

Summits and Valleys



I am a city girl, born and raised in the Bronx, New York. My exposure to nature consisted of tall buildings, concrete streets, and sitting under the one tree in our backyard. As I grew older, I spent summers in the woods in the Poconos breathing in newfound fresh air, and I began to understand what others meant by connecting with nature.

At the age of 24, I embarked on a trip I never once imagined: going backpacking. For non-city people this might not sound unusual, but for a Bronx girl it seemed very adventurous. I planned to go with three friends who had all been backpacking before and wanted to expose me to a new challenge. As they excitedly began planning to hike a section of the Appalachian Trail with well-known lookouts, I was hesitant about going. The thought of being in nature for that long and physically pushing my body to new limits was completely out of my comfort zone. I remember condensing all my gear and preparing my pack while my parents were telling me, "Hiking 30 miles in three days carrying all your water, food, clothes, tent, sleeping bag, everything on your back? Are you crazy?!" Although I talked a big game and told them I was prepared, I was nervous I wouldn't be able to take the trip. I allowed my competitive nature to push me and decided to at least try.

On our first day of hiking, I felt like a champion. The scenery was beautiful during those first miles; we saw magnificent lakes and met unique people from all over the country along the way. The conversation with my friends made time seem like it was flying by. I was confident I would make it.

Similar to the beginning of my hike, I felt like a superhero during my first month of teaching. Everyone had warned me that teaching math was hard and that students would be disengaged. I was told that the state exams for public schools in New York were challenging and that geometry was particularly difficult. However, my lesson plans were written exactly as I had been trained, I arrived to school an hour early each day to set up my classroom, and it seemed as if my students appreciated me. I was confused as to why people said the beginning of teaching is so hard. I thought nothing could stop me.

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On day two of the hike, we prepared to go 13 miles. About halfway through, the joys of yesterday felt like a dream. My legs were sore, my pack felt heavier, blisters began forming on my feet, and suddenly the views looked less enticing. My friends had no trouble hiking along, but I was feeling short of breath and moving at what I thought was a snail's pace. We encountered hikers trekking all the way from Georgia to Maine; they were on their 1,200th mile while I felt like I couldn't reach my 21st mile. I was exhausted, burnt out, and wanted to quit.

After the first few weeks of teaching, I became overwhelmed. Maybe everyone was right and teaching was a lot harder than I anticipated. Although I told my friends and family I could not see myself doing anything but teaching, it wasn't everything I said it was. I entered the classroom scared and nervous that my lessons wouldn't go well; to be honest, they often didn't. I lacked confidence to fully implement the tasks I desired. Every day felt like a struggle as I failed to be fully present for my students when I didn't get enough sleep because I was up late planning for the next day. My lessons were not beautifully orchestrated because my classroom management was lacking. I sat in team meetings and didn't feel outstanding and energetic like the other teachers around me. I felt burnt out and unable to achieve the daily goals I wanted for my students. Some days I failed, some I succeeded, but most days I left my classroom feeling drained and exhausted. I learned quickly that the thought of teaching, similar to the thought of hiking 30 miles, was much more thrilling than it actually felt. It was much harder than I ever anticipated. I had reached my first valley of teaching.

Gladly my story of backpacking didn't end with misery and exhaustion. My friends pushed me to keep going. On day two—after 10 hours of walking, two feet with blisters, and eight miles of hiking—we reached a beautiful summit that had a lookout on both sides of the trail. The air was fresh and the breeze was relieving as I had to catch my breath for the final push to the top. I had never seen anything so unbelievably beautiful in my entire life. I looked to a friend and said, “If people like me don't push themselves physically, they never get to see anything this beautiful.” Suddenly the journey seemed worth it. I realized that sometimes the most difficult challenges in life have the most worthwhile outcomes.

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Reflecting on my first backpacking trip has allowed me to recognize how it paralleled my teaching journey. I began to look for the everyday summits and valleys in my classroom. Yes, some days would feel like a 13-mile trek, but—rather than dwelling in the exhaustion of it all—I needed to look for the smaller, daily accomplishments. With a change in perspective, I started celebrating the mountaintops that my exhaustion seemed to cover up. I began to allow myself to see little summits, like when my students came to see me in the morning just to say hello or tell me they missed me when I was absent. I even took more joy in the bigger summits, like when I got to call a student who believed she wouldn't pass the state exam and tell her she scored the highest in the grade. After shifting my mindset about my teaching journey, I've realized that teaching does not have one end goal or summit to conquer. There will never be a moment when I realize I became a great teacher; it is more about the journey along the way.

Teaching is filled with endless numbers of beautiful, breathtaking summits if we allow ourselves to experience them. My backpacking experience was not just about reaching the mountaintop—it was about the excursion it took to get there. As teachers, we will have low points where we don't fully feel successful and affirmed. Some days might feel like a 13-mile trek where we feel burnt out, worn down, and tired. However, if we learn from the challenges and find support to keep going, we will always get to see a new breathtaking view. Equally importantly, we need to take time along our journey to see the incredible mountain range created by not only the summits and but also valleys we have conquered.

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