

Mount Washington

WHEN MONROE COUPER and Erik Lattey left Harvard Cabin in Huntington Ravine, the weather was not bad, considering that they were on Mount Washington. The temperature was in the teens, and the wind gusts ranged from forty to sixty miles an hour on the summit. The weather was forecast to hold, and since they didn't plan to go to the summit, they weren't worried. They were going to climb a frozen waterfall known as Pinnacle Gully and be back at the cabin before dark. They decided to travel light and leave their larger overnight packs at the cabin.

Climbing magazine had recently published an article about an ascent of Pinnacle Gully, an exciting story of triumph over adversity, which had attracted a lot of climbers to that route. No one knows if Couper and Lattey had read it, but they were enthusiastic novice ice climbers and well may have. The story worried Mountain Rescue Service volunteers who felt that it might encourage people to push on beyond their abilities. Couper and Lattey thought of Pinnacle as an easy climb, a natural next step after the guided trips and climbs the two had completed during previous seasons. They were wrong.

While the two men were hiking up the broad and rugged trail toward Pinnacle, Alain Comeau, a leader with Mountain Rescue Service and a local guide, was taking a group up another trail. He saw fast-moving clouds on the horizon. As he said later, "I've been in the worst weather on Mount Washington." He knew how bad it could be. He started his group back down to seek shelter. Bill Aughton, director of search and rescue at the Appalachian Mountain Club, was also guiding that day. He was so impressed that he photographed the weather before turning his group around.

Comeau had guided Monroe Couper and had taught him ice climbing. "He'd had a bit of experience before that," Comeau told me. "He wanted to

learn to lead. He wanted to move off on his own. But the Pinnacle was not the right next step. It's a serious climb in a serious environment. A lot of people aspire to a climb like that. Technically he could have done it, maybe, on a good day in perfect conditions. But Pinnacle is a vertical ice climb and very technical. On a scale of one to five, this is a three plus. They had all brand-new gear, too, which tells you something."

As Couper and Lattey reached the base of the gully, they realized that in their rush to get started, they had forgotten their climbing rope. It was noon by the time they'd returned to Harvard Cabin, retrieved the rope, and left again to make the strenuous hike for the third time. After that, they would have been tired and therefore much more vulnerable to hypothermia. "They definitely would have been sweaty when they started," Comeau said. "And in this environment, it's essential to stay dry."

They could have easily calculated that they no longer had the time to make the climb and descend before dark. They could have seen the weather moving in, as Comeau had. They could have recognized that leaving your rope behind is a sign of mental impairment. And even if all that evidence didn't deter them, they could have read the big yellow signs posted at the trailheads. They say, "Stop." Then in smaller letters, "The area ahead has the worst weather in America." Not some of the worst, but *the worst*. General Electric tested early turbojet engines on top of Mount Washington because of that. The notice continues unequivocally: "Many have died there from exposure, even in the summer. Turn back now if the weather is bad."

Even without the posted warning signs, they could have looked up to see what Comeau and Aughton saw.

Couper and Lattey pressed on.

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The mythology is that anyone can get up Mount Washington, if not to ski, then at least to stand on top and look around. Every year, many people do. But a beautiful day on Mount Washington can turn bitter so fast that most people can't imagine it. They've never seen or felt anything like it, so they don't have that true belief we get from direct experience. Like falling into icy water, it shocks and numbs and defeats people before they have a chance to think clearly. The first person to climb Mount Washington in winter conditions was also the first person to die there. In October 1849, Frederick Strickland, an English gentleman bent on experiencing the outdoors, began his climb.

Ill-informed and ill-prepared, he succumbed to hypothermia, ripped off his clothes, and died short of the summit. Scores of people have died there. But death is only one measure of the hazards. For every body that comes back, dozens more have been injured or have suffered needlessly and have had to be rescued. As on Everest, some dead climbers have never been brought back.

Recently, I hiked up Tuckerman Ravine Trail on the first beautiful warm day of spring to see some of the half-million people who visit there each year. As I slogged up the steep, slippery slush in a dense forest of birch and pine richly floored with blowdown and the damage from ice storms, I was never out of sight of at least a dozen people on the switchbacks. The sun was warm, casting a cathedral light through the trees. I saw octogenarians in long johns and six-year-olds in high-tech, expedition-weight summit gear. There were snowshoes and no shoes and serious-looking people with ice-climbing gear. Everyone was grinning, joking, saying hi to strangers. It seemed utterly unreal that a day like this could turn nightmarish in a whiteout blizzard within a matter of minutes.

