

<https://dissonanttimes.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/Backpacking.mp3>

While hiking the Pacific Crest Trail last summer, I found that backpackers traveled in a special kind of bubble. The Pacific Crest Trail (PCT) is a 2650-mile hike that runs from the Mexican to Canadian border through California, Oregon, and Washington. Thousands walk all or part of it every year. It usually takes between four and six months to complete.

"I'm homeless," backpackers often joked. Although that's technically true, we were honored with special treatment rather than the stigma normally faced by the urban homeless population. We received special discounts, sometimes free drinks or food. Sleeping in parks was often tolerated, if not always welcome. A self-organized network of unpaid "trail angels" supported us in the forms of food, shelter, transportation, and simple but profound acts of kindness.

We were generally welcomed. Our dirtiness and large backpacks were written off as quirky or appropriate to the experience, rather than marks of shame, danger, or exclusion.

PERCEPTIONS OF BACKPACKERS

Backpackers were usually received as sort of dirtbag athletes or harmless idiots arriving in town hungry and with money to spend. The one exception I experienced was while passing through Ashland, Oregon, where I received significantly more stares or an avoidant demeanor I understood to mean "don't ask me for money". While texting in front of the nearby WinCo, a passing mother and her young son skirted around me on the sidewalk. The mother advised her son, "That's a homeless person." I tried unsuccessfully to hitch a ride back to trail for two hours before being rescued by a trail angel who I found on a hiker app. She quickly arrived to provide me a ride to trail and friendly conversation, free of charge.

The experience in Ashland was jarring because it was unusual,

at least relative to the world I'd become accustomed to over the last few months. And even there, I was welcomed with food and a yard to sleep in from some hikers I met in California, tolerated while shaving my beard in a Safeway bathroom, and lent a pair of scissors to cut my hair by a thrift shop employee.

The way I see this is: Ashland is on the I-5 corridor, and hosts many less-privileged travelers. Many people I spoke to weren't aware of the PCT or the fact that it passed through town. In contrast, many trail towns are smaller and off the beaten path. Locals are generally used to backpackers passing through and causing a minimum of trouble. And spending money, sometimes a lot of it.

Part of the perception of backpackers has to do with wealth; backpackers in general are coming from and going to a stable life. Engineers and health professionals were overwhelmingly common on trail. Hiking for half a year can be an extremely expensive endeavor. There's also the idea that people hiking a long trail are on a journey of some sort, usually not just in the literal sense. We were not perceived as "stuck" in the way that many view the urban homeless population. More on this later.

TRAIL ANGELS, AKA MUTUAL AID ON THE PCT

While I credit much of the positive treatment of backpackers to our status as a kind of dirty tourist, not all of this experience boils down to spending money.

A trail angel is a person who offers aid or comfort to backpackers. It's hard to quantify just how much these generous souls do. Their help could mean water in the desert, company in a lonely stretch, a week-changing hot meal, a shower and laundry when dirtiness has drained the spirit and multiplied the rashes, or a safe spot in which to sleep. A night resting under a friendly roof is something that can't be

quantified, no matter how hard the ever-expanding borders of capitalism try to commodify hospitality. To receive kindness from a stranger is to have one's sense of safety expanded.

A hiker friend described trail angels as "The best-organized mutual aid network I've ever seen." Many coordinate by phone with other trail angels, and others still have set up local Facebook pages as resource hubs for hikers.

Most trail angels do their work for free. Their payment comes in the form of human interaction or just the act of kindness itself. The reasons for rendering aid are as varied as the person giving it. An elderly woman who picked me up while hitch-hiking explained it this way: her son was traveling rough somewhere in the world, and offering me a ride was her way of making the world a better place for a child who had long ago left her protection.

Some trail angels are fans of backpacker social media accounts. Some are looking to trade food for stories. Some are former backpackers, while others have never heard of the PCT but just happened to get a good feeling about the person with a thumb out on the side of the road.

Perhaps most importantly, trail angels seem to enjoy practicing generosity. Helping another person doesn't need to be a grim-faced deed, and usually isn't.

THE WHY AND WHAT

I think what trail angels do is about helping someone on a journey. Their motivation is to be a part of that journey, live vicariously through it, and to give in the sacred tradition of providing hospitality to travelers. There's practical reasons for this too. You might be a traveler now. You might be a traveler one day, in the future or past. Someone you love might right now be relying on the sometimes-rare kindness of the world.

I wonder if that same grace can be extended to people who are living outdoors on other types of journeys. The housed population holds a lot of fear and mistrust towards unhoused people, much of it unexamined. And then there's the phenomenon of moralizing the problems of others: "Homeless people are like that because they chose it," goes the refrain. This type of myth has been created and dispelled time and time again, in mental health, in addiction, and (hopefully, one day) in poverty. Explaining the suffering of the other in terms of personal failure makes it seem less possible that we too may suffer similarly. In reality, hard things happen to everyone, mostly for reasons out of our control. Not everyone on the street is going through the same thing. But everyone is going through something.

I'm not qualified to give a list of suggestions about how to treat a neighbor or visitor. That's a practice to be developed according to each of our means, and according to the need we witness. What I can observe is that hospitality and human kindness is a coin more valuable than the calories or warmth shared. We're all in this together.

Author's note: I'm a cis white male with a North American accent. While I observed people of many nationalities, races, and identities treated with kindness in the trail community, it bears mentioning that my experience may not be the same as others.