

NO.

28 Find the Ultimate Hiking Partner.

By Steve Friedman

WHERE YOU GO MATTERS, BUT NOT AS MUCH AS WHO YOU BRING. CHOOSE WISELY.

→ I SCREAMED AT MY HIKING PARTNER. HE DESERVED IT. "Hey, Dave!"

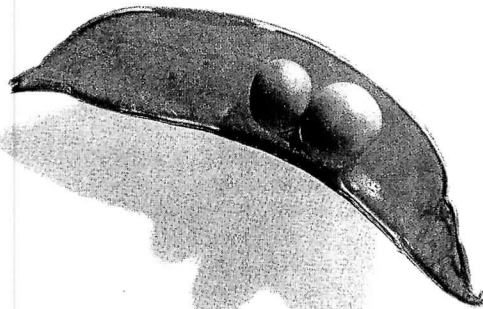
He had been singing in a language I didn't recognize for 35 of the last 45 minutes, even though I had made him promise, specifically and in writing, before we set out from New York City to the White Mountains of New Hampshire, that he would limit his trail singing to 10 minutes a day.

"Yo, Dave!" I screamed again, when he ignored me. "Remember how we agreed about singing? Remember what I told you about the sublime hush of the mountains?" (It was Dave's first backpacking trip).

Dave stopped, turned around, brought his hands together palm to palm in front of his chest, and closed his eyes.

We were half a mile and 45 minutes into a 7-mile hike that promised to be worse than the hike the day before—which had been a granite-scrabbling, chest-heaving, bickering nightmare.

"Chanting is not singing," Dave said, then sped up, fast enough that he disappeared from sight, not so fast that I couldn't still hear him singing. (We had also agreed before the trip that we would



walk at the same pace.)

"Daaaaaave!!" I screamed a third time, and he turned around. "Let's stop for a minute and have a snack. Some of those soft and juicy mango slices would be great. Why don't you get them from your pack?"

I wasn't hungry. But I desperately needed a break from the awful noises coming out of Dave's mouth. Mostly, though, I suggested the snack because I suspected Dave of having secretly sucked down an unconscionable amount of the mangos I had packed specially for this trip. I planned to confront him with the evidence.

"You have the mango slices," Dave said.

"No," I said. "You do."

"Nope, definitely not. I haven't seen

them."

"I'm pretty sure I saw you pack the mango slices this morning." Without intending it, I'd let my voice rise to a sort of screech.

Dave stared.

"You are addicted to blaming and shaming!" he said. "You are poisoning yourself with paranoia. I'm worried about you."

It was only the second day of our four-day hiking trip, and it was not going as smoothly as I'd hoped. I had spent weeks planning this hike to three of the Appalachian Mountain Club's eight White Mountains huts. The idea was, we would tackle lung-busting hikes in ancient mountains, at the peak of fall color, and not have to worry about carrying food or shelter, because at each hut we would

be fed delicious and bountiful meals by cheerful college-age hut keepers, and sleep in perfectly comfortable bunks, a pillow and three woolen blankets provided. (The AMC system is the closest thing America has to the legendary huts of the Alps.)

I had devoted even more time to contemplating whom to invite. He or she would be cheerful but not chirpy. He or she would be willing to endure discomfort, but not a masochist, decisive but not bossy. He or she would be strong as a yak, placid as a mountain marmot, silent and wide-eyed as a snowy owl while listening raptly to my tales of mysterious and unsolved multiple murders nearby.

And I had ended up with a passive-aggressive, chanting, lying mango hog. I had ended up with Dave.

What had gone wrong? How could I set it right?

I took a breath. I had experience hiking with all sorts of challenging people (more on that soon).

"Dave, I'm not angry," I lied. "But you know, the first place I shopped in New York only carried regular mango slices, which can be really tough and dry, so I made a special trip to find those soft and juicy man..."

"Let go of your need to otherize and stop worrying so much. You definitely have the mango slices. I saw you pack them. Besides, I don't think you really need any extra snacks, if you know what I mean." He looked at my stomach. I felt my fists clench.

