

Dear Steve/Mighty Blue,

I hope this email finds you well, or as well as can be expected. Firstly, I love your show! I first discovered it in 2017, when I was getting ready to hike the AT SOBO, and have listened to it ever since, both on trail and in “regular” life. Your episodes from the Camino gave my boyfriend and me carte blanche to drink all the beer on the Camino del Norte earlier this year. I won’t say that “what would Steve do?” was our mantra, per se, but we may have invoked your name as justification for “una cañita más, por favor!” on more than one occasion. More than anything, though, your show is adept at demonstrating the universality of the hiking experience through the eyes and experiences of interesting guests.

Alas! People never just give compliments, do we?

I’ll be honest: I’ve thought about sending you an email ever since Kate decided to go through with her hike in the midst of the pandemic. After a couple of episodes, you addressed your mixed feelings about the segment, and presented your rationale for going forward with it. I felt I’d missed the boat on speaking up; additionally, what’s one small voice? I kept listening, vainly hoping that she’d have the “aha!” moment when she decides to go home. This moment has not, as of your most recent episode, arrived.

Her lack of humility is, quite honestly, upsetting. From the beginning, she seemed aghast that establishments were closing. She spoke snarkily about the ATC, threatening the withdrawal of her membership as well as the membership of her friends. She said at the beginning that she was going to eschew Uber, forgo hitchhiking, and walk to the towns close to the trail; we then heard her astonishment at not being able to get an Uber, and listened to how she finagled a ride with a local. She had a minor altercation with a caretaker in Pennsylvania that ended because she simply refused to obey the rules. It’s impossible now to look at an incident like this, and the accompanying sense of entitlement, and not acknowledge that if she had been a Black woman, that interaction would have ended much differently.

In one episode, she expressed her dismay with the Mohican Outdoor Center for having water off. This is, on the one hand, potentially dangerous. However, the ATC and local organizations have stressed shorter trips and/or self-sufficiency; if a hiker is following the rules, that hiker shouldn’t need the facilities. Additionally, turning on the water after a cold winter and months of being stagnant could require maintenance and (wo)manpower that the organizations may not have right now.

But it is not only her decision to continue hiking despite the ATC’s urgings to stay local. There’s also the flagrant disregard for local rules that actual locals have been obeying. She hiked all the way through New Jersey - how did she camp? New Jersey is still not permitting camping anywhere, shelters or otherwise; it’s the same situation in Massachusetts. I know that in the three northernmost states, non-residents have to self-quarantine for 14 days, or at least get a COVID test. In total, she will either have to spend six weeks in quarantine, or get three COVID tests. Which option will she choose? My guess is neither, that she will continue walking northbound, ignoring the protocols and choosing her comfort over the good of the areas through which she is walking. She will find places to stay and restaurants to eat at because businesses are desperate for income and willing to flout all the rules in order to make July’s rent. She will find people with whom she can commiserate about the overreaction of the ATC because the other people out there are of the same mindset.

I am a native New Yorker currently living in Tarrytown, NY (equidistant from Grand Central and the Appalachian Market!). New York has suffered terribly, with thousands of lives lost and millions of lives altered dramatically due to the virus and its ripple effects. We were lucky in that the governor did not close parks and trails, though local officials were allowed to make closures at their own discretion. I and everyone I know throughout my state have spent the last three months doing the right thing. We stayed close to home. We got creative, and walked in the middle of residential streets because no one was driving. We did boring loops of the same parks over and over and over again, gaining intimate knowledge with marks on trees, watching the growing of plants in spring in real time.