After studying accidents for decades, I had come to Tuckerman Ravine with a question in mind: How do smart, capable, even well-prepared people—people such as Monroe Couper, 40, and Erik Lattey, 28—make seemingly stupid mistakes and end up in such serious trouble? There are many happy places with dark secrets—from the beaches of southern Lake Michigan with their deadly rip currents, to Longs Peak in Colorado with its grand slippery slide that sucks people in. And when it comes to death and suffering, those places have one thing in common: people—even experienced people—underestimate the hazards and overestimate their ability to cope with them.

Located within a day's drive of nearly a quarter of the nation's population, Mount Washington is what modern-day search and rescue volunteers call "instant wilderness." (The Potomac River is another such place of high hazard and seemingly bland complexion within easy reach of millions.) We travel from the relatively safe environments of cities and suburbs, where our mistakes are generously forgiven, and we may bring with us the careless ways we've learned there. Worse still, we travel to these danger zones and have a benign experience of them (such as my experience on Mount Washington on that beautiful sunny day). And that gives us a false sense of security and a misplaced confidence.

Mount Washington, the highest peak in the Presidential Range, is only 6,288 feet high. Most people don't take it seriously. "Climbers from out west like to say that they have to dig to get to six thousand feet," Rick Wilcox told me.

He is co-owner of International Mountain Equipment and one of the founders of the specialized Mountain Rescue Service.

Rick Estes, who conceived and headed that service, says, "People come here and say, 'I've climbed K2. I've climbed Annapurna. How bad can Washington be?'"

Three major storm tracks converge on the top of Mount Washington. The jet stream runs across the summit, while the cold Labrador Current and the warm Gulf Stream meet off the coast. A local weather observer told me that this weather system is called "the exhaust pipe" of the continent.

The average wind speed on Mount Washington is 44 miles an hour in winter and 26 miles an hour in summer. Averages can be deceptive. A typical average wind speed in the lowlands is 4 to 8 miles an hour. Corrected for altitude, the wind on Mount Washington is about fifteen times stronger. Winds with the velocity of a hurricane occur on the summit two out of three days from November to April and three out of four days in January, the windiest month.

Wind itself is a deceptive force. A hurricane is defined by a wind going 73 miles an hour or more. But a wind of 100 miles an hour exerts twice the force of that. It's not linear. Nicholas Howe, an authority on accidents in the Presidential Range, wrote in his book, *Not Without Peril*, about one night when the pen went off the recording chart at 162 miles an hour: "Facing the wind made it difficult to exhale, back to the wind made it difficult to get a breath in. Strictly speaking, it was physics, but it felt like drowning in an ocean of air."

Unlike conditions in the lower elevations, where the coldest days are the calmest, Mount Washington's lowest temperatures occur along with its highest winds. Charles F. Brooks of the Mount Washington Observatory wrote, "Temperatures of 30 below zero coupled with winds in excess of 100 mph are not uncommon."

In May alone, 20 to 30 inches of snow can fall. On the summit, 250 inches of snow fall each year on average. But most of the snow that people encounter is blown to lower elevations by the wind. Nothing stays on top for long. "An inch on the summit equals a foot in the ravines," Wilcox says. At times you can see the snow boiling off the summit from miles away. It settles on the eastern side of the mountain. "There is no other mountain that has the same loading on the eastern slopes."

And yet, if Mount Washington is more extreme than other danger zones, it's not entirely exceptional, either. The fact is, most people do not die or even get seriously injured when visiting Mount Washington or other popular places

where obvious hazards exist. I make a distinction between hazard and danger. Danger comes when you suspend your awareness of the hazard and refuse to change your plan.

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Wet and tired before they began, Couper and Lattey struggled from the start. At Pinnacle Gully, other climbers watched the two move at an agonizingly slow pace up the first pitch of a mere 150 feet.

“They should have taken a couple of hours on that at most,” Wilcox told me, “but it took them close to four hours.” That should have made it obvious to Couper and Lattey that it was time to quit. “A simple rappel down to the bottom—two ice screws worth maybe fifty bucks each—what’s your life worth?” Wilcox asked. “They would have come back another day.”

But by then hypothermia would have had a chance to set in, as each man had to take a turn standing still in the cold to belay the other in sweaty, inadequate clothing. Whatever water they hadn’t drunk would certainly have been frozen .

“If you look at the etiology of a lot of these accidents, you find that they are due to dehydration,” says Maury McKinney, who is Wilcox’s partner at International Mountain Sports and a member of the Mountain Rescue Service. The dehydration sets in motion a physical and mental deterioration that will eventually result in death from exposure. Add exhaustion, and the downward spiral is that much more rapid.

