

A Walk in the Woods

- Another Gin's 26-mile training trail



Wild Mushrooms taking root in one cool soggy spring day

“In every walk with nature one receives far more than he seeks” - John Muir



Chi S. Chan, RPCV
Azerbaijan 2009-2011

Early Sorrow

Winter of 2012, I moved to Virginia, a place I hardly knew. First week, I was lonely so I occupied my mind by dusting; washing, scrubbing, and mopping, arranging furniture around, hanging up my favorite mountain climbing photographs, placing plants by the



windows, and decorating my apartment as homely and comfy as possible. Every night, I went to bed exhausted. When finally everything was in order, I looked around and wondered what else I should do.

Sunday morning, I woke to a cloudless dawn. Outside my bedroom window, little birds cheeped, chirped, warbled in the chilly air. I lay and listened for a while. Soon after, I got up, moving about bared foot. The wooden floor was cold as ice. I looked around my apartment, everything was still in order. I made myself a cup of coffee, stood by the window with a blank stare, feeling so desolate and bereft.

First month returning back to the United States from Peace Corps, I was busy arranging job interviews. I saw my friends maybe once or twice, hiked with the Chinese Mountain Club two times.

My new place is becoming like a home

Soon I received a job offer and travelled to DC almost every weekend looking for an apartment. Weeks later, I found the place, and moved out of New York right away. Two years with Peace Corps in Azerbaijan, I never once felt lonely. Of course I missed my friends in New York, but I was in no way, SAD. Here I am, unhappy and miserable! I miss my friends greatly. In retrospect, I do not think I was ready to leave New York so soon and to separate from my friends once again. My God, I just got home!

New York is where I went to college, landed my first career, fell in love, owned my first home and built my life. Chinese Mountain Club of New York (CMCNY) is my second family. I shared many outdoor adventures with friends in the club. Few individuals to whom I am much attached. Moving out of New York is like leaving my security blanket behind. Receiving regular CMCNY 26-mile training e-mails only makes me more home sick; I am



*I will always call New York
my home*

going through a very tough time alone in Virginia. Fortunately, I am not a type of person who can be unhappy for long. After a few days of self-pity, I have enough of it.

Walking

Another cold dawn, I awake before sunrise, stick my head out of the heavy blanket, and peer through a frosty window at a scene dim and vague. I can feel the cold air seeping in through the crack of a bedroom window. The sun will be up in a few minutes and it should warm up soon, time to get dressed, get out, forget about my misery and pay a visit to my new neighborhood. After breakfast, I head to the door. Outside, I feel the heaviness in the air, a chill in the sunlight, an oppressive stillness in the atmosphere that hints of much but says nothing. Instinctively I zip up my jacket and am eager to take a long walk.

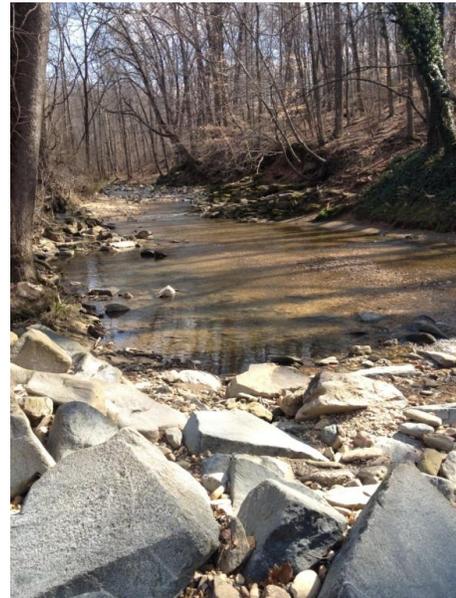
There are many good things about walking. Walking takes longer to reach the destination and therefore allows you to have time to observe the details around you. Edward Abbey once said:

“To be everywhere at once is to be nowhere forever. The longest journey begins with a single step, not with a turn of the ignition key. That is the best thing about walking, the journey itself.”

Perhaps, in the course of walking, I will find a way to cure my nostalgia. So the walk begins.

The Four-Mile Run Stream

Down by the hill of my apartment lies a creek. It is the Four-Mile Run stream, a perfect place to start my walk. This small river originates in Arlington County, about 6-7 miles west from where I live. Once it reaches my neighborhood, it carries only half of its original water capacity. This section of the river is highly polluted, carrying plastic bottles, cans and paper cups. Perhaps it is too close to the urban area, with Pizza hut, China Café nearby, not every urbanist is a nature lover. Another 3 miles further east, the stream joins the Potomac River and eventually disappears into the sea.



