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Walter Daniels
Ed Goodell
Wednesday Hikers

In response to one aspect of Walter Daniels' post of May 22, "*what we may learn from the tragic accident*", I think that a short background history of the Wednesday group would be a beginning that I believe would have met with Nick's approval:

In 1966 three Westchester friends began hiking together. By the time I was invited into the small group of perhaps eight Nick was already one of that group, as was Alan Melniker. At the time, the only surviving member of the original trio, Jake Abel, was still with us and hiking regularly. He was about the most powerful lumberjack who could wrestle bulls yet produce the most sensitive and refined art, photography, and wooden inlay. His is a story all its own for another time. Jake's take on hiking whenever we went off trail was, in a stentorian decided German accent, "With so many beautiful trails, why do we have to bushwhack?" But we did and he did.

In the early days one came to the Wednesday group by invitation only. I had been doing some Adirondack winter peaks with Henry Young, then just retired as president of the ADK, when he invited me to join. It was a time when one member of the group who had "a thing" about women, objected to the admission of women. Some may remember Walter, now also gone, whose nay saying was ignored by the small group as Betty Newman was invited in. He withdrew just before Lila and Kate Peyser were asked to join. I liked Walt as a hiking partner, but believe me, I loved Lila and am still fond of Kate.

All this was well before 1980, the year that the bear tick of Colonial days, now called the deer tick, came back into the woods from which it had been ostracized by generations of farmland, that now had again returned to woodland. As I type this I have a photo on the wall of the Wednesday group bushwhacking up Paradise Rock with Nick, wearing the same knapsack he carried probably since infancy, off to the left. We were all dressed for early summer with no concern for ticks we did not even know about and probably cared less.

For an informal group that it was, the Wednesday Group nonetheless had some rules: Meet at 10:00 AM. Lunch at 12:00 sharp. Pick a leader for the following Wednesday.

There was always a "sweep," to bring up the rear even when the group was only six or eight. The English and Welsh call the sweep the "Whipping-in boy" for obvious shepherding reasons. The meeting was *not* conditioned on weather. (I can recall one Wednesday when we had to abandon our car in Sloatsburg because of flooding and walk to Lake Sebago to meet the people from Westchester and Nick from Queens to start the hike. I have a photo that I cannot immediately retrieve of our group, with Nick and his wife Virginia, everyone sitting on logs in the steady downpour seemingly enjoying our lunch.)

One informal but important rule was that the leader would scout the hike before Wednesday. It was expected that the leader would always know the route of the Wednesday hike. The only problem with this was that sometimes the weather did not understand about scouting and the Wednesday hike might be in ice when the scouting had been in sunshine, an entirely different hike. Hikes were longer years ago and it was not uncommon to get out of the woods in the dark in the winter. I can recall one nine-mile winter hike that Dotty Kinaman led when she was in her late seventies. When we came out of the woods our cars were buried under snow and a thick layer of ice. That was a soluble problem, but what do you do about the road? That brings me to another inviolate rule: We did not leave the parking lot until everybody was known to be out of the woods, nobody drove off until everybody did. I am reminded of the time Nick, perhaps the most agile, capable and kindest person to be in the woods with, failed to show up. Nick loved to admire the quietude of nature and this time he admired nature just a bit too long. When Nick did not emerge after a respectable period of time Henry Young, flashlight in hand, went back to look for Nick. I am sure you know the rest. Nick came out and, after waiting a respectable length of time again, Nick and I went back in to look for Henry. By this time, of course, it was past late dusk well into dark.

That incident brings me to another standard rule in the group that had no rules: we always carried flashlights that worked.

As the group grew and one group member would ask another hiker-friend to join the group, the informality persisted. I cannot recall any, not a single, dispute - ever. There were differences of opinion, of course: Should the leader outline the proposed hike the week before, or should he outline it before starting out on the day of the hike, or not at all? Not getting into the pros-and-cons, Nick and I never resolved our different takes on this issue, but so what? We hiked anyhow in warm friendship. Trail-time political differences never ended in disputes, as we understood that the others' irrational political viewpoint had nothing to do with hiking. As we aged and collected various infirmities, very few hiking related, some of us aged more rapidly than others. Nick was seemingly ageless with an unspoken credo of helpfulness; it was helpfulness, of course, that turned out to be Nick's Shakespearean fatal "flaw" as he went back down to help others achieve safety.

The group grew and now, at well over 100, no one person knows everyone in the group. While that changes the character of the Wednesday group it has also increased the opportunity for conviviality. But it also presents a greater responsibility for its members

to look out for each other, to make certain that everyone is aware of the hiking level he or she may anticipate in each hike, to know where everyone is in the woods and on getting out and home safely. The Wednesday group has been sub-grouping into levels of activity, taking into account the length of time and difficulty of the hikes, the fast and slow, the all-day and the part-day. That is unique and valuable in the hiking community.

