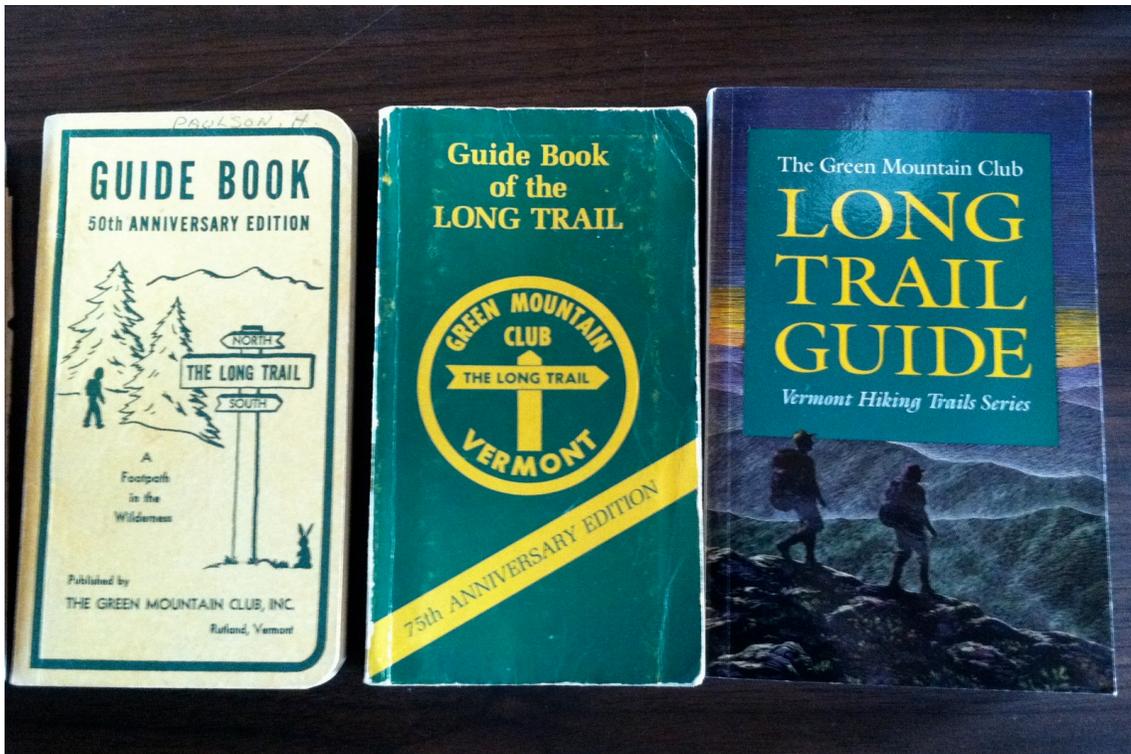
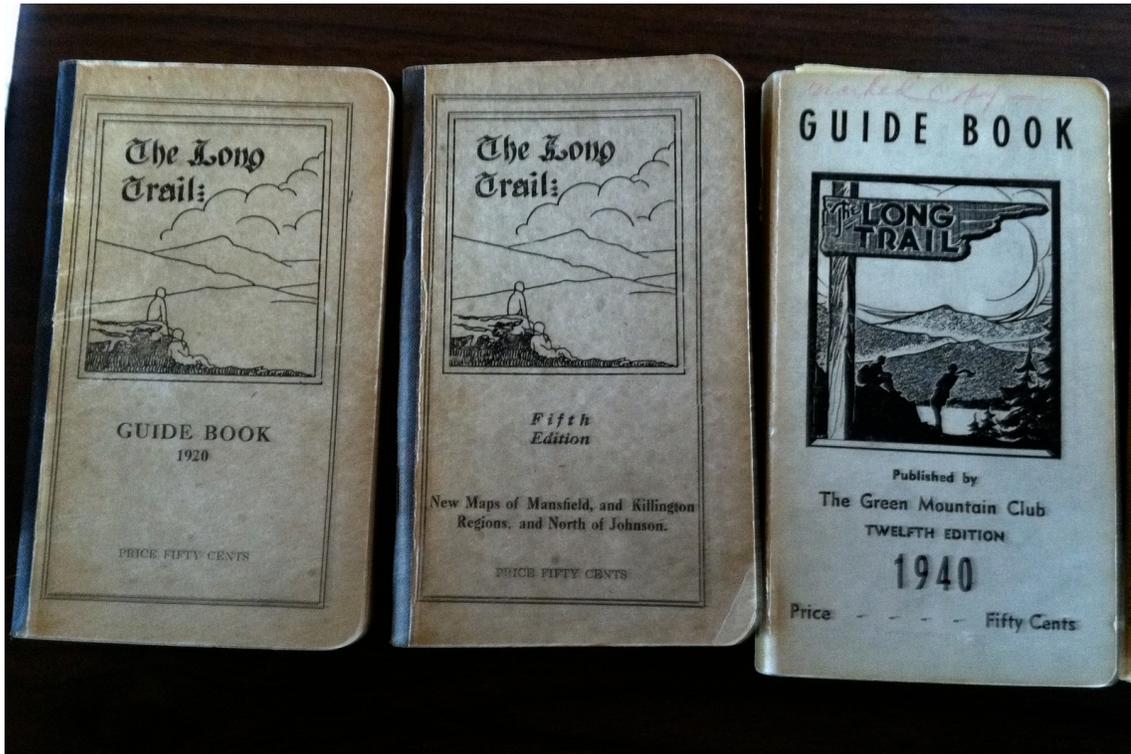
Hiking/Backpacking style:

