

THE LONG WAY 'ROUND

Sacred trails the world over help hikers discover deeper truths about the world and themselves. But what truly makes a path transformative? **ELISABETH KWAK-HEFFERAN** treks a new 170-mile loop in Montana in search of the pilgrimage she needs.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JACQUI OAKLEY



DAY 4, MILE 39

This is not what I was expecting.

Twelve miles into a 19-mile day, I'm edging along a field full of scratchy brush and cow pies. It's hot and dusty, there's no shade, and I'm nursing blisters on both heels.

I had heard wonderful stories about Montana's Sacred Door Trail. Grand vistas, sparkling lakes, animals everywhere. But *this*? This sucks.

I plod along, yanking too hard on my pack straps in a futile attempt to lighten the weight on my back, kicking the dirt clods. When the trail peters out for the hundredth time, I stop and stare at the sky. *Are you f***ing kidding me?* I say under my breath, to no one. Pressure gathers behind my eyes.

I came to the 170-mile Sacred Door Trail last summer looking for the opposite of this: serenity, calm acceptance, a way out from under the wave of rage that's been drowning me for more than a year. This is

DAY 1, MILE 2

Light fades as the sun sets way too quickly. We—my friend Randi and her 11-year-old daughter, Shaeli, who'll be hiking the first leg of the trail with me—left Missoula late, and by the time we jounce my Subaru up 10 miles of washboard dirt to the trailhead, night is coming fast. I'm worried about making our planned campsite in time, or accidentally ambushing a grizzly in the dark, but I tell myself to chill: *This is a spiritual journey, remember, so just go with it.*

The Sacred Door Trail, like many pilgrimage sites, is intended as a place for spiritual reflection. It's for "grieving, healing, and honoring life's major transitions," Weston told me over lunch a month ago. Inspired by a hike on Spain's Camino de Santiago, in 2009 Weston started piecing together existing trails (including part of the CDT) into a loop route with the help of a coalition of local faith-based and indigenous groups. The trail officially "opened" in 2012 with

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a brand-new American pilgrimage trail, and it promises three weeks of inner peace by way of backpack and boots, or so I've been told. But right this second, I'm more pissed than I have been in months.

It's not just the heat, or the cows. It's what the trail's founder, Weston Pew, told me to do before I started this trip: Hike some sections in silence, noticing where your mind drifts and where it sticks. So I did.

He's late, again. Very late, and not answering my texts. "Have you left yet?" "When will you be home?" We're supposed to go out tonight. I pace around our apartment, sweeping a floor that doesn't need sweeping, checking my phone every few minutes. Annoyance gives way to anger, then cold, prickly fear. Something's wrong. "Sweetie, where are you?"

a multi-faith ceremony, as well as a guidebook and website. But unlike many of the most famous pilgrimage sites—such as the Camino or the Hajj to Mecca—this trail is explicitly nondenominational. And it gets its sacredness not from the grave of an apostle or footprints of a prophet, but basically because Weston declared it so.

Spiritually, it's a bit squishy. But so am I. I mostly grew up nonreligious, and these days, I suppose I'm an agnostic, and a shallow one at that. It was hard not to roll my eyes as Weston went on about "the evolving universal life force that connects all things" or how the trail "deepens our connections to our original church, Mother Earth."

"What makes this a pilgrimage and not just a hike?" I asked. "Wouldn't being in the mountains for three weeks anywhere make you feel better?"

"You should go out there with the intention to introspect," he said. "Those insights, that catharsis—that might not happen without you trying to make it happen." While he allowed that would-be pilgrims can do that anywhere, he also stressed that traveling the same route as other pilgrims with the same purpose is a key part of the deal. "It's powerful and affirming to know that you're walking in the footsteps of others who have hiked the trail with similar intentions," Weston said. "The Camino offers a more defined 'container' that helps crystallize the experience. The key to creating a pilgrimage trail is to create a framework that's flexible, yet also strong enough to help orient and contextualize the experience for people."