In my hiking years I made close friends who are no longer here, and I have missed every one of my friends with whom I have formed bonds extending beyond hiking. Most recently Hal Cohen's death left a large void. We expect death from illness in life, but Nick's death seems doubly tragic because, on the surface at least, it seems more preventable. Yet, was it really? That is the question Walt Daniels asked, could we learn, and prevent such tragedy again? Paradoxically, Nick's death was perhaps less preventable than that of some of my hiking friends who died of what we call "natural causes," where environmental circumstances induced their adverse effects gradually.

Rocks give way. I first saw this dramatically (again with June Slade) when a huge boulder high up in Shingle Gully at the Ice Caves in the Gunks picked this particular moment in history to roll down and cover, like the lid of a sarcophagus, a terrified young woman as she fell between boulders that had come to rest in the gully perhaps 10,000 years ago. After many anxious and tedious hours of rescue work she emerged from what we all thought surely was her coffin. When I took off her pack and checked for internal injuries I saw that the Hershey bar was pulverized to pure powder. But, except for a few bruises, there were no internal injuries. A month ago, as I drove away from the parking area outside the gate to Greenbrook Nature Sanctuary I saw a chunk of the Palisades come tumbling down, all on its own. Nick did the right thing in using the rock as he did. But who can know the vicissitudes of nature?

Last Wednesday's accident happened off trail. Does that mean bushwhacking should be avoided as Jake Abel, now many years ago, would have it? Like Jake, I maintain that I would decidedly prefer to see hikes that are lead for groups be designed for trails without *planned* bushwhacks, but there are times when bushwhacking is absolutely unavoidable. That is how June Slade and Lila and I once found ourselves accidentally on the West Point firing range. We were so lost that I dreamed for a map of West Point I obviously did not have. It seemed as if my wish reached Valhalla; the gods Thor or Odin were dispatched to help us before the Romans could send Mars to our aid. Right there on the ground and at my feet I saw a map some future five-star general dropped in his haste for lunch. (I still have that map; I was afraid, during the height of the Cold War, to turn it in for fear of being suspected as a Communist. June can verify that adventure, our necklaces of 50 caliber bandoliers and all).

Aside from inattention while hiking on the trail and then going astray (who, me?), we have a situation with disappearing trail markings - trees come down with their blazings or snow covers markers. I can recall winters in the Adirondacks where one habitually looks for the markers at your feet, not ten feet up, and having to judge if a slight depression in the snow-covered ground is, indeed, the trail when the snow is seasonally super-deep in drifts. Lately, too, there has been a fair amount of vandalizing of markers by neighbors

hostile to hikers and, specifically in Schunemunk, We once caught a hunter where hunting was not legal, taking down a trail marker. We did not argue with his rifle and later reported his license plate at the trailhead

Nick would have my head if I suggested banning bushwhacking. Besides, one can't ban something that cannot be avoided unless one bans hiking altogether.

What can be done to avoid similar tragedies to that which befell Nick and Dan O'Rourke and Gunvar Satrai? Less than one may think. There are techniques in safety taught in climbing schools and Nick observed the cardinal one, that you don't grab onto "vegetable holds," bushes and trees, but depend for support on rocks, the anchors to earth. What makes last Wednesday's events such a tragedy is precisely that nothing was done wrong. Even when things are done correctly terrible things can still happen because there is a very finite limit to what we can do to control our destiny.

I can make a few suggestions for increasing hiking safety but not as a consequence of last Wednesday. Whatever suggestions I can make, and I can think of a few, pale against this: The greatest risk is not the hike itself but the ride home. I know with absolute certainty that I am not the only hiker who has ever fallen asleep at the wheel coming home from a hike. The fatigue, even after an easy hike, the road rhythm, the sun, whatever else blows the sandman's sand into our eyes, gets to us. We can doze off for an instant, and that's all it takes, one lousy yawn. As I write this, this Memorial Day weekend, there will be 250 highway fatalities in our country. As a group we have been very fortunate, but our good luck will not continue unless we take a very serious look at this issue. Caffeine and other stimulants may perk us up getting into the car but closer to home the rebound effect could make us even more vulnerable to zonking. I see the ride home as more threatening to safety than all the ticks, rattlers, and trail obstacles.

We can honor Nick's memory no better way than to take an oath of Caution, to carry on his creed of helpfulness, and assess risk probabilities realistically without undue and irrational alarm. I recall the wisdom of Henry Young, a dear friend of Nick's as well as mine. He always knew how long it would take to get off the mountain or out of the woods from wherever he was. He always paid attention to the winds and the sky for changes in the weather. The hills will be there tomorrow, he would say. Nick would, too.

I will always carry some of Nick's philosophy and love of Nature with me so long as I have the capacity to remember.

Sincerely,

Joachim Oppenheimer

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