

I am not a nature person. I never understood how wandering through mud, spider webs, poison ivy, and mosquitoes qualifies as amusement. In the ten years I have attended camp, I've gone on three hikes, two of which were against my will. Trees, rivers, and flowers are far more beautiful when seen from a window than up close. So for years, I had passed up hikes in favor of my cabin and a book.

But in September of my senior year, while on a church retreat high in the mountains, five of my closest friends and I were sitting in our cabin, bored in the way that only high schoolers can manage: we couldn't find anything to do, while surrounded by a thousand possibilities. Suddenly, Sarah was struck with an idea – “Let's go exploring!” The rest of us were notably unenthusiastic, but eventually, we set off grumbling into the woods.

It began innocently enough. We stayed on the well-traveled paths, and amused ourselves climbing on the rope courses set up by the camp, and sprinting down steep flights of steps. Then we came to a fork in the trail, complete with two paths diverging in a yellow wood. After some deliberation – and some spirited arguing by Sarah the intrepid explorer – we decided to take the road less traveled.

In the hour that followed, the trees echoed with our battle cry: “the road less traveled!” Frost would've cringed. Eventually, the path we were following totally disappeared, but the lack of a trail didn't faze us.

As we climbed higher up the mountain, things became difficult. I fell into a waist-deep creek; Brian nearly tumbled head-first into the same creek. Amelia took two consecutive face-plants in a mud puddle. Lillian got a face-full of spider web. Sarah realized that flip-flops were not the best choice of footwear.

Finally, we were forced to admit that we were lost. Normally, I cannot stand being lost; the lack of control usually results in a tantrum. But that day, it didn't bother me. I had caught the adventurous spirit I had always disdained. But after three hours of searching, we finally found a way out of the woods, and worked our way back to the road – a mere 400 meters from the entrance to the camp.

As we spent the next several hours bragging about our adventure, I realized how much I would've regretted not going on the hike. I had always cherished my comfort zone, often unconsciously. Taking the big steps – moving to Japan, volunteering in impoverished countries, eating cricket – those had been easier for me than leaving behind the shackles of my preferences for comfort and control. Before I took that hike, I had considered myself courageous. But about the time I was shivering in a creek, I realized that being brave isn't always about taking the big steps. It's about understanding where your comfort zone holds you back, and leaving it far behind.