

Five million steps:

A son's tribute to his father brings peace, perspective and deepening faith



A

llow me to introduce myself ... my name is Benjamin Barron Richardson. I grew up in beautiful Traverse City, Mich. I was raised in a Catholic family. Life was good for me, though spirituality was hardly a priority. After graduating from high school, I moved downstate to begin my college education. During these years, I became an apostate Catholic.



» Ben Richardson stops on a portion of the Appalachian Trail in Massachusetts. It was moments like this, he writes, that helped him realize how tiny he really is among all God's creation.

I started my education at one liberal arts college, but eventually transferred to Aquinas College to pursue a different direction. I soon realized that Aquinas was a unique fit for me. I was making friends, my soccer career took off and the academics were of the rigor that I was seeking. The community of Aquinas and the faith-filled passion that enveloped the people gently, yet persistently, urged me to question the self-reliant ideologies that I relied upon. I explored

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many churches and talked for hours with different students and professors to learn about their convictions. By the middle of my junior year I began taking theology classes out of sheer curiosity and interest. I was in love with my faith and the people who had supported my discernment.

In October 2007, my junior year of college, I was given the single greatest test of my faith. I was 20 years old, and we had just finished a soccer match against Madonna University. My parents had made their traditional drive to Grand Rapids to watch me play. We had won the game, and I marched across the field to greet my family. Something certainly seemed different. I looked first at my mom, and saw feigned positivism. I then looked at my dad, and saw something much different.

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In the weeks that followed, my dad was diagnosed with a rare form of cancer which spread quickly. He suffered from periods of unbearable pain, yet we could only pray and cry. After all options at various hospitals were exhausted, my father was brought back to Traverse City to spend his final days in the town that he loved so much. On May 13, 2008, my father passed away. It was surreal, yet I feel blessed to say that I was able to hold his hand as my dad took in his final breath and entered eternity with Jesus.

In memory of my father, my family and I created a fundraising organization to support people with cancer. My dad and I had planned

» One of the last family photos taken before Ben's father, Ray, died. (back row, from left) Ben's brother Zac, Ben, his brother Nate; (front row, from left) his mother Karen, Ray and sister Bethany.



on taking a backpacking trip upon my graduation from college, so we decided to fashion the fundraiser around a hike. I opted for the Appalachian Trail (AT), a trail as expansive and meaningful as my father is to me. We deemed the fundraiser "PennyBen." The idea was to have sponsors donate a penny per mile that I hiked along the trail which is 2,178.3 miles. We brought the concept to Aquinas College where the campus relished in our grassroots inspiration. By the time I was packing the car to head to Georgia to begin my PennyBen hike, our organization had raised over \$14,000 and donated it all to the American Cancer Society's Hope Lodge in downtown Grand Rapids.

I began my hike on May 13, 2009, the one-year anniversary of my father's passing. My life on the trail was simply phenomenal. There were magnificent times when the weather was stunning and the views were sublime. Spending more than four months in the wilderness also brought some anxiety, like lightning storms in New Jersey and the floods, hurricane and tornadoes around Vermont. I would go days without seeing



» Standing at the entry to the infamous "100-Mile Wilderness" in Maine, Ben prepares to tackle the last section of the trail before summiting Mount Katahdin.

» Ben stops to celebrate in the White Mountains of New Hampshire, one of the most stunning regions of the entire trail.



any signs of civilization, and I frequently encountered wild bear, deer and even ponies! I reached the summit of Mount Washington amidst 30-degree sleet and came off of McAfee's Knob in near 100-degree weather – all in the same week.

I bid farewell to many hiking buddies as they dropped off of the trail for various reasons. I met people who had been bitten by rattlesnakes and even attacked by rabid skunks! I met a person whose career was hiking the AT, repeatedly going up and down the trail for years. I met couples that only lived on boats, hikers from France, Poland, Montreal, Vietnam and all corners of the United States. I met a member of Congress from Illinois, war veterans, former NFL players and homeless people.

