

A CLOSE CALL REVISITED | By Stephen S. Murray '81

After surviving a close call, one danger still remains: a false sense of security. “Hey,” we think to ourselves, “I lived through that. It must be O.K.!” Sometimes we need to revisit our close calls, because their lessons can change as we grow.

One of the pivotal experiences of my adolescence was just such a close call: a November camping trip in New Hampshire’s White Mountains that I took with seven other Exeter students. At the time, I didn’t fully grasp how lucky we were, but the group of us could have lost our lives.

We made the trip as part of an Outward Bound-style program called Outdoor Challenge, which students could take in lieu of sports and which had been introduced at Exeter several years before by Peter Greer '58, a member of the English department and an experienced outdoorsman. I still have the hand-typed list given to us when we were chosen for the program: Henry Bonner '82, Pam Chu '81, Michael Hobbs '81, Jeff Kimball '81, Jennifer Meares '82, Stacy Randell '82, Margot Schwartz '81 and I made up Group A, one of two sections of Outdoor Challenge that fall term, and English teacher Morse Hamilton was our group adviser. After weeks of canoeing, orienteering, rock climbing, camping, trust exercises and general stumbling around in the woods, laughing most of the time, we were ready for our camping trip, a “solo” expedition in the White Mountains that we would take without our adviser.

On a steel-gray, bitter cold, late-November Saturday, Morse Hamilton drove us to a trailhead at the foot of the Presidential Range. After reviewing our planned route from Mount Jefferson to Mount Madison and agreeing where we would meet the following afternoon, he bid us farewell and we set out. While beautiful on sunny days, the Presidential Range is prone to volatile shifts in weather that can strike with devastating consequences. Some of the worst weather in North America has been recorded on these peaks, the first substantial mountains encountered by storm patterns that come roaring out of the Arctic. Given the forbidding weather, we certainly could have turned back, but I don’t recall considering that option. We had experienced a number of challenges together, and the resulting closeness of the group contributed to a confident, almost intrepid feeling. The gusting wind and ponderous clouds hardly made us pause.

After several hours on the trail, we stopped to camp just below the peak of Mount Jefferson. By now the wind was so bad that even with dry wood

and stove fuel, we could neither make a fire nor light a stove. We had no tents, and trying to pitch a tarp was impossible, we found, given the force of the wind. We finally lashed two tarps down flat on the ground, one on top of the other, to make an envelope. Piling our packs around the edges, we crawled in between and spent the night huddled together against the howling storm, eating peanut butter sandwiches.

The next morning we arose, breaking the ice that was caked on the tarp. In wet clothes, amid driving snow and intermittent freezing rain, we set out to follow the ridge line that would take us from Mount Jefferson, over Mount Adams, and on to Madison. Hiking on the Gulfside trail through heavy snow and strong winds, it took us nine hours to complete what in better weather might have taken no more than three, and we still had to hike down the north side of Madison.

Soaked to the skin and completely exhausted, we spent the final eight hours descending one of the steepest trails I have ever been on. Nearly vertical, the trail would have been a challenge even on a dry day, but now it was icy. Night had fallen, and between the eight of us we had just a single working flashlight. And so with arms linked, a couple of feet at a time, we painstakingly inched and slid down the trail, aware that a twisted ankle or broken bone would mean additional hours of exposure to the driving rain and the numbing cold.

At the time, we actually laughed at our predicament. We were a close-knit group of friends who had prepared well. Faced with an outdoor challenge far greater than we had anticipated, we hung together. We sang songs, we told dirty jokes, we kept our spirits up. On the trail we joked incessantly about symptoms of hypothermia, the remedy for which, we had learned, was to remove one’s clothing and share a sleeping bag with a friend. While we never actually had to resort to that, we did get creative when the feet of one group member grew numb, making it difficult for her to walk. We removed her sodden boots and wool socks, and took turns holding her feet against our bare stomachs to provide some relief.

After 17 straight hours of hiking, we finally stumbled out of the woods and onto a back-country road sometime after 1 a.m. This was well before cell phones, so we had to keep hiking until we came to an all-night gas station that had a pay phone. Someone fished out a dime, and we called the ranger station using the emergency *(continued on page 106)*



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Beckjord '47 remarked that "his bark was worse than his bite." There are many stories of his kindness and sensitivity to the boys in his charge. He took a special liking to boys who came from small-town high schools from far away, boys who were not used to the kind of academic rigor that Exeter had to offer and may well have had only modest ability. He worked long hours to tutor these students and to help them improve their writing.