This river works magic with my early sorrow.

I walk toward upstream. First pass an area that is designated as a “Dog Park” by the city of Alexandria. Dog owners bring their dogs here and let them play, run, sniff and do all other “dog businesses”. They bark, sweat, bathe and SHIT all over. Not that I do not like dogs, but dislike how the place is spoiled by noisy crowd and animal waste. This precious river is

in the mid of an urban area, it is a piece of oasis that every nature lover so desperately wants to preserve. Every one should respect it, treasure it and leave it as it is.

Further upstream, the river snakes away from the urban area; it meanders quietly inside a small park. Its slow-moving water forms a small stagnant pool, slightly bubbling with gases from decaying leaves and grasses beneath, and with a little unpleasant smell. This pool, as I discover in spring, is a paradise for wild iris.



Inside the park, the place is cold, gloomy and deserted. No one is around in this early cold morning. Wrapping myself in the richness of being alone, I find myself walking through the silent woods with pleasure, climbing up small hills to get my heart pounding. Soon, the heat of the emerging sun feels warm on my shoulders; the temperature rises to a very comfortable level. Motivated by the exceptional nice weather, I follow the streambed, walk and walk until I cross the county line. Before long, I am in Arlington, 6 miles from where I live. Eventually I turn around and head back. At home, I feel tired, the same worn-out feeling I used to experience when I hiked with Mr. Chen. After a warm bath, I feel rejuvenated. Then, a light bulb goes off in my head, the idea of using this path to train for the upcoming 26-mile hike set in. I am thrilled with the thought!



My training trail is still deserted in early March

Audacity and Aspiration

Two years with Peace Corps overseas, I gave up the 26-mile hike. After returning to New York, I jumped back to routine exercise at once. I thought about resuming the 26-mile hike in 2012 but had serious doubt about my ability. Here in Virginia, I do not hike regularly. Most hikes with Derrick are short distance with minimum elevation gain. My body needs to go back to the weekly 18-20 miles routinely training. I am definitely not getting it in Virginia.

At first, I convinced myself to give up, maybe try next year. But each time, when I read James' and Chung's email updating me the latest news of the 26-mile training; I became more and more restless. I envied them, envied all them to have such a high target, discipline, and aspiration. Now that I have decided to take up the hike again, I feel the surge of energy inside me. From this point on until April, I have a goal, a well-defined goal.

Various Trainings

Once I make my decision, the training begins. I am well aware that walking on a flat surface is not the same as hiking on the mountain. Walking alone, regardless of distance will not be sufficient. I need strong leg muscles to tackle the lengthy steep hills leading to Scutt Memorial and Irish Potato; the two toughest sections of Gin's 26-mile hike route. I need a plan.

Jogging definitely helps, which I learned from Joseph, another 26-mile veteran hiker. Evening after work, I head out for a 3-4 mile run. My neighborhood actually is very hilly. Often I am out of breath running up those hills. Weekend's walk, I add 30 lbs to my backpack, adding more weight and distance each weekend. Since I start the regular training, every night after dinner, I fall asleep in front of a TV. In next to no time, I notice my mood changing, I am no longer feeling idle or lost. I am so focused on the training that I have no time to think about anything else. Life begins to go back to where it once was. I am happy and not feeling futile any longer.

The Running Stream

Spring arrives early in Virginia. First weekend of March, parks along the Four-Mile Run stream are full of bikers, joggers and dog walkers. Inside the parks; young leaves unfold overnight, new birds in their nests, new winged creatures in the air, and new leaves, new flowers spreading, shining, rejoicing everywhere. Along my training trail, emerald plants dot with red, yellow and purple blossoms. My two favorite flower trees: dogwood and lilac vie for attention. As I follow the stream further and further to its source, the river reveals its charm. One notable allure is its persistent perpetual purling of the water. The sun may or may not shine, the wind may or many not blow, but the stream speaks to me as long as there is water. My weekend visit to the river is truly a delightful experience. I become very fond of this new acquaintance, look forward seeing him every Sunday. I appreciate the walk immensely.



