

# phren-z

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## John Moir

### Time and the Mountain

Dusk is approaching as I begin my solo descent from a pine-covered plateau perched high above Ojai in Southern California's Los Padres National Forest. On a steep section of trail that winds down the chaparral-covered mountain, I slip on loose pebbles, lose my balance, and tumble to the ground. As I go down, my right foot catches on a boulder embedded in the pathway, pinning my ankle under the weight of my body. The impact knocks the breath out of me. When I gather my wits, I am swamped in a roar of pain. Something is very wrong with my ankle.

Stunned by the sudden turn of events, I try to fathom how a beautiful day could have gone so wrong. Just a few minutes earlier, I had been standing on the plateau, savoring the view westward across the Ojai Valley carpeted with citrus and avocado orchards.

But sprawled here on the red earth and wracked with pain, I now need a plan. With only a couple of hours of daylight remaining, it is unlikely I will see other hikers. My cell phone is out of range. The trailhead is more than two miles away. My injured ankle is ballooning out the top of my boot, and under my sock there's an ominous protrusion of bone.

The good news is that I've told my wife, Ellen, where I am hiking. We're staying about half an hour away in Ventura, and I try to imagine how events might unfold when she returns to our hotel room from her dinner meeting. As daylight fades, her concern will grow, and she'll watch the clock, wondering why I don't answer my cell. Eventually, she'll make the call she's been dreading, trying to be calm as she reports that I am missing. After that, it's anyone's guess how long it might take to mount a rescue effort and how difficult it may be for responders to hike up the mountain in the dark.

I have no jacket, and already my body is trembling from shock. How cold will it get once the sun sets? I am not keen on simply staying put where I am on the trail—not at all.

I push my way up to sitting, and then—somehow—to standing, resting my weight on my good leg. I move forward with a tentative first step. The agony takes my breath away. But I am now a step closer to weathering this storm.

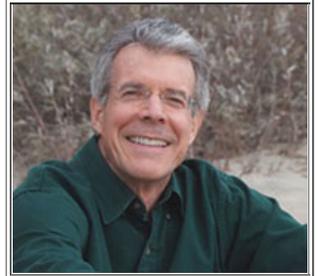
I first hiked up this trail more than 30 years ago and fell in love with the little mountain plateau known as The Pines. I have been returning ever since, and during those decades, my life has gone through innumerable changes. However, The Pines itself seems immune to Ovid's dictum: "Time is the devourer of all things." These trees and ridges hew to a subtler geologic clock, and as the years slip past, this unchanging plateau offers at least the illusion of permanence. Standing under the same trees where I stood as a young man and feeling the familiar breezes winnowing up from the canyons below

provides a comforting continuity in the face of life's uncertainty.

And today, things are definitely uncertain as I attempt the long slog toward safety before the arrival of nightfall. One step at a time I work my way down the trail, sweating, my chest heaving, holding myself upright with sheer willpower. Two hours and four stream crossings later, my car comes into view at the trailhead, and as night closes in, I hobble the final distance.

Four days later a surgeon repairs a two-inch-long break that spirals up my fibula, setting the bone with a titanium plate anchored with five screws. I make a rapid recovery, and as time passes I think about going back to The Pines as a way of putting final closure on the accident. But somehow, four years slip past before I'm once again in Ojai, this time on holiday with Ellen. She is fighting a cold, and I decide to make the return hike alone. After the broken ankle, several friends have suggested to me that it is sensible to hike with a companion. But I just don't want to live my life with that much caution. Naturalists like John Muir often spent weeks at a time hiking alone. I can certainly manage a measly six miles on a familiar trail.

So on a warm spring morning I head back up the mountain. At first, the hike seems routine, but as I move deeper into the chaparral, an unfamiliar foreboding settles over me. Curiously, I have no concern about falling, especially since I've brought along an aluminum walking pole. No, it's mountain lions I'm worried about. *Mountain lions*. In thousands of miles of hiking, I have had exactly one split-second mountain lion sighting. There is a greater statistical chance that I will be struck by lightning than attacked by a mountain lion. The logical part of me realizes that my worry has nothing to do



John Moir is an author and environmental journalist whose special interest is the preservation of biodiversity. Moir's articles have appeared in publications such as the *New York Times*, *Smithsonian*, *Washington Post*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *Outside*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Birder's World*, *Orion*, *Audubon California*, *High Country News*, *Birding*, *Writer's Digest*, *Poets and Writers*, *Catamaran Literary Reader*, and elsewhere. His narrative nonfiction book, *RETURN OF THE CONDOR: The Race to Save Our Largest Bird from Extinction*, tells the riveting and controversial story of one of the most dramatic attempts to save a species from extinction in the history of modern conservation. In addition, MOIR is the author of the nonfiction book *JUST IN CASE* and has contributed to three anthologies. Visit John's web site at [jmoir.com](http://jmoir.com).

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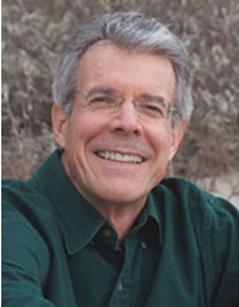
Wilma Marcus Chandler

with reality and everything to do with hiking this trail for the first time since breaking my ankle.

Nevertheless, emotion trumps reason. To comfort myself and to ensure that I don't inadvertently surprise any savage beasts lurking nearby, I begin to sing aloud. The song that comes to mind is the old bubble gum pop tune "Sugar, Sugar," which, even in my addled state, seems moronic. I try singing "The Ballad of Davy Crockett," but even though it has a more outdoorsy theme, I feel ridiculous. In any case, I do arrive at The Pines without encountering a single mountain lion.

Back in the early twentieth century, a group of local students cleared this little plateau and planted about sixty pine trees. There are several fire rings and a spring that provides fresh water. I stroll about, wondering if there is something I should do to mark my return. The plateau looks exactly the same, just as it does every time I come here. Like always, I'm the one who has changed since my last visit, and this time that includes a metal plate in my leg. Gradually, my angst over mountain lions evaporates. Everything I need is right in front of me and all there is to do is enjoy the whispering stillness.

By the time I head back down the trail, I walk with an easy rhythm. It feels exactly like when I first hiked here decades ago. I am happy. The fragrance of sage and the calls of the black-headed grosbeaks fill my senses and the years roll back and the world grows young and for a short while, time—that devourer of all things—vanishes.

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