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## Night News: Trailside, Hearing of the Financial Collapse

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# Night News

*Trailside, hearing of the financial collapse*

**Sandy Stott**



ON THE ELEVENTH EVENING OF A MOUNTAIN WALK TAKEN during the ninth month in 2008, I call home. Nothing unusual there, you might say, but the act of calling is the only usual part of what follows. As I punch in the number, listen to the ringing, and wait for my wife to pick up, I scan my surroundings. Dusk is approaching and a gauzy, yellow light filters sideways through the turning beech and maple leaves; it's windless, and, as if to emphasize this late summer stillness, cicadas and crickets offer up a constant trill. The boulder I've settled back against feels solid and warm. On the fourth ring, Lucille picks up, "Hello?"

"Hey," I say.

"Ah, I'm glad you called," she says, and over the airy distance between us I detect an edginess.

"What's up?" I ask.

"Well, it's hard to figure out where to begin," she says, and the miles between this Vermont mountain and our Massachusetts home seem to grow fat with imagined disasters. "I'm OK," she adds, at the intake of my breath.

The frontcountry summary that follows is hard to take in, perhaps even more so after days of immersion in the backcountry terrain of Vermont's Long Trail. But, after wobbling repeatedly to the edge, the stock market has parapented off a cliff, seemingly without parachute. Lehman Brothers has failed; Merrill Lynch has gone under via fire sale. Insurance "giant" AIG is being bailed out to the tune of billions of government—taxpayer—dollars. Banks aren't lending, even to each other, because no one knows who may fail next. "It's gone," Lucille repeats, anticipating my disbelief. "Wow," I say, sitting back on my ledge. "Wow."

One of my classmates at Amherst College was a Smith scion back when the firm was Merrill Lynch Pierce Fenner and Smith; he played right wing to my left on our college soccer team (and, yes, in political leanings too). I conjure a decades-old image of his blond hair swept back by the pace of his running; I recall his erect surety about competition, about life. "Gone?" I say simply because I'm unsure what else to say. "Yep," she says. "Whatever they've been doing with their mortgage investments, it's washed the foundation out and now they're having to fold. Our retirement funds are taking quite a beating too," she adds. I've wondered for some time about the "irrational exuberance" sloshing through our money system and trickling even into

*Near the Long Trail's Minerva Hinchey Shelter, a brook goes about its evening's work.*

SCOTT LIVINGSTON

our modest accounts. I remember hearing that one of our high school's teachers had married a money-savvy twenty-something, who had emerged from college and within a short time taken over management of a hedge fund. Her teaching seemed a hobby in his world. I've read that the annual pay for hedge fund work dwarfs my lifetime's earnings many times over.

NOTHING CHANGES IN THE EVENING FOREST. THE LIGHT SLANTS IN; the mild air flows upslope from the West; a few birds get used to my still figure and decide it's safe to feed nearby. Twenty minutes below me, the seven other people at this Long Trail shelter have fired up stoves for dinner. Flying Blondie, a recurring character in my walk, has been through on her way to a cadged meal with friends of friends nearby, and people laugh about her light-footing it along in Crocs, the ubiquitous water-shoes that have migrated here from the coast. The Virginians, a 60-something couple who have fallen in with my pattern of shelter stays, are trying some chokecherries from the bumper crop littering their tentsite. "Sweet, but all seed," is their report. "Like eating sugar-coated marbles." A pair of women, walking their dogs from the valley, have stopped to say hello; asked when dinner is, they smile and tell a story of once finding two men here in frigid January, out of fuel and food and yet still trying to do the trail north to south. "We did feed them," says one. "You all seem OK, though, so no dinner from us," the other adds. Clearly, this shelter's not far from "civilization." And yet. There is the suddenly unraveling world of finance. All those hyperactive, supposedly hyperbright people—what have they been doing? Titanic-related imagery rises: the whole brightly lit enterprise seems to list, to tip, even as the lights burn fiercely and music floats across the night water. A few lights wink on now, announcing dusk in the valley.

"So what does all this make you think?" I ask Lucille. "That I'll get up tomorrow and teach," she says. "Beyond that I don't know."

"I guess I'll keep walking north," I say. But the urge to go home, always present when we talk, strengthens. Do I really want to be at distance when shakiness has the frontcountry world agog, when the dollars floating its (and our) future seem to be draining away? But, if I were to go home, what would I do, other than stare helplessly at the news? Lucille and I share some local news in muted voices and then sign off from this call of unsettled silences and odd descriptions. As I wander back down to the shelter, I think I'll keep the "news" to myself. Route 4 and Rutland are only a few days up trail; I can always hop a bus there if I need to.

I am not superstitious, but I am also mindful that this is the year's ninth month and my walk's eleventh day and that those figures have ushered in an altered world before. I think about this as I lie in my tent and wait for sleep. Chased here from the shelter by my urge to complete the night-strangulation of a snoring sleeper, I've written in my trail journal that the twenty minutes of airtime with Lucille were "a gift"; surely her voice was that. But the residue of financial news is a bathtub ring around my mind; there's no rinsing it away. I am in two places at once and that isn't the meditative state I've sought during this trail sojourn. I may admire and want to emulate the deliberate life of this ridge, but my night-and-subject-hopping mind unbalances me again and again.

