

The Vintage Voice

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My Last Great Mountain Hike

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Mount LeConte, at an elevation of 6,593 feet, is the third tallest peak in the Great Smoky Mountains, outside Gatlinburg, TN. With numerous trails of varying lengths and steepness, it is a favorite hiking destination for young and old.

Back in 1970, my 65-year-old mother introduced my family of five, with children 12, 9, and 8, to the Alum Cave trail. At 4½ miles, it is the shortest trail and also one of the steepest. After the climb to the top, she treated us to the pleasure of an overnight stay at the very rustic lodge there. It had no electricity or flushing toilets, and our children discovered a new appreciation for their modern home. A couple of years later, we went up and down in one day, again using the Alum Cave trail, and enjoyed a picnic lunch at the top. We were soaked by a rainstorm on the way down, but that just added to the experience.

In the fall of 2006, at 70 years of age, I was given the opportunity to climb LeConte again and to stay at the lodge at the top. A group from our home parish in Columbia, S.C., had been climbing this mountain for years under the guidance of their rector, John Barr, now deceased. My wife Nancy and I walk between 2 and 3 miles several times a week in our neighborhood and I THOUGHT I was up to the hike. I had forgotten how painfully my knees had complained in descents during shorter hikes last summer, and had not taken fully into account what had happened to my body in the years since I had first ascended LeConte.

This group has done all the trails over the years and decided, for variety, to go up the Trillium trail and come down the Rainbow Falls trail. That sounded interesting to me. Unfortunately, I didn't realize that each of these trails are about 6½ miles long. The hike up Trillium was complicated by leaving our cars at the Rainbow parking lot, where we would return, and walking to the start of the Trillium trail, which we THOUGHT was about one mile away. It turned out to be about three miles, and in the middle of this extra excursion, I broke hiking's cardinal rule: Don't leave the group! It was taking us so long to get to the Trillium trailhead that I thought we had missed a turn and so I went back, by myself, to attempt to discover our error. That meant that when the rest of the group did reach the trailhead, I was not with them. So they and I had to expend time and energy to get back together.

Finally, we all headed up the trail — and it went up and up and up. About halfway, I hit the proverbial Wall. All energy I had was expended, and it became simply a matter of will to put one

foot in front of the other. One of the group, Joe, had reached the top and, leaving his pack, he came back down to help his wife with hers. Seeing my condition, he took mine, as well. Two new stars appeared in his crown! We last ones eventually dragged ourselves into the lodge just at dark. I was so done in that I ate little of the wonderful supper prepared for us. I made a trip to the now indoor plumbing and headed for my cabin where I was to have the upper of a double bunk bed; a couple to whom I am related by marriage were in the bottom bed. He has a bad back and couldn't climb into the upper.

More problems! As I attempted to get out of my clothes, now wet with perspiration and mist, I found that each time I tried to bend over to take off socks and jeans, my legs cramped painfully. Finally, I called Margaret Anne and told her that since she was married to the man who was the brother of the girl our son had married and thus was family, would she help me pull off my jeans? I stuck my legs out from the top bunk and she pulled. I was able to get into something dry and slept from 9:00 pm until 7:30 am. Margaret Anne, God bless her, had shared a muscle relaxer with me and I awakened the next morning refreshed.

After a good breakfast, and a group Eucharist and picture, we headed off down the Rainbow Falls trail. Naively I THOUGHT downhill would be a breeze. There had been a strong windstorm five days before, and though the Trillium trail had been cleared because the llama pack train that supplies the lodge uses it, the Rainbow Falls trail had not. Much energy was expended bending under or climbing over trees that blocked the trail, and my knees started complaining. My downfall came at a bend in the trail where I lost my balance and fell flat, just avoiding falling off the mountainside. The group went into rescue mode!! They picked me up, Joe again took my backpack, David gave me his hiking stick for steadiness, and two others produced Ace bandages with which they wrapped both knees over my jeans. Off we started again. Even with the help of so many, I was the last one to the parking lot, again very tired, very sore, and very humbled.

After a lifetime of being a giver, feeling strong and competent, I became a very grateful receiver. I would not have made it up or back down without the others. I needed them and they ministered to me. Any false pride of self-sufficiency was taken away. Amazing Grace was my experience.

Mount LeConte is a lovely mountain with various trails. I've now hiked three of them. I still like to walk, but I promise never to hike LeConte again!



Charles Duvall lives in Columbia, SC, with his wife, Nancy, a writer and gardener. Though retired after 20 years as Bishop of the Central Gulf Coast, he stays busy preaching at special events and telling stories "at the drop of a hat." Preaching and storytelling are part of the oral tradition, but this article is a first attempt in the writing field.