

Five Surprising Essentials For Crafting YOUR Successful Walk of the Appalachian Trail -In a way that lights you up and fulfills your Dream

A report by Regina Reiter
developer of *Forgiveness Walks*

BEFORE WE BEGIN

“The AT is 1,000 times harder than I thought it would be!”

Judy said this after her first hike in the Appalachian Trail in Georgia. Luckily, she was on a test walk and not launching a hike of the entire 2,185-mile path.

“I had read all of the books and watched all of the videos. I had done some sections in Maryland and Pennsylvania. I believed I knew the trail. I was so wrong. I was not at all prepared for how steep some of it was or how mentally beaten down I'd get so quickly. It's like seeing photos of the Grand Canyon or seeing it on TV – – you really think you've "seen" it, but you will never really get it until you're standing on the rim in person”.

Mrs. Baggins, AT Thruhiker

Appalachian Trail aspirants commonly have one of two perspectives. Many believe that preparing for the AT is a daunting and overwhelming task that takes a very long time. Others, by contrast, think it's a simple, quick lark that anyone can do with a few trips to Walmart. I've met both kinds of hikers! The first keeps putting off their walk, finding continual excuses and reasons to delay. The second jumps on the trail with inadequate gear and insufficient physical training. Successful walkers fall somewhere in between, with a healthy respect for the unique requirements of a journey of this magnitude and a willingness to relinquish control over the infinite array of unknown details.

What I've found is that acknowledging what's actually going on in any moment, clearly seeing the big picture, and having a succinct and thorough plan provides a solid foundation for the training, preparation, support, and integrity that a successful walk expresses. You may think that however you prepare that you'll have to do it on your own, or maybe with the help of a salesperson at REI, but what I've seen is that getting help from experienced hikers who can help you craft your own unique walk in a systematic way can make all the difference in not just achieving, but fulfilling your dream. That's what I do. I help people prepare for their AT hike.

And to get you started, in this report I share what I've seen are the five essential areas that successful hikers work through. These five points, like a guiding star, help you organize the overwhelming and confusing details as well as thoroughly attend to the necessities of this iconic journey. Yours CAN be a successful adventure that lights you up and fulfills your own dream.

ESSENTIAL #1 KNOW YOUR TRAIL

Mary worked with me for a year to prepare for her 5-day walk in Scotland. The first thing we did was look at the elevation profile of her trail, The Cowal Way. The most difficult day would be a 16-mile traverse that included a 1600-foot climb. We knew that's what we needed to train her to do easily so she could focus on enjoying the companionship of her son, who had invited her to share this special Mother-Son adventure. She didn't want to be struggling with the trail. Knowing the physical characteristics of the trail gave her a good starting point for all other aspects of her planning and training. Other ways of "knowing" a trail and what it's like to sustain a long-distance walk were less obvious to Mary, and often to Appalachian Trail aspirants too.

For example, there's the community of the trail that can be surprising to new hikers. When I did my own walk of the Appalachian Trail at the age of 52, I went to the AT by myself, trusting that there would be others I would meet for companionship, safety, and support. I was right about that! In addition to the thousand or so who set out each year to walk the whole trail, there are thousands of people who have built and continue to maintain the trail. Then there are business owners, librarians, Post Office clerks, gear outfitters, just to name a few, who provide services along the trail. And there are strangers who stop to give rides or conversation, or even unexpected help. The community that creates the journey of a trail walk is a rich and diverse network of people who create one of the most surprising aspects of the Appalachian Trail. Getting to know this community can awaken and nurture a sense of security and creativity.

You might think that to complete the AT you have to start in GA in late winter and walk 20 miles a day in a continuous line to Maine, but what I've seen is that hikers can see the trail as a clear canvas on which they can paint their own creative version of this 2,000 mile walk. You can accomplish your AT walk with a pace and a pack that feel really good for your body. You can customize your walk for your body, your timing, your budget, and your hiking style in a way that lights you up and fulfills your dream. Knowing the geography of the trail, where the high mountains are, the river fords, the buggy places, and even the off-trail attractions can give you the pieces of the puzzle to assemble into your unique journey.

