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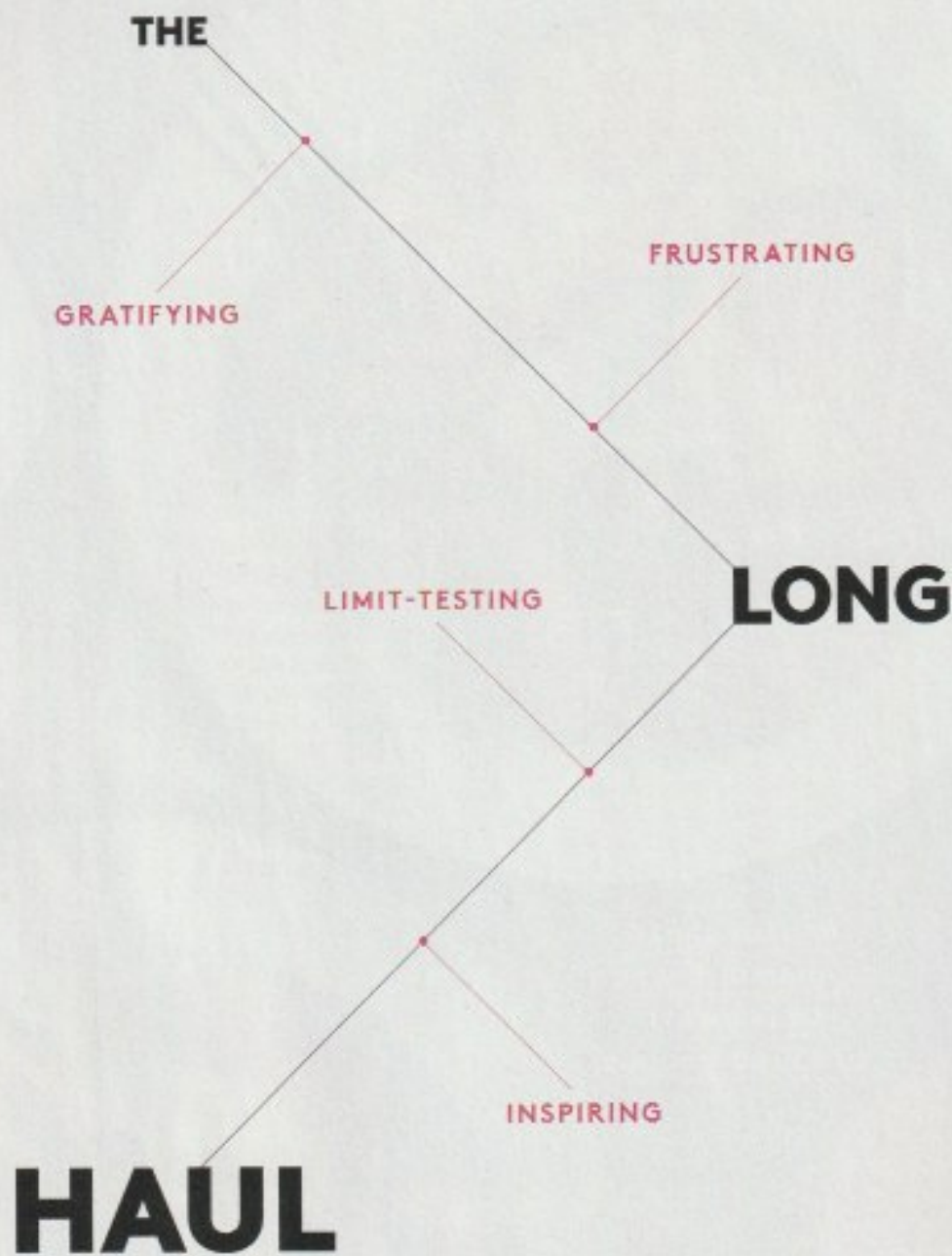
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What makes otherwise normal people take on epic (2,000-mile, multiyear, multipart) projects? Writer **Amy Shearn** explores the motivation behind their journeys—and the pleasures and pitfalls they experience along the way.

Photographs by Peter Hupak

**I HAVE A CONFESSION TO MAKE:** I've been reading the same novel for nine years. In my defense, it's really long. I don't know whether it makes it better or worse that it's an obscure book. For who on earth will give me appropriate credit for having read a 13-volume, out-of-print, stream-of-consciousness early-20th-century work called *Pilgrimage*, by a little known author named Dorothy Richardson? I'm not saying I need a medal, but I admit I'd like someone to be legitimately impressed, as if I'd read *Ulysses*, say, or the first print on an iTunes update.

