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To Read Beauty

Seeing the beauty in things can be a challenging endeavor. Much like mastering a new language, it requires practice and patience. The process begins with recognizing the basic elements, the letters, and the small details that form the foundation. From there, one must learn the grammar, syntax, and context, linking these elements into cohesive units and interpreting their surroundings to discern their significance. Over time, this skill becomes instinctual, as natural as speaking your native language. Immersion is key to genuinely becoming fluent in the language of beauty. My four backpacking trips during middle and high school provided me with an immersive experience, each teaching me more about the subtle art of seeing beauty in the world around me.

My first trip was to Jackson Hole, Wyoming. I was just twelve years old and was the youngest one on the trip. The backpacking was relatively easy in hindsight, but it seemed nearly impossible as a kid who hadn't ever hiked more than a few miles with someone else carrying my things. I remember the first day was particularly challenging, and I wasn't in the best mood when we got to our camp, but that night, my group and I circled the flickering fire off the bank of the rushing river just a few feet away. It was in that moment, as I began to focus on the symphony of embers popping off the fire, crickets chirping in the nearby woods, water crashing into and eroding the rocky river bed, and the soft chatter of new friends that I began to see the letters of beauty first. The next morning, I was more excited for our day of hiking, and over those 9 miles that day, I noticed more letters: the sound each person's footsteps made as they collided with the trail, the wind rushing through the leafy trees, and the collective sigh when we took breaks. It was these little things, little pieces of beauty, that, while I didn't consciously appreciate, made the whole trip so much better.

My Oregon trip was when I began to learn the grammar. This trip was more intense than my first; it was fifty miles to the base of the mountain we were going to summit. This was daunting; I knew I could do it physically, but I needed more confidence in whether I had the sheer willpower. When we first started hiking, all I could think about was the summit coming up and how difficult that climb would be. I found myself getting lost in those thoughts. It was in these moments of doubt that the structure began to become apparent. It was the night before the summit that I could piece together all those letters I had found in Wyoming. We had gotten to the base camp earlier that day; we did all our usual camp stuff: setting up tents, making dinner, laying down, and hanging out. However, this afternoon was a little different than most as we had to prepare for the summit; luckily, it was just a day summit, so we got to leave our heavy packs behind and bring smaller day packs, so we stuffed those with our lunches, water filters, plenty of layers, and some extra snacks. Then, we were instructed to go to bed early because we had to wake up at 4 a.m. to ensure enough time for the summit. That night, all we could talk about was the climb and its difficulty; we all joked that we could just skip it. So, as we climbed into our tent, I couldn't get my doubts out of my head, and I found myself struggling to sleep.

After a while of tossing and turning, I just decided I needed to walk around. I quietly wiggled out of my sleeping bag, unzipped the door, slipped my shoes on, grabbed my camp chair, and began walking down to the lake at the mountain's base. We had all gone and jumped in the freezing lake earlier after our backpacking to freeze the aches out of our feet, but now, at night, I was the only one down there. I found what looked like the most comfortable spot on the rocky beach and set up my chair. I sat there for a minute, staring at the soft reflections of moonlight on the lake, fidgeting with a few rocks in my hands, and trying not to think about anything. I started to see those letters again: the erosion lines across the entire mountain, the altitude where trees can no longer grow, and the mountain fully reveals itself, the subtle ripples in the water as little bugs flew around, and the sounds of rocks shifting as I adjusted my weight in my chair. But I also began noticing something else; the pieces came together, ceased being separate, and I began to understand them as a whole. I thought about how the water that carved the mountain was now settled in this lake; the rocks I played with were once pieces of the mountain; the trees had dictated the water flow and housed many of the bugs and animals that now caused ripples in the lake. It was all connected, it all made sense, it was all beautiful. I tried to decide where I fit in, what effect I had, and what I influenced. I couldn't find an answer, but now, a part of me thought I just needed to see more; I needed to reach the top of that mountain.

Learning one sentence of another language is relatively easy, but fluency certainly is. I had read the language of beauty at that moment in Oregon, but I was not fluent. I knew there was more out there; I wondered how much I had missed in the past simply because I had not realized what to look for. I tried to practice whenever I could, but it's much easier out in the backcountry than anywhere else. So, it was not until my next trip to Alaska that I could keep learning. This was my favorite trip because of the incredible location and because I now knew how to appreciate it. I struggled a lot less on this trip, which I largely attribute to my understanding of the beauty I was lucky enough to be experiencing; it is much easier to enjoy yourself when you recognize the beauty all around you.

After all my trips, I've become fluent in beauty, but I know I could still be so much better. The hardest part is trying to keep working at it outside of my trips and trying to find the letters and meaning in my everyday life. The biggest realization I've had was that beauty appears very differently. Instead of coming from running water, blowing wind, and looming mountains, I've found it in the people around me. The meaningless conversations that all I can remember from are the belly laughs, the moments when a friend has saved me a seat at a table, bonding over a shared annoyance, being sent a song a friend thinks I would like, and being comfortable enough with someone to sit in silence. I couldn't have learned how to notice and appreciate everything I do now without my experiences in the wilderness and the adversity that forced me to find beauty in something that initially seemed awful. I hope that as I continue to practice and learn the language of beauty, I can help others who struggle to understand how to see the letters, piece them together, and finally become fluent.