Would you hike the Long Trail again?

Other long distance hikes/backpacking trips you've attempted/working on/completed:

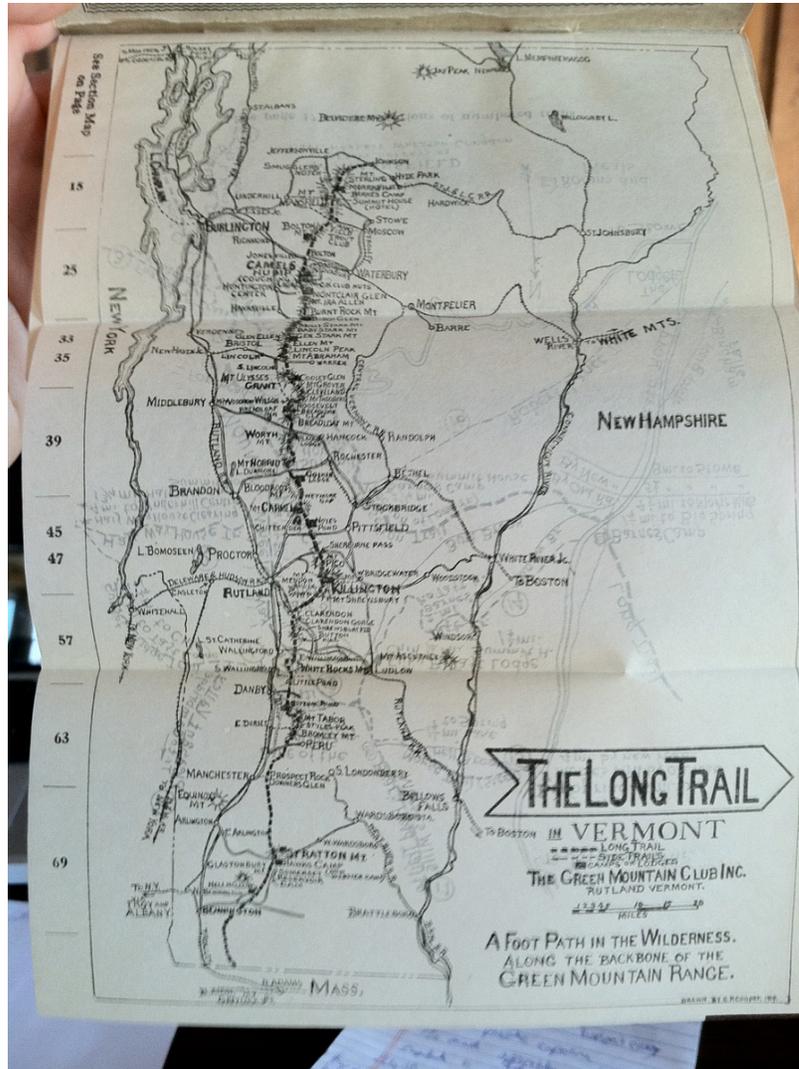
What other outdoor activities do you participate in?

Appendix C: Long Trail Guidebooks



Top Photo: 2nd Edition (1920), 5th Edition (Unknown), 12th Edition (1940)

Bottom Photo: 50th Anniversary Edition (1960), 75th Anniversary (1985), Current Format



A map included in one of the early editions of the guidebook. All photos: S. Masters.

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