"Listen, you bast..."

"We are blessed," Dave said, and closed his eyes and put his hands back in front

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No. 29

PHOTOS BY MAC STONE (LEFT) ANDREW BYDLON (RIGHT). TEXT BY MAREN HORJUS



NO. 30 GLISSADE



Ready! Pick a low-angle (less than 30°) slope with soft snow. Sit with bent knees and boots pointing downhill. (Never glissade while wearing crampons.) Grasp your self-arrest tool (such as a trekking pole, ice axe, or sturdy stick) firmly against your hip like an oar.



Go! Use your hips to steer and your self-arrest tool as a rudder—applying downward pressure acts as a brake.



Stop! If there's no natural run-out, you'll want to self-arrest: Flip onto your belly and dig the "rudder" as deep into the snowpack as you can. Make sure to practice self-arresting in a safe spot first.

of his chest and resumed chanting. Or singing. I was panting.

"Breathe," Dave said. "Don't forget to breathe."

I LIKE A QUIET walk in the woods as much as the next guy and have even undertaken some solo camping trips and enjoyed them. Nothing against cracking open the soul through personal communion with the hushed and unpeopled wilderness. [See page 43 for more on going alone.] But isn't a camping trip, like a meal or a movie, usually more fun with someone else?

It is, I had learned from experience. I had also learned, long before Dave, that the wrong partner could transform even a sun-kissed, shadow-dappled, vista-soaked, pine-scented idyll into a nightmare.

Joey was one of my greatest teachers. He had forgotten the compass and map when we hiked into the Adirondacks seven years ago. Honest mistake, sure. But then he yelled at me for getting us lost. Worse, while I had packed my cherished camp coffee press, Joey had forgotten the coffee, and then accused me of being an "addict" because I complained. College sweetheart Mary Ann, bold and fearless if not always prudent, had led us farther and farther into the bear-infested (I heard them growling, no matter what she remembers) terrain high above Little Yosemite Valley. With cliffs all around, we searched for a path that she was "pretty sure" she had heard about and that appeared on no map, until I was hanging onto the branches of a manzanita, my feet dangling above hundreds of feet of air and she was yelling, "We're not going to let this mountain beat us!" It beat us.

Of course there were other, more prosaically annoying hiking partners: The guy who refused to carry his share of the cooking equipment, but was all too comfortable eating the food; the other guy who was never satisfied with any campsite, who always wanted to hike a little farther, until it was nearly dark, and we had to camp at a place not nearly as good as the first choice; the guy who would not shut up about how yes, where we were hiking was nice, but it didn't compare to the mountain/beach/meadow he had visited recently.

This time would be different, I had vowed, as I went about deciding whom to invite to New Hampshire. For this trip, I would be accompanied by The Ultimate Hiking Partner. We would like and respect each other. We would share wilderness goals and views on things like scary backcountry tales and whether peanut-butter-cup trail mix or plain chocolate bars are preferable hiking snacks.

I could have posted something on hiking message boards. But I wanted to bring a friend—someone with whom my friendship would become more profound by virtue of sharing a wilderness experience. If said friend had never backpacked before, that was OK, because we wouldn't be hanging bear bags or

pitching tents on this trip, anyway. If he had some odd traits, that was OK. I had my quirks, too. Who doesn't? Besides, which would be worse, a buddy who hiked to a different drummer or a grim stranger well-versed in knot tying who didn't want to hear my ghost stories? That's how I came to punch Dave's number.

"NAMASTE, MOTHER***!** You have reached the Badass Buddha/Gangsta Guru/Spiritual MVP, ready to enlighten your emotionally stuck ass."

"Hi, Dave," I said. "I have a proposition."

Dave is a personal trainer who majored in philosophy and religion. So he's very fit and apt to appreciate the spirituality of the wilderness. His inexperience gave me pause, but of course introducing novices to the outdoors is a life-list item itself (page 41), and besides, it meant he would defer to me on points of contention that often arise between hiking partners: how far and fast to hike, what snacks to bring, when to eat, who carried what.

