

Stepping Out in the Swan Range

Silent, Simple, Sacred

By Keith Hammer

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While hiking to Lamoose Lake last week I met two local men backpacking the length of historic Alpine Trail #7 from Columbia Mountain to the Bob Marshall Wilderness. They had spent their first night at Jenny Lake and seemed in no big hurry to move along, taking a few moments for some pleasant conversation. I was encouraged to see people taking the time to re-create their relationship to the natural world and thought maybe that's what the word "recreation" is supposed to mean.

In contrast, my hiking companion and I on our return from the lake ran into a motorcycle rider intent on making a huge loop up Peters Ridge, over the Swan Crest, out Jimmie Ridge and back, then down past Strawberry Lake and back to his pickup on Peters Ridge Road before nightfall. No small task, especially given his late start of 5 pm. We listened without choice to his motorcycle instead of the birds and watched as he struggled to negotiate switchbacks in the trail already deeply rutted by similar spinouts.

It made me wonder what exactly the motorcycle rider was trying to re-create. It didn't appear to be a simpler and more sacred relationship with the Swan Range. And it didn't appear that the sounds of our footsteps were interrupting his concentration in the least.

The words "sacred" and "sacrifice" come from the same root and, to the degree personal sacrifice appears anathema to our modern consumer society, perhaps it also explains why very little seems sacred any more. I've found there are many things easily sacrificed in order to regain a sense of the sacred.

Top on my list are my car and motorcycle. They are the first thing sacrificed right at the trailhead. Turn the thing off and the sounds of the birds and the breeze appear as if by magic.

The next things sacrificed are thoughts of work or other obligations. All of a sudden sounds become sharper and everything begins to smell more and better; the evergreens, the wildflowers, even my sweaty t-shirt! These are simple and temporary sacrifices that quiet the outside and the inside.

I'll admit right up front the toughest thing to sacrifice in today's world is time, but it is not so much a sacrifice as a transformation. Ultimately, our time is the biggest gift we can give of ourselves to others, our community, and to ourselves. Even the time given to renew ourselves comes back to benefit others through our improved state of mind and

body. Most importantly, the measures here are time, not distance; and quality, not quantity.

Some of my most rewarding and sacred times in the Swan Range have been the result of wandering around aimlessly. Like my aromatic Life is Good t-shirt says, "not all who wander are lost." Perhaps it is the magic combination of relaxation and exercise that turns an outing into a truly sacred and healing experience.

Indeed, health experts agree that leading threats to human health are stress and lack of exercise. Perhaps that is why the Montana Cardiovascular Health Program highlights activities like hiking to "prevent cardiovascular disease and its associated risk factors – such as physical inactivity, obesity, hypertension and high blood cholesterol." I would add that what is good for the heart is also good for the soul.

The Swan Range is uniquely situated to provide quality re-creation and benefits to the Flathead's spiritual, mental and physical health. Whether out for a short hike or for several days of backpacking, the close proximity of the Swan Range to our urban communities eliminates the need for a long drive to find peace and quiet in our publicly owned backcountry.

The United States consumes one-quarter of the world's oil even though it has just 5% of the world's population. The United States is also the fattest nation on Earth, with 65% of its population being overweight or obese. States like Michigan have found that physical inactivity is costing the state \$8.9 billion per year in health costs and that, for every 5% of the population that could be encouraged to participate in daily aerobic exercise, the state could save \$575 million!

It doesn't take a rocket scientist to see a quiet walk in the nearby woods can save money, reduce our demand for fossil fuels, improve our physical and spiritual wellbeing, and preserve the quiet for others to enjoy as well. And besides helping re-create a sacred relationship to the great outdoors, it just plain feels good!

