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Outage

*An adventure in situ, learning to fear storms
in a more fundamental way than before*

W.D. Wetherell



OUR GREAT WIND CAME IN THE SIXTEENTH MONTH OF THE Great Recession, and blew so fiercely, with such greedy malevolence, that it seemed the dismal American economy transmogrified into a meteorological force.

My old-fashioned transistor radio brought me tidings of both. This was on Friday, just after the latest unemployment numbers had been released down in Washington, but well before the gales started blowing across New Hampshire. I thought the worrisome stuff was over once the hard news was finished, relied on our public radio station's always optimistic weatherperson to top it off with a rosy forecast. Instead, he talked about an enormous low off the coast near Cape Cod, a huge differential in pressure gradients, the possibility of winds reaching 60, 70, even 80 miles an hour over "exposed terrain."

We live in west central New Hampshire, in the center of a large meadow, with precious little shelter from whatever the wind dishes out. From experience, I've learned to take the necessary precautions. Anything that can be blown away is battened down or brought inside. Fill pots and bathtub with water. Ready candles and flashlights. Wheel the generator out from its hiding place in the garage and check the gasoline level. Oil the chainsaw. Send out last messages to the world via email. Stuff a cooler with ice.

We had already suffered two hundred-year storms in the past three years. On April 15, 2007 (not just tax time, but Patriots' Day in Massachusetts and Maine, the anniversary of what used to be called "Concord Fight"), ferocious winds blew in from the Northeast, toppling thousands of trees across these hills. Our town took the full brunt of this, but nearby valleys saw no damage whatsoever. It was different with the next big weather "event," the ice storm of December 2008, which took out power across the entire state. We were lucky with that one, in that we were without electricity for only five days, but people right up our hill, serviced by a different utility, went two weeks before being restored.

As for that other hundred-year storm, the greed-and-avarice fueled storm of the recession, we again had made out better than most. I'm a writer, used to living with economic uncertainty; Celeste is a nurse, which is as recession-proof an occupation as exists. Yes, our retirement savings had taken a hit;

Climate change has altered our expectations, as storms arrive less predictably and fiercer than used to be the norm only a decade ago. Left, June 30, 2012, turned into a survival adventure in the 4600 block of Sixth Street in Arlington, Virginia. The day before, a derecho—a severe wind- and thunderstorm—destroyed the power system. DENNIS DIMICK

friends and relations had been laid off; our daughter, graduating college, bursting with energy and enthusiasm, had needed a year and a half to find a job—but by and large we had ducked this one, though looking upon the wreckage had frightened us, then made us angry.

But it was the weather that concerned me now, the weather weather.

“Red sky in the morning, sailors take warning,” I told Celeste as she left for work.

“I’m not a sailor.” She glanced out the window. “And besides, the sky is purple.”

“Worse yet.”

That was our last lighthearted moment for the next four days. In the afternoon, my preparations complete, I turned on our weather radio to get the latest updates. If anything, the forecast was worse now—punishing winds, record tides along the coast, snow in the White Mountains changing to rain, with the danger of floods. The voice on the government forecast is computerized, it’s a machine talking, and yet edginess and foreboding had crept into its tone.

You didn’t need to be a meteorologist to understand we were due for a storm, a punishing one, just as, in the first decade of this century, you didn’t need to be an economist to know our extravagant gilded bubble wouldn’t last. Never had a winter been so strange. My sister, 300 miles south on Long Island, had three times as much snow as we had in New Hampshire; my son, attending college even farther south in Philadelphia, had twice as much snow as New York. Washington had been clobbered by two infamous blizzards, the aftereffects of which included the scraping of climate change legislation off Congress’s fastidious plate. Here in New England, the weather had been just as bizarre in the opposite direction. For six weeks, there had been no snow whatsoever, hardly even clouds, and the temperature, instead of dropping reliably below zero every night, barely ever fell below freezing.

Some expert, contemplating this, suggested that global warming was entirely the wrong phrase; that the more operative term was “global weirding”—and here was the proof.