But isn't a camping trip, like a meal or a movie, usually more fun with someone else?

True, Dave chants and sings a lot, sometimes in public, and attends "emotional release" dance workshops. He practices Qigong and has ingested the hallucinogen Ayahuasca five times in four months, under the guidance of shamans who are either ignorant of or willing to ignore the widely held caution against swallowing the drug more than twice a year. The fifth and final (for now) ceremony had been dedicated, Dave said, "to sealing my portal, because when my demon came out on my fourth ceremony, he wouldn't go back in."

But Dave is smart, and entertaining, and strong. We met playing basketball, and while we both like to win, we're also amused and sometimes horrified at the screaming arguments some of the other guys at the gym engage in. We run together in Central Park. He has told me more than once that he feels sorry for people who don't spend enough time outdoors. And he likes ghost stories.

"Hell, yes," he said when I outlined the plan. "We'll do Qigong and yoga on the trail. We'll be emotionally naked in the wilderness. I will sing to the trees, and to the flowers and to the mountains."

"I think it will be better if we just enjoy the quiet of the wilderness," I said, already questioning the wisdom of inviting him. That's when I proposed the limited singing document. "Just, you know, try to enjoy the moment. And be ready to leave at 2 p.m. on Saturday. We have a long drive."

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AT 1 P.M., Dave called to say he would be three hours late. At 3:30, he said he couldn't leave Manhattan until 7 p.m. At 7:30, he finally showed up at the Hertz office on Manhattan's Upper West Side. I stared at him.

"Don't shame me," Dave said. "I carry a heavy burden of shame. And let go of your anger. You'll feel better. Be in the moment."

The drive took almost six hours. For the first hour, we argued over the perfect five-point checklist for picking a girlfriend. (Final result: intelligence, sense of humor, beauty, attitude toward sex, how much she likes you. We left out ankle circumference because we agreed it was objectifying.)

We arrived at the Highland Lodge, near Crawford Notch, New Hampshire, at 1:30 a.m. In the morning, we would start a 20-mile hike connecting Greenleaf, Galehead, and Zealand Falls Huts.

But between Dave's insistence on sleeping in and the hike logistics (dropping our car at the end point and getting a shuttle to the trailhead), we didn't get an early start as I'd planned. We began the hike to Greenleaf mid-afternoon, about 50 feet behind two middle-aged women with short hair and hiking poles.

"We can beat them," I said.

"Beat them?" Dave said. "We will dominate them! We will crush them!"

This cheered and disturbed me. For all his spiritual jabber and fancy rationalizations, at heart Dave possessed a certain raw competitiveness and an ugly-in-a-certain-light need to not just win, but to make sure there were losers. He reminded me of me. Not in an entirely positive way.

We surged forward. We devoured the first half-mile climb, passing the women with ease, and then kept pushing for another mile until we were panting. I thought I might vomit.

"Ugh," I gasped.

"It's Qigong time," Dave said, and started waving his arms and bouncing on the balls of his feet. "C'mon!"

"I think it's puking time," I said.

Just then the women rounded a boulder below us, smiling, breathing easily, moving steadily.

We gaped.

