

## **Digging in the Dirt**

by Madison Christian

My pick-axe sinks deep into the tread of the trail with a satisfying “thunk.” The soil gives ground easily to the blade now that rain has finally fallen. It’s almost dark and I’m alone on the hill. The mountain bikers, hikers, runners, and dog walkers have retreated for the night leaving me with the coyotes and the crescent moon. I take another whack. The ground, heavy with blue clay compacted by a parade of tires, feet, and hooves, splits to reveal the dark, moist soil beneath. A promising sign. That wouldn’t have happened a week ago. Then, impregnable to the steel in my hands, the surface would have simply shattered like broken pottery. That all changed with the rain. Now the earth is malleable. It bends to my will. And to my axe.

Ideally, a trail should have about a 5-10% outslope so that water from above can sheet flow across it. A steeper gradient will cause erosion. The path here slopes considerably more than the optimal because users are walking and riding the outside edge which is now failing. I shave material from the upslope to shore up the collapsing edge and realign the tread to push folks back to center where they belong. As I rearrange the dirt, a late hiker comes by and gingerly crosses the area I’m working. She asks me if I’m repairing the road. I tell her I’m trying. Perplexed, she turns and disappears down the trail and into the night. I finish what I started by tamping down the loose soil with my feet and shovel. Bikers and hikers will do the rest of the compacting for me the next day.

I’m working with some urgency to take advantage of the transient conditions. Aridity has already returned with the sun to steal what little moisture the ground has absorbed. The forecast is bleak. Nothing but warmth and sunshine for the foreseeable future. If conditions don’t change, it won’t be long before the tread returns to concrete. It wasn’t always this way. Water used to regularly drop from the sky during that brief interval between fire season and tick season, between the howling Santa Ana winds

and the springtime explosion of black mustard. During that three-month period, the jet stream would muscle the stubborn high pressure out of the way so that inclement weather could come ashore. Now bad weather is just an occasional curiosity, a nostalgic memory that is being slowly erased by an endless summer. Long days of heat and short days of water. This is the new reality.

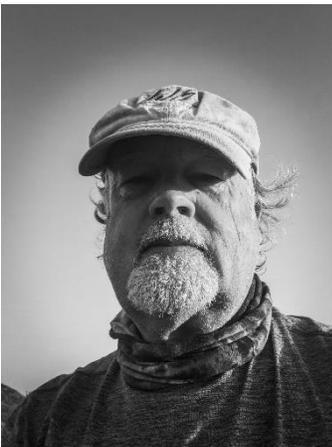
I try to not focus on that depressing fact. It feels good to be in the local hills. Alone in the fading light. Digging in the dirt. Moving rocks. Clearing water bars. All without authorization, sanction, or blessing from the bureaucracy. A guerrilla campaign undertaken to counter governmental indifference and neglect. And if I'm honest, to salve my own conscience. I've been walking this trail four to five times a week for almost two decades. In the summer, when the sun hangs in the sky long into the evening, I'll climb to a sandstone prominence with a can of beer to watch the daylight fizzle on the horizon. During the winter months, I'll skip out of work early to get in a quick romp before the light fails. Or I'll venture out for a stroll in the blackness with a headlamp. That was once an unnerving experience. Now I'm quite comfortable with it.

I've received substantial benefit from all those trips up and down the trail. Something beyond the pure physical. I'm not much of a mystic, but I've experienced the palpable thrum of the universe in these hills. Sometimes the humming is so intense my ears ring. I've had similar experiences on other trails. One time, as my daughter and I were traversing the trail from Cerro Noroeste to Grouse Mountain, we stopped briefly where the path dips to the Puerta Del Suelo. The energy there was almost electric. It was as if we had stumbled upon a vortex where the ley lines intersect. We left some quartz on a log to charge in the sunlight as we continued to the summit of Grouse. On the return, the Om or chi or 'elan vital was still present and so intense that I hesitated to pick up the stones we'd left for fear of burning my hands. These experiences don't occur with any regularity or consistency. They are rare and fleeting, like a flash of clarity. You have it and then it's gone. And the more you strain to regain it, the further it recedes from you. The universe divulges its secrets in drips not buckets.

Aside from the twenty plus years of fun and recreation, that is the gift these trails have bestowed upon me. A glimpse of the unseeable. An understanding that there are phenomena that cannot be understood. The realization that the phrase "there's more to

it than meets the eye” is not just an old saw, but a statement of fact. For all of that, I’m obligated to provide some form of recompense. That is why I’m standing on the side of a steep slope with my pick-axe, shovel, and rake. Restoring the trail, one short segment at a time, is my contribution to the collection plate of the universe.

I’m out of time and out of light. I pack up my things and leave. My flashlight shows the way. On the descent, I make mental notes about other sections of the trail that need attention. There’s a lot of them. The alms dish will overflow with my offerings. Near the bottom, just before the vacant parking lot, a water bar has filled with sediment. It’s become useless. I stop and pull out my axe and shovel to clear it. I can’t help myself. I scrape the debris away and then retrench it. Satisfied, I put my tools down, look up at the starry sky, and hope for rain.



**Madison Christian** is a lawyer by trade. He is a nature activist, beer elitist, outdoor curmudgeon, and dharma-bum wannabe by birth. As a writer, Madison focuses on creative non-fiction, including memoir, personal essay, and travel (or what he likes to call “vagabond”). He dabbles in poetry. Some of his writing is collected on the two blogs he maintains: [wildsouthland](#) and [The Black Sage Journal](#). He lives in Southern California with his wife Kellie where he is at war with Black Mustard and Russian Thistle. You can connect with him on Instagram and Vero @wildsouthland.