Maybe he's on to something. According to Linda Kay Davidson and David M. Gitlitz in *Pilgrimage: From the Ganges to Graceland*, a pilgrimage "is by nature a quest, a journey in search of an experience that will effect the kind of change that will make a difference to the individual's life or spirit."

And change is exactly what I need. When I let my mind drift, it still gets stuck on painful memories.

I walk him from our friend's house to the car, kiss him goodbye, tell him to drive safely. I'm going back to the party; he's traveling for work and will be gone all weekend. That's the official story, anyway, one I'll believe for another seven months until he confesses where he's really going. Which is straight to her apartment.

In cold, hard math, this is what it looks like. Six and a half: years we were together. Four and a half: months we were married before he cheated. Nine: months the affair lasted before I finally dragged the truth out of him. And 14: months that have passed since then.

I think the most acute phase is over by now—the sucker punch of shock, the despair of looking at a future suddenly wiped blank, the grief that weighted me down like one of those lead smocks you wear when getting an X-ray. But the anger? That stuck around, and the slightest provocation—a song on the radio, an Instagram photo—can fan those coals into a mighty blaze. At first, it acted like a shield, deflecting the worst of the heart-break. Lately, though, I suspect it's holding me back. I know, I know, hell hath no fury like, well, me. But fury is heavy, and a year is a really, really long time to carry it.

I've set aside almost three weeks to try to hike it off here on the Sacred Door Trail. A rotating crew of friends will join me, and first up are Randi and Shaeli. When



we spill out of the woods into Trident Meadows, we can barely pick out the metal pyramid trail marker halfway across the clearing. A few steps into the grass, an eerie, mournful *awchooo* erupts somewhere off to the north. We all freeze. An answering call drifts in from the west. Wolves. I've never heard them before, and tonight, their howls sound deeply spooky and thrilling all at once. If I've been expecting some kind of sign from the heavens to kick off this pilgrimage, this will do.

DAY 8. MILE 73

High up in the Beaverhead Mountains, I walk the Continental Divide, my right foot in Montana and my left in Idaho. How many times did he and I go together to places just like this—skywalking on ridges, deep in the mountains, with row after row of shaggy peaks radiating out beneath our feet? One hundred? Two?

This is the guy who stood next to me and watched black bears forage past our campsite in the Olympics. Huddled with me in a leaky tent in the Canadian Rockies. Gulped coffee with me in the dark to catch sunrise everywhere from the Grand Canyon to the Argentinian Andes. We were snowshoeing through hip-deep powder in Colorado when he told me, "I want to do this with you for the rest of my life."

Of all the unanswered questions my ex-husband left me with, I struggle with this one the most: *Who is he?* How could the man who held my hand through all of that be the same man who betrayed me so deliberately,

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so quickly, and for so long?

My friend Kim, who's hiking this section with me, and I haven't spoken for a half hour or so. In that silence, I poke at myself to see how deep the hurt still goes. Outwardly, I must look like I have it together: I get up every morning, feed my cat, hit my deadlines. I don't cry much anymore, and only when I'm alone. But I'm not myself anymore, either.

Betrayal shakes so much more than your faith in the betrayer. More than your faith in people. It crumbles everything you thought you knew about how the world works. *If I was wrong about this, it's easy to think, then I could be wrong about everything.*

"I need to ask you something." My body feels shaky, and not just from the chill of the early-winter rain-forest soaking into my bones. We're hiking along the Elwha River in Olympic National Park, on a romantic getaway I planned because I can't take his vague, distracted distance anymore. "What's going on with our marriage?" It sounds dire, and I mean for it to. He stops abruptly, tells me he's sorry for how he's been acting, that he loves me. But strangely, he's crying, and I only feel colder.

In the week after my husband told me about his affair, I twice drove to Mt. Rainier and ticked off 18-mile days like someone was chasing me. I hardly let myself stop, choking down food as I hiked. But I wasn't trying to run away from anything. Rather, loping through the miles was the only thing that let me catch up to my wildly spinning mind—the only thing that gave me a toehold of control. On one of those days, I stopped to jump in an alpine pond after a brutal climb. It was the only time for a week I felt a glimmer of anything besides wretched.