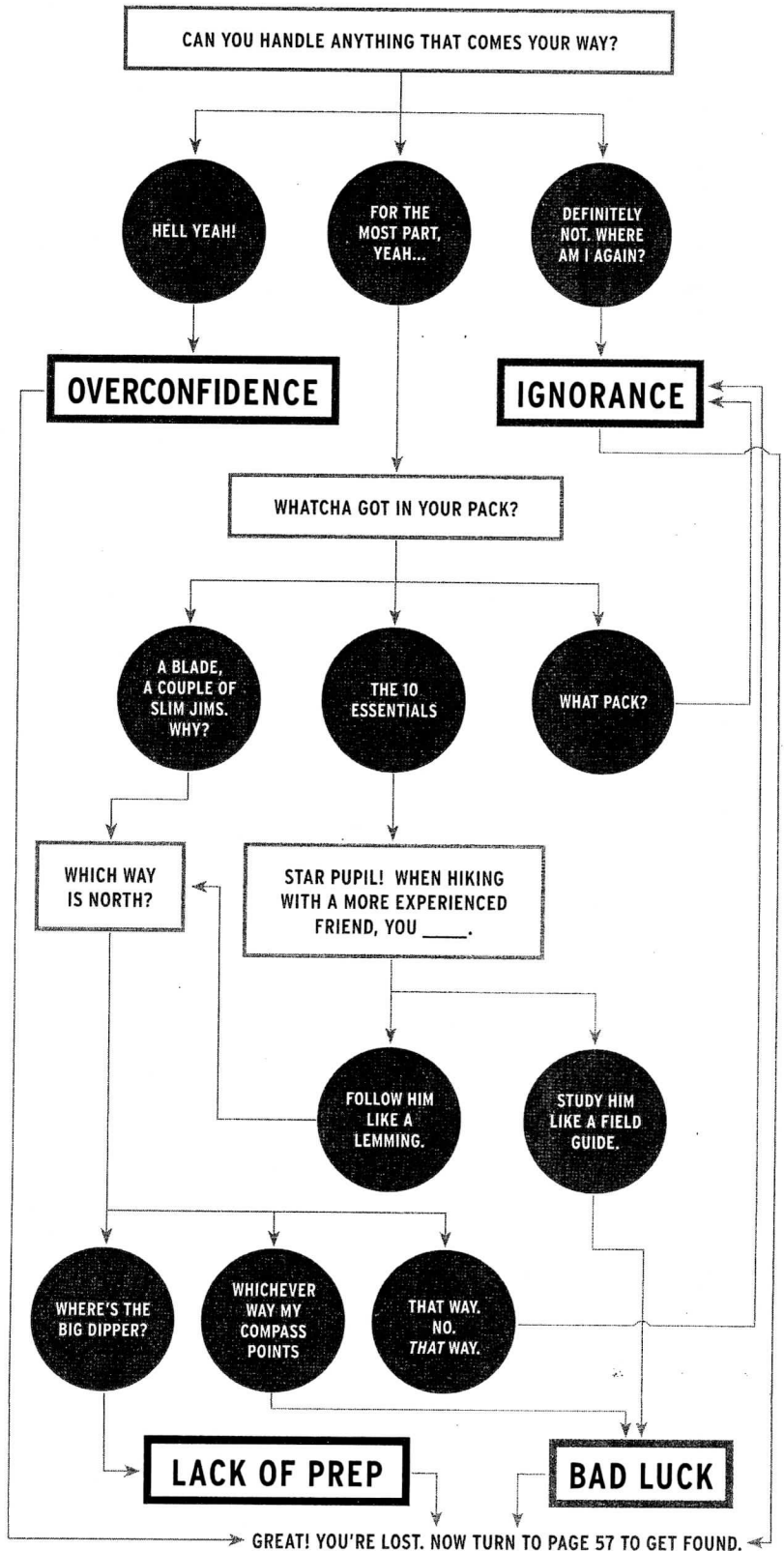
"Tortoise and the hare," one of the women said as they passed.

We continued to ascend, but more slowly. Actually, incredibly slowly. Which suited the scenery. We stopped at vistas overlooking crimson-splashed mountains. We trudged up absurdly rocky trails and agreed that the guidebook had been correct, and that no person, except for the two women who Dave referred to over the rest of the hike as "those inhuman hiking machines," could possibly move faster than a mile an hour on these trails. We gasped and stumbled and trudged and partly to deal with our pain, partly because Dave and I both like to talk, we argued and made lists.

We compiled a list of 10 greatest U.S. presidents and 10 greatest athletes of all time and 10 greatest vitamins ("I don't think bee

#31: GET LOST.

Anyone can get lost. And most of us should: There's no better reminder about how small and fragile we are, and you're not likely to forget it. But how will it happen to you?



