

Backpacker

THE MAGAZINE OF WILDERNESS ADVENTURE

MAY 1988 \$2.95

SUMMER BEACHHEADS

A COAST-TO-COAST LOAFER'S HIKING GUIDE

WALKING ON WATER

Analogies to Moses, Pythagoras and Christ lend no technical credibility to the potentially dangerous article, ("Walking on Water" May). As an avid wilderness enthusiast and registered nurse, I must state that fasting while engaged in sustained, rigorous outdoor activity is courting serious metabolic compromise and creating a potentially life-threatening situation. Keep the radical techniques out of the backcountry, where health and safety are not in jeopardy.

Ron Todaro, R.N.
Chardon, OH

Fasting while backpacking has to be the most irresponsible thing I've ever read.

There are two points that must be made. First, there is no objective evidence for any of the claims regarding the effects of fasting on the human body. Second, the body's nutritional requirements are not put on hold while you fast. In the case of protein, the body isn't very particular; either you supply it with foods containing all eight essential amino acids, or it will take what it needs from the internal carbohydrates in the diet. Dangerous levels of ketones can accumulate when your body starts metabolizing stored fat and protein.

Scott G. Newman
Great Falls, VA

The weight loss that occurs as a result of fasting (or starving, since there is no metabolic difference) results primarily from water loss, and loss of protein from the muscles and liver. Fat loss from the body occurs at a maximum rate of about two pounds per week for an average-sized person. This loss of protein and fluid can cause an electrolyte imbalance, with potentially fatal consequences, especially for someone who hikes while the humidity is low and temperatures are high.

None of the substances that author Mark Braunstein suggests eating are good sources of replacement sodium. The fruit juice and spirulina do contain potassium, but it also may be inadequate, depending on the amounts consumed and needed by your body. In addition, if you carried one quart of liquid fruit juice for each day, it would amount to 11 pounds of liquid for a five-day trip—hardly a lightweight pack.

Marjorie McNairn, R.D.
(registered dietitian)
Chico, CA

Mark Braunstein replies:

People throughout history have benefited from fasting, and continue to do so. Mr. Newman is correct that no objective evidence exists regarding the effects of fasting. The documentation comes from the fasters themselves, or from their supervisors. Therefore, the reported benefits are entirely subjective and personal.

Ms. McNairn is correct when she says there's no metabolic difference between fasting and starving. The difference is not in the metabolism, but in the mind. Doubt and worry cause greater harm than any temporary nutritional deficiency, ketones or an electrolyte imbalance. Anyone who observes the article's strong advice to read the books about how and why to fast, and who becomes convinced, will succeed. Anyone unconvinced and worried, should never attempt to fast.



WALKING ON WATER

The delicious possibilities of a food-free hike.

By Mark Mathew Braunstein © Mark M. Braunstein



I confess. I lied to a National Park Ranger.

When my brother and I appeared at the Grand Canyon Backcountry Reservations Office, we were fully equipped for a three-day hike down to the Colorado River and back up to the South Rim. At least on our own terms, we were prepared.

To assure ourselves a trail other than the heavily trodden Bright Angel or Kaibab, we had dutifully applied for a backcountry permit months in advance. With similar planning, we'd prepared our backpacking gear, including everything we could possibly need.

Nevertheless the ranger, in the polite tone of an airline stewardess asking passengers to buckle up, queried us from a short list of items.

"Do you have first aid and snakebite kits?" she recited. I answered yes.

"Compass and signal mirror?" Yes, and yes.

"Water containers for one gallon per person?" Yes again.

"Water purifier or tablets?" Oh yes.

"No campfires allowed," she advised, "so do you have a stove for cooking?" Yes, I said. This time I was lying.

"Food for three days?" Boy did I lie.

The truth is, we weren't going to eat anything much at all. And our fast would last our entire time in the canyon. Water, our two quarts of fruit juice, and a few ounces of spirulina (one of the dried, edible algae) would be more than enough food for us, though the ranger might not have agreed. Had we been honest, she surely would have

denied our permit, probably figuring we would end up as statistics in one of the 200 or so rescues undertaken in the Grand Canyon each year.

We tiptoed away, the permit hanging from my backpack. Tiptoed indeed. Each of our backpacks was 20 pounds lighter than normal. No stove, no pots or pans, no food.

Now that we've returned safely from our "fast" hike (and from several more since then), I offer the long overdue case for "walking on water." And I do so with reckless disregard for whether or not that Ranger reads this.

Fasting is as old as Moses. Pythagoras required his disciples to fast for 40 days before admitting them to his tutelage. Christ supposedly fasted 40 days before he began to preach, and he recom-

mended fasting and prayer as cure-alls. Hippocrates prescribed fasts as remedies. Plutarch advised fasts instead of medicines.

In America, fasting has been promoted by 19th Century health crusaders such as Sylvester Graham—ironically of Graham Cracker fame—and John Harvey Kellogg of corn flake fame. During the 1970s and '80s, both the holistic health movement and quick-weight-loss fads stimulated renewed interest in this ancient technique.