At the top of the first pitch, they faced another five hundred feet of climbing on similar ice. The normal turnaround time is three o’clock at the latest, but Couper and Lattey were seen there, hanging on the wall and not making good progress, at five in the evening.

“The last climbers to pass them were around three thirty-ish,” Wilcox said, “and they were still a good distance from the top of the gully, maybe halfway up with four hundred feet to go. Daylight ends at four thirty or five here at that time of year. Couper and Lattey had asked the group that passed them if they’d wait at the top and show them the way down, a walk-off route.” But as it grew dark, the group couldn’t wait any longer.

Reaching the top, Couper and Lattey found themselves on an exposed slab, in darkness, with temperatures that were rapidly dropping toward minus twenty-five and winds rising to gusts of 108 miles an hour. Comeau said,

“There’s no real way down once you get to the top. You’re really exposed for a mile of horrendous travel across the Alpine Garden.”

At the same time, the other climbers had made it down to Harvard Cabin and began noticing the two packs. No one in the cabin knew whom the packs belonged to. Searchers around town on this Saturday night began to hear their beepers go off.

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In any hazardous situation, there are three zones: the safe zone, the danger zone, and the dead zone. By leaving the safety of the cabin and hiking up Huntington Ravine, Couper and Lattey had passed from relative safety into the danger zone out on the ice. Because of hypothermia, dehydration, and exhaustion, they were unable to process new information. “Their judgment was failing as they got deeper and deeper into trouble,” said Wilcox. They had one way out, and they could no longer think clearly enough to take it.

That is the heart of the mystery of why rational people do irrational things: they were no longer making decisions. Their mistakes were all behind them, stretching back for months. Their fate was purely physical by then. Their bodies were simply going up the wall of ice without the aid of reason, following an outdated plan toward an imagined idea of rest and safety that no longer existed.

“It’s the repeats that get to you,” Wilcox said. We sat talking in his cluttered office at International Mountain Sports, which lies in the shadow of Mount Washington in North Conway, New Hampshire. Wilcox and McKinney can outfit and train you for anything from a day hike to an Everest expedition. (Wilcox made it up Everest himself, while McKinney climbed K2). Since 1972, Wilcox has been on more than five hundred rescue operations. After seeing the same accidents over and over again for thirty years, he said in frustration, “What am I going to do? I sell this stuff to them.”

One accident repeatedly occurs on the Lion’s Head Trail, the standard hiking route to the summit. It’s not technical, but it is snowy. Crampons are a good idea. Up to a hundred people climb it every weekend, and at least one person a month breaks a leg. It’s the same every time.

Lion’s Head Trail follows a high ridge from east to west on the north head-wall of Tuckerman Ravine. Going up it is straightforward but strenuous and rocky. Going down is slick and tricky. It can also be exhausting, and exhaustion always impairs judgment. Just before the trail begins to drop off the ridge back to Tuckerman Ravine Trail, it borders a long, wide, creamy-looking chute of

snow that doesn't appear to be too steep. White on white is deceptive. At that point, you're well below the summit, and if you're not tired, you're a cardiovascular giant. You're probably at least a little dehydrated, too, further impairing your judgment. Your body desperately wants to stop walking downhill. And your body almost always gets what it wants. That's why people see this spot and think: I've got a great idea. I'll slide down. Glissading is a conventional mountaineering technique, but like self-arrest, it takes training and a keen eye for conditions. It also requires removing your crampons.

In seconds, you can get to going thirty miles an hour or so, a frighteningly dangerous speed when you're on your butt on a high ridge. Fear adds more stress, which confounds good judgment. With clear thinking completely out of the picture, reflex will take over, and you'll put your feet down to stop yourself. With or without crampons, your own momentum will flip you, and then you'll go cartwheeling a very long way indeed. If you're lucky, this will merely snap one or more of your leg bones. In the pack room in the basement of the Appalachian Mountain Club, a traditional meeting place, I had noticed numerous young people walking around with leg braces on. Now I knew why. Some aren't so lucky as to be walking around in braces. "After a rain, we get fatalities on that route," Wilcox noted.

McKinney had been listening to our conversation. He poked his head into the office and said, "Yeah, if you want gear, go up to the bottom of Lion's Head Trail Monday morning. Lion's Head is definitely the scene of the most accidents."

"What we need is education, respect, and common sense," Wilcox said. He pointed out the window to Cathedral Ledge, which offers great rock-climbing from easy to advanced. He said he could predict the accidents there like clockwork. In fact, some of them are the work of clocks.

