

This was written in the summer of 2019 on what turned out to be my last hike with this good friend for many years; he has since, as mountain people are wont to put it, 'gone on up the mountain.'

Down on the Ground Hiking with Hobbes

*Sumer is icumen in
Loude sing cuckoo!*

There are unquestionably serious things I could be writing about this month – water management, forest management, Repugnicans and Democranks, et cetera.

But it's summer, peak of summer, and here in the mountains the shortness of the season is countered by its sheer intensity, as if every living thing above 7,000 feet elevation were dropping all other activity in order to raise to the blue morning sky a big vulgar Orffian hymn of rejoicing (*Loude sing cuckoo!*). I just have to join in. Besides – I have a good ridiculous summer story – one that could only happen (legally anyway) in Colorado and a few other states. It's a story about hiking with Hobbes – name changed to protect me from Hobbes.

Hobbes is a longtime friend, one with whom I've been hiking and skiing 25 years or so. Our greatest achievement, in my books, was figuring out how to go over a barbwire fence without taking our skis off. Hobbes is a political scientist, a philosopher really; we call him Hobbes because that cranky old medieval philosopher, Thomas Hobbes, was kind of his lodestar – not a hero, just a light to steer by in his own meditations and musings on the future of the species. Hiking with Hobbes is fun because the conversation is always pretty rich, moving back and forth through current events of the past five or six centuries.

Anyway, we decided to hike up to Lamphier Lake in the Fossil Ridge Wilderness. Fossil Ridge is almost what one might call a boutique wilderness. Originally, wilderness referred to all that which surrounded a settlement; Fossil Ridge is a 32,000-acre wilderness almost entirely surrounded by roaded settlement. But respectable granite peaks going to 13,000 feet thrust up through fossil-rich limestone, with several lovely mountain tarns leaking streams into a couple Gunnison River tributaries.

We've both been to Lamphier Lake before, but never together, and also – not recently. Which is why, as the morning wore out, we both began to think that the trail to the lake had grown steeper since our last trip up, and maybe quite a little longer. We had to acknowledge that this may have been because we have become a little older. I'm only 78, but Hobbes is 83, and has had some serious stresses in recent years, including the loss of his longtime partner.

We were stopping more often to catch our breath, and spending a little more time on Hobbsian questions like – look at this stand of dense and mostly dead lodgepole – is this a happy forest? Contented? Hobbes tends toward 'mysterious but ultimately perfect are the ways of Nature,' while I think that the condition of a lot of our forests is more akin to the urban slum. We can kill twenty minutes or half an hour easily on something like that.

The upshot of this is that we reached a point where both Hobbes and the day were wearing out, and I asked Hobbes several times if it was time to turn around and head home. Well, he would say, don't you want to get to the lake? Well, I'd like to, of course, I'd say, but – and he'd say, well then, and we'd get back on the trail. Thus do old men enable each other in remembering youthful folly.

We were having that conversation for about the fourth time, sitting on a big rocky overlook from which we could see all the way to the Continental Divide, when some younger hikers came along, fully equipped with electronic technology, and told us it was still almost half a mile to the lake.

Okay, I said, we're eating lunch here, enjoying the view, then heading down, and Hobbes agreed this time. So we ate lunch, which consisted of sandwiches we'd each brought, and sharing some grapes I'd brought and an innocuous little loaf of carrot cake that Hobbes had scrounged out of the fridge before we left his house.

Then we tried to stand up.

Interesting exercise: trying to stand up when you are suddenly two or three feet taller than you remember, with noodle bones, and the planet is gently but insistently rocking you in its cradle. Or maybe not so gently: Hobbes looked like he was trying to stand up in a strong wind. 'Whew,' he said. 'I'm kind of dizzy.'

'Can you walk? Downhill?' My razorsharp mind was plodding through stuff.

We started downhill. It was obvious we were both having trouble remembering the basics of walking downhill, or anywhere. 'I feel like I'm drunk,' he said.

A vagrant thought wandered into my mind. 'Hobbes,' I said. 'That carrot cake... who... what...'