But Hippocrates's modern medical grandchildren have little to say about fasting. "Fasting can be useful in a religious context, as an exercise in self-discipline, or as a means of political expression," says William Jarvis, M.D., of the National Council Against Health Fraud. "But medically, fasting for extended periods has no documented benefits." He admits the evidence either way is scant: "There are very few controlled, systematic studies on the effects of fasting." Traditional medicine has declined to investigate fasting, largely because it purports to benefit not just the body, but also the mind.

Contemporary motivations for fasting range from the silly to the sublime. Many fast to shed the evidence of their insatiable appetites. (The effects are immediate, but temporary.) Others, happy with the size of their body, but not its condition, fast to cleanse themselves. A most beneficial practice, comparable to spring-cleaning or an oil change and tune-up. And convalescents fast to heal themselves, diverting their body's energies from digestion to rejuvenation. Animals, in fact, follow this exact regimen whenever they are sick. Finally, a few fast to achieve mental clarity. As everyone knows, drowsiness faithfully follows a heavy meal. Guess what follows no meal at all?

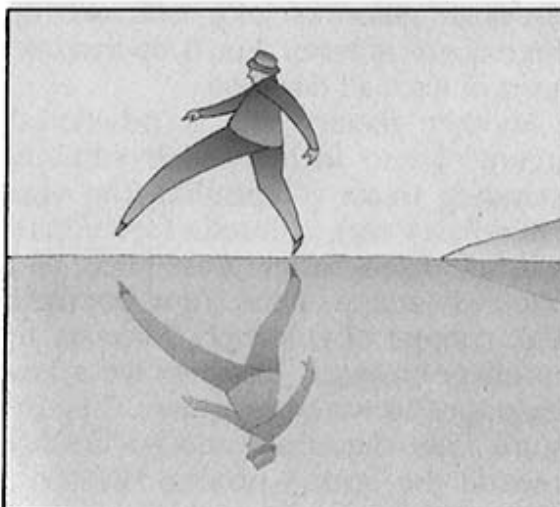
Wilderness campers have even more to gain. They also have much to lose—mostly overstuffed packs and pounds of weight on their backs. On the trail, I prefer contemplating the beauty around me—not the load on my back. So, I travel light. Bottled drinks, dehydrated foods in plastic, freeze-dried foods in foil, even fresh foods in skins and husks, are all superfluous. This reduces not only the excess baggage carried in, but the garbage carried out. You can also cross off the stove, cooking and eating paraphernalia, and cleaning supplies.

While we're on the subject of reduction, don't forget about body weight. Count on losing about two pounds for every day on the fasting trail.

All this goes gloriously beyond the

tenets of minimum-impact camping. Let's call it "no-impact." No littered trails and campsites, because no litter. No fire scars, because no fires. No dishwater pollution, because no dishwater. No time wasted cooking meals and washing dishes, either.

As dusk descended on Monument



Strangers will assume your fast is involuntary. Some hairy creature must have stolen all your food. They will feel sorry for you, and offer their food. This is a dependable way to con others into providing free food, but an uncertain way to fast.

Creek near the bottom of the Grand Canyon during our trip, other campers grew preoccupied with supper, as my brother and I happily explored the path of a dry creekbed. As they struggled to light stoves and boil water, we were rewarded with an incredible sight—a cloud of bats suddenly exited a nearby cave, blackening the sky above our heads. Things like that seem to happen all the time.

More than that, though it might sound like so much airy-fairy new-age hype, fasting also induces a deeper awareness of nature and our own tiny, yet integral role. Let's just say that hiking takes you to the mountaintop. Fasting while hiking takes you one tall step higher.

The faster sees and hears and thinks more crisply than ever before. The voice resonates. The vision sharpens. And the mind clears. While no traditional medical evidence confirms this, the Natural Hygienic Movement, which recently achieved wider recognition through the best-seller *Fit For Life*, has documented this phenomenon for nearly a century among patients in its fasting clinics.

If you're worried about whether you'll be able to climb that mountain on an empty stomach, relax. The veteran faster actually experiences greater, not less, stamina. Visualize what happens when you place a log on a campfire. Before the log begins to burn, it absorbs and depletes the heat of the campfire. Now think of your body as the campfire, and food as that log. When you eat, your body directs its energy to digestion. When you don't, energy instead can be devoted to exercise of the body—and the mind.

The converse, too, is true. Your fast will be enhanced by your hiking. Air and water are the faster's primary nourishment, so their purity is crucial.

Only by putting the horse of experience before the cart of theory can you learn that fasting really is easier than eating. But how to walk on water? First, a warning: You should hike while fasting only if you are an experienced hiker and an experienced faster.

Let's assume you're already an experienced hiker. Step one is to fast at home for two or three days, once a month, for a full year. During the first fasts, you will undergo something called the holistic health healing crisis. And it works like this.