Services along the Appalachian Trail are diverse, and yet it helps to know before you go about where they are and how you'll get to them. You'll want to consider how you will restock your food and batteries, socks, shoes and other gear that wears out. Knowing what resources are available to keep your gear in good order, or even replace it, will help you stay on your journey. How you will get to the trail, or leave the trail, or have visitors to the trail are other questions to consider.

There are also social and spiritual characteristics of the Appalachian Trail that can be considered for planning your walk. Becoming familiar with the common social aspects of the trail community, and then considering your own lifestyle preferences can help you plan your starting place and date. It can also help support your unique spiritual experience, your Inner Journey. For example, if you're really counting on spending lots of time walking quietly in the woods, you may want to choose dates out of sync with the annual "herd" of hikers. However, if you enjoy meeting lots of people, camping in large groups, and hanging out in towns with trail friends, you would be disappointed if you miss the crowds.

So what I do with aspiring walkers is help them get familiar with the Appalachian Trail in its physical, social, and spiritual aspects. Guidebooks, maps, and personal accounts of the Trail provide a beginning picture of the venue of your unique journey. The more you know about the geography of the mountains, the weather, and the services available to hikers, the more you'll be able to craft a journey that works for your own timing, your own budget, and your own purpose for hiking the Trail.

ESSENTIAL #2 CONSIDER YOUR TIMING: MAKE TIME YOUR ALLY

When do you want to walk the Appalachian Trail? How much time will you need to prepare your body, your life, your family and relationships? How much time do you want to take to walk the trail – one trip, several years, two years, one day at a time? These are some of the questions of timing to consider before you even start looking at gear or guidebooks. You'll be surprised at all the aspects of a long-distance walk that depend on Time!

Timing is even a consideration in the small scheme of a walk. Attention to the timing of your own pace can turn a torturous walk up a mountain into an easy and fulfilling meditation, as for Waylon Brooks, whom I met on the Trail climbing Three Ridges, a mountain in Virginia that challenges hikers with 2900 feet of elevation gain. He got a quick lesson in my "Meet the Mountains" technique for balancing pace and breathing to make climbing easy. "I met you just at the right time!" he said as he continued his climb, thoughtfully aligning his arms and feet for his new way of stepping. "Wow! I can tell a difference already!" he called back.

I accompanied Jann, a successful AT thruhiker in 2013, on the first day of her walk up Springer Mountain, the southern terminus of the Appalachian Trail. She started out with 8-mile days to build up her stamina. When I met her again in Virginia around 780 miles, she was averaging around 15 miles a day. She also planned her itinerary to include weekly "zero" days at comfortable hotels or bed-and-breakfasts. She used these days off the trail for resting, rejuvenating, and staying in touch with her supporters. She finished the trail on October 9, well

before October 15, the last day for hikers to summit the northern terminus on Mt. Katahdin, Maine.

You may think that doing a continuous walk from Georgia to Maine is the only way to accomplish a successful walk of the AT, but as more and more people walk the trail a variety of itinerary styles are emerging. The more you get to know the trail, the more you'll see that you can complete it in just your own way! "Zipper" started her hike in Virginia! "Fast Enough" started at Delaware Water Gap. I completed my first 2,000 mile traverse at Catawba, Virginia. "Blissful" walked from Georgia to Maine and then back again! The first AT hiker I met on the trail in 2001 was just completing the final 15 miles of his Section Hike that unfolded over 20 years! The AT yields to your timing.

Just setting the date for your walk can help get your planning underway! If you're not setting the date for your walk, there may be both practical AND emotional reasons. You may not see the connection between acknowledging your feelings and setting the date for your walk, but what I've seen is that we can actually use those suppressed feelings of disappointment, fear, and resentment as a gateway to claiming our dream. So, What I do is help aspiring hikers see the connection between their emotions and many aspects of their walk, including timing.

I learned this on one of my own training walks! When support for my teenage son who would be staying home during a month-long section hike fell through a week before our start date, I discovered that I had an unconscious belief that "People who sign up to help me always abandon me!" Clearing that belief let the creative energy flow and an even better support team emerge. When I work with hikers, I pay attention to the practical as well as the emotional details.