"When they change the clocks in the fall, it starts getting dark at five," he explained. And every year several people do the same thing. They start climbing with their heads in the old time, get benighted on top, and decide they can tough it out, because when they began it was sixty-five or seventy degrees. They make it to nine or ten o'clock, when it gets down to about thirty degrees, and start yelling for help—that's how close to civilization they are. The base is a fifty-yard walk from a hotel parking lot. "It's only three hundred feet, two rappels. But we have to go up and get them." He threw his hands up in the air and shouted, "Can't you see the sun going down?"

The top of Cathedral Ledge is in the town of Bartlett, but the bottom is in the town of Conway, and one day when someone fell off and died, the police

got into an argument over who had to clean up the mess. One of them finally shouted in frustration, “Well, he was fine when he left Bartlett!”

Climbers do notice the dark coming on, of course. But it is difficult to believe how quickly and efficiently stress can short-circuit rational thought and allow your body to take over and simply keep you moving in the wrong direction. Like Couper and Lattey, they may know the right thing to do in an intellectual sense. But reason becomes a small, far-off voice, while their bodies tell them that if only they finish the climb, they’ll be fine. Rest and hot chocolate lie ahead. Keep going.

Wilcox said Couper and Lattey “had this incredible failure to change their plans, this do-or-die attitude, even after spending four or five hours on the first pitch—and that’s after the debacle of leaving the rope behind.” But it’s more subtle than that. The word “attitude” implies thinking. They were done thinking. They were effectively zombies.

Our fate is fashioned out of more than simple mistakes. However stupid our actions may seem to others after the fact, no one sets out to be stupid. In fact, everything we do makes sense to us at the time in terms of the sum total of what we have learned. And that learning takes place in the body, beyond the reach of consciousness. Couper and Lattey’s biggest mistake was never having experienced the worst weather on Mount Washington. By the time they did, it was too late to learn.

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We know what happened to Couper and Lattey when they reached the top. Long years of experience have shown that people follow a pattern of behavior shaped by physiology, psychology, terrain, and natural forces. “People won’t walk into the wind when they’re lost in a whiteout,” Wilcox says. “They arrived there after dark. Now they’re faced with no visibility, wind over a hundred miles an hour right in their faces from the direction they should be going, and they decided to hunker down below the lip, where it’s sheltered.”

We can safely speculate that they thought of the tents and sleeping bags and clothing they could have brought with them. Rick Estes agreed. “Rule number one, especially on Huntington, is that you should always be prepared to spend the night out.”

By dawn on Sunday morning, there were thirty-three high-angle rescue climbers, including Comeau and Wilcox, at the base of Huntington Ravine. As they began working their way up, the wind reached 127 miles an hour. Soon

everyone was back down in the trees. They couldn't work safely in those conditions, which have been known to freeze eyeballs.

"The accident happened on Saturday," Comeau told me, "and it wasn't until Tuesday that we got to them. The wind stays for days here. People always think that if something happens, someone will come along. But we don't always come along."

Monday morning the wind reached 128 miles an hour with temperatures down to minus fifteen degrees. Comeau, Wilcox, and the other searchers had to crawl on their bellies to keep from being blown off the mountain, which would have meant falling two thousand feet. Wilcox surmised that Couper and Lattey had started to spend the night together as early as five o'clock. Lattey had decided to go for help but was turned back by weather and terrain. He was crawling back up when he died.

It was Comeau who found Monroe Couper. He was frozen, leaning up against a cairn with his hands reaching into his pack, as if trying to get his stove to make something hot to drink. With all the wind, it took Comeau some time to realize that Erik Lattey lay close by. His face was in the rocks, his arms reaching up toward Couper. "They were ten feet apart," Wilcox recalls. They were also only a quarter mile from an auto road and a way down. They had no map or compass.

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Most of our actions, most decisions about what to do next, take place without conscious thought. Joseph LeDoux, a neuroscientist famous for his research into how the emotional system works to generate behavior, has concluded that for the most part, we do things and then make up stories to explain what we've done so that it seems consistent with our view of who we are and what our lives are like. That sounds ridiculous if we think of ourselves as fundamentally rational creatures. But brain research dating back to the early 1970s is leading inexorably to that conclusion. So-called implicit learning or emotional learning is more powerful than conscious intellectual learning because it drives behavior. It is all the more powerful as a motivator of behavior because it is unconscious. We make decisions based on it all the time. Part of the proof for this is that people who have suffered damage in the areas of the brain that mediate emotional learning can't make decisions at all.

LeDoux writes, "In modern life, we sometimes suffer from the exquisite operations of this system, since it is difficult to get rid of this kind of

conditioning once it is no longer applicable to our lives.” That is why having a lovely experience in a place that can turn horrible may set a trap for us by shaping the way we unconsciously make decisions. It’s like winning on your first visit to the casino. It will forever after seem like an attractive place, whereas in reality, you are certain to lose.