The longest most people stop eating is for eight hours, when they're asleep. If you wake in the morning with gunk in the corners of your eyes, a filmy coating on your tongue, and lousy breath, believers in holistic health say you've already experienced a scaled-down version of the "healing crisis." These morning indignities result from the discharge of the wastes and toxins you accumulated during the course of the previous day.

When you go on your fasts, this process goes into high gear, as your body seizes the opportunity for a much-needed purge. The neophyte faster's healing crisis, then, results from the discharge of everything from last week's Big Mac, to other junk you have carried with you all your life. The experience is rarely pleasant. In fact, you'll feel lousy. But persevere.

Three books to help you over the hump are: Herbert Shelton's *The Sci-*

ence and Fine Art of Fasting, Arnold Ehret's 1922 classic, *Rational Fasting*, and Paul Bragg's *The Miracle of Fasting*.

Once you've gotten past those first few fasts, you're ready to hit the trail. Among the many methods for doing so, all good, is my tried-and-true technique.

Set a goal of fewer miles than you know you can hike, and fewer days than you have ever fasted. You are not Moses on Mt. Sinai. Save the 40-day fast for when your beard reaches your belly. During the strenuous activity of wilderness hiking, a four-day or shorter fast is plenty long enough.

Pay even more attention than usual to the calendar. You will be particularly sensitive to chills, so choose warm seasons. Tucked in there among my many successes, I admit to two climate-caused surrenders. One in Big Bend National Park in March, and one in Acadia National Park in June. Both times, the freezing temperatures broke records, and I broke my fast.

Begin your hike on an empty stomach, and with clean plumbing. Don't indulge yourself as though that sign outside the restaurant at the National Park entrance read: "Last meal for 40 miles." It very well may be, but you certainly won't want to carry that meal around with you. If you gorge and then fast, you force an abrupt change upon your body. Its reaction will be to simply shut down and clog up.

Better to decrease your food intake slowly. On your last day home, eat as many fruits as you wish, but *only* fruits. On the day before you set off from the trailhead, drink only fruit juices, preferably fresh.

The night before your hike, treat yourself to a motel room. Forget about cable TV and waterbeds. Check out, instead, the bathroom. You'll need it when, during the evening, you slowly sip an entire quart of grape, cherry, or prune juice. Next morning, squeeze yourself a quart of fresh orange juice and strain the pulp before slowly sipping. This should inspire one final inspection of the bathroom, and you're on your way.

Strictly speaking, the only *true* fast is a water fast. Consumption of anything in addition to water is really a "mono-food diet." Juice fasting is currently trendy, especially at health spas. The juice supposedly helps dissolve mucus, and aids the cleansing process. For the backpacker, restrained amounts of fruit juice are fine—say, one quart a day.

Drink only pure fruit juice with no added sweeteners. Avoid fruit crystals, frozen concentrates, reconstituted

juices, and the new, foil-packed concentrates. Bottled fruit juices from the health food store may be a luxury, but they're an affordable one, considering all the money you'll be saving on food.

Just before you hit the trail, pour your juice into polyethylene bottles to save weight. Every morning during your hike, before you break camp, dilute your daily, one-quart ration of juice with two or three quarts of water. You'll sip that one quart of juice all day long.

Another dietary aid is powdered greens. These include such yummy-sounding treats as spirulina (an alga that whales eat), chlorella (spirulina's cousin), dried barley grass juice, and dried wheat grass juice. Yum! But their high content of chlorophyll acts as an excellent cleanser. Just dissolve a few teaspoons in water each day. They require little digestion, and so do not impede the fasting process. Esoteric, but so is fasting.

Never talk about your fast with strangers (and least of all with rangers). No matter what you say, they will assume your fast is involuntary. A grizzly or some other hairy creature must have stolen all your food, and you are simply being stoic. They will feel sorry for you, and will offer you their own food. This is a dependable way to con others into providing you with free food, and into hauling it for you, too. But an uncertain way to conduct your voluntary fast.

The most important time of the fast is the "break fast." Fasting properly is easy. Breaking it properly, however, is more difficult. Exercise the same restraint in exiting the fast as you did going in. Retrace your steps. Start with fresh orange juice. Then bottled grape, cherry, or prune juice. Then a day of only fresh, whole fruits—preferably melon, but berries or dates will do. And check in again at that motel.

Once you grant your taste buds a vacation, your other senses will be enhanced. Things normally obscure and unnoticed will be magnified into either very repulsive or very attractive sights, sounds, or smells. After a fast, food tastes better than ever before. Even during the fast, mountain spring water could prove to be the most delicious taste you've ever tried.

From natural fasts, you logically progress to natural foods. From seeking to be in nature, you logically allow only nature to be in you.

But that's another story. ■

Mark Mathew Braunstein is the author of Radical Vegetarianism and a frequent contributor to several holistic health journals.