

Many times there are several paths that can be taken to arrive at the same goal. We have verified this at times during some of our wilderness adventures. One particular trip reminds me of a complex diagram used in particle physics (Feynman diagram) for multiple interactions. As a group, we actually travelled multiple paths!

We started out driving to the motel in Gatlinburg, TN, that had been reserved as our launching point. As we were arriving late in the evening, the key was to be left out for us. Naturally, we couldn't find it and had to find another place to spend the night. It was a great start for the trip.

The next morning, we drove to the trailhead and donned our gear. It wasn't much gear, as this was to be a two-day death-march with only fanny packs and what we could load in and on them. Warning: danger ahead!

The first part of the trip was great as we climbed Snowbird Mountain. Then storm-clouds began to gather. Along with the clouds came thunder and lightning so close that it seemed to shake the ground. The rain was very unpleasant as well. By this point in our hike, we had naturally bunched into two groups of relatively similar hiking speeds.

My group was pretty worried about the danger of a lightning strike, and found shelter in an aircraft VFR station high up on the mountain. We got our little plastic emergency ponchos out and tried to huddle up in the shelter of the building. We were concerned about whether or not the other half of our group was able to find a way to protect themselves. From time to time we seemed to hear voices, but my friend David boldly proclaimed that it was only the output of the radio equipment inside the building. So we waited and worried a while longer, and when the storm finally let up, we found that the other group had been huddling on the other side of the same building! We had been so close to each other, without realizing it even though we could actually hear them! We were very relieved to be reunited.

We trudged on, and finally stopped for our camp for the night at a place called Brown's Gap. We stretched out our hammocks between trees and put our ponchos on a string about a foot above the hammocks. Brilliant, huh?

Until another storm came, that is. Late in the night the rain drenched us and not even the poncho roof had any effect. In fact, rain came down the strings above us and dripped on us like Chinese water torture!

I was cold and wet and wide-awake. When the storm passed I tried to go to sleep, but I finally gave up and got the fire going again. Eventually, everyone got up as well to dry out. David got too close to the fire and performed a wild dance when his poncho began to burn! But we had a great night of fellowship as we stayed up the rest of the night. Some thought what I did was sort of heroic, but the truth is I did it for myself (the others just benefitted).

The next morning we were pretty tired. Those who had lesser hiking experience decided to take the forest service road back to civilization and hitchhike to Hot Springs, NC, where our friend Jerry was to pick us up. Three of us who had been on all of the previous death-marches went on the trail as originally planned. We left camp within a few minutes of each other going our separate ways.

Group one somehow made it to a rest stop near I-40. Then they paid a pick-up truck driver to take them into town. One of their number was slightly injured as the truck took off before he was fully in the bed, but it wasn't serious.

Group two followed the Appalachian Trail to Hot Springs. The views (especially overlooking the French Broad River as we hiked the switchbacks down to the town) were truly magnificent! It was well worth the effort.

We arrived at our destination, in spite of the differing paths, within 15 minutes of each other after travelling for about 10 hours. That was amazing. Then we had to wait for a while for Jerry, who it turned out was waiting at the other end of the trail (on the other side of Hot Springs). We have never let him forget that, but in truth the entire trip was unforgettable.

Is there a lesson to be learned from this? Probably not. But perhaps there is a parallel to the different emphases that we have with our religious beliefs and interpretations. We may find ourselves in the same "place" even though we have approached it with different methods. And there was the fellowship factor as we shared difficulties and struggled to choose the right paths

for ourselves. We found that the struggle was not necessarily bad – it molded our perspective such that we had a better view of everything.

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