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Mountain Chatter

Can one escape gabbing on Welch-Dickey?

Elissa Ely



Here one might think high thoughts.

—A. P. Coleman, *The Canadian Rockies: New and Old Trails* (Unwin, 1884)

I WENT WALKING IN THE LATE FALL. THE PLAN WAS TO GATHER VISTAS I could visit in my mind's eye through another dire winter. The Welch-Dickey loop, near Thornton, New Hampshire, is not a quiet trail, but for some reason, I had hopes of quietude.

It was the middle of the week, and there were only a few cars in the lot: probably a couple of route runners with dogs. Three men were climbing out of an orange Mustang—itsself the color of a fall flame—that had a USMC bumper sticker. While I filled out a fee envelope for \$3, they slapped their pockets. One wore shorts and had a tattoo on his calf that somehow spun when he walked. He came over, still slapping.

—*Pardon me, miss. Got change for a five?*

—*Sorry*, I said. I thought about suggesting they donate the whole five dollars to this worthy mountain cause. Then I thought, they're Marines. They've donated already.

They were cheerful talkers, these Marines.

—*4.4 miles. That's one way, right?* one said.

—*My wife should be here*, said another.

—*Don't mind us, miss*, the third said. *We just like to gab.*

The gabbing receded. It grew quiet. I started gathering my views. That's why I had come.

On the first ledge, a young couple bent over a map.

—*Is this the Welch, of Welch-Dickey?* the man asked, as if he were seeking a formal introduction.

I said no it wasn't, not yet.

They took a few photos then wandered in half-moons until they found the trail, buried off to the right. Ten minutes later, I came on them again, sitting on another ledge, looking at the map.

—*Glorious day*, the same young man said, as if we hadn't met yet.

—*Certainly*, I said.

Perhaps on their way to overhearing new recipes from other hikers, Ryan Smith and Todd Harris hike the Welch-Dickey loop at dusk. JENNIFER SMITH

Welch-Dickey is beautifully brief. It took next to no time to get to the top, where there were only circling hawks, who make noise but do not talk. I stopped to put some gloves on, then saw an older man vaulting up the rock stairs from the other direction: white-haired, white-whiskered, elegant. He looked like an antelope, except for the spandex.

I started to pass, but he spoke before I could.

—*I'd planned to go up Mount Washington this morning*, he said, as if we were already in the middle of the conversation—*but the reports said it was all socked in. I've been thinking about gun control. Every presidential candidate should insist on wage equity and gun equity—every man, woman, and child should be given a gun as part of his platform.*

—*Ah*, I said. It was hard to know if he was joking, since this was New Hampshire.

—*If you roll out of bed in the morning on your own power, it's a good day*, he said, and sprinted away.

Right before the long views from Dickey Mountain disappear into forest, there is a fin I always sit on. It's a chance to glance out the window one last time before shutting it. I'm very fond of that vista and was looking forward to squirreling away the nut of an image. I headed toward it.

Two older women, walking heavily and without trekking poles, came up behind me. They wore fluorescent vests—fully alert to the hazards of hunters—and were talking loudly, very loudly.

—*The sweet potatoes. I boil them. I don't believe in canned*, said one.

—*But how do you peel them?*

—*Like a banana*. There was triumph in her voice. *Just like a banana. That skin comes right off.*

I hurried ahead. Fifteen minutes later, I sat by my window, took out water, an egg, an apple. There was wind, there were trees, there was quiet.

—*Parsnips are trickier*, said a voice behind me. *But I've got a no-fail method.*

—*Hey, should we take a break?* her friend asked.

They sat down a few feet away.

A little gall was rising; it's one of the sacred fluids. Enough was enough. Didn't they know there are rules? Hiking is like entering a theater—you turn off the phone, and when the lights go down, you stop whispering. The place goes silent. It's part of the social contract.

Were they ever going to stop talking?

Years ago, I read a psychiatric paper. It described waiting for therapy to begin. New therapists are eager—beside themselves, really—to dig deep into the patient's history and grapple with muddy emotion. They yearn to get to the soul of the matter. But often, that never happens. Instead, little irritants and secondary crises intervene. There's been an argument with a neighbor, or the husband has been a jerk again. These are impediments, but trivial ones, and the student therapist waits for them to settle so the real job can begin. Yet somehow, they never settle.

The author argued it was for good reason. These impediments were not impediments. They *were* the therapy. The soul of a matter is how we deal with neighbors and husbands; it's nothing more. There's no need to wait. The work has already begun.

I came for images and silence. I left with an understanding of how the potato is like a banana.

Accepted in the right spirit, a vegetable is therapeutic, too.

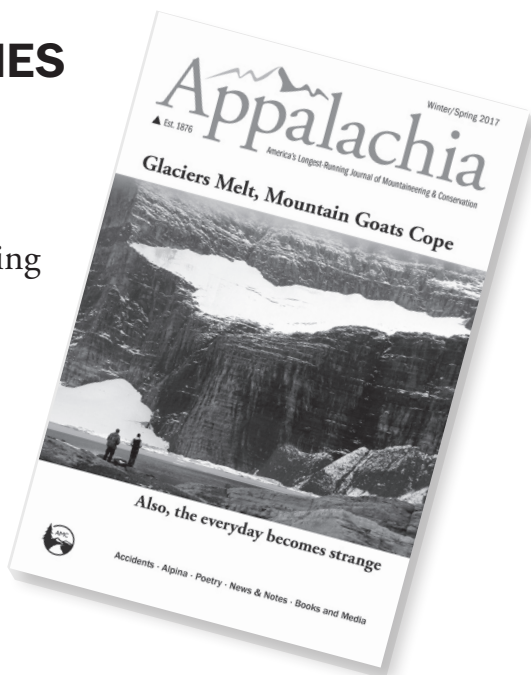
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