In the following months, I went through regular therapy. It wasn't enough. So why not at least try the one thing that has always helped me in the past? Wilderness.

On this ridge-hugging section of the Sacred Door Trail, I stop for a snack on a fallen log with a million-dollar view. Crumbly beige scree fields stick out here

and there among the evergreen expanse where the mountains have craned their necks just above timberline. A few miles away, smoke plumes rise from a small wildfire that roared to life yesterday and is already choking itself out. It will make for a glorious sunset.

He would have loved this, I think in spite of myself. And now I'm mad again.

DAY 9, MILE 82

My friend Kim and I slow to a crawl on the steep sides of Bradley Gulch, where we find the biggest patch of thimbleberry bushes I've ever seen. Grazing with wine-red fingers, Kim and I start talking forgiveness. I know this is key. Maybe if I can let it all go, the anger will turn to smoke and drift away.

But I've been wrestling with this one for months. "How do you forgive someone who's never asked for it?" I say. "Or apologized? How do you forgive someone who doesn't deserve it?"

"I don't know," Kim says.

I'm not the only one to pack big questions along on this trail. For the past four summers, Weston and his colleague Shannon Ongaro have voluntarily facilitated small-group leadership courses through his nature-based educational program, Inner Wild, on the Sacred Door. Next summer, the course will expand to a five-week, on-trail deep dive into theory on rites of passage, community development, pilgrimage, and personal leadership. Either way, many of the participants come to the trail hoping for a pilgrimage-like experience.

"I felt like I wanted to check in with myself, like, 'What do I really want?'" Sean Sweeney, a 26-year-old artist from Texas who went through the program last summer, told me. "Who am I, what am I doing, why am I doing it?"

Even if they don't emerge 170 miles later with all the answers, at least some of these pilgrims swear by the transformative nature of the trail months and years later. "Thinking about the people who had come before us was such beautiful imagery to me," says Robyn Trivette, a 33-year-old teacher, of her hike last summer. "Just being in a similar headspace and having a similar intention, and that we were carving the earth in that

way with our feet. I could sense a difference from the people we ran into who were thru-hiking the CDT."

Pilgrimage scholar David M. Gitlitz says there's nothing inherently "wrong" with simply proclaiming a trail sacred. "Sure, why not?" he asks. "But it's very difficult to set up a shrine that will attract a spiritual following on its own. People have to go someplace, say, 'It changed my life,' and the word gets out. You can't substitute that. It has to take root in some popular way."

In other words: The Sacred Door Trail is a pilgrimage if enough pilgrims say it is.

DAY 11, MILE 105

"Pay attention to your dreams," Weston told me before this trip—a fine example of how his method can blend the sacred with the self-help. I've never put much stock in analyzing dreams, but I do believe they can sometimes let you peek into the subconscious. For months after I left the home I shared with my husband, he and his—mistress? lover? mistake?—stalked through my dreams, so that I'd open my eyes and wonder, *When do I get to the part where I don't wake up every morning feeling shitty?*

And yet. Stretched out on a wooden bunk in the



Hogan Cabin, a Forest Service rental hut perched between the second and third segments of the Sacred Door Trail, I have a dream. I'm back in Seattle with my husband, but there are two of him. One sweet, funny, kind, the one I fell for, the one I meant to love for the rest of my life. Then there's another one, identical but dark. They're aware of, and hate, each other. Sometimes the bad version will show up around town, lurking in a bar we duck into, and we have to leave. Sometimes he's waiting in our apartment when we come home, and the good husband—*my* husband—gets into a screaming match with him. We try, but we just can't shake him.

DAY 12, MILE 113

The dream stays with me as I start the final stretch across the Anaconda-Pintler Wilderness, a wind-blown, rugged slice of cirque-cradled lakes and airy alpine passes. This morning, I hugged Kim goodbye; my friend Norman, another transplanted Montanan, is hiking the last 60-odd miles with me. We push through dew-wet meadows and climb a ridge scarred from some long-ago wildfire, where the bare trunks grant us wide views of the crinkle-cut ridges to the north.