We had seen robins all winter, not just the usual stragglers, but whole flocks feeding on our lawn—our lawn that was more green now than brown. Mallards and mergansers had been flying happily around all winter, smart enough to know they were better off remaining in the north rather than



After one signs the papers and owns a house, storms inspire the review of the list of things the wind could destroy or blow away. Above, a house in Arlington, Virginia.

DENNIS DIMICK

migrating. The redwing blackbirds, which come back every year right around town meeting day in March, decorated our maples in mid-February. We had crocuses popping up in sunny spots along our foundation six weeks earlier than usual. Maple sugaring began on Valentine's Day.

"We're going to pay for this," we told each other, in our usual Puritan way. And, if the forecast was to be believed, our long overdue punishment was now on its way.

As a young man, I reveled in bad weather, found storms to be a real turn-on, enjoyed immensely nature's display of sheer, elemental power. (If I'd been given a ride on a time machine, one of the first places I would have had it stop was September 1938, when the mother of all hurricanes ravaged New England.) I can mark the exact moment my attitude changed: the morning 30 years ago when Celeste and I signed all the papers and bought our first house. A hostage to fortune—and to winds, lightning, hail, and every other expensive danger the weather could dish out. I had never invested in the stock market, I was never that brave or foolish, so I could listen to what the Dow

Jones was doing with total aplomb. The weather forecast, on the other hand, I suddenly began listening to with the keenest interest because we homeowners were all invested in weather whether we wanted to be or not. I owned trees now—owned trees! I owned shingles, shutters, sashes, and sills. Windows, too. I had a long list of things that could be ripped, cracked, or shattered—or simply blown away.

IT WAS PAST MIDNIGHT WHEN THE WIND HIT, AND IT WAS FEROCIOUS right from those first fanfare-like blasts. A windstorm's sound is often compared to freight trains rumbling past—a cliché, but true enough if you're old enough to remember freight trains. If you're not, eighteen-wheelers is a better analogy, so it seems like your bedroom has been plopped down in the center lane of the New Jersey Turnpike. What I thought about, listening to the sibilant whoosh, was violins amplified to excruciating levels. The sound quickly deepened—violas now, cellos, double basses—and the musicians were thumping the sides with their fists and eerily chanting. "Sixty!" they chanted, taking their cues from the anemometer. "Seventy!" There was no melody, only the same percussive rhythm, over and over again, so it came to me more through my temples than my ears.

Wind this huge smothers lesser sounds, so if any trees were falling outside, any shingles blowing off, it wouldn't be apparent until morning—unless, of course, one of those trees found our roof. I thought about waking Celeste and moving us down to the basement—anyone my age remembers what happened to Dorothy in Kansas during that twister—but, miraculously, she stayed sound asleep with a blissful unconcern I could only envy. Around 2 A.M., the power went out, and, as is the way of things now, this was announced by wistful beeps from our computer, which I then had to go unplug.

A wretched night. I woke up before dawn, fixed myself a mug of tea using our backpacking stove, sipped it slowly, in no hurry to confront the damage outside. As it turned out, it was less than I feared. No trees down. Hundreds of limbs, branches, and twigs strewn across our meadow. A lawn chair I had forgotten about had blown 60 yards downhill, torn into pieces. The tarp covering our sailboat ripped to shreds.

The branches and twigs amazed me most. I thought there were hundreds strewn across our property, but now that I really looked, I changed my estimate to thousands. To our northeast, along the stone wall that separates us from our neighbors, grows a long stand of trees, mixed hardwood and pine.

The wind had come from this direction blowing the branches downwind. What was amazing was how far they had flown; I counted off 50 long strides to the twigs that had sailed farthest, then zigzagged my way back to the hedgerow, stooping for the biggest ones as I went.

Dozens of branches had fallen vertically, so they stuck javelin-like into the grass, and some of these were sharp and thick enough to make me cringe, imagining what it would have been like being outside during the worst gusts. Surprising, too, was the number of spruce boughs that had fallen; pines are ever ready to shed their branches, but spruce usually hang tougher. We'd already had our late-season bonfire of blowdown brush, but now I would have to build a second one, and just on that first pass around the house, I collected enough to make a pile well over my head.

That's the damage here. As for the rest of New Hampshire? I went back inside, turned the radio on, learned that at least 360,000 electric utility customers had lost power, which means half the homes in the state.

