

ANGELS AMONG US (George the Ridge Runner)

Hiking on the Appalachian Trail had been a dream for a while, maybe ever since reading Bill Bryson's book "A Walk in the Woods." Why then was I so anxious now?

The day before had been a topsy-turvy day. Chuck, Jim and I left Cincinnati at 7 AM and drove the six hours to the Smokey Mountains in an almost constant rainstorm. After a few unintentional detours, we arrived at our destination to sunshine!

We dropped off Chuck's vehicle close to where we would finish our four-day hike and were transported to where the hiking would begin. Almost as soon as we got in the car for the transport to the trail, it started raining again. Over the next 90 minutes of riding, it absolutely **POURED**. Chuck laughed at the folly of us preparing to hike in this. However, our transport driver wasn't headed back to our vehicle, so we were committed (and wondering if we should **BE** committed.) The three of us began putting our rain gear on in the car and pondered the start of the hike in the rain. Just as we reached Clingman's Dome and the start of our hike, the rain miraculously **STOPPED!** While the trail was definitely slippery and muddy, it offered a nice 4+ mile starting day, and rain never did strike our hiking party!!

This second day started out right -- we were hiking the Smoky Mountains, enjoying a clear sunny day. All three of us were enjoying the beauty and grandeur of the Smoky Mountains. Then, while walking **DOWN** a hill, my right knee started having sharp pains with each step. I ignored it, figuring the pain would subside. Not long after, the left knee started hurting too. Every step came with associated pain.

Reality hit - one of the beauties of the Appalachian Trail - its remoteness - also would present a major obstacle. At an altitude of over 5,000 feet, surrounded by trees, you can't exactly hail a cab, call for a ride or even easily bring in a rescue helicopter. The action plan was simple: Steve, you'll need to just "gut it out" and trust in God and others to work this out.

My two hiking partners were great support in those next six miles of walking. Jim and Chuck kept my spirits up, offering assistance at every turn. We climbed 'ol Rocky Top together and then began devising a preliminary plan to get me down safely: we'd cut this day short, stay at the Spence Field shelter (a three sided 12 x 24 foot space with wooden bunk beds) overnight, and then hike down to Cade's Cove in the morning.

That plan bothered me though since we couldn't control the logistics. Would there be room at the shelter? Even if I could walk all the way down to Cades Cove, we had no ride out of this remote area and Chuck's vehicle was parked 60 miles away. Perhaps it was at this time that I decided to take some of my favorite advice: "if God is your co-pilot, **SWITCH SEATS !!**"

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After what seemed like hours of walking, we finally arrived at the Spence Field shelter. There we met George Luther who happened to be at Spence Field in his capacity as an Appalachian Trail "Ridgerunner." In his almost 30 years of hiking in the Smokeys, Jim had never been in camp with a Ridgerunner, so we were in luck. (In fact, there are only 20 or so Ridgerunners along the entire 2,167 miles of the trail.) When we entered camp, George immediately gave our hiking party injury status and made room for us in the shelter, though we didn't have a reservation.

We got to talking with George for a minute about the circumstances of our trip -- we still had two days to go, with many miles of difficult downhill hiking remaining. It was then that George became the answer to my prayers. He took control of the situation, saying he would assure that I made it down the mountain (about six miles) in the morning and that he'd arrange a ride for me back to our car.

Little did I know how much of my successful arrival would be due to George. The next morning when we were preparing to leave, he informed me that he would be taking my sleeping bag to lighten my load. The way he did it was perfect - not asking how he could help - just taking charge. He let me know that once we made it to Cades Cove he would be driving me back to where I would stay that night. And when he saw I didn't have trekking poles (sort of like skiing poles for hikers), he gave me his, along with solid instruction on how they could be used to take some of the pressure off my knees.

Then, off we went. My progress was mighty slow for the first 1.7 miles on the Bote Mountain Trail. After a brief rest stop, George checked if I was okay and then said he would go on ahead to get his van from the remote parking lot. I spent the next several miles walking the Anthony Creek Trail alone. Periodically hikers going the other direction would ask how I was doing -- my guardian angel had informed them of my condition and was assuring I was helped as necessary.

Those downhill miles were painful to walk, but they gave me valuable perspective. I realized the incredible blessings in my life -- among them, good health, solid family and faith. It dawned on me that using these poles and the pain of each step must be quite similar to the everyday experiences of my friend Ken who is a quadriplegic or of people with muscular dystrophy. All of a sudden my troubles seemed pretty small. I thanked God for my blessings of this day and every day.

There were several times I stopped in the next few miles and wondered if my legs could go another step. I was dragging my right leg along and altered my path if a large rock got in the way. Little did I know that at almost exactly this time others were praying for me. An email my mom sent to my wife at 10:12 on this morning mentioned specific thoughts and prayers for my safe travel. That prayerful effort undoubtedly helped guide and strengthen my steps.

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About a mile or so from the end of the trail, who should arrive but George. He had dropped off his own pack in his van and hiked back up the trail to carry my 30+ pound pack for the remainder of the trip!

George personally drove me back to the motel where our vehicle was being stored. On the trip, he encouraged me to consider doing more hiking, making it clear that it wasn't a personal failing that caused me to not make the entire hike.

Even though we were only 10 miles away from the motel as the crow flies, it was probably 50 or more miles of driving, taking George several hours out of his way. To top it all off, he would accept no gas money or other compensation -- just the thanks of a weary, thankful human being. He was truly a timely guardian angel!

George isn't the first guardian angel to appear in my life and hopefully he won't be the last. As the words from the tune "Angels Among Us" say: '... oh I believe there are angels among us, sent down to us from somewhere up above, they come to you and me in our darkest hours, to show us how to live, to teach us how to give, to guide us with the Light of love ...' Thanks to George, I have a very evident example!!!