ESSENTIAL #3 LOVE YOUR GEAR

By "gear", I mean all the things you carry, including food. What specific gear or skills will you need? Backpackers are most concerned about weight, comfort, safety, utility. As you explore all the possible gear choices, you'll soon learn that the fastest way to lighten your pack is to focus on just three items;

- Your shelter
- Your sleeping bag
- Your empty pack

Many new hikers believe there is a gold standard list for backpack contents that every hiker wants and needs. People come to me wanting me to tell them exactly what gear all the successful hikers use, but when I talk to them further, what I find out is what really helps most is a deep understanding of what life on the trail is like and the freedom to get in touch with their fears and doubts about their own walk so that they can make this walk custom-made for

their own body, their own budget, and their own hiking style. When they do that, they develop the skill and confidence to make their own good choices about not just gear, but all five essential aspects of a successful hike.

I walked on a section of the Benton MacKaye Trail with six other experienced hikers. I noticed that we all had different gear, but we each loved what we had chosen. Just take shelter, for example. Among the seven of us we had a bivy sack, a hammock, a four-season dome tent, 3 varieties of lightweight single-person tents, and my homemade silnylon tarp. We each had our reasons for choosing our specific shelters.

What gear and food you will need depends on several characteristics of your hike. Here are a few things to consider before you even make a gear list! Not only could you consider the obvious things like choosing a backpack, a tent, and a sleeping bag, the more you develop your own purpose for hiking the trail, your own hiking style, and your personal preferences for living on the trail, you will also consider deeper questions like these:

- The season and climate. Will you walk in summer, fall, winter?
- The duration. Will you resupply every 3 days? 6 days?
- The geography. Will you encounter snow? River fords? Sun? Rain?
- Your style of walk. Will you camp out? Sleep in shelters? Stay in hotels or hostels?
- Your preference for walking solo or with a partner

Once you explore these kinds of questions, you are ready to select each piece of gear. Although it IS possible to switch your gear during your journey, you'll be most comfortable, safe, and happy by meticulously choosing each piece of gear before you set out. And make sure you've tested it too! I met a family of eight whose walk was changed when a sudden thunderstorm soaked their gear through their leaky tent which no one had tested before they got on the trail.

Plan your journey well in advance to be sure to have time to test your gear before you start walking. The Approach Trail, an 8-mile trail between Amicalola Falls Park and Springer Mountain, the southern terminus of the Appalachian Trail, gets littered with jettisoned gear that neophyte hikers carelessly and irresponsibly leave because they failed to love their gear and failed to take time to thoughtfully consider what their needs were. This is a problem that can be avoided by determining your optimum pack weight and customizing your gear choices for your body.

In my Heartsingers Walk the Appalachian Trail Program, we discuss dozens of gear choices and help you make your best choices BEFORE you get on the trail, saving you money, time, and discomfort on the trail. Many hikers push too hard while carrying too much weight, resulting in shin splints, blisters, and stress fractures that force them to quit. Others take sentimental items that they don't really need, only to discover they struggle under the weight. Still others try to get by with scant gear and compromise their safety.

When I did my thruhike in 2007, I had thought that having walked 1600 miles that I could add more stuff to my pack and not notice the weight. It was winter then and I thought it would be nice to have an extra fleece vest, a couple more pairs of socks, and maybe even my *Satori* board game to play when it got dark at 5:30. My partner and I loaded up our packs and walked out of Damascus, VA. To our surprise our packs felt really heavy. "This just isn't fun now!" we complained. The next day, we took a detour and made an extra town stop in Hampton, VA, walking directly to the Post Office to send away some gear. With careful consideration we stacked up a few articles of clothing and set them aside. I thought of getting a Xerox copy of my game board and found that the pharmacist, who had the only copier in town, was willing to copy it. We had each pulled out 3 1/2 pounds of unnecessary gear. Hoisting my pack up onto the postmaster's scale, it read 27 lbs. "Ah! That feels better! I guess my optimum maximum pack weight is 27 lbs. Any heavier and it's not fun anymore!"

ESSENTIAL #4 HAVE SUPPORT: CREATE YOUR OWN "TRAIL ANGEL" NETWORK

Some hikers find all their support in towns or by phone with gear suppliers. Consider what support and from whom you would like to have support on your journey. When you've thought through and put in place the right support, then you'll be able to have what you need when you need it, as well as back up for the inevitable surprises along the way. The kinds of support that seem to be helpful are someone at home to send maildrops of food at the right times and places. Some people love to have support from visitors to the trail. Others want support with regular phone calls from home. Some hikers forego any off-trail support and trust that their needs will be met by people and services they find along their way.

