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# Flying with Icarus

*A Sunday afternoon church hike takes an unexpected turn*

**Douglass Teschner**



The dangers of life are infinite, and among them is safety.

—Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

PLANNING MOUNTAIN ADVENTURES, HOWEVER SMALL, I USUALLY have a pretty clear idea of how things will turn out. But the word *adventure* implies that there is a certain unpredictability and risk, which is, after all, part of the attraction of going into the mountains. Still, I wasn't expecting too much of an adventure on a simple Sunday afternoon church hike.

I used to lead after-church hikes on the small mountains near our New Hampshire home when our sons were small, but I had not done this for several years. I had worked overseas after the boys grew up, but last year I was back home, suggested a church hike, and the response was positive. It would be a 5-mile round-trip walk up Blueberry Mountain, a nice little peak that has become more popular since landing on the “52 with a View” list of mountains, first devised by the Over the Hill Hikers group.

When the day came, I was disappointed that, despite the perfect early June weather, turnout was slim. At coffee hour after church, only Don, an energetic 81-year-old ski buddy, said he would go. But then Sam, a kind, 71-year-old man my wife and I have known for years, announced that he was hiking, too. Sam lives with some disabilities associated with a long-ago accident. Before I had much time to react, he left for his nearby assisted-living home to get his boots.

I phoned Sam's home, and the staff member told me it was OK if Sam went on the hike. Sam came back soon with his boots; he had no pack or food or extra clothes. I emptied my pack to show that I had plenty of clothes and water, plus a first-aid kit and headlamp. Sam objected to adding cookies left over from coffee hour, saying he wanted to lose weight, but I won him over by explaining that it is always a good idea to have extra food in the mountains.

After the short drive, the three of us began walking up the U.S. Forest Service North-South Road, where I had cross-country skied just a few weeks before. Usually in summer, you can drive the first 0.7 mile to the Blueberry Mountain trailhead, but a big storm the previous summer had left washouts;

*The 2,622-foot Blueberry Mountain may be an easy hike by some athletes' standards, but for Sam, its short, steep ledges pushed him hard.* DOUGLASS TESCHNER

the road was gated at a bridge over the beautiful stream where the Appalachian Trail crosses en route to Mount Moosilauke.

Soon after 1 P.M., I led off, up the closed road at what seemed like the slowest possible pace, until Don spoke from behind, suggesting I go even slower. Sam was taking occasional standing rests, and I proposed that he try to set a pace he could sustain without stopping. I internally calculated that it was unlikely we would reach the top, but at least these two men would have a first-time experience of hiking a White Mountain trail. What I failed to anticipate was Sam's determination.

When we reached the actual trailhead, I took a photo of the pair with the trail sign announcing 1.7 miles to the top. I have done this easy hike, a 15-minute drive from my home, dozens of times. In my younger days, I once reached the top in less than 28 minutes, although, at age 68, I am slower—especially on the downhill, with knees crying for replacement. On my own, I usually do this hike now in 2 hours or so round-trip. The AMC *White Mountain Guide* “book time” is 1:25 one way, and I had figured about 3 to 4 hours round-trip for this day, including the extra 1.4 miles along the washed-out road.

The three of us continued on, but Sam stopped frequently. He would sit on a rock or a log, or sometimes just stand in place for a couple of minutes, but he always expressed a desire to keep going. After some experimenting, it seemed to work best if I was in front. Don became somewhat frustrated at the slow pace, at one point suggesting he could go ahead, leaving Sam to wait behind. I didn't say anything but was not at all enthusiastic about splitting the group. Anyway, Sam gave no indication, despite the pace and a couple of falls, that he wanted to stop or turn around, and fortunately Don dropped the idea of going ahead.

As the trail transitioned from hardwoods to spruce-fir halfway up, we passed two couples descending. I heard Sam behind me talking to them about his age. We came to the first rock slab and Sam persisted, never complaining, soon passing the spot I call “fish rock.” At one of my favorite spots on the trail, we sat next to a cairn with southern views toward Mount Cardigan through the trees. We had been going for 2 hours and, over cookies and water, I told them I estimated it would take another 45 minutes to the top. Sam said he wanted to keep going.

The 2,622-foot Blueberry Mountain may be an easy hike by White Mountain standards, but the next section had some short, steeper ledges. At several spots, I offered a hand from above, but Sam only accepted once,

wanting to do as much as possible himself. The easier, semi-open ledges in the upper section are glorious, with unusual red pine and spectacular views east of nearby Moosilauke. Eventually we reached the short side trail to the summit and finally the top; it was 4 P.M., three hours since leaving Don's car.

After cookies, water, and fruit, we began the descent. I got a cell signal, rare up there, and left a message for my wife that we were proceeding down slowly. I suggested she call Don's wife and Sam's home to let them know we would be late.

I was hoping for a bit quicker pace on descent, but it became apparent that Sam was tiring and struggling with balance. Most of the way down, he held my hand, and we proceeded at about the same slow pace as the ascent. At 1.3 miles from the top and 0.4 mile from the forest service road (and 1.1 miles from our car at the gate), things took a turn for the worse. Sam's legs gave out, and I asked Don, who had been quietly following behind, to assist. Holding Sam on each side, our threesome made slow progress with frequent rests that I insisted be kept short. Given that this was a church hike, I probably should have said a prayer, but being so focused on the task at hand, I confess I didn't think of it. I just tried to stay positive and offer encouragement, much the same as back in March 1983 when another hiker and I helped an injured man down off Mount Washington.<sup>1</sup>

I was confident we would get down before dark but knew, if things got worse, I could send Don out to call for a litter carry. As rescues go, it would have been an easy one—if embarrassing for me, as trip leader. In my younger days, I had done some litter carries and had also had a few close calls of my own on some challenging rock climbs and mountaineering routes, although none required rescue.<sup>2</sup> I am an advocate of the Doug Mayer self-sufficiency school of rescue, which means taking full responsibility for yourself and your team to the greatest extent possible.<sup>3</sup>

Reaching the forest service road, Don suggested he go ahead for the last half-mile to try to break the gate lock and bring his car closer. But downed trees blocked the road and, anyway, I felt we were making adequate progress.

