

Circle in the Snow

The fact that it was snowing lightly when we set out that day did not matter overly to either of us. My friend was an experienced hiker, having traversed various alpine slopes in Switzerland, and having walked the better part of the Appalachian Trail at one time or another. Furthermore, I knew the region intimately. I had walked through this particular section of the forest almost every day for two years, and in all kinds of weather. The presence of snow only added flavor to the hike.

There were no trails in that section of the state forest, but there were any number of good landmarks—a small ravine with a brook at the bottom, a great gnarled yellow birch, an immense clump of mountain laurel, and, of course, there was the general lay of the land—most of the ridges ran north/south in that part of the world. This was to be a casual walk; we carried no supplies, had no specific goals to attain, and had not bothered to check the weather reports before we went out. There was no need; we planned to be back long before sundown.

By the time we passed the gnarled birch, the sky had darkened considerably, and by the time we left the clump of laurel behind there was a serious snow in progress. We crossed a small valley, climbed to a ridge, tracked along the top for a while, and then, after 40 minutes or so, because of the deepening snow, decided to go back.

I knew my way back well enough. In the beginning we simply followed our own tracks and the ridge lines. But there came a point when, because of the heavy snow, the tracks faded out, and then suddenly the ridges seemed to be running in the wrong direction. I followed them anyway, knowing the navigational anomalies that a whiteout can bring to sailors and bushwackers. In any case, we came to what seemed to be a more sheltered spot where somehow our outward-bound tracks had not yet filled with snow. Knowing they would take us back without regard to other landmarks we simply followed them. We were involved, as I remember, in a discussion of some weighty philosophical matter, not really paying much attention to our situation.



After a half an hour or more it seemed to me that we should have spotted at least one of my usual landmarks. There were many laurel clumps, to be sure, but I couldn't be certain whether any was the large one that I always used as a guide. Furthermore, I had yet to spot the gnarled yellow birch, let alone the sharp ravine with the brook at the bottom. We hiked on anyway, but we began to search for something with a ring of familiarity—something other than white snow and vertical trunks.

After another 15 or 20 minutes I saw a familiar-looking hemlock. A few minutes later, I spotted another

signpost, a four-trunked maple, and slowly, one by one, what seemed to be common guideposts began to appear. No matter that they weren't the ones I usually noticed; we had seen them before and were clearly headed in the right direction. Nevertheless the time frames were wrong. We had been hiking for at least an hour, through ever-deepening snow, on the return trip, yet we had only spent 45 minutes at most getting to the turnaround point.

It suddenly occurred to us that there was, perhaps, a remote possibility that we were lost. We rejected the thought immediately. Only white people get lost in the woods; the real earth people, the American Indians, our models in those days, might not know where they were from time to time, but they were never lost. We were in the midst of making this point when my friend saw another familiar hemlock tree. It had a lot more snow on it than the first one we had seen, but then it was snowing a lot harder by that time. We watched for the four-trunked

maple, and it appeared right on schedule. Clearly, we were in a rut.

If we had been true Indians we would have had a smoke or made a camp. As it was we kept walking, looking hard now for a break in the circle, and knowing well that to find it we might have to make the entire circuit again, possibly twice—perhaps, my friend suggested, forever. We were still taking all this lightly, probably a good thing in view of the circumstances.

We did indeed go around once. But the second time around I realized that what I was really looking for—the general lay of the land—was impossible to see: the visibility was no more than a few feet. Then about five minutes into the second circuit, we saw what appeared to be a curious channel in the snow, leading off in God knows what direction, but at a definite angle to our vicious circle. The only things that could make such a channel in the snow were two-footed humans or a herd of deer and, since deer have more sense than to travel in such weather, we assumed that the tracks were ours.

It turned out to be a good guess. We got home just past dark after picking our way through an alien landscape of grotesque white shapes. It also turned out to be a record storm for that winter. One more circle and our channel of tracks might have filled, the darkness would have descended, and we would indeed have circled for eternity.

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