

Yael Saiger

Describe a place or environment where you are perfectly content. What do you do or experience there, and why is it meaningful to you?

I am lying on my back staring up at the bright orange tarp above me. A thin sleeping pad separates me from the rock-littered ground. I wince slightly as the rainwater that has been pooling in the imperfectly-constructed tarp begins to trickle onto my feet and seep through my sleeping bag. I am sore, I am wet, I am cold, I am exhausted, I am hungry. And I am content.

This is how I ended my days during my back-country trips in Sedalia, Colorado. Last summer, I participated in a program that prepared high school students to lead trips in the back country and manage survival situations. Once we had accumulated the necessary skills like Wilderness First Aid and orienteering, we were assigned to plan and lead a six-day trip in the back country. The instructors gave us checkpoints that we had to reach by biking, hiking and climbing. The rest was up to us.

The days began early, ended late, and were packed with activity in the middle. By the time my friends and I wriggled into our sleeping bags one night (a process which was harder than it sounds, and involved a not insignificant amount of inadvertent head-bashing and probably avoidable name-calling), we were exhausted. That night, I expected to drop off as soon as my head hit the balled-up sweater that served as my pillow, but I surprised myself. Suddenly, I had no desire to fall asleep. My eyes focused on the tarp above my head, but I am fairly certain that the traffic-cone orange, dulled by the darkness, is not what held my attention.

On that day, we had gone mountain biking. The steep uphill was physically draining and the terrifying downhill mentally taxing. I remembered the slight relaxation of tension in my hand as I gradually released the brake, allowing myself to speed up despite the fear. I recalled the extra five feet I pushed up the hill before stopping to rest, despite the pain in my legs. I relived the pride of riding over difficult obstacles and the sting of my cuts after I fell flat on my face. These moments were not obviously significant, and to others they were all but invisible. But as I lay there under the tarp, successes and failures still fresh in my mind swirled together.

I was tired but not the kind that wears me down. It was the kind of tired that lets me know that I have pushed myself to my limits, and that, even if I haven't done everything perfectly, I have done something. It's not just mental awareness of the accomplishment that differentiates it; this kind of tired feels physically different. It tickles my throat and relaxes my body. This kind of tired has a freshness to it; it's energizing. It is the kind of tired I love, the kind of tired I look forward to and seek out. My exhaustion, I knew, was the fruit of the day's work. The soreness in my legs signified that they had grown stronger. I could channel the excitement of the past day's experiences into energy for the next.

I exhaled softly, relieved that the day was over. But, even as my muscles loosened and relaxed, I was ready to do it all again in the morning. I wondered what would happen the following day, because on these trips, you can never really know. For the moment, I was content to lie still in this beautiful place in the mountains and stare at the tarp above me. I lay there in the silence. The experiences of today and tomorrow were keeping me awake.