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FOREVER ON TRAIL

By Cassandra Overby

Lessons from Karen Sykes

I often find myself wondering about the meaning of life. Don't we all, at some point? There comes a time when we simply can't go through the motions—getting up, going to work, coming home, falling asleep and living for the weekend—without wanting something more. But knowing you want more is the easy part. The hard part is discovering what that means. How, exactly, do you go about having a more meaningful life?

An ancient proverb says, "When the student is ready, the teacher appears." And I know no better teacher than Karen Sykes, the beloved and prolific Northwest outdoors writer who introduced thousands to hiking and died earlier this year doing what she loved most. She personified *joie de vivre*; she lived with passion. Many of us were inspired by Karen while she was alive; others will come to find that inspiration only following her untimely passing. Either way, she still has a lot to teach.

Her spiritual home was Monte Cristo, where she first realized the beauty of the outdoors. And though she planted her heart there, she let her feet take her wherever her insatiable curiosity wanted to go.

Love Something Deeply, and Do It Often

Living a life of meaning and passion isn't easy, but Karen made it look that way. There were many things she loved: feral cats, backseat driving, photography and corny jokes. But the depth of her love for her greatest joys—writing and hiking—gave her life meaning.



and in Hearts

Karen was, first and foremost, a writer. Her partner, Bob Morthorst, says it was never something she chose; writing chose her. In her early years, Karen's enthusiasm for language was spent creating tomes of poetry that she published under the name Karen Waring. Eventually, she turned her attention, and talent, to writing about the outdoors.

Karen didn't discover her second great love, hiking, until she was in her 30s and the death of a boyfriend forced her to re-evaluate her path. Some say her demons drove her to the mountains. If

Her enthusiasm for hiking was contagious, and she had a gift for making any place—no matter how mundane—sound appealing.

they did, she left them there. She gave up smoking three packs of cigarettes a day, stopped drinking and started walking—and never looked back. Her spiritual home was Monte Cristo, where she first realized the beauty of the outdoors. And though she planted her heart there, she let her feet take her wherever her insatiable curiosity wanted to go.

Share Your Joy With the World

Karen roamed and wrote for more than 30 years, until her death earlier this year at age 70. But she didn't keep her joy and her writing all to herself. Instead, she shared it with the world. She led hikes for The Mountaineers, teaching hundreds of outdoors enthusiasts how to recreate safely. She was also a virtual trip leader for many others through her descriptive and lyrical trip reports and incredible photos.

Her enthusiasm for hiking was contagious, and she had a gift for making any place—no matter how mundane—sound appealing. So it was no surprise when, in 1996, Karen was offered a Thursday hiking column in the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*. Her column became hugely popular, and for 13 years, many in the Northwest eagerly anticipated her weekly column and excitedly followed her into the mountains. More than a few have Karen to thank for their very first exposure to the outdoors.



“My first backpacking trip took a route described in Karen's *Wildflower Hikes* book, so despite having never met her, I think of her as something of my own hiking godmother.”

— Becky Hutton



Eventually, Karen went on to write two books: *Hidden Hikes in Western Washington* and *Best Wildflower Hikes: Washington*. She was a shy person in a lot of ways, but she loved seeing people on trail with her books and knowing that she sparked them to be a little more curious, walk a little farther and discover a bit more of the wilderness she so loved.

Trust in Your Impact

Karen's life on—and off—trail was one of meaning. But in the end, she didn't comprehend just how much she meant to those around her. According to Morthorst, in the months before her death, she doubted her impact on the world. Part of that stemmed from her disappointment in no longer writing for the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, which cancelled her column when the newspaper went exclusively online in 2009. And Karen didn't have any book projects on the horizon, although she was writing blogs for VisitRainier.com. It was with a mixture of sadness and humor that Karen told WTA's Karen Daubert in May 2013 that it was time for the younger writers to take over. Karen thought herself a thing of the past.

Nothing could have been further from the truth, and it's heartbreaking that Karen never got to see just how impactful—and relevant—she really was. During the search effort near Owyhigh Lakes Trail in Mount Rainier National Park, where Karen's body was eventually found, local hiking forums exploded with kind thoughts, prayers and well-wishes. When Karen's death was announced, the news went viral. Newspapers as far away as Miami and London featured stories about Karen and her life, some with front-page articles. She was all over CNN.

For Morthorst, the response was astonishing. Karen, he says, would have been absolutely shocked. In the end, Karen's life touched more people than she ever met personally. Her impact was more than she could have imagined.

Although we mourn having lost such a friend, mentor and hiking partner, we celebrate having been touched by her tremendous spirit. And we smile for getting to learn from her life. In your own quest for more, I hope you take a piece of Karen with you. I hope you love something deeply, share your joy with the world and trust in your impact. It won't be just your life that's better for it—it will be the world. ♦



“I miss her desperately. Every time I'm on a trail I hear her voice, I smell her scent, I keep looking to see if she's up ahead.”

— Bob Morthorst

Newspapers as far away as Miami and London featured stories about Karen and her life.



“Karen was a fierce and iconic presence in the mountains. So many of us have been the beneficiaries of her drive to share the mountains she loved.”

— Margaret Anne Cashman

For most of her life, Karen hated having her picture taken, even by a friend. That changed when she saw a photo Alan Bauer took of her playing in the sand at White Bluffs and looking like a happy little girl. To Karen, the photo captured her essence. And from that day onward—and for the past 12 to 13 years—she never cared if Alan photographed her. “She always had that certain smile when knowing I was taking her picture,” he says.

Photos by Alan Bauer