In other words, we have developed an adaptation to one environment, and we fail to take into account the fact that some environments—such as the seas and mountains and canyons and stock markets of the world—are subject to huge and sudden changes. At the same time, we give too much credit to our intellect and overestimate its power over the real learning we possess, which is buried within us: the emotional learning that resides in the body.

Many other scientists (such as Michael Gazzaniga, John Krakauer, and Antonio Damasio) are involved in related research. This new research has far-reaching implications, especially regarding hazardous environments. It suggests that conscious, rational, stepwise thought is not the giant we take it to be. It is instead a ghostly companion to our bodily behavior, only vaguely and imperfectly guiding it. Under stress or in high emotional states, it becomes a faint echo that is all too easy to ignore.

Certainly, the mind’s ability to plan ahead is a useful and efficient tool. But in that very utility is a trap. We have to be able to continuously review plans in the light of new developments. We have to remain flexible.

Wilcox notes that he lives in the shadow of Mount Washington. Any day that the weather is nice, he can get up there in a short time, hike or ice climb, and “be home for beer call,” as he put it. Thinking about Couper and Lattey and numerous others whose bodies he’s retrieved, he adds, “They’ve been planning this for months. To them, it’s the big trip, a once in a lifetime thing. Like Everest was for me.”

Once the plan has become unshakable, it’s easy to ignore new information or to unconsciously interpret it as favorable to that plan. For example, instead of interpreting “iffy weather” as meaning that it might be bad, you’ll interpret it as “It’ll probably be okay.” Making matters worse, Couper and Lattey underestimated the severity of the cold they faced. Their lack of equipment (no down parkas, mittens, or tent) testifies to the fact that they had not experienced such extreme weather, had not had that crucial opportunity to let the body learn. Monroe Couper was a smart guy. A composer, he was also an associate professor of music at Kingsborough Community College in Brooklyn. But an inflexible plan—which had developed through stress, bodily innocence, and a

few miscalculations—left him and Lattey vulnerable in an environment where everything they'd learned was wrong. They were operating in an imagined world that no longer existed.

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Before I left Mount Washington, I sat in the lobby of the rundown Eastern Slope Inn in North Conway with Rick Estes, recently retired from the rescue service. Estes was a powerfully built man with the brush-cut moustache of a previous generation of outdoorsmen. He had the philosophical demeanor of someone who'd spent way too many years watching way too many people hurt themselves in the same predictable and avoidable ways.

Despite all the efforts, from public relations to legal remedies, the same accidents continue to happen year after year. "We had so many in 2000, I don't remember them all," Estes said. "We were running out of funds. Thanksgiving Day we ran out of volunteers. There were just horrendous cases."

The Falling Waters Trail leads up from Franconia Notch State Park to the summit of Little Haystack Mountain. The gradient is steep, and the drop-off from the trail is a long one. A favorite viewpoint is at a place called Shining Rock, a two-hundred-foot granite ledge kept wet and slippery by springs coming out of the forest. Estes recalled for me a guy and his girlfriend who were hiking up during that bad year. The girl got tired and decided to go back down, while the guy continued on up, taking his camcorder so he could show her what she'd missed. "He beat her down," Estes said. "We picked up his brain in a bread bag, which was all we had with us."

Estes watched the tape from the shattered video camera. It showed the man's feet on the green wet slime that covered the rock from which he'd slipped. Then: nothing.

The forest is littered with such stories, and most of them lead us back to simple principles. Estes and most others I talked to believe that as a nation, we have made ourselves less self-reliant by creating what he calls "magic wands," such as GPS and cell phones. But everything in our culture, from warning labels on McDonald's cups that coffee is hot to personal injury lawsuits, encourages us to hand over responsibility to someone else. In his novel *1984*, George Orwell called it "protective stupidity."

"You usually find people with brand-new packs and a stove that's never been started," Estes said. "They call and say something like 'I'm lost, but I can

hear the cars.' What do you say to someone like that?" Estes had recently retired from the Fish and Game Department, which oversees search and rescue activities. He sighed, thinking over his career.

As long as there are moody places in this world, beaches and mountains and canyons and forests that can go from paradise to hell in minutes, there will be people lost and hurt and killed in them. In the larger system that puts millions out there each year—a complex system that arose from the availability of transportation, the inducements of advertising and hype, the money that allowed people to get there, and the proximity of people—there's no way to stop the accidents from happening. But we can stop them from happening to us.