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Soaking Wet in the Sierras

Laura and I lived in Toadtown, in the foothills of the Sierras, west of the Sacramento Valley, before we had children, a car, or many material possessions. We did own an aluminum-frame, nylon backpack that carried groceries and laundry well.

Now, because of dangerous experiences, I won't hitchhike. Then, however, we did hitchhike, because it was the only way we had to travel distances beyond what we could walk. Early that day, we hitched a ride down the mountain, visited friends, bought essential groceries, and laundered at the laundromat. When we headed back up the road, dusk descended, hastened by heavy clouds gathered close against the mountain.

With our thumbs in the air, we hiked about three miles of a necessary ten, and rain began to pour down. We didn't own rain clothes, but the rain was bearably warm, and we kept walking. Our clothes soon soaked through. Water ran off our hair, noses, and fingertips and into our shoes. Laura said, "Why won't anyone give us a ride?"

"We're soaking wet. We would get their upholstery wet. Besides that, anyone who would walk in a downpour like this has to be crazy, and people shouldn't pick up crazy hitchhikers."

The rain began to erode Laura's spirit. I realized I could easily become discouraged. Then we would be two wet, discouraged walkers with a long way to go in a rainstorm. I sang songs I already knew, and songs I never heard before but pulled out of the dark rainstorm around us. I sang upbeat, even crazy songs. I danced. I blessed the rain and praised the clouds. I found reservoirs of energy that fired me with warm enthusiasm.

Laura's beginning descent of spirit stopped, then reversed. She kept walking. She cheered up. She laughed and realized good still surrounded us. I couldn't think of anything I'd rather do than walk with a heavy pack on my back, Laura by my side, singing in pouring rain as cars sped by, spraying water from their tires and soaking us more, if we could be more soaked.

Laura said, "All those people are in their warm, dry cars, with the windows rolled up."

“I know. Think of what they're missing. All the great outdoors. This wonderful rain. What do they have? A tiny, isolated little place, rolling along too fast, cut off from everything real. They're missing out on this once-in-a-lifetime experience. Think of how boring their lives must be.”

Years later, tonight in fact, Laura told me I rekindled her energy and helped her appreciate the rain, the clouds above us, the water running off us, and the earth running with water under our feet, but she wondered if I was crazier than she had ever realized and if the dark, wet night might never end.

I thought her descent into discouragement might begin again, and I said, “We'll get home in good shape, in good time, and we'll look back on our rainstorm hike with appreciation.” The time had come, in her thoughts, for that promise to develop.

A pickup passed us, and bright red brake lights flashed on. The pickup stopped on the shoulder of the road. A voice floated through the dark rain, “Jon, Laura, is that you?” and since it was us, and the driver was Pike and his passenger was Shirley, and they were our neighbors in Toadtown, we ran, put the pack in the back and crowded in front with them, because they said they didn't mind if we were wet. They delivered us right to our front door.

We built a roaring fire in the stove. We discovered the backpack was, as advertised, waterproof, and while our clothes weren't, our skin was, and our hair soon dried. We had carried home freshly-laundered clothing, and we put some of it on after we hung what we had been wearing to dry.

I peeled and sliced apples while Laura made a pie crust, and the odor of baking apples and cinnamon soon filled the small cabin, already full of the sound of rain drumming hard on the tin roof and the sound of Laura singing of the joy of rainstorms and the joy of living.