Support can also come by surprise on the trail, just when we need it! A hiker I met in Virginia, "Valley Girl", shared her experience with support, which is called "Trail Magic."

"I have had awesome trail magic this week, just when I needed it most. My friend Margina came to my aid when I called after I fell again. I felt like quitting, overwhelmed with pain and loneliness I began to break down. Margina, without a second thought, drove from Manhattan to get me off the trail in New York, if only for one night. She got a room for us and we laughed over dinner and we watched fireworks. She was there when I was at my lowest and ready to give up."

Mary realized that she needed support even before setting foot on her journey. She hired me as a personal hiking coach almost a year before her 5-day walk in Scotland. When she started, she was a swimmer, not a hiker. At the time when she had accepted her son's invitation to walk with him in their ancestral land, she had said, "I walked around the block and thought I would die!" What I did was create a custom coaching program for her to prepare her physically and mentally for the trip, so she could focus on being with her son, not on struggling through an

ordeal. That included regular walks, introductions to existing hiking clubs, and emotional support for her ups and downs.

In her book about her journey, *This!*, Mary describes our final training walk this way:

“On the last weekend of the training before going to Scotland, Regina and I hiked the Len Foote Hike Inn loop trail (10 miles) on Saturday. Sunday we hiked from the top of the falls at Amicalola Falls to Springer Mountain and back. Sixteen miles. Brutal for me, and I thought I would die, but said, “THIS IS EASY! I AM READY FOR SCOTLAND!” A few weeks later, I would be so grateful that I had trained on the hard trails. Scotland would prove to be very different in terrain, but the physical and mental training proved to be invaluable.”

After her successful walk in Scotland, Mary said

“Yes! I want to be one of the 22 women who join your Heartsinging AT Walk Program! I had never considered hiking the AT, but I’ve declared that I will. What’s been really helpful is having an extraordinary coach, someone who sets up walks to increasingly strengthen me. Someone who is always encouraging me. Someone who draws me into the conversation about what it would be like to sleep on the ground, or what foods to eat, and who has knowledge of all the questions that might come up.”

But what if the people in your life, who you would expect to be your biggest supporters, discount your dream of hiking the AT? Then what do you do? You might think that family members and friends who oppose your plan to walk the AT will sabotage your dream and never change their minds, but what I’ve seen is that as you develop your stamina as a walker, nurture your own self-expression and your own passion for connecting with Nature, learn the lifestyle of the Trail, and make friends in the Trail community, your inner confidence will radiate out and like magic, their fears and doubts may subside and their reactions may reflect your own inner hiker glow. You may be surprised to find that your original detractors may become your most ardent supporters! So, what I do with aspiring hikers is help them love their dream and take small, regular steps along their unique Inner Journey that supports and creates their Outer Journey.

ESSENTIAL #5 HAVE RELIABLE TOOLS FOR GRACEFULLY MEETING YOUR EMOTIONAL UPS AND DOWNS

Hiking the Appalachian Trail can be a surprising mental challenge. One 2008 Thruhiker said,

“I expected it to be more of a physical challenge than a mental one. Don't get me wrong, it's pretty physically challenging, but as a college student in pretty decent shape to begin with, it wasn't the physical challenge that I found difficult. It was the mental challenge of going on day

after day after day....hiking in the rain for days on end, the boredom of some areas....just continually convincing myself that this was something I wanted to do. "

And thruhiker, Darryl G expressed it this way.

"It seems that a lot of people go thru the preparation of getting in physical shape, getting all the right gear and planning their food drops and all without preparing themselves mentally for the trip.....don't forget to feed your head, lol. You have to be firmly committed to doing it or you'll end up dropping out like so many others."

What I provide aspiring hikers is a tool box of meditations, visualizations, and exercises that help them quickly shift their perspective on the troubles that pop up on a long-distance hike. These are the same tools that I used to get myself to the Trail, transform my fears when they developed, and attract miracles and services along the way.

I met "Golden Ray" around mile 820 of his AT walk. He was trying to catch up with another hiker he wanted to walk with. She, on the other hand, was trying to get ahead of him, avoiding a relationship with him. He talked about that with me and I offered to play a game of *Satori*, my favorite board game for changing perspective, with him at the bed and breakfast where we were both staying.