ILLUSTRATIONS BY SUPERCORN. TEXT BY MAREN HORJUS (GLISSADE) AND CASEY LYONS (LOST)



#32 LEARN TO I.D. POISON IVY

Never hike in fear again:
Recognize the stuff and
hike in peace.



The leaves are either smooth or notched (never serrated). It grows in clumps of three; it can be shiny or dull, green to red.

#33 *Drink wine from a fountain.*

—TRUE, HIKING SPAIN'S historic Camino de Santiago is the real prize here. But 115 miles into the 500-mile route, you'll encounter a trailside wine fountain inscribed with the text: "Pilgrim, if you wish to arrive at Santiago full of strength and vitality, have a drink of this great wine and make a toast to happiness." Winemaking has been a staple of the Navarra region for more than 1,000 years—about as long as people have been walking this path—so stop at Bodegas Irache winery for a free taste and raise a glass to your friends back home (yes, there's a webcam). Bonus: easy logistics and terrain. Info hikingthecamino.com

pollen really counts," I said, to which Dave replied, "Open your eyes, open your heart, and then your soul might finally crack open") and 10 greatest film directors. "You can't even consider such a list without including Godard," Dave insisted. "His work was seminal."

"Have you ever seen a Godard film, Dave?" "What's that got to do with it? We're talking about greatness, not narrow definitions and how you can't bear to let go of your small life."

Dave stopped walking, which didn't really require too much, as we were barely moving. I suspected we would need to fine-tune our approach to pace the remainder of the trip. If we weren't sprinting in a self-immolating fever, or nearly crawling, or jabbering, Dave was either about 30 yards ahead of me, or 30 yards behind.

I sighed, started moving again, and after we hashed out the 10 greatest left-handed basketball players of all time, and after Dave persuaded me to say "we are blessed" and to do some breathing exercises when we arrived at a particularly transcendent view, and midway through an argument over the 10 greatest spiritual leaders of all time, we arrived at Greenleaf Hut.

The hike had taken almost three hours, so we arrived just 20 minutes before dinner, and had time only to claim our bunks, wash our hands, and sit down with the 20 or so hikers already there. We were sitting across from the women who had smoked us on the trail.

"I want to apologize," Dave said to them, after turkey soup, before salad. "On the trail today, we were otherizing you two."

I kicked Dave under the table. "It's his first big hiking trip," I explained. "He's tired."

"I'm not tired," Dave said. "I'm blessed. We're all blessed."

Turned out the women were not inhuman hiking machines at all. They were funny and kind and perfectly willing to accept Dave's apology, even if they didn't quite understand it. We chatted with them about hiking and pace and being blessed and Dave and I promised each other that we would hike more like them, and then we slept.

Over breakfast, we chatted with the women some more. They had known each other for years. They camped together often. Without talking, they seemed to share an ease and comfort around each other. I noticed that when they packed, one would occasionally close an open buckle on the other's pack. Maybe this was what Ultimate Hiking Partners looked like. Or maybe they looked like the quiet, white-bearded man and his wise-cracking daughter who announced, at dinner the night before, that

"The old man would still be on the mountain in the dark, if he hadn't brought me along." Her dad smiled (he had first brought her to the huts when she could barely walk). And what about the two perpetually frowning, lean, 30ish guys who studied topo maps together, had their gear packed before breakfast, and as Dave said, "hogged the pancakes"? Were they good partners? Probably, but they didn't make it look like fun.

I wondered if other hikers were sizing up Dave and me in the same way. I turned to ask Dave what he thought. But he wasn't there. Where was Dave? I looked in the main room. No Dave. I checked the bathroom, too, and the porch. Finally, with a heavy heart, I returned to the bunkroom and looked up, up, up, to the top of a triple-decker bunk. There was Dave, sitting cross-legged, meditating. We were the last to hit the trail.

IT TOOK US 45 MINUTES to climb half a mile. Dave

sang, or chanted. (I never learned the difference.) And then, halfway to what looked like a beautiful summit, the mango incident.