It was a similar number to the ice storm fourteen months ago, when our outage lasted five days. Driving to town to buy some extra gas for our generator (hoping the gas pumps would be working), I passed four big pines down over the wires. The fire department had marked them off with orange cones, but there was no sign of any utility trucks; clearly, they would be concentrating their efforts on the populous lower third of the state before worrying about villages like ours. "I heard it'll be a week," guessed our postmistress when I collected our mail. "Maybe Monday," opined our police chief from the open window of her cruiser. "Probably Tuesday," said our fire chief, who lives down the road and is said to be a pal of the governor's.

Outages, as our storms grow fiercer, have become a regular part of New England life, just like town meeting day, maple sugaring, or Thanksgiving. Probably one day our current crop of youngsters, grown old, will think back nostalgically to how it used to be when the computers went dark. And, for the first 24 hours, it's pleasant enough. No electronic gadgets nagging you. The woodstove blazing. A peaceful hush over all. The return to fundamentals. By the second day, the novelty wears off, boredom sets in; on the third day, you're feeling exasperated and impatient; the fourth day, anger takes over—and then, just before stoic resignation sets in, the lights come back on, the plumbing works again, communication is restored, and you quickly forget the whole trying experience.

The logistics of coping are relatively simple. A bucket for a toilet or behind the trees outside. A Coleman stove to heat up beans. Old corded telephone

instead of cordless. Water poured from jugs stored in the basement, and when that runs out, trips to a nearby spring that has the purest water in town.

We hate using the generator—it's so noxious and hard to start—but when we do we only use it on the lights and sump pump. (During the great ice storm of 1998—another hundred-year “event” I forgot to mention—gangs on snowmobiles rode around looting generators in nearby Quebec.) After the last outage, we decided to have an electrician come install a special hookup that would allow the generator to run all the power in the house, but upon learning this would cost more than a thousand dollars, we decided against it. How many more hundred-year storms could the decade cram in?

But, as mentioned, it's fun at first, eating by candlelight, enjoying the quiet, reconnecting with our ancestors via a power-free world. Looking out at the hills in the moonlight or across the Connecticut to the long, high esker that is Vermont, seeing not a single light nor sign of man, is pleasant, too, replicating the deep calm that, not that many years ago, must have been an everyday feature of rural life.

That's how we cope, how we make it through. As far as coping with the larger implications, what will happen with storms in the future, we're as clueless as everyone. Certainly, if the climate continues to weird out, we're better placed than many. We're too far inland for rising sea levels to threaten us. We don't own a ski condo, so snowless winters don't faze us. We live near a major river, but well above its floodplain. Aside from more and nastier insect infestations (ticks, with the threat of Lyme disease, become worse every year here), ice storms and windstorms will probably represent the main dangers—ice because winter temperatures hover around the freezing mark now, rather than remaining safely below it; wind, not only in winter and early spring, but in the punishing series of violent thunderstorms that have become a new feature of our summers.

IN THE YEARS SINCE THAT UNNAMED, FORGOTTEN STORM, THE WEATHER has only gotten more melodramatic here. Tropical Storm Irene, the eye of which passed directly over our town, devastated Vermont to our west and left us unscathed—but terribly saddened by what our friends fifteen miles west had suffered in a calamity whose effects aren't over yet. That same autumn, an unprecedented Halloween blizzard put power out all across New England. Hurricane Sandy, a year later, trapped our son in his Lower East Side apartment for three increasingly miserable days. Just last summer, a freak storm the

media hardly paid attention to dropped thirteen inches of rain on my niece's house on Long Island in one overnight burst; the previous New York state record for rain in a 24-hour period was less than half that total. Her family's cars were destroyed, the basement flooded, her children's toys ruined.

And the melodrama comes in softer ways. Last year, we had no frost until November, the geraniums in our window boxes were abloom on Veterans Day, and farmers were out haying their fields. We read in the paper that 2014 was the hottest year on record and were not surprised . . . and then, the weather slamming back the other direction, were surprised considerably when Boston's winter of 2015 turned out to be one of the snowiest, most punishing that any major American city ever suffered.

