

UPHILL ALL THE WAY

Despite last week's boost of crisp October air, my first hike since a knee injury almost four years ago challenged me more than expected.

Bowing to my wife's cautions, I had chosen a rather public place to hike--just in case. Nevertheless, intricate spider webs completely spanned the trail sporadically, proving that no hikers had recently traversed my route.

I started early and strong, naturally expecting weariness to gradually overtake me. But I was wrong. Exhaustion swarmed me suddenly at the end, even though the knee hadn't protested at all over the brief three miles of mildly rugged terrain.

From the outset, the trail gradually descended to Panther Creek, where it leveled out for a ways. For many, downhill slopes pose greater dangers than uphill. Amplified by the natural pull of gravity, a misstep going down can instantly convert to an uncontrolled tumble or slide. Though I bobbed a time or two, a stout hiking stick served as a third leg.

Uphill navigation is another story because gravity can work like a rope on a tent pole, adding stability by its steady downward pull. Stable, yes; refreshing, no.

For me, the erosion of energy by persistent gravitation pull was never more dramatic than on a five-mile hike into the Chicago Basin area in southwest Colorado. Unwisely, I began the hike with a slight fever and was thoroughly expended in little more than an hour. A friend dropped his own pack on two different occasions to return and carry mine. But he wasn't well either and soon wore down.

At about the halfway point, my son compelled me to sit down and shed the pack altogether. Until then, I had endeavored to trudge 30 minutes and rest 5, then walk 20 minutes and rest 5. Endurance declined to where I was walking only 5 minutes but resting 10--and still losing ground.

We stowed my pack among the rocks, intending to return for it later. But our leader suggested that several fellows take turns gradually shuttling it to camp.

For the first time in my life I thought death might be imminent--and prayed for my wife to be reminded to pray for me. And I commended both her and our son into God's hands and watch care.

Tortuous and tedious uphill grinds remind me of this opening verse of a Christina Rossetti poem. "Does the road wind uphill all the way? Yes, to the very end. Will the day's journey take the whole long day? From morn to night, my friend."

Despite the struggle, last week's trek held treasures for the careful observer. A large, sandy-colored snail halted his inching beside Panther Creek until I passed. And the rapid fluttering of a single leaf against a branch on a windless day imitated the subtle tick-tick-tick of a clock.

Nevertheless, the last segment wound uphill all the way--a perfect reflection of how life seems to be right now. But the journey will level out again near the top.