

Jeff, this hike is for you, dad and Erin.

Hellroarin Plateau is calling and I have to hike. The trail/jeep road round trip up and back Hellroarin Plateau is 14 miles. Seven miles up and seven knee jarring miles back down. I am not in shape to do this comfortably, but I must go. Jeff is going to die and I have to hike. Jeff my brief friend I made while back in the corporate world, father of a young son and husband is going to die. Cancer invaded his body and has weighed him down. Hospice has been sent home. Holly is left to take care of him. I have to hike for Jeff.

The jeep trail up Hellroarin ascends fairly steeply following the contours of the mountains. Each step takes me higher as I ascend through bouquets of wild roses, Indian paintbrush and assorted Montana flowers. The day is exactly as I like it, blue sky, dry air and cool temps.

The only sound is the crunch of my size 11 hiking boots and 225 lb body crushing, crunching gravel, stones and rocks. Crunch, crunch the rhythmic but slow steady pace. Crunch, crunch is my metronome. I don't know if it is the rhythmic nature of hiking that promotes a Zen like state, but after a while, a Zen like state is achieved where grinding and crunching is my only universe. I must hike. Crunch, crunch, crunch, crunch.

I began thinking of Jeff and the inspiration he would need to give me in order to make this trip when suddenly my Dad appeared on my right side. I was startled to say the least. I had never thought of dad in this context. But there he appeared out of nowhere and began hiking with me. I imagined the sound of his steps grinding his own gravel. Crunch, crunch two sets of boots on the trail. He appeared to me in the poor physical state he was in for the last 10 years of his difficult life. That is to say, he was heavy. He was heavy in body, heavy from poor life style choices, heavy from business deals gone bad and heavy from the affects of a disease that tortured his body disabling him at a very young age. It was good to be with him.

Crunch, crunch down the trail we went. Then Erin appeared. She appeared in the mental state that I have known her entire life, that is to say, heavy. She was heavy of soul, heavy of spirit, heavy with worry from real and imagined injustices, demons and delusions. There is an unshakeable heaviness resulting from

a devastating mental illness. Here she is, crunching up the trail with me. Now there are three sets of boots on the trail.

Crunch, crunch down the trail we went. Then Jeff appeared. Jeff appeared as I suspect he may now be. Heavy with an illness that has caused Jeff and his family heavy pain resulting from enduring a life ending illness process. Heavy from the toll of numerous unsuccessful treatments and hopes dashed. Cancer, a sinister heavy illness. We are now four sets of boots crunching up the trail.

As we crunched up the trail I noticed the higher we went, the lighter they were getting. Their crunching started getting feint. Not from them leaving me, but from shedding their burdens injected into their souls without reason, without cause, without justice. As I hiked each switchback looking down on Hellroarin creek, we were clearly getting higher and higher. As we got higher, I noticed my dad first. He started taking on the body of a slight built, energetic, track athlete he once was as a young man in college. He was filled with energy, vitality and smile. He was almost skipping next to me. The heaviness was leaving.

The trail crossed over a mountain waterfall offering a short flat spot. Erin stopped to wash her face and explore the waterfall with the enthusiasm of an innocent young girl. Gone was her heavy heart. She splashed in the water and looked back at me with a face I have never seen. A face without burden. A face without anxiety. A face without demons. A face without confusion.

Crunch, crunch around the bend climbing, climbing and looking back; the canyon is now very far away. Jeff is hiking along with a lift in his step and the determination, energy and love of life that I experienced in our very short friendship. Gone were his burdens, gone was his pain.

The hike to the top took us around 3 ½ hours with Dad, Erin and Jeff releasing their burdens every step of the way. We made it to the top and scrambled over a boulder field which led to the edge of the mountain. The edge was covered in wild flowers, and soft green ground cover. Looking down into the canyon and up into the sky it felt as if we were at the entrance to heaven. A majestic, knurled, ragged rock formation leaped out and up into the sky way out over the edge into space. I knew this was going to be the launching pad. By now Dad, Erin and Jeff were almost opaque just floating along wearing huge smiles. I sat down to say

goodbye as Dad, Erin and Jeff climbed the rock formation, walked across the top line and with burdens lifted, one by one ascended into the heavens. My tear soaked liverwurst and onion sandwich never tasted so good.

We are all connected and love is the only answer. I have to hike. And Jeff, this hike was for you.