“In Pursuit of Authenticity”

For my whole life, I've struggled with the idea of authenticity. Being genuinely authentic was never something I could picture myself being. The idea of not holding any part of myself back and letting other people see me for all the things I didn't like about myself was so out of the question and scary that it never even occurred to me. However, I didn't always have this problem.

When I was a young kid, I just existed. I did the things I loved, said whatever came to mind, all without caring at all about what others thought. Trying new sports, messing up, it didn't matter to me. But growing up changed something. Maybe it was the internet, or perhaps just understanding more about people and the world. Suddenly, I felt others' eyes on me in a way I'd never experienced. I overthought each conversation, worrying if I'd said the right thing, if I was odd, or worse, if I'd made someone uncomfortable. This fear of making others uncomfortable even stopped me from talking at all sometimes. I yearned for the confident, happy kid I used to be, but didn't know how to overcome these deep insecurities. It wasn't until the summer before freshman year, while I was backpacking in Alaska that things began to shift.

Over most of middle school and high school, I have been privileged enough to go on backpacking trips in the summer with a company called Wilderness Adventures.I have gone on a few of these trips; however, when I went on a backpacking trip in Alaska before freshman year, something clicked in my head. All my trips have been two weeks long and usually only consisted of three to four days of actual backcountry backpacking; however, this Alaska trip had six days of backpacking in which we would cover sixty-five miles. Part of me was nervous about the increased challenge, but I knew I was physically capable.

The trip started with the required superficial introductions and icebreakers, but to me the trip truly starts on the first day of backpacking. The first day on the trail is always tough; your feet and shoes aren't entirely broken in, and you are still used to the luxury of bathrooms. To make matters worse, it started to rain about a mile from our camp. Everyone ran -- or as close to running as you can get with 40 pounds on your back -- to the site.

Usually, when you finally make it to the campsite each day, you fall back onto your pack, unbuckle all your straps, and lie there for a minute. You let yourself decompress and then take off your shoes, switch into your comfy camp shoes, and then after plenty of relaxing, you set up your tent with your tent mates. However, because the rain was coming down so hard and the temperature was starting to drop, we didn't have any time to relax. My tentmate and I scrambled to get our tent pieces out of our packs and assembled the thing while trying to keep it somewhat dry. At last, I had a moment to return to my pack and dig out my warmest clothes and a rain jacket and pants. At that point, everything I was wearing was soaked, and my only option was to just be cold and wet while everything dried under my rain layers.

After everyone sat in their tents for a while to dry off, the cooking crew for that day had to go back outside and brave the rain to make dinner. Everyone else went out to keep them company, despite it still being fifteen degrees and raining. Luckily, the camp stove we had was able to work in the rain. Despite its purpose being mainly for cooking, it also emitted just enough heat to make us a little warmer. So, there we all were, nine teenagers and two adults, all wrapped up in warm clothes crouching and huddling around a pot of cooking beans, talking about how miserable and cold we were.

I had only known these people for less than three days, and we had already gone through a lot. It was these moments of genuine human connection that felt so pure and new to me. It was these moments that changed my way of thinking.

I've always loved how being in the backcountry strips away the superficial layers people wear, especially myself. It's hard to not be vulnerable and authentic with people when you are hiking ten miles a day and sleeping in the same small tent with them all while not showering. I love the person I become out there. I love how I never look in a mirror because there simply isn't a mirror to look at. I love how I wear the same outfit for five days straight because who will judge me. I love how I freely talk about anything on my mind because when you are out hiking for nine hours a day, what else are you going to do? I love how I get out of the tent early in the morning to watch the sunrise. I love how despite my aches, pains, and blisters, I still muster up the strength to keep going. I love how I stay up late around a campfire and talk about things I would never even imagine discussing anywhere else. I had felt all of this before, but never as intensely as I did there, huddled around the stove, and that's when it really clicked for me.

After that trip ended and I went back home, I knew I was no longer that person in the backcountry I loved so much, but I knew he was inside me. I at least knew I was capable of that type of authenticity I didn't even know was possible before. That has allowed me to start working towards achieving that authenticity even outside the context of backpacking.