. "That was like a light bulb shining into my inner darkness", Golden Ray shared four years after his hike. "For several years, I had been struggling with the deeper pent up feelings of a former work relationship which had suddenly ended without closure. During the Satori Game with Regina, for the first time in my life, I heard those magic words, 'I'm sorry that happened to you.' The sudden relief was like a waterfall rushing out: all the pent up feelings of incompleteness, guilt, and lack of closure literally melted away. Playing the game helped me touch the core cause of why I had been experiencing such emotional distress for so many years and realize how that pattern was being recreated with the female hiker on the Appalachian Trail. At that moment, I released my attachment to that Old Story and resumed my hike, feeling free of my past and from the need to manipulate the unwanted relationship with the other hiker. Furthermore, I completed my AT journey feeling whole and once again back to my old jubilant, grateful self."

Another hiker, "Trillium," had struggled and pushed herself for the first 800 miles of her northbound AT walk. When I met her, she was on the verge of quitting.

"I'm a biologist, and I'm not even enjoying the plants, which is what I came out here to see! But, my feet hurt, I never get a rest walking 16 miles a day, and I miss my family. I didn't think I would miss my family! I'm so disappointed in myself, in the Trail, in the whole experience!" She had no way to step outside her walk and get a new perspective. All she knew was to stay focused on her goal. "Keep your eyes on the prize. If I don't make it to Mt. Katahdin, I will be a

failure," she said. I walked with her to the next road crossing and guided her to be open to what the Trail may be providing her at that moment.

The hostel she was aiming for in the nearby town was closed for the Fourth of July holiday. A local shuttle provider drove up just at that moment and reminded us that Three Springs Hostel was nearby and would be the perfect place for Trillium to rest and immerse herself in compassion. I went with her to introduce her to Nancy and Marcia, the owners of this unique, pastoral farm house just opened for business. Nancy's motto is "those who need to find us, will." I listened to Trillium pour out her story and offered her a new perspective on her situation, sharing with her my *Walk for a Singing Heart* that she could use later on the trail. She stayed for a whole day, her first full day off the trail in two months. "Thanks for taking me under your wing," she wrote the next day, when, with lighter spirit she resumed her walk. We need ways to reframe our trail's ups and downs. I make sure that my clients have them in their packs before getting on the trail.

YOUR FULFILLING WALK

When you have delved into all five of these essential areas and found your own expression within each area, you will have a clear path to creating a journey that really does light you up and fulfill your dream. Let these five essentials be your guiding star for crafting a whole and complete map for your unique journey.

After Mary successfully completed her trip, she reported,

"I knew that it would take a lot more than I could do myself. Regina provided me with the instructions plus the emotional support I needed. She taught me how to use hiking poles, how to hike up mountains - and down. What's more, she has opened me to a whole new world of people, trails, and experiences. Most of all she provided me with the strength and the physical stamina, plus the mental clarity and focus I needed to complete this trip. I could never have done this a year ago without Regina's support."

AN INVITATION FROM REGINA AT FORGIVENESS WALKS

You may think that simply gathering information on your own about lots of other hikers' experiences will assure you of having all the information, the gear, and the best itinerary for your own walk of the Appalachian Trail. What I've found, however, is that when aspiring AT walkers ask for help so they can move efficiently through the planning and preparation process, they can lean on the experience of others for information that they take into their own research. This approach of combining coaching with personal research prevents overwhelm and assures thorough preparation as well.

Together, the hiker and coach can set out a good timetable for test walks and gear trials. A coach can also help aspiring hikers look deeply into their own lives to discern their unique calling to this iconic experience. With this balanced approach they can more satisfactorily fulfill a walk that really lights them up and addresses their own physical, emotional, and even spiritual needs. These hikers are happier, healthier, and well supported on their journey. They encounter fewer surprises and disappointments along their way, and they are more likely to meet their goal! The more they clarify their own purpose for their walk, their own pace, and their own walking lifestyle, the more confidently they prepare and choose gear that works for them. They deeply integrate and express the wisdom of “hiking your own hike” from within themselves and without comparison or competition with others. Theirs truly becomes a personal connection with the trail and a personal expression and fulfillment of an equally personal inner journey that allows them to create an itinerary that flows out of their intentions rather than being a rigid obstacle they must overcome.