I remember reaching the end of the AT – the summit of Mount Katahdin in Maine. I was above the tree line, totally exposed to the elements, where 50-60 mph gusts knocked and blew me around the mountaintop. My body was soaked and shaking from sideways rain that stung like bullets. The landscape was so fogged in and slippery, at times I had to crawl from one trail marker to the next. After inching my way up 5,200 feet of mountainside, I finally saw that five-foot wide, gnarled, wooden sign indicating the end of the trail about 100 yards ahead. My mind flashed through all of the images of the famous "Katahdin" victory photos that I had seen: For 129 days I periodically stopped into stores, hostels and restaurants and would see photos of hikers victoriously standing atop Katahdin, arms raised in triumph for completing one of the world's most rigorous trails. And now, the same sign was standing only inches ahead of me.

I felt the emotion swell as memories of my dad warmed my near-hypothermic body. I thought about his great sense of humor that was so uniquely him. His kindness, his passion for the outdoors, I remember his love

that poured out for our family. It seemed like only the blink of an eye from when I was a little kid riding with my dad in the passenger seat of his truck, to that moment when I was suddenly grasping the top of the Katahdin sign, the insignia that so definitively marks the end of a journey. The tears came, purging drops releasing me from the anger and sadness that had gripped me from my father's passing, and yet tears of happiness knowing that he was with me the entire time.

And then, just like that, my hike, my pilgrimage, had come to a close. There truly was only one thing that kept me on the trail – grace.

Some of the most powerful moments that I had while hiking were the hours at the break of dawn where I would walk with God. I would tell him how I was feeling, think about my dad and cry over memories from the top of the Appalachian Mountains.

While I was hiking I deepened my relationship with God, yet my physical appearance turned me into a societal pariah. How fascinating to have these two experiences juxtaposed. I felt the burn of judging eyes as I would walk into restaurants. I felt the stare as people sheepishly gawked at my massive beard. I heard children remark to their parents about my unbearable stench. I noticed people ogle my dirty body, my famished limbs caked in mud and sweat. They winced at stained clothing, and the pack that carried my every belonging. I wondered if people realized that I was hiking the Appalachian Trail and hoping they didn't think I was going to ask for money. Their fixated looks made me ashamed and self-conscious.

Then it suddenly dawned on me. I was experiencing first-hand what it was like to be considered homeless.

Occasionally I would think, "If only they knew I've graduated from college. If only they knew that I..." and the list went on. I was viewing society from the other end; I knew what it was like to be considered subhuman. I vowed then to never poorly view a person without a home or any person based on their appearance.

I learned much while I was hiking the Appalachian Trail, but I was left with more questions. In order to truly believe, perhaps we have to be in a situation with nothing to lean on but God. Maybe in order to truly have compassion for another, we literally have to walk in his or her shoes. To truly

understand another's pain, might we have to suffer with them? I wonder if in order to seek justice, we first must be judged. In order to be Christian, must we bear his cross? Time-honored questions with untimely responses though eternally relevant.

I do know that statistically I shouldn't have completed my hike. Yet I kept walking, one foot in front of the other, for more than five million steps, through 14 states, over 2,178.3 miles. From Georgia to Maine, I hiked that footpath, and I hiked every inch of it with my dad and God. They took the trip with me, and we spoke every night. We laughed, cried and stared blankly at the skies for hours soaking in the darkness as if it were bathwater.

After many months of hiking, I now find myself working with Catholic Charities West Michigan as a social justice coordinator. I hope to walk in the footsteps of people like Dorothy Day. I pray for the inspiration of Martin Luther King Jr. I hope for the heart of Mother Theresa. I yearn for the simplicity of trail life, and I beg for Christ's blessings on all of his people; especially, "the least of these."

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» Ben and his dad embrace for a Father's Day hug in June 2007. His dad would be diagnosed with cancer just a few months later.