Instead of lunging at the lying mango thief, I said nothing. I remained still. If I wanted Dave to be The Ultimate Hiking Partner, maybe I had to act like one myself. I would be dignified. I would forgive. I would be generous.

I told Dave that maybe he was right, and I probably did have the soft and juicy mango slices. I often forget where things are packed. Maybe Dave could help me open up a little more, trust a little more. Maybe I should start to breathe more deeply, appreciate the countless blessings surrounding me.

"Damn straight, son," Dave said.

At the top of the ridge, we stopped, removed our packs, and turned in 360-degree circles to suck in the sweet air, to regard the explosive oranges and yellows and reds around us. "We really are blessed," I said. I was grateful to be sharing this with Dave. "Now let's have some soft and juicy mango slices."

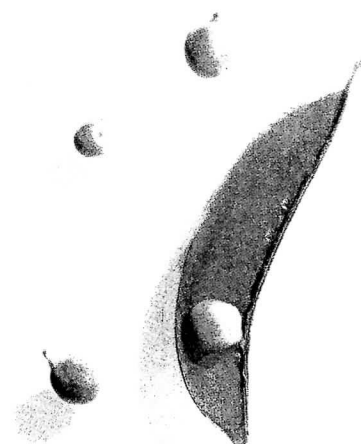
I dug in my pack. And dug. And dug. No mango slices. I looked up. Dave had them in his hand. He had pulled them from his pack.

"You have the mango slices?" I said.

"Yeah, but I was content to let you take the blame. I wanted to put you in the shame spiral."

I chuckled, and then I laughed. Dave laughed, too. We laughed together on the top of Garfield Ridge. We gobbled mango. We both congratulated ourselves on defeating what would clearly be the most difficult part of the day's hike.

Then we descended into hiking hell.



PHOTOS BY (FROM LEFT) ISTOCKPHOTO.COM / EPANTHA; ANDREW BYDLON. TEXT BY MAREN HORJUS (POISON) AND ANNA DINTAMAN (CAMINO)

"This is brutal," I said, as we picked our way down slick, small, crooked rocks.

"We are blessed," Dave said, grunting.

"Man, this is ridiculously hard," I said, clambering up more slick, small, crooked rocks, slipping, clambering some more.

"New Hampshire sort of sucks."

"Be in the moment," Dave said.

"I really might throw up," I said, after descending again, and climbing again, and descending and climbing and descending and looking up at another ascent.

"I am a humble light in heaven," Dave said.

I kept further complaints to myself because Ultimate Hiking Partners do not bitch and moan as much as I usually do. Over the next mile that felt like 10 miles, I concentrated on the fall foliage, screaming and subdued at the same time, the hush of the woods, the cold wind that washed us whenever we crested another rocky rise. I grunted and swore, but quietly, to myself, until I heard a crashing behind me. Dave had slipped on a rock.

"This is bullshit!" Dave said. "This is a bullshit hike!"

"Has the humble light in heaven dimmed?" I asked, and then Dave started laughing, and we stopped and sat on a rock and finished the mango slices and I admitted that I had never seen a Kurosawa

film, even though I had put him on the list. And Dave said that maybe we should try Ayahuasca together, that he knew a cool shaman, but "only if the plant calls you, because that's how it works."

What had changed? The trail didn't get easier. We didn't hike faster. The stunning scenery didn't get any more stunning. But every quarter mile or so one of us shouted, "This is bullshit!" and we both chuckled and cursed. The 7.7 miles took us eight hours.

More bountiful food, more cheerful staff, another night in the bunks, another witnessing of the grim guys grimly packing early in the morning, another enormous breakfast, an easier 7.2-mile hike that took us nine hours, because we walked slowly and at approximately the same pace, stopped frequently, and debated for a long time if we were bad people for ranking pretty hair in girlfriends, and if so, should we accept our badness and stop calling it badness and do our humble-light-in-heaven best to live in a shame-free world?