I want to plant a few seeds for the future. My passion is to help women and couples walk the Appalachian Trail. For the past five hiking seasons, I’ve been working as a Ridgerunner on the AT in Virginia. My job is to meet people who have already started their walks. The hikers I have met have walked almost 800 miles from Springer Mountain, the southern terminus of the trail. Some are feeling strong and confident, content with their hiking lifestyle. Still, they have nearly 1400 miles to go! Many are pushing themselves physically and mentally. Some are wondering when Virginia gets flat, as they’ve heard and wanted to believe. They experience the “Virginia Blues”, seeing only the “green tunnel”, too driven and stressed to distinguish the nuances of the plants, rocks, and people. The weather discourages them and they dread the next thunderstorm because they have inadequate, cumbersome shelter and an adversarial relationship with weather.

These hikers may accomplish their journey and achieve their goal, but they seem disappointed and empty of the joy and daily fulfillment that are possible with preparation that illuminates the Inner Journey of their own unique walk. Perhaps they don’t understand that the Trail is a blank canvas on which they could paint a journey that beautifully expresses their own physical, emotional, and spiritual purpose and ability. For them, the die has been cast.

For me, and for other 2,000 Milers, the overwhelmingly beautiful immersion in Nature, the surprising connection with humanity, and the profound sense of personal accomplishment available through a walk of the Appalachian Trail have far outweighed all my doubts, fears, and obstacles. All the reasons that people have for NOT doing the trail can be addressed with information, training and getting a new perspective on the details of the trail and of their own lives.

Hiking the Appalachian Trail can be a huge investment of resources . . . time, money, physical endeavor and emotions. For most, it’s a once in a lifetime adventure into a new and unknown world. To assure that YOUR walk is the richest, most fulfilling experience possible, even in

addition to being a grand achievement, isn't it worth investing in the best information and support to create a journey that expresses your own unique reason for walking, one that works for your own body and your own life?

What I do in my work as a coach is to work with those who have not yet begun. I can help you, who have not yet started your journey, to create a relationship with the Appalachian Trail, with yourself, with your gear, with Time, and with others, so that you can fulfill as well as achieve your deepest dream of walking that sumptuous path.

For most people, walking the entire Appalachian Trail is a tempting dream, but the obstacles are too overwhelming! You may find that the right support and preparation will take you past dreaming to sorting through the fears to setting a start date, planning and making the trip. You will be amazed to feel that deeply satisfying rush of fulfillment when you pose in radiant victory at your walk's completion, shouting, "I DID it! I walked the Appalachian Trail!"

"When you consider walking the Appalachian Trail, you're taking on a larger than life idea of what it might be like. I like the idea that I can do – and have support to do – something I never thought I could do. It takes forgiveness and letting go that it has to look a certain way. Planning a successful hike means really leaning into that continued support with conversation and information about trails and what trail life is like. It means being blessed with support during the unknowns and for the unknowns." ~ Mary Campbell

Now it's YOUR turn.

You're ready to create YOUR walk of the Appalachian Trail!

Let's get started!

There are just 8 questions that can help you take your first steps on a path to this journey of a lifetime. If the Appalachian Trail is calling YOU, carefully consider these questions and let them guide you. When you're ready for assistance to fulfill your dream, please contact Regina at regina@forgivenesswalks.com where we can respond to your questions and steer you on your path.

Walk on!

1. What's your picture of walking the Appalachian Trail? What do you imagine it would be like for you?
2. Why do you want to walk the Appalachian Trail? What do you most want to get out of it?

3. What needs to happen before you can set a date for your Appalachian Trail walk?
4. What kinds of support would you love to have for your journey? Who are your detractors?
5. When you are upset or disappointed, how do you respond?
6. Having read this report, which of the Five Essentials are you most drawn to learn more about or develop further?
7. What burning question(s) do you have about the Appalachian Trail or about considering taking that journey?
8. What would you most like help with from an experienced Appalachian Trail walker to prepare for and accomplish your journey?

Walking in Service!

We're here at Forgiveness Walks to thoroughly and professionally help you navigate your answers to these questions! Drop Regina a note at regina@forgivenesswalks.com to schedule a free conversation to help you take your first steps toward fulfilling your Appalachian Trail Dream.