Vegetations begin to appear

River is a living being. It must be free to flow, twist and turn to whatever direction that it needs. Here entering to another park, the Four-Mile Run stream becomes narrower. Occasionally, the river is confined by high walls. I can hear the roaring sound of the water, trying to break through gaps. Once it is free, the river, once again returns to its calm, meanders lazily over cobblestones, murmuring softly. When I reach this section of the river, I usually remove my 30lb backpack and take a most needed break, eat an apple and

watch the water “*working at their leisure with a liberal allowance of time*” as Henry David Thoreau would say.

Nearby, according to my GPS, is a Sparrow Pond. I definitely see and hear a lot of birds around me, but never quite figure out which one is sparrow. There are red birds I spot regularly. They are not afraid of me and ignore my presence. They continue to leap up and down on the grass foraging foods. One time, I nearly stepped on one. Right by the Sparrow Pond stands a young cherry tree. It is still a young, not fully grown tree. While other cherry trees produce clusters of pink cotton ball like flowers, this young tree stands by the river with just a handful of blossoms. Nevertheless, I love the way her boughs curve, voluptuously and seductively, as if she is posing for her young lover. It reminds me of my young age.



The Stream murmurs softly beside me

Steep Hill

Next to a small stone bridge lies a faded trail. A few feet to the north of the trail a ridge rises sharply, precipitous enough to require a scramble to get to the top. I find it almost impossible to scale when a carpet of sugar maple and cottonwood leaves is slippery and wet. It is definitely not a popular walking area. I met two walkers only once passing through here. They were actually surprised to see me, kept checking out my heavy pack and wondering “*What the hell is she doing here*” This hill is my favorite training ground. I just wish it was longer, steeper and would lead to another steep hill. Nevertheless, by the time I reach the top, usually my heartbeat accelerates, my face turns red and my knees ache. I love this hill. If I success on the 26-mile hike, I must give credit to this hill.



Love flowers best in openness and freedom

Top of the hill is a school playground. Sunday is empty here and I walk through the grass field to look for the reentrance of the Park. I once saw a rabbit wonder around here, but immediately leaped back to the nearby bush as soon as it saw me. I must have frightened their poor little animal. After I pass the school parking lot, a dirt trail appears. It is a steep hill going down, so I use it to strengthen my thigh muscles. Soon, I spot my stream again.

From this point on, the whole stretch of the rivulet through next Park is generally slow-moving. There are intervals of faster water, but not to amount to anything. It is peaceful. I can hear the quiet murmuring of the Four-Mile Run stream combined with the cheerful cheeping sound of birds. I watch two red birds playfully chasing each other; occasionally dipping to the stream for a cool bath. The whole setting gives you a sense of serenity, infinite peace. Out here, time seems to stand still. How lovely life is when one is with nature.



Nice to have you!

Dogwood and the Strawberry Field

Spring time is just lovely here along the Four-Mile Run stream. The place exerts a magnetic spell. Wild flowers are everywhere. So far I have identified the daffodil, dogwood, Virginia bluebell, wild iris and strawberry, forget-me-not, yellow buttercup and many many more. Among all the flowers the most instinctive and my much loved is the wild dogwood. Its foliage usually appears in early May but this year the warm weather has brought out its white flowers by the 2nd week of March. I learnt from my research that the wood of dogwood is strong and resilient and was used by the Indians to make bows. The bark of another dogwood species was once used in



Flowering Dogwood

a solution to wash mangy dogs, hence the common name. In my opinion, this elegant plant ought to have a much better name, perhaps spring beauty.

About four miles into my walk, there is a patch of earth full of wild strawberry. Its pale yellow flower is a reduced replica of a wild rose. Back in New York, by the hiking trail of Harriman State Park, I once spotted wild strawberry shrubs with tiny yellow flowers, but never had an opportunity to witness its flowers grew into fruits. Perhaps, they lacked of nutrients, or maybe birds got into the fruits before I had a chance to see them. But here it is! a plot of grassland is full of wild strawberries. The fruits are very small, but plumb with crimson color. I pick one and taste it, not so sweet but juicy. The birds should love them. I have decided to name this place a “Strawberry Field”.



There is another plant I discovered by the hillside of the river. Its leave resembles the Chinese squash that my Brooklyn friend Wood grows in his garden. It has the same yellow flower. I have to remember to check them out in autumn. Maybe that yellow flower will turn into a squash. Wishful thinking!