'S---- baked it,' he said – his daughter, who had moved up from New Mexico to stay with him through his problems.

My razorsharp mind immediately wandered to a hypothesis. 'Could she have used some special ingredient?' (Legal of course.)

'Uh-oh,' said Hobbes.

So we began a long trip down the mountain, that was fairly quickly complicated by a side effect of the carrot cake, a serious cases of drymouth and other signs of dehydration, like serious leg muscle pains for Hobbes. Being the young guy on the trip, I was doing okay, aside from the constant need for enough water to unglue my tongue from the roof of my mouth. We were both balance-challenged, but leaned into each other as much as away from each other, and only fell a couple times.

But it was very slow going. The situation began to penetrate my cuckoo mind, and I didn't know whether to laugh or panic: two old farts staggering around accidentally stoned, hilarious. But two-plus miles up a rocky mountainside – not so funny.

Hobbes really was feeling serious pain; but Hobbes being Hobbes, he needed to analyze it, talk through it, and the only way he could do his analysis was by stopping completely in order to expound on it. 'What is the mind-body relationship?' he asked. 'Am I really in physical pain? Or is this psychosomatic?' He then wandered into a greener field of Shakespearean analysis: 'What did that soliloquy mean, anyway?'

'What soliloquy?'

'To be or not to....' Then a pause; then, 'I don't think I'm making any sense,' he said, with a prim note of discovery.

I, on the other hand, descended into a panicky pedantic state of freeze-dried rationality. 'Hobbes,' I said, 'Hobbes my friend, we have just one thing to think about now, one thing to do, and that's to get down this mountain.'

'But my legs, and the mind-body issue -'

‘Hobbes!’ I reiterated. ‘Getting down the mountain! That is our sole focus now. All questions will be answered, all positions discussed, and all hypotheses analyzed – at the bottom of the mountain!’ (*Loude sing cuckoo!*)

So we staggered on into the disappearing afternoon. It involved frequent rest stops, and occasional philosophy stops – and once Hobbes memorably stopped and broke into song, maybe some old Shakespearean ditty, or his own setting for a poem by Emily Dickinson, his favorite poet.

As I began to come down from whatever had been in the carrot cake, I began to worry that we would actually not get down on our own resources.

“Should I maybe go on down and get some help,” I asked, but Hobbes was adamant: ‘No! Never!’ Exactly the way I would have responded, had it been me in trouble. I’m at an age where I’d rather die on a mountain than be rescued from it. (*Loude sing cuckoo!*)

The hikers who had passed us going up caught up with us on their way back down, and they opted to stay with us, which was good company, especially since they lived in Mississippi where Hobbes grew up. And more especially since they had some water. Hobbes was not remembering things that well at that point, so that coincidental Mississippi connection was re-established three or four times in the remaining 1.4 miles on their electronic device – each time requiring a delay in forward progress.

I persisted in my stoned mantra: ‘All questions will be answered and all issues discussed – at the bottom of the mountain!’

Our new companions chuckled the first three or four times I said that – then, as the shadows lengthened, they began saying it too. Their water, along with ours, was mostly gone, but Hobbes became more stable and coherent as we came down (physically and psychically), and when it became apparent that we would make it off the mountain, I went on ahead quickly to bring the car closer to the wilderness boundary. Fifty yards from the trailhead, I met his daughter coming up to look for us. I asked her then and there if there’d been anything special in the little carrot cake.

‘Oh my god!’ she cried. ‘He knows he’s not supposed to touch anything on that shelf in the fridge!’ Hobbes was in trouble. But also out of trouble by then; we’d made it off the mountain. Under our own power, with a little help from friends and family.

There are undoubtedly sober lessons to be learned from that day – something about old men learning our limits, about listing ingredients in baked goods, about how much water to carry, et cetera. But my main takeaway from it is the image of Hobbes swaying in the rocky trail, singing over and above the pain in his legs. It might have been one of his finest moments.

O Summer: *Loude sing cuckoo!*
