

Being: A Hiking Guide through Life

Philippe Erhard

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Nature has great healing power for people at odds with their existence on earth. Its vast complexity brings an appreciation of life that calms even the most harried among us.

A hike through the Vosges Mountains in Alsace, France, serves as backdrop for Philippe Erhard's *Being: A Hiking Guide through Life*. Fictional characters Michael and Paul discuss how to achieve mindful living while hiking through those picturesque mountains. The friends, who grew up exploring the area together, are still fit, but aware of their advancing years. Michael has lived his adult years abroad and recently left a stressful career, with vague plans to create a more satisfactory life. In contrast, Paul lived his entire life in the region and has already retired to pursue an interest in psychology.

During their week together, they discuss the importance of maintaining physical health while cultivating qualities such as awareness of the present moment and gratitude for life's small gifts. Written in present tense and from Michael's point of view, the discussions are balanced with situations the two men encounter while hiking. Each short chapter begins with an inspirational quote and ends with aphorisms and practices the author suggests to reinforce ideas covered in the chapter.

Erhard intersperses the friends' dialogue with descriptive scenes of the mountains and valleys they traverse. These passages provide relief from the intensity of their psychological sparring but fall short of showing details that reveal a true sense of place. Instead, he summarizes, "We can see villages down in the valley to the north" and, "Toward the south, the fog hides the valley." A lack of information about the region's history and customs leave readers unfamiliar with it, yearning for more.

One morning Michael wakes early and goes outside to experience the day's beginning while "practicing awareness," as Paul has suggested. This quiet time then cuts abruptly to Paul savoring breakfast in the hotel dining room while telling Michael about the benefits of gratitude. Other unclear transitions similarly interrupt narrative continuity.

Although Michael and Paul represent different levels of psychological maturity, their on-page personalities lack much additional delineation of character. They converse in similar speech patterns, resulting in dialogue that lacks the verisimilitude of two reunited friends engaged in physical exercise as they ponder the meaning of existence.

The author succeeds in presenting readers with sound ideas about changing old habits of behavior that prevent them from living more meaningful lives. Some attempts at levity miss the mark, as in "What do you mean, Michael, by finding yourself. [sic] You mean you got lost?" Marring the text are errors in punctuation around quoted material, inconsistent spelling of words, missing letters, and nondescriptive clichés, such as "the view is amazing" and "surrounded by beauty and flowers."

While Erhard's message does not differ appreciably from that of other self-help books, his book uniquely combines practical ideas for achieving personal growth with an account of two old friends hiking through awe-inspiring nature. His formula for finding peace and contentment in life merits the attention of people interested in achieving that goal.

MARGARET CULLISON (April 9, 2013)

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