

The Earth, Anew

Fundamentals of Geology was the class that I most looked forward to in my first year at UVA. I always had an interest in earth science and I was eager to learn more about this planet we call home. For three days a week, I would sit and listen to lectures on the structure of the Earth and its dynamic changes throughout the history of the universe. I stretched my mind to wrap it around the vastness of time and space, marveling at the thunderous rumbles of tectonic plates crashing into one another and the monstrous explosions of molten hot lava erupting from the depth of the Earth to spill over, creating the landscape anew. I held in my hand sparkling crystals with many facets and learned to identify samples by simply observing them. I saw sedimentary rock piled in layers, an open book revealing the secrets of pasts no living organism remembers only if we know how to read it.

Lectures taught me about the science of the Earth. We looked at pictures and diagrams and videos and discussed what these things are and how they happen. It wasn't until I took a geologic fieldwork course that I truly connected with this material instead of simply learning it. This spring, I piled into vans with 19 other students I barely knew and embarked on a 5 day trip driving all over the Mid-Atlantic region to visit sites of geologic significance. We left Charlottesville in the early morning, warming our hands in the parking lot as we waited for our rapid tests to deem us COVID negative one final time. Our first stop was not too far from the school, in the Shenandoah Valley. The drive over was quiet, filled only by nervous small talk as we learned each other's names and politely got to know one another. We talked about features of the landscape as we drove by and discussed our reasons for taking the class. Some of us were already involved in research with the professors teaching the class and others were first time geologists interested in branching out to a new discipline.

In the Shenandoah Valley, we drove beside the Blue Ridge Mountains, explored the limestone caverns beneath their base, climbed a ridge overlooking the valley, and walked along the curves of the river's famous seven bends. From traversing through the depths of the Earth to

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climbing its peaks to kiss the sky, my cohort of budding geologists had our magical first experience of really seeing what we were learning about firsthand. The energy was electric, chatter exploding as excited students drew from their areas of expertise to add to our collective education. The smell of the caverns was explained through chemical reactions. The shape of the clouds above our heads were discussed with atmospheric physics. The ecology of the river was analyzed with anecdotes from previous fishing trips. For the first time, we were immersed in the reality of what we were trying to understand. We slipped and fell on the glistening smooth stone and dipped our hands in the cold river we were taking notes on. We listened to the flow of the river and the drip drip dripping of stalactites forming above our heads. We saw and heard and smelt and felt and lived what we were learning.

Taking this field trip offered me an understanding of the Earth that I could never achieve in a classroom. As our day drew to a close, we set up camp next to the river and began to prepare our dinner as the sky turned from blue to orange to red as the light faded, leaving us with only our fires and lanterns to see by. Some of us chopped vegetables, some of us tended the pots, and some of us flitted about helping with any other task that arose. We cackled and gabbed with ease, talking about funny moments from the trip so far and panicking over whether or not the orzo was actually cooking. One day walking through the mountains of Virginia easily brought us together from complete strangers to comfortable friends. Connecting with nature involves a deeper relationship with the environment around us as well as our neighbors in it. Under the vast, dark sky in the middle of a sparse field ringed by deep, thick forest, we filled this space with laughter and warmth just by enjoying each other's company.

You need to experience nature to truly understand it. You need to connect with it, to feel the dampness of the soil under your feet and the crispness of the cold morning air stinging your nostrils. You need to feel that sense of community, that we are all citizens of this land, we are fed by it, nourished by it, we rely on the Earth for lives and we must care for it because we are joined

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in an unbreakable bond. We stand on this ground at the mercy of our surroundings, born of this Earth and returned to it in death. Go outside, experience the wild, and be changed for the better.