On a level rock, I find a nice spot to take a break. The gurgling sound of the stream relaxes me. I take off my shoes and dip my feet to the water. It is cold but pleasant, a boon for hot feet and sore legs. I truly enjoy the feeling. My mind begins to drift back to the time when I just moved here. I had my early sorrow. Now the walk slowly but surely heals my wounds. While I am with the river, I forget my loneliness. I keep walking and walking, discover more attractions along its bank. The river has also shown me a lesson in life. Life resembles the flow of river, which is constantly moving and changing. No matter how many

twists and turns, the river keeps on pushing forward and eventually reaches its destination. Moving to a new place is a life changing experience, it requires lots of readjustments. Instead of troubled by the sudden changes, I should be more pliable and not be defeated by its “turbulences”. Given time and with open-minded, I shall adjust my new life in Virginia, meeting new friends, developing a new altitude and living contentedly in a quiet suburban area.

Pleasant Encounter

Part of my training path goes through dense woodlands. Inside the wood, there are network of trails made by dog walkers. Those trails are secluded from the bicycle path and the Four Mile Run stream. At first, I was afraid going into those woods alone. Eventually, curiosity overcame my fear, I went in the wood one Sunday afternoon and since then, and there is no turning back. Initially, I was startled by every rustling noise of the forest, and I cursed at each creature erupted under my feet. But after a while, I realized that there was really nothing to fear in nature. Now, I am more afraid of bumping into a stranger than a wild animal. Besides, those isolated winding routes are perfect for my 26-mile hike training.

Last Sunday, I went into the woods again. The entrance was a narrow corridor leading to a small hill. The path was littered with broken tree barks and padded with many seasons of fallen dried leaves. It was very comfortable to walk on; perhaps it made a nice bedding as

well. As I casually looked ahead, something caught my attention, at the top of the hill stood a small animal. At first, I thought it was dog, a very small dog. But then, I noticed that the animal had a slim figure, too elegant to a dog, and beside, where was the owner. I took off my sunglasses and had a second look. That animal looked straight at me. It did not move, just stood there and looked at me intensely. I stared back and did not move either. For five seconds, we both just stood there, waited to see who would make the first move. Finally, it walked away slowly, realized that I meant no harm to it. As it turned away, I could see its profile, it was not a dog. It is a wild red fox! a beautiful red fox with long brown tail. I hurried up to the hill, stopped on the spot where the red fox once stood. The red fox was long gone but I found myself standing there with a big smile.

I remember an article of Edward Abbey. He described his encounter with a mountain lion in the wild. This is what he wrote:

I have not seen a mountain lion since that evening, but the experience remains shining in my memory. I want my children to have the opportunity for that kind of experience. I want my friends to have it. I even want our enemies to have it.....

That was exactly how I felt!



Carlin Spring

Along the Four-Mile Run River, there are many side streams. Each of the streams has its own personality. Some streams are thin to mere trickles, some are full and chortling, some are clear and bright, and some are well hidden. Leaving the forest, I approach a confluence where a spring bisects Four-Mile Run stream. I ask a man about the spring and to where it flows. He gives me no answer except the name of the spring. It is the Carlin Spring. I walk closer to the confluence, peek inside and find a tunnel of green. The spring flowing down to the confluence carries crystal clear water. I can almost taste its sweetness. Something convinces me that there are hidden mysteries inside that narrow gully. I dawdle not a moment longer, tighten the straps of my backpack, hurry inside the tunnel.



Carlin Spring is a hidden gem, a true beauty

I follow the watercourse and it leads me to an even

narrower gulch. Inside, the air is moist and cool. Trees arch over from bank to bank, making a leafy tunnel full of soft subdued light, through which the stream sings and shines like a happy living creature. Immediately, I am taken in by the luxuriance of plant life along



the stream. Middle of the stream, a huge sycamore tree has split, bridging the stream with a solid cross-hatching of shredded limbs. At the edge of the stream's bank, plant roots are dampened by stream water. All the moisture-loving plants are in lush profusion. Ferns, mosses, spring beauty, and forget-me-not-blue speedwell dangle languidly in the stream current and their leaves are freshened by stream atmosphere. The quiet splashing sound of

running water echoes through the gully. Occasionally, small rapid appears, and the water

cascades down to a rock chute. There it is, a lovely water hole right underneath it. Sun rays filter through tree branches and cast a glow on the stream surface. Beneath the pellucid water surface are pebbles covered with green algae and I find a few tiny fishes wiggling merrily along the bottom. Occasionally, one rotates and reaches up to the surface smacking the air. I stand there, very much enjoy watching them. Surrounded by the gully's steep walls and richly forest, I can not help but wondering how wild this place that once was. This place ought to be a remote coulee profuse with wild life and exotic plants.