And it makes me smile, hearing of young people traveling the world to take part in "extreme" sports. Nowadays, wait long enough, the extreme comes to you—and probably a lot more extreme than you bargained for.

I'VE COME TO FEEL THE SAME WAY ABOUT WEATHER AS I DO THE ECONOMY; I worry about it, but don't understand it at all. Wind, of course, is a perfect metaphor for what history dishes out; we feel world events on our cheek, the merest zephyr, then it starts to blow more noticeably, then it carries us willy-nilly in directions we don't necessarily want to go, before finally ripping us to shreds. Your duty, as a family man or woman, is to protect your loved ones from the fiercest gusts. Often these are gusts of war. And although such gusts are certainly blowing right now, the ones affecting most Americans are economic, so it's not surprising how many economic terms borrow from meteorology. "Rainy day" funds. A "blizzard" of selling. A "perfect storm" of bad economic news, or even "depressions." The only difference is that weatherpeople can forecast the future a lot more accurately than economists can—though, long term, they're both in the dark.

And for all the fuss and bother in the media, few thinkers have really come to grips with global warming's larger implications. If, as many claim, we're on the verge of the greatest environmental catastrophe humankind has ever experienced (a phrase that bears repeating—if we're on the verge of the greatest environmental catastrophe humankind has ever experienced), then even the deepest sense of dismay and urgency is hardly dismal and urgent enough.

For instance.

Although, rightly, most of the worry about climate change focuses on what happens in the future, why aren't pundits talking about the implications

for the past? Yes, we have to be careful about judging history retrospectively, bringing our values to bear on eras that held different ones—and yet we do it constantly; it's part of the thrashing out of our relationship with the past. Columbus may not have been a greedy, hypocritical racist slaver by the standards of 1492, but, looking back from 2015, it's hard to think particularly well of him.

So too with climate change. If we truly accept all its revisionist implications—if we look back on the past knowing what we know now—we can see that humankind, ever since the introduction of coal-fired power plants and internal combustion machines, was launched on a suicidal path. World War I, for example. The madness that led to it has always been hard to fathom, and now we realize that the countries involved were even crazier than we thought they were because, instead of fretting about who ruled Alsace-Lorraine or which country possessed the biggest dreadnoughts, everyone should have been worried about the planet slowly beginning to heat up. No one worried about that because no one knew about it—and yet, retrospectively, humankind's blindness was even more appalling than we thought.

World War II? The merest sideshow. Korean War? A distraction. Vietnam? A complete waste of carbon.

By the same token, any thinker writing between 1890 and 1990 on any subject—history, economics, politics, technology, zoology, dendrology, anything—was completely missing the biggest story, so, going back to study their work, we undoubtedly think less of them. The habitable world as we know it was probably beginning to end—and for a century, no one noticed! Karl Marx didn't notice. Sigmund Freud didn't notice. Albert Einstein didn't notice. The only ones who come out with any credit are those nature writers who sensed in their deepest being that humankind's relationship to the planet was fundamentally skewed. Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, Henry Beston, Rachel Carson, Edward Abbey, and Cassandras of their ilk. None of them used the term *climate change*, but they were right in their hunch that something unprecedented was happening to the natural world.

Put that down as another part of a power outage. Anger. After three days, you get angry, start dreaming up conspiracy theories just to pass the time (only one small letter separating outage from outrage). Since it's hard to get mad at utility workers climbing poles in icy weather, stringing up dangerous wires, working eighteen-hour shifts, I direct my anger toward engineers,

Nobel Prize-winning economists, the ones “good” at science and math—the oh-so-smart thinkers who turned out to be oh-so-stupid after all.

So—one more thought while I sit here in the dark waiting for the power to calm me down. After the blizzards in Washington buried climate change legislation for the year, scientist after scientist marched to the microphone to explain the error in the Senate’s thinking—climate and weather are not the same thing. Fine, I can accept that intellectually; I know the difference between micro and macro. But here on the ground, how are we to experience climate change if not by what is borne to us via the weather? I accept that climate change is real, not because experts tell me so, but because of the weather I experience in my little three-acre patch of New Hampshire, the behavior of local wildlife, the responses of my plants. I don’t need a climatologist to tell me something major is happening. It’s warmer here. Weirder. We’re in the Alice in Wonderland stage of climate change, its Dadaist era, its Theatre of the Absurd—and the absurdity scares me a lot more than the warmth.