Kate bemoans the fact that people are causing erosion and stepping all over the place. People are stepping off the trail because, while people might be wearing masks in the stores and in closed places, VERY few people on trail, if any, are wearing face coverings. People here are cautious, still traumatized, still scared. Being able to turn the news off is a privilege. Being able to complain about things like widened trails is a privilege. She also complains that there were so many people on Bear Mountain on a Monday, saying something like, "Where did they all come from?" She asked how they even got there. I will tell you who goes to Bear Mountain: Black families. Brown families. People from the Bronx and Yonkers and Newburgh, people who don't have cars. Bear Mountain is one of the few trails accessible by public transit that is currently open, and the people of New York have been cooped up inside, many of them without income, for months.

It's possible that we're only hearing snippets of your conversations with her; perhaps she feels conflicted on a daily basis and we're just not, um, privy to those personal, internal debates. However, you reach a wide audience, many of whom, in absence of respectable government leadership, are looking to media personalities for advice, guidance, and answers. If she is having internal struggles and acknowledging her privilege as she traipses northbound, the show would be enhanced by hearing these struggles. Unfortunately, I do not believe this is the case.

You told her recently that she sounded determined. My question to her is why? I would challenge Kate to ask herself why she is hiking, if the motivations are extrinsic or intrinsic. She was unjustly critical of Anthony's Nose, one of the most epic lookout points in the Hudson Highlands! I know we thru-hikers have this "no blue-blazes" mentality, but that's antithetical to what hiking should be about.

New York is a challenging state to hike in; skipping those glorious views means that one is hiking merely to prove a point. That's what this segment feels like: That she is hiking to prove a point, that grand American point of individuality. Her hike embodies the myth of American individualism that activists are writing about, which is really white American selfishness: It is saying that the needs of the individual and the beliefs/opinions of the individual transcend the facts of science and the needs of the society as a whole.

I won't propose to know your motivations, but perhaps you're airing this segment to prove a point as well: That you're true to your word, that you can have a show that appeals to all listeners regardless of political persuasion, race, gender, ethnicity, or belief system. If I've learned anything from the last month of racial unrest, it's that the outdoors and social justice are inextricably linked, and we as white people can change our minds.

I should add that I am not some armchair traveler who is judging Kate's decision without walking a mile (or hundreds) in her trail runners: When the pandemic began, my boyfriend and I were hiking the Camino del Norte in Spain. We'd saved money for months, and quit our jobs in pursuit of an epic adventure. We were 307 miles in and loving it. But as the virus spread, and we read stories of suffering, it no longer felt right to be gallivanting around. We flew home a week before Spain went into lockdown and headed straight into NY quarantine. Was it sad? Yes. Was it right? Hell yes. (Here's the [blog](#) about it if you're bored).

This is not the only frustrating decision I've made while hiking: I had to skip 26 miles of the White Mountains in 2017 due to weather (I went back, obviously!), had to take a cab from O'Cebreiro to Tricastela on the Camino de Santiago because I got hypothermia, and I ended my LASH of the AZT at the Grand Canyon because that was the only place I could get a ride. I follow some hikers on Instagram, and saw that most called off their hikes this season. Part of taking on the challenge of these outdoor expeditions is that, as they say in the song, you gotta know when to fold 'em.

I'll share what I wrote in response to the [NYTimes article](#) about hikers who chose to keep hiking: "The people who stayed on trail are hiking while the world burns, putting their desires above the well-being not only of trail towns and locals, but the future of the trail as a whole. They are giving the finger to health care professionals and essential workers who make an impossible decision every morning before going to work, falsely championing transcendental

ideals as they post pictures with mocking captions: 'Social distancing at its finest!'" I felt that way a month ago when Times published the article, and I feel that way now.

My request, if you've indeed reached the end of this treatise, is that you reconsider this segment, or at the very least address the privilege Kate wields as she walks through COVID-ravaged states in the middle of a viral pandemic, breaking rules and disregarding the rules of the organization that works tirelessly to keep the trail alive for us.

This letter was not meant to be a diatribe; blame my verbosity on three months of limited social interactions. I very much enjoy your show, and wish you well for the summer and beyond.

Thank you for reading!

Sincerely,

Lily M. Gelfars