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<sup>1</sup> An account of this incident, "Like Hay in the Wind," appeared in *Appalachia* Summer 1984, 45 no. 1, and was featured in the anthology *No Limits but the Sky* (AMC Books, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> See the author's "Running the Rope Out" in *Appalachia* Summer/Fall 2010, 41 no. 2.

<sup>3</sup> In an epic self-rescue, which he recounted in *Appalachia* December 1990, 48 no. 2, and in the 2014 AMC anthology *No Limits but the Sky*, Mayer extricated himself unaided after breaking his leg in winter on New Hampshire's Valley Way, near Watson Path.



Without Don on one side, I wouldn't have been able to keep Sam moving at all, so I insisted we stay together. At the last rest stop before reaching the car, Sam sprawled out on the ground on his back, eyes closed, totally exhausted. When I asked how he was doing, Sam replied, "I am fine lying here." Soon we had him back on his feet and reached the car about 8 P.M., after a seven-hour outing.

Once inside Don's SUV, Sam seemed to quickly revive, expressing satisfaction that he had done the hike. Passing a large truck, he launched into an energetic monologue about his brother once driving a similar vehicle. When we got to his residential care home, Sam quickly exited on his own and, to our surprise, walked unaided inside, where the relieved owner escorted him straight to the dinner table.

An hour or so later, the owner called to report that Sam was playing a board game and was "like a kid on Christmas morning," recounting the day's adventure. Two days later, I visited Sam, who reported he was feeling much better, if still sore. He said he was glad he had done it and told a story of doing horse logging when he was a teenager. I gave him a small album of photos taken on the hike, and he smiled, flipping the pages. The next Sunday, Sam announced at church he was disappointed there hadn't been more people on the hike!

In recalling the day, I thought of the Greek myth of Icarus. Icarus was having such a great time up in the sky until he flew too close to sun and the wax on his feathers melted, and he fell to his death in the sea. Climbing mountains is like flying: We get out there, we love it, we can't get enough, we want others to enjoy it, too, and sometimes we downplay the risks.

I thought of extreme situations, such as in 1996, when guide Rob Hall took his client Doug Hansen up Mount Everest so late in the day, or 2015, when Kate Matrosova persisted through dangerously cold weather up New Hampshire's Mount Adams, in the Presidential Range of the White Mountains.<sup>4</sup> Those three flew much too close to the sun and died as a result. Not that I would compare a summer hike on Blueberry Mountain to Everest or the Presidentials in winter. No one was going to die on little Blueberry that day, barring something like a heart attack—admittedly possible with three

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<sup>4</sup> See the excellent risk management analysis in Ty Gagne's 2017 classic, *Where You'll Find Me: Risk, Decisions, and the Last Climb of Kate Matrosova* (TMC Books, 2017). See also Sandy Stott's stories, "Too Cold," *Appalachia* Winter/Spring 2016, and "Looking for Kate," *Appalachia* Summer/Fall 2016 (67 nos. 1 and 2).



*Douglass Teschner has climbed Blueberry more times than he can count, giving hikers young, old, weak, and strong the opportunity to discover it at their own paces.*

COURTESY OF DOUGLASS TESCHNER

guys ages 68 to 81. But we were surely overextended, flying close to the sun. As trip leader, that was my responsibility. I could have told Sam he shouldn't come on the hike. I could have compromised by turning the group back at some point below the top. Some days after the hike, Don suggested it was my enthusiasm for the mountains that had kept Sam going, although I didn't see it quite that way. I thought of myself as more of a facilitator for someone who had set a goal for himself and persisted, despite challenges that would have convinced just about anyone else to quit.

Sam was so determined to keep going, like Doug Hansen on Everest, so I played Rob Hall and acquiesced, although I clearly failed to anticipate the challenging descent. In the end, we were lucky things came out OK. The wax softened but didn't melt.

Reaching a summit, of course, is arbitrary but gives a certain meaning to an experience: setting a goal and achieving it. I am left wondering how Sam might have felt if I had denied him the opportunity to come, or if we had turned back sooner. I shared this story with one mountain veteran who wrote, "Clearly Sam had no business being atop Blueberry Mountain, and that's exactly where he needed to be. Those of us inclined to go up mountains do want others to have their chance, too, even if it means opening them to some risks they don't understand."

Right after we had dropped Sam at his home, Don had chewed me out pretty well, saying I shouldn't have let Sam come at all or at least turned us back earlier. It is hard to argue against that viewpoint, and I would be carrying a heavy burden if anything serious had happened to my friend Sam. Caution and safety are very worthy, of course, but sometimes a little danger is, too—at least when you get away with it.

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DOUGLASS TESCHNER has published many adventures in this journal over the past five decades, most recently "Africa Mountain Journal: 1971–2015" in Winter/Spring 2017 and "The Last Gift" in Summer/Fall 2018. Doug is a leadership trainer and coach and can be reached at [dteschner@growingleadershipllc.com](mailto:dteschner@growingleadershipllc.com).