At Zealand Falls hut, we sat by an insanely peaceful and soothing waterfall, where we soaked our feet and discussed the five greatest planets, the five greatest ice cream flavors, and the five greatest comedians. (We were becoming more discriminating. Or just more weary.)

As we walked the final miles to our car

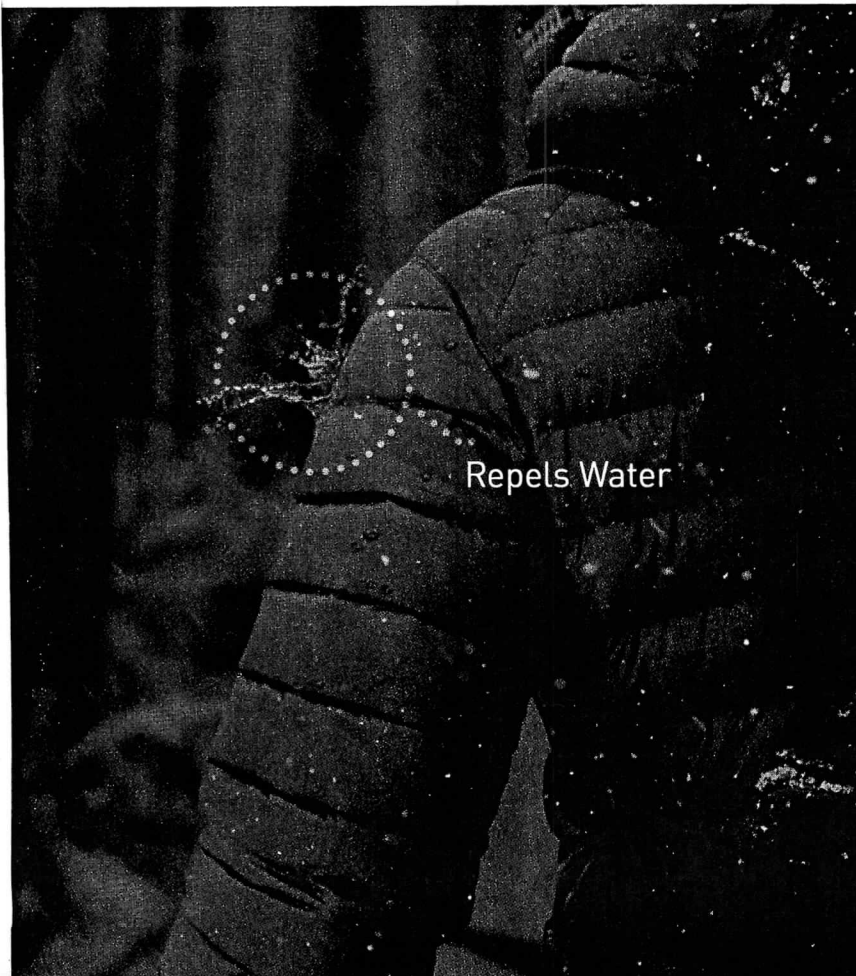
the next morning, I decided that The Ultimate Hiking Partner is, like cereal brand or mattress firmness, an intensely personal choice. Do you want to hike in purposeful silence, in grunting resignation, or in jabbering contention? Do you want someone who knows how to build a fire, or someone who can debate film history and rank spiritual leaders? Even if he's a lazy mango hog and unremitting chanter?

Maybe choosing the perfect partner is not primarily about gauging physical ability or capacity to endure hardship or industriousness or even tendency to snore (though all of those matter). Maybe the key is choosing someone who thinks like you, or who doesn't think like you, which provokes you to think in different ways. Maybe if you choose a conventional hiking partner based on conventional criteria, you'll end up with a conventional hike.

I had plenty of time to mull this over when we got stuck in horrible traffic on the drive home to New York. "Welcome back to hell," I said, raising my voice above the honking.

"Hell is inside us," said Dave. "Breathe. We are blessed." ■

Steve Friedman is the author of Lost on Treasure Island. He wrote about back-country yoga in June 2013.



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