But even if no accolades await me, I feel a particular thrill every time I pick up one of the volumes—that old-book scent as redolent as a boyfriend's borrowed sweater. I'm in no particular hurry to finish. For one thing, there's not much of a plot, so it's not as if I've been on the edge of my seat for a decade. And for another, reading this book has become part of who I am. As the other



## THE HIKER

NAME: Macon York  
PROJECT: Hiking  
the 2,160-mile  
Appalachian Trail  
TIME FRAME: Six solid  
months, March  
2012 through  
September 2012

aspects of life fit and flurry around me—over the course of my reading I've changed jobs, moved apartments, and had two children—good old Dorothy is always midsentence, midrevelation, waiting for me to return.

Of course, I'm not the first to discover the pleasures of extended projects, and mine is certainly among the more mundane. Diana Nyad swam 53 hours from Cuba to Florida in 2013, after five prior attempts. Director Richard Linklater filmed his 2014 movie *Boyhood* over the course of 12 years. And Beat-generation painter Jay DeFeo continuously applied oils to a work called *The Rose* for eight years, beginning in 1958, until the picture weighed nearly a ton and had to be removed from her apartment by forklift. It all leaves me to wonder, why on earth do we humans embark on crazy extended endeavors?

Alex Lickerman, a physician and the author of *The Undefeated Mind*, has thought a lot about this. He says committing to lengthy ventures allows us to test "what in psychology is now called grit," that buzzwordy mix of patience and perseverance. Lickerman reminded me of the famous study about delayed gratification conducted by the psychologist Walter Mischel and explained in the book *The Marshmallow Test: Mastering Self-Control*. In this study, children were offered a choice between one reward immediately (usually a marshmallow or a cookie) and two rewards if they waited. Mischel concluded that the ability to delay gratification for the sake of future reward has profound long-term consequences for people's welfare and health.

But science illuminates the long haul only elliptically. What I want to know is, why do some of us not just tolerate delayed gratification but seek it out? And how do we keep the faith along the way? To find out, I tracked down three intriguing specimens and asked about their long-haul adventures.

## THE HIKER

**MACON YORK** was 15 when she set her sights on the Appalachian Trail. Her dream was to walk the length of it—from Georgia to Maine—backpacking and camping along the way, before she turned 30 (an age that to a teenager seemed impossibly distant). After college, the Georgia native moved to New York to work as a designer, and one day, in the magazine office where she worked, she happened upon a memoir of hiking the trail. "It felt like a sign," says York.

She spent the next year planning her trip, taking on an additional roommate and freelance work, and squirreling away a tax refund to amass the \$6,500 she needed for gear and expenses. In March 2012,

at age 27, she set out with a friend. The second day, the friend had to back out due to an injury.

"I was totally alone," York recalls. She did encounter other hikers (a whole culture exists around hiking the trail), "but they were so cranky and grumbly. I was just happy to finally be doing it." About 100 miles in, she met—and joined—a group of like-minded souls. "Having friends laughing through the hard days made it so much easier. It felt less like a feat of endurance and more like an adventure."

How does one conquer a 2,160-mile trail, even with a supportive posse? "Starting out, you do 10 or 12 miles a day until you get your 'trail legs,'" York explains. "After about two weeks, I was doing 15 to 19. Your body acclimates a bit at that

point. You get quick with your chores—getting water, packing up the tent—and you're more in shape."

York reveled in the beauty of the trail and the wonders of waking up in the woods. Walking through the change of seasons was thrilling: from the brown, barren tones of March, through the blossoms of springtime, the lush greens of summer, to hints of autumn gold.


Of course, it wasn't all magic. "In Vermont and southwestern New Hampshire, the newness was over. I was sore and tired, and there weren't many spectacular views." Later, Maine's White Mountains proved incredibly demanding. "Five to 10 miles was all we could do. It was kind of demoralizing to hike all day and cover so little ground, but the trail was hard and the days shorter."

At the end, York found herself full of triumph, and as a bonus, in love with one of her hiking buddies, Luke Costlow, who is now her fiancé.

York says she wasn't thinking about the epic quality of the undertaking as it was happening. "It was more, *Tomorrow I am going to get up and hike 17 miles*. There was a basic understanding that I'll eventually get there if I do the work." And physically? "I was impressed by my body," says York, now 31. "I feel like our bodies are stronger than we give them credit for."