The Nature Center

Ten minutes to my walk, the spring takes a sharp turn. The slopes on both sides continue steepened. High up on the ledge, a rustic house half hidden behind thick foliage; “Nature Center” a big green sign is painted on the wall. I find a man-made trail leading up to the building. Half way to the house, a small pond appears. “Do not disturb Wild Life”, a signage stands by the entrance. I peek at the still water and notice three small turtles sun bathing on rocks. Delighted by what I uncover, I approach the pond. The sleepy turtles are alarmed and immediately, they dive into the water, disappearing without a trace. The trail goes around to the back of the house and another sign comes into view; “Amphitheater”. I follow the direction of the arrow and soon arrive at a small auditorium. The place is surrounded by tall trees, with a platform and few wooden benches. Next to the platform is a fire ring blackened by many years of woods burning. The setting has an un-sophisticated allure. The Nature Center must be an educational meeting place for the local kids. I picture young school children sitting here and learning everything about nature. The trail continues on at the other side of the auditorium and it re-routes back to the front of the Center. In front of the Nature Center is a garden. Flowers and shrubs are carefully planted and labeled; wild yam, columbine, Virginia blue bell and many other names I do not know. Sunday, the building is closed. I take a few photos and carry on with my adventure.



Next to the visitor parking lot, an interesting writing on a signboard catches my attention. “*Amphibian crossing – Speed limit 5 miles per hour*” I look around and am careful not to step on any such creature. Before long, a small pond comes into sight. This pond is smaller than the previous one but is completely covered by willows and yellow pond lily leaves. I catch a glimpse of quick movement, *Kerplunk*, a toad leaps into the pond. Another creature emerges among willows. It is a green-head ducking, swimming away from me. They both are protesting my invasion. I take the hint, shot a few pictures and leave them alone.



The sun begins to set and I realize time passes quickly inside the gulley. It is high time to head home. I take another look of the pond, the flowering dogwood, the clear green pool, and the delightful spring.

“The place seems holy, where one might hope to see God” - John Muir

I am beginning to believe that if there is God, I ought to find him here. How fortunately I am to stumble upon this place.

The River Source



The 26-mile hike is approaching quickly. Today, in less than six hours, I walk nearly 22 miles. From my apartment, I follow the Four-Mile Run stream to its source. The name Four-Mile Run does not derive from its length, in fact it is misleading for the entire distance of the stream is 9.5 miles. Years ago, I read the “Arabian Sands” and was enthralled by the author’s courage and determination to travel long distance and to follow the Awash River to its end. The journey nearly cost him his life but he solved the mystery of the Awash. Standing in front of this “0” mile signage and knowing it is the beginning of my river, I feel I have solved the mystery of the Four-Mile Run stream as well.

For the past two and half months, I have hiked on this trail every weekend, rain or shine. This river becomes my closest companion. I have discovered many charms and hidden beauties along its riverbed. Tomorrow, I will be leaving for New York. The river will be here waiting for my return.

The Actual 26-mile hike

See: <http://www.cmcny.org/Articles/2012.Chi.26.Miles.article.pdf>

Returning to the River

Now is deep in the summer, the water of the Four-Mile Run Stream is low. Most of the flowering plants have gone to seed, but many others are still unfolding their petals every day. Today is the first time I return to the river. My 26-mile hike was a success. I feel I owe much to the river. Without its ever winding path and the serene beauty, I would not have lingered here every weekend, walked as far as I did.

When I arrive at the Nature Center, rain begins to fall. I watch the rain thicken and enjoy listening to the pattering sound on the tin roof. The rain runs in rivulets down the road, making gullies in the dry dirt. It sweeps through the hillsides, continues down to the pond, refreshing the pond, and the pond begins to live again.....

THE END

*August 2012
Alexandria VA*