When an already homesick Franklin Bennett '53 discovered that his new pen and pencil set, a birthday present from his parents, had been stolen, it was the last straw for him. He approached Darcy to tell him that he wanted to leave the Academy and return home. Darcy listened to him intently, then asked him to change into comfortable clothes and come back to his apartment. When he returned, the student found two other boys in Darcy's living room. Darcy and his wife, Carrie, took the three boys out to the ocean for a walk along the beach and then for ice cream. Aware of the student's financial concerns and the importance of the missing pen and pencil set, Darcy offered to keep the student's allowance in his own apartment for safekeeping from that point forward. In a follow-up letter to the boy's parents, Darcy wrote, "Some misbegotten bastard stole your son's pen and pencil set."

In another letter, written to the parents of Ramsey MacMullen '46 in December, 1945, Darcy wrote, "This A [that your son earned in my course] represents, I think a certain flair for my subject, but also very distinct & tangible effort. He is to be congratulated. You must feel pride in hav-

ing so talented a son. I hope that he has a good vacation and that your own holiday will be happier for your having him again at home with you."

Darcy corresponded with some of his former students for over two decades. He wrote about why he had chosen teaching as a profession, and why Exeter was a great school. To D.W. Coates '49, he commented, "No money, no buildings, no system is a substitute for devotion [to teaching]." He described teaching to Tim Coggeshall '40 as "a vocation, or way of life—not a way to earn a living. Nobody ever gets rich at it. A teacher in a place like Exeter must really like [adolescents]—their voices, their lack of consideration for him, their everlasting need of the tight rein. If there is anything on earth more exasperating yet more lovable [than students] I don't know what it is. A teacher must live a teacher's life: and often his life seems quite hostile to family life. It is hard work. Like a fireman, a teacher is always on duty." Darcy also warned Coates, "Don't fall into the current mania of ascribing too much to teachers. They are craftsman, not miracle workers, and no man was ever a good teacher unless he had good pupils."

What do you think? Was my mentor right? Has the essence of what makes a great teacher and adviser remained the same despite the passage of the years? Are teachers today the same as they were 60 years ago? Or, on the contrary, have teachers and Exeter changed a great deal? I don't think you can really answer these questions unless you have the opportunity to step back and see the school through the eyes of the students and teachers who were here before us. ●

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number Mr. Hamilton had given us. He arrived with the rangers not long after, and he cried as he hugged us. I have a fuzzy memory of sitting in the ranger station wrapped in a blanket, drinking Campbell's tomato soup. The next morning, we piled in the van and headed back to Exeter—where, we learned, we had been given a standing ovation at morning assembly when it was announced that we had made it out of the woods.

As a young adult, this experience became one of the cornerstones of my confidence, giving me a sense of near-invincibility. "If I had the strength and steadiness to make it off that mountain," I concluded, "I can weather just about any crisis in life." For many years, I relied on the self-assurance I gained from that experience.

Twenty years later, now a teacher and school administrator myself, I happened to run into Peter Greer at a conference on school leadership. As we reminisced, I reminded him of that fateful trip to the White Mountains. He was silent for a moment, and then confessed that he had often thought about the trip. He was, he said, certain that our closeness as a group had enabled us to accomplish things that would have seemed impossible back in Exeter—one of the fundamental goals of the Outdoor Challenge program. But, he added, he sometimes wondered whether sending us on such a challenging climb without adults had been the wrong choice, even an irresponsible one.

I laughed and told him how much the trip had meant to me. But as I reflected, it dawned on me for the first time how utterly

vulnerable we had been. My sense of invincibility suddenly seemed brash and foolhardy. We had been lucky, I realized, just very lucky. Sure, we had shown grit and determination and strong teamwork, and these qualities had helped a great deal. But it suddenly felt naïve to conclude that because I had made it across one slippery tightrope, I could simply and easily beat the risks inherent in other situations.

As a dean of students in a boarding school for many years, I had seen adolescents take the most foolhardy risks. ("Relax, Mr. Murray, we had it fully under control. We called a cab and took him to the hospital as soon as he passed out.") I had cautioned students endlessly about risky behaviors and the false sense of security that can come from "surviving" a crisis. And yet here I was, unable for years to see that I, too, had simply been lucky.

So what do we make of our close calls? What do we learn from them? Acquiring life's lessons is a tricky business. Experience can be a great teacher, and it can lead to a certain confidence, but there are traps—the wiser conclusion may be less obvious and may take some searching. In this case, I learned, many years later, to re-examine my assumptions from time to time, because what once were certainties can change with time and perspective. ●

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