A FEW YEARS BACK A FRIEND INTRODUCED ME TO A ROBINSON JEFFERS poem about building his stone house by the Pacific. When he finally got it right, Jeffers said he had "hung stones in the sky," and for me, the image works metaphorically whenever I try to construct something beautiful and lasting. Writing well is hanging stones in the sky, the words with their varied surfaces and shapes and gravity floating on the page's white air, rising then, one hopes, in the mind and heart too. So too, I begin to think, is living well.

Not long before I began this walk, I stumbled upon a seagirt hollow near the Giant Stairs on Bailey Island in Maine. The Stairs, carved by nature, descend into a thrashing strait of sea, but in the pocket of rock just to their right, there is an almost eerie calm. There, invisible from above, hundreds of stones balanced on fins and juts of rock, some in improbable combinations, others alone; the shaking sound of the sea filled the space too, but the stones hung serenely. The presence of opposites created a hush, a spirit, a wonder. "Look," such exhibits seem to say, "consider your original relationship with the world, its everyday miracle; don't be distracted or deceived." I hung my stones before leaving.

I have Jeffers and Bailey Island in mind because earlier today in a hushed pine forest along the side of White Rocks Mountain, I was also witness to hundreds of hanging stones. It was a prosaic approach to the extraordinary, though the absence of birdcall and the cathedral light and air might have alerted me had I been paying attention to something other than my footing. Still, when I saw the first stone balanced on a jut of larger rock, my breath rushed out and the quiet pines wrapped me in another world; instinctively, I softened my tread. The needle-dark ground made this quiet walking easy. The constellations of arranged stones surrounded and rested upon a cluster

of erratics, a few more than head high; the whole composition must have been 30 feet across, beyond the measure of one glance or many. I began a slow walk around the rocks. Some of the balanced stones must have weighed upward of twenty pounds; others were dwarfed by my fingernail. A number of micro-cairns rose from flat stone shelves jammed into horizontal cracks in the erratics; some “ropes” of tiny stones wound their way up slanted surfaces like necklaces. On the far side of the site, I found my favorite: a thin-edged flake of stone a foot across floated in a backlit slot between two erratics. The flake glowed around its fringe like a small sun rising between two soaring cliffs, a wonder of light, stone, and air.

“Who made this,” I said aloud, casting my question into the moment’s still water. And into the aftermath of its splash and ripple rushed the possibility of hundreds of walkers here simultaneously, levering up stones from the forest floor, eyeing the glacier-dropped rocks for the right place and right composition. That image faded and I thought next of a former student, now a painter, who has an uncanny ability to bring trees to life on canvas or paper. When Andrew was 17, he used to wander along our school’s perimeter river with its bankside willows and pines. During my own wandering, I’d often find constructs of sticks or stones that bore his mind print and pleased the eye. Somehow, Andrew “saw” the way art came from the random scatter of life. In some way this forest and these stones have summoned the Andrew inside the Appalachian Trail southbounders and northbounders—the SOBOs and NOBOs—inside the many foot-weary hoboes, pulling us from staring at the puzzle beneath our feet or the funhouse mirrors inside our minds to the way, improbably, stone can ride air.

I take out my phone, flip it open, and check the time. Three in the morning, no time for a call, and I settle for a quick scroll through the series of numbers recorded there—a whole community of relatives and friends. I snap the phone shut and in the newly complete darkness lie back and listen to the steady hum of night insects. On Bailey Island, occasional winter gales stir waves that wash out the pocket of balanced rocks; even the Green Mountains shake with tremors sometimes. I’m sure the stones of White Rock Mountain fall. Then, in ones and threes, walkers arrive. Andrew takes a stroll; a cairn rises. We begin again.

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SANDY STOTT is a teacher at Concord Academy in Massachusetts and a former editor of *Appalachia*.

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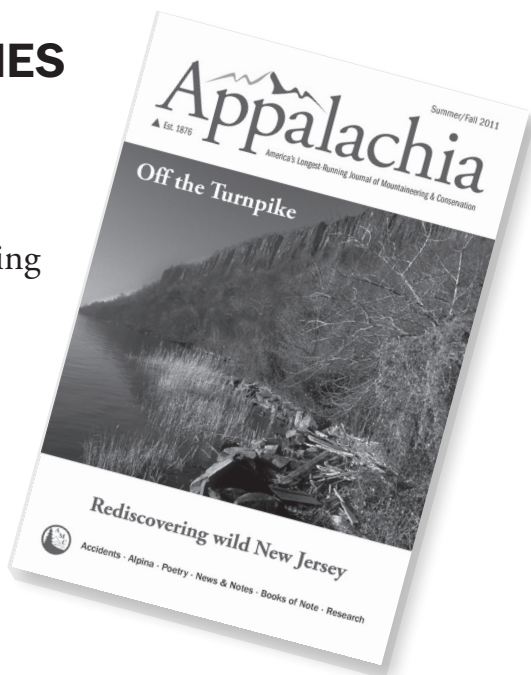
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