The overnight forecast, as I sit here writing, is for six inches of rain across the middle of New Hampshire—or, in other words, almost two months’ worth of rain in eight hours.

BACK TO THAT FIRST STORM.

When we woke up in the morning, the power was still out. I drove to the dump, our town’s best source of information, and found the general pessimism had lifted, though no one could pinpoint exactly when normalcy would be restored. “You have power yet?” we asked each other, as we sorted our recyclables. Human nature being what it is, it was hard not to be envious of those who were back on the grid.

That was the day of the great earthquake in Chile, following hard on the heels of the great earthquake in Haiti. It put our cheesy little outage in perspective, but did nothing to dispel the sense of an outraged, abused planet hell-bent on revenge.

Later in the afternoon, facing another long night, Celeste and I decided to take a hike across the hills behind our house. I wasn’t sure, it was just a flash, but I thought I glimpsed something orange in the distance, orange as in a utility truck. I got pretty excited with that—I threw my arms up like I had just scored a goal for the Bruins—but Celeste insisted it was a mirage.

For a change, I was right. Reaching the bottom of the hill, turning left along River Road, we came upon the first utility truck and there was another

right behind, patiently going from pole to pole checking things out. We gave the crews an exuberant thumbs-up and they waved tiredly back. When we finished our loop, came back into the house, it was humming and flashing with all the lights and gadgets we had forgotten to turn off four days ago.

There's the drill we follow getting ready for power outages, and the drill that comes when power is restored. Flushing things down, flicking things on, cleaning things off. An emotional drill, too. Relief comes first, then a renewed appreciation for the conveniences of modern life (as things like refrigerators and dishwashers were once so quaintly termed), then, all too quickly, amnesia about the whole inconvenient experience.

But not total amnesia, not this time. For I noticed one thing during our four days without. Somewhere in the last few years, my spirit had crossed a threshold—and not a happy one. I spoke before about how owning a house had made me leery of the weather, and though I had long since come to terms with this, something deeper had taken hold.

Between what scientists were telling us and what I could plainly see with my own eyes, I was learning to be afraid of storms now in a much more fundamental way. I was afraid, not just of what they could do to my shingles or my trees, but what they could do to my world, the world of my children. As a bona fide card-carrying contemporary human being, I was afraid of the economy, afraid of politicians in Washington, afraid of war, ignorance, and epidemics, afraid of all the dark forces that seem to have blended into one oleaginous 21st-century stew. What was new about this and startling was that of all those wretched ingredients I was now afraid of weather most of all.

The wind that had once brought nothing but beauty—wavy meadow grass, a child's tossing hair, silver streaks across the water—now brought. . . .

What?

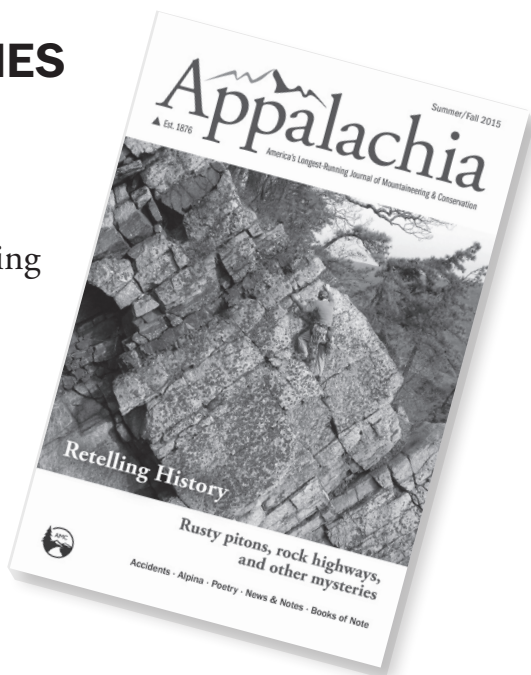
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