I'm still turning the dream over. It reminds me of a parable I once heard. Sometimes it's attributed to the Cherokee, but no one really knows. In it, a wise grandfather tells his grandchild, "Inside of us all live two wolves. One wolf is evil, full of greed, anger, selfishness, lies, and pride. The other is a good wolf—joy, kindness, peace, truth, and empathy. These wolves are constantly fighting inside us, ripping at each other's throats for control."

The grandchild asks, "But which wolf will win?"

The grandfather smiles and says, "The one you feed."

We pitch the tent along the edge of Good Medicine Meadows, a low, grassy clearing with a stream winding through it. It's lovely, and also a classic cold sink: Sometime before dawn, I wake up shivering. Frost coats the tent fly.

"Are you cold?" Norman whispers. I know what he's getting at, and I don't want him to do it. We broke up a month ago—it was my first post-divorce try at dating—and I don't want to lead him on. More than that, I don't want to admit I need his help, or anyone's.

But somehow, just as much, I want him to. "Yes," I whisper, and he pulls me close. What a place to be, hung between yes and no. Desiring two opposing things at once.

DAY 13, MILE 118

We leave the burned-out landscape behind by mid-morning, emerging into a boulder-choked field where only a few trees have managed to survive in the thin air. Ahead, the peaks get taller, with sharper edges and hairpin ridges plunging down to a

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necklace of lakes strung together by alpine streams. This is the beginning of the heart of the Pintlers, the most spectacular section of the whole Sacred Door Trail. Maybe it's because I've finally had enough time processing things on the trail, or maybe because this sure looks like a place for thunderbolt visions, but suddenly, something occurs to me.

What if I don't have to reconcile the man I thought I knew with the man I know now? What if I just dropped that tug-of-war, realizing it was impossible? He can be both of those people at once. It doesn't make sense, but do any of us?

It's such a simple idea, but I've never thought of it this way before. Ask any psychologist, and you'll learn it's normal for people to hold contradictory beliefs. We do it all the time. Though our conscious brains struggle mightily to impose order, sorting people into neat categories, our minds remain messy places.

Nobody simply is a good or bad person. We only make choices, feed one wolf over the other. And my husband, who really was the wonderful man I thought he was, instead chose not to be. But instead of rage, for the first time I feel something else. Pity, maybe. But maybe compassion, too.

Just like that, I'm no longer just a victim. I haven't forgiven him—no, not yet. But holding on to the bitterness would only be feeding my own bad wolf. Instead, I have a choice. For the first time since it all happened, I feel a space in myself, clear and distinct, where forgiveness can go.

DAY 17. MILE 165

We topped out at our final high point, Goat Flats, for lunch; now we hug the edge of a cliff and switchback down to Upper Seymour Lake for our last night in the woods. Tomorrow, I'll stroll

out of here to the waiting shuttle car and finish this trail.

But first: The sun is out, and it's the warmest day of the week. Norman and I drop our packs and head straight for the shoreline, shimmying out of our pants and tossing our shirts over tree branches before jumping into the lake. The cold water makes me gasp, but it feels exhilarating, too. I scrub seven days' worth of grime and sweat off my skin, dunk my head, come up laughing. And feel better.

I'll be damned. I actually think I'll finish this pilgrimage a happier person than when I started. Part of it is the wilderness itself: Out here, there's nowhere to hide from your demons. Part of it is the physical hiking. By giving my body something to do, my mind could go free. But a large part of it, I must admit, is the spiritual intention: setting aside a dedicated time to pick through the thorniest corners of my heart. However you parse it, for the first time in more than a year, my anger is draining away. If I can say that, then who cares if this counts as a "real" pilgrimage or not?

By now, my toes are stinging. I belly-flop, seal-style, up on a boulder and shake off the droplets. I shield my eyes against the glare off the water, stare up at the ring of peaks around the lake, and let the sunbeams restore my warmth. ■

Elisabeth Kwak-Hefferan is the Rocky Mountain Field Editor.

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