## THE DRAFTSMAN

**JAMES GULLIVER HANCOCK** likens his plan to draw every building in the Big Apple to the proclamations of enthusiastic children. (*I'm going to fly to the moon! I'm going to be king of the world!*) "I love it when kids make huge, sweeping statements," he says. Of his own grand plan, the freelance illustrator says,



**THE  
DRAFTSMAN**

**NAME:** James  
Gulliver Hancock  
**PROJECT:** Drawing  
every building in  
New York City  
**TIME FRAME:** Begun  
in 2010; 1,000 down,  
a zillion to go

## THE QUILTER

NAME: Sister Judith  
Ann Shea

PROJECT: Intricately  
embroidering and  
quilting a queen-  
size bed cover

TIME FRAME: 47 years,  
on and off, from  
1966 to 2013



"I'm committed to it as a goal, no matter how unachievable."

Hancock, age 38, who is from Australia, started the project when he moved to New York, five years ago. He says he wanted to keep a diary of how the city looked to him as an outsider. "I couldn't get over [the buildings'] familiarity from film and TV," he explains. "I was intrigued to see it operating for real."

He never leaves home without his sketch pad. When a building catches his eye, Hancock might do a quick sketch in a minute or two, or he might settle in and spend 20 minutes. "Your observation goes to another level when you sit and draw real things out in the world," he says. Over the years he has been at this, his drawings have evolved, taking on more detail and, in some cases, color. (Full-color pen-and-ink pieces can take an entire day.)

At press time, Hancock has drawn more than 1,000 buildings. What drives him? He says that when he sees the city from a distance—from a bridge, for example—he's moved by its vastness, and sad about the impossibility of spending time with every building. "I think this manifests as anxiety, and that might be what keeps me going," he says. "I want to gather and gather and gather till I get all of them in my collection."

## THE QUILTER

**WHEN SISTER JUDITH ANN SHEA** of the Sisters of Saint Joseph, in Brentwood, New York, was a novitiate, back in 1966, a sister at her convent was given an expensive quilting kit as a gift. After cross-stitching one elaborate 14-inch snowflake, the sister gave up in frustration. There was a whole queen-size expanse to

cover. The kit ended up on a giveaway table, and Shea took it for her mother, who had just retired. One more cross-stitched snowflake later, the kit was back with Shea.

She began carrying panels of the quilt and cross-stitching whenever she had time to fill on an airplane, in a community meeting, or in medical waiting rooms, as she helped her sister through a lengthy illness. Eventually Shea set a goal: to have the quilt ready for her nephew's 25th wedding anniversary, in 2000. That date came and went.

More than a decade later, in 2012, that same nephew announced the wedding of his daughter Kris. Suddenly Shea had a feeling that the quilt had really been for Kris all along. She happened to have been born in a blizzard and would appreciate all those delicate snowflakes. So Shea buckled down, spending

every spare minute measuring and cutting batting and hand quilting each panel. "I don't think I came up for air once that year," she says. "My fingers had calluses. But I had that goal to have it for Kris's wedding, and that was very important to me."

When the quilt was finished, in time for the August 2013 nuptials, Shea looked at it and could not believe that she had finally done it. She proudly presented it to the delighted bride and promptly immersed herself in other quilting projects.

Shea, now 76, knows what it is to put something aside, then have that unfinished endeavor call until you pick it back up. She was never troubled by the way the quilt morphed in scope and meaning. To her, that's all part of the process. "In art, when you're creating," she says, "you have to be open to the possibilities."

**BEING, AND STAYING, OPEN TO THE POSSIBILITIES.** That, right there, is exactly the near mystical appeal of the long haul. What struck me most about these disparate long-haulers was how similar their attitudes were. They remind me to enjoy the slowness of a worthy, complex endeavor, to surround myself with positive people, and to remember to laugh, even through the moments that aren't fun, even when you look in front of you and see hundreds more miles to walk, eight more feet to cross-stitch, even when life takes over and you need to put away your project and come back to it later, sometimes much later. These are all part of the process. And they are all, in fact, what makes the long haul so very worthy.

I suspect another benefit of the long haul has something to do with what John Keats called "negative capability," the willingness, even desire, to embrace uncertainty and live with mystery. There is so little of this in our scheduled, circumscribed daily lives. Practically every single question we have can be answered by Google, and I know I'm not the only one with a Ticking-Things-Off-To-Do-Lists addiction. But we crave something more. We suspect that by pushing ourselves, by digging deep, we will get a little closer to knowing what we are made of.

Whether it's a singular goal or a venture that becomes a daily practice, having a project can sustain us through the rocky times, can serve as a comfort, can offer something to return to. The long haul is in that way akin to the essence of life: adding one stitch, then another, then another, in order that the larger pattern can make itself be, eventually, seen. ■