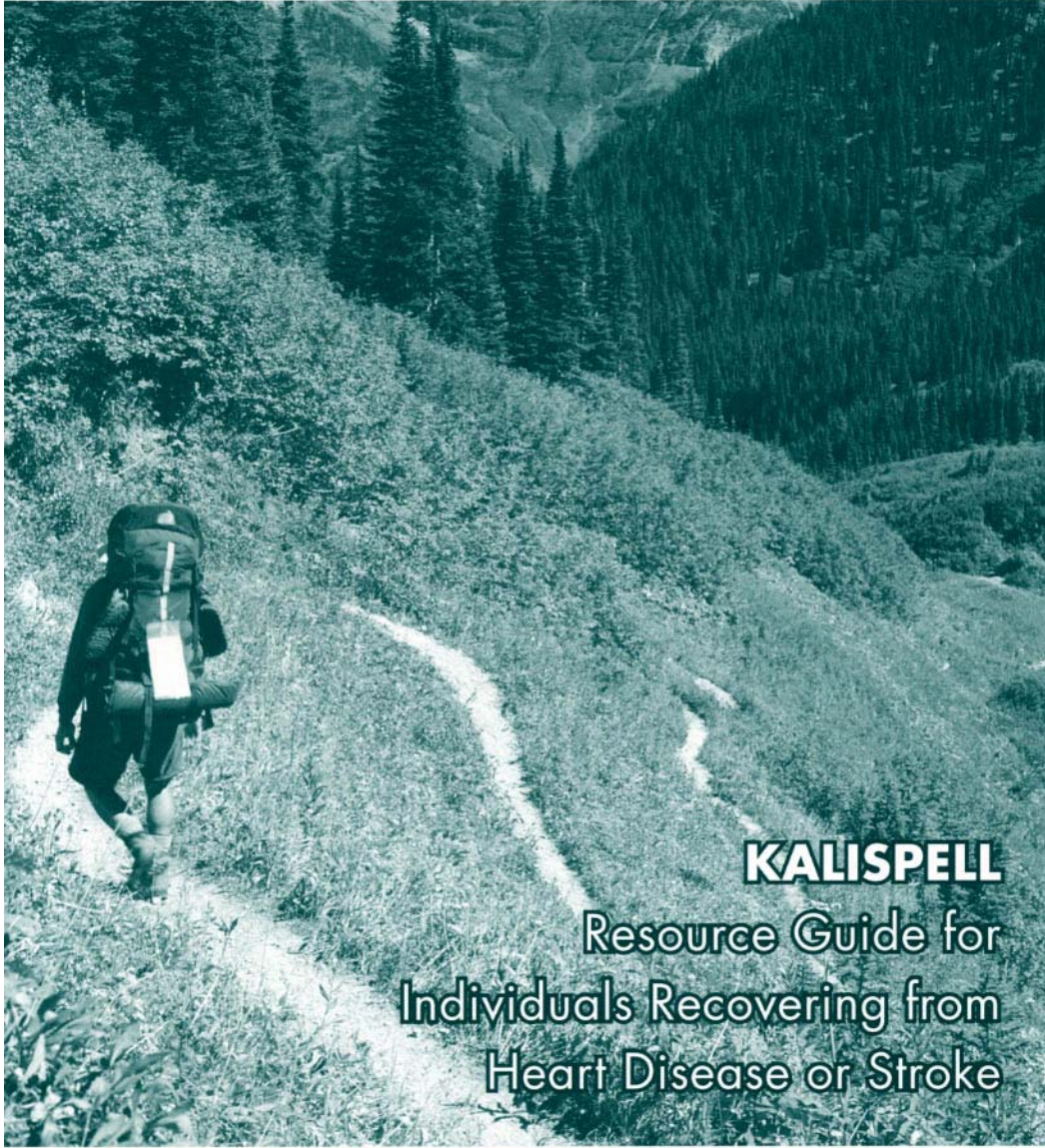
Simply put and borrowing from Wilford Brimley's healthy oatmeal commentary, "It's the right thing to do."

Keith Hammer grew up hiking, skiing, camping, hunting, and fishing in the Swan Mountains. He has worked a number of jobs, from Forest Service trail worker to logger to backcountry guide, and currently works as an environmental consultant and head of the nonprofit Swan View Coalition. His column will appear regularly in this paper and will also be archived at www.swanrange.org. Keith can be reached at 406-755-1379 or keith@swanview.org.

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Hiking is featured on the cover of a Montana Cardiovascular Health Program brochure produced by the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services.