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The Long Way Home: Straight Up

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Straight Up

FIVE YEARS AGO, I FAILED TO SAVE A MAN'S LIFE. IT WAS A BEAUTIFUL morning. Sunlight cast splotchy shadows onto the rock highway of Tuckerman Ravine Trail. I always expect crowds on Mount Washington, but the long line of trudgers surprised me. I meditated on the rocks, but this was no time for solitude.

A man walking nearby with his son said, "Hi—we heard you talk last night," and we chatted about the subject of that talk, "Straight Up," on why trails in the Northeast's most jaw-dropping range tend to blast straight up mountains rather than follow the kind of switchbacks known in the West. Tuckerman Ravine Trail qualifies as one of those straight-up routes.

I was on my way to the Alpine Garden, just below the summit. I'd never seen that section of the mountain before and looked forward to walking near the tiny-leaved plants, even though their flowers had already come and gone for the year.

Then, around one of the big curves about two miles from the trailhead, we came upon a commotion. Someone was shouting, and three men crowded around a figure lying in the trail. I saw black sneakers, white socks, knees and calves, tan shorts, motionless. One of the helpers who identified himself as a nursing student had pulled out an EpiPen. He was counting loudly, pounding on the still man's chest while a friend blew air into the his mouth. (This was five years ago, just around the time cardiopulmonary resuscitation practices were changing to chest compressions only.) "Does anyone know CPR?" he called. I said I did.

I supposed I still knew it. I suddenly thought of a movie I'd seen in my CPR class, in which one of the people saving a victim was using techniques learned decades before. The film told us we would never forget.

I leaned close to this stranger. My face hovered inches above his clean white T-shirt over his slight potbelly, his round clean-shaven face, and his dark hair with the fewest bits of gray. I took my turn pushing on his chest. I found myself falling into the rhythm of a desperate lifesaving act with three or four or five men and women I'd never met until then. We tried to push life

back into him. I could not tell if he was responding or if I was just hoping I saw color in the man's face and movement in his chest.

Our group of a half dozen people rotated work: first compressions, then blowing into his mouth, then resting. Men and women of all ages stopped and helped for a while. The nursing student fashioned a mouth guard from a latex glove. I spent many minutes blowing hard past that latex. The air went in, but it seemed to do nothing for him. We knew the odds were small he would survive. We didn't think. We just pumped and blew as minutes stretched into an hour. He did not move.

We all walk along in life carrying burdens, most of them of our own invention, looking for meaning. I'd gone out there that morning hoping to connect with the essential me, as I always do on mountains. Now this urgent business occupied my entire mind. Saving Mr. M., whose identity I would not learn until later. A man whose teenage daughter, I soon realized, sat nearby on a rock waiting as we did our work. Whose other daughter I'd passed while chatting with the father and son. She had been running downhill against the tide of climbers.

A caretaker from Hermit Lake Shelters came running down toward us, hauling a defibrillator on his back. One of the lessons I remembered from my long-ago CPR training was that, in the backcountry, you keep going with the compressions until someone with more training tells you to stop. We stood by for three or more rounds while the caretaker tried to jump-start life. And then we resumed. He called the hospital, turned his back to us. When he came back over, he told us we had done our best. We had tried but we must stop now.

I couldn't leave just yet. A few of the hikers had sat with his daughter during the ordeal. I stepped over to her. I sat down. I tried to tell her we had done everything we could. She stared off into the shade. I realized I should move away out of respect.

We dispersed. Some hiked up. I went the half-mile to Hermit Lake, paused at the fence, looked up at the rock bowl below Washington, then headed down. This was not a day for the Alpine Garden. A few days later, I posted a condolence letter on the funeral home's website, introducing myself as one of the hikers who had tried to save him.

Mr. M.'s sister emailed. "Can you tell me any more about what happened?" she asked. We were going to try a phone call, but she realized that would be overwhelming, so I wrote some details. Tried to explain what one of

the nurses who stopped to help told me: that he had likely felt no pain. His last thought might simply have been that he was on Mount Washington on a stunningly gorgeous August morning with daughters at his side and wife waiting below. Several days later, a small card with flowers in its corners came in the mail. The sister had hand-written her thanks. She obviously was grateful for the few details I could share.

SUDDEN DEATH AT AGE 57 A FEW MILES FROM A ROAD. HE WAS A YEAR younger than I am now. One might say that had he not chosen the biggest mountain in New Hampshire, he might not have collapsed. Can we know that? He could have collapsed almost anywhere. How and when people die can be the result of choices—or not. How we live determines (somewhat) the quality and length of our days. But no one can be complacent. One June afternoon I suffered heart palpitations and dizziness on a small mountain I had tried to run up after work. Later I found myself on a cardiologist's treadmill, resting my hand on the nurse's shoulder as she took my blood pressure. "You're fine," the doctor said. I had let myself get dehydrated, which is an error someone like me should know not to make. I could have collapsed. I thought of Mr. M.

Even now, I wrestle with what happened that day, five years ago. I learned something about myself: I had not hesitated to help. Until then, I hadn't known whether I had the nerve, but all of us are capable of things we aren't sure we can do. The team we made there on the rocky incline worked in harmonious purpose. We did not know each other's names and would never learn them. But we did know each other briefly during that moment of doing what we must do.

—Christine Woodside
Editor-in-Chief