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Happy Birthday from Tuckerman Ravine—?

A boulder changes the trajectory of an idyllic hike

John Stifler
About the title here, well, yes and no. The main event of my 75th birthday celebration occurred shortly before noon on a Friday in October, two-thirds of the way up from the Hermit Lake Shelter to the wide, curving ridge that is the top of the most famous ravine in New Hampshire’s Presidential Range.

I was hiking with my friend Pura Vida. I’ve known him since we overlapped for ten weeks of our respective Appalachian Trail thru-hikes in 2017. His real name is Mark Mosher; his trail name comes from the years he lived in Costa Rica, where the phrase *Pura Vida* (“pure life”) connotes that country’s generally easygoing manner. My trail name is Whistler. Why? Ask anyone who has ever hiked within 50 yards of me.

Pura Vida is a rugged hiker. Now he was revisiting the trail on a long section hike from Katahdin to central Vermont, and he welcomed me to join him for this weekend. For all the time I’ve spent in the White Mountains, including many trips up Mount Washington, I had never climbed Tuckerman Ravine Trail before. Friday would be a sunny early autumn day in northern New England. All good reasons why this hike had been my choice of how to celebrate my first 75 years.

I drove from my home in Massachusetts that Thursday to meet Pura Vida at Pinkham Notch Visitor Center, where he had just hiked down via the steep trail from Wildcat on the east side of the Mount Washington Valley. We’d used the rest of the afternoon to hike from Pinkham to Hermit Lake Shelter, 3,850 feet above sea level, near the upper edge of treeline. We slept there and made the ascent the next morning.

To someone standing beside Hermit Lake and looking upward, Tuckerman Ravine appears to be nothing more nor less than an 800-foot-high wall. The fact that in winter people actually ski down it says something about a downhill zealot’s combination of skiing skills and faith in the balance between gravity and divine luck. Still, the Tuckerman Ravine Trail is a popular footpath through this nearly vertical field of boulders, packed dirt, and scrub vegetation alongside a cascading rivulet that eventually feeds the Ellis River at the bottom of the valley. We started up the trail.

The granite that constitutes the White Mountains is massive, but it’s not a solid block. Weathered by freeze-thaw cycles and famously severe winds, it is broken into rough-edged chunks as small as a pocket watch and as

*Tuckerman Ravine Trail above Hermit Lake. A boulder in this general area rolled onto the leg of the author’s friend, altering their reunion journey in an instant.* HOWIE WEMYSS
large as a pickup truck. The smaller ones necessitate a careful eye as you step. The larger ones are obstacles to get around, often by using an edge as a handhold.

On one of these boulders, Pura Vida chose the wrong handhold. I was following him up the path, mostly watching the ground directly in front of me, when I heard a clunk and a brief, sharp cry. I’d never heard Pura Vida cry out about anything before. Looking up, I saw the cause: A boulder lay in the trail some ten feet ahead of me. Pura Vida lay on the ground twenty feet above it, grasping one leg.

“I grabbed it to get around it,” he said, pulling himself together with some audible effort, “and it came loose and rolled over my leg.”

I guessed this boulder weighed 300 pounds. No wonder he had thought it was a solid piece of the mountain. Maneuvering above it, I tried to push it farther down the steep slope. I thought it might tumble to a more stable part of the sprawling rockpile hillside below me and then not come loose again under someone else’s misplaced grasp. It would not budge.

The more immediate concern was my friend’s right calf. I scrambled up to him.

“I’m checking for breaks,” I said, venturing to prod and slightly squeeze the limb. “Let me know if anything hurts.”

He didn’t wince, but in a couple of monosyllables he suggested that I back off and let him lie there for a moment. “Let’s see how it looks,” he said after a moment, slowly rolling up the leg of his trousers.

Bleeding was minimal. Despite its jagged edges, the boulder had left no gouges, only three or four surface cuts that looked like pin scratches. Aware from recent personal experience that even a small cut can lead to serious infection, I wiped the area with gauze, applied some bacitracin and bandaged it.

On a hurt leg it’s generally less uncomfortable to walk uphill than down. Besides, the top of Tuckerman is less than a mile from the summit of Mount Washington. True, it’s also a thousand feet of elevation gain, but we could manage that. Furthermore, if we decided at the summit that we needed to bail out, we could get tickets to ride back down the Mount Washington Auto Road in one of its vans.

But only if. Pura Vida has a high threshold of pain, along with a strong sense of self-reliance. It was a given that if he could keep hiking, we’d continue with what we had planned, which would be another half-dozen miles to AMC’s Mizpah Spring Hut that afternoon. From there I’d hike with him the next day, then head back to my car, while he continued along the Appalachian
Trail across the rest of New Hampshire and on to Vermont. We both thought that after lunch and some ibuprofen he would, and could, keep going.

Which he did, for a while. When we got up from the lunch table at the Sherman Adams summit building and headed toward the trail that leads southwest from the Mount Washington Observatory down to Lakes of the Clouds Hut, Mount Monroe, and onward, I was surprised to see how heavily Pura Vida limped. Still, he moved ahead adeptly over the mountain’s weathered granite, and the gap between us steadily widened. That’s how we hike; he hikes faster than I do, we both know where we’re going to stop for the night, and he knows that I’ll get there eventually at my own pace.

In the next mile and a half, I encountered some of Mount Washington’s countless day-hikers, who had started early from the Ammonoosuc side of the range and were making their way uphill toward the summit. One youngish man asked me whether this was the right path. It was, I said. He thanked me and then, with exquisite timing, asked, “If you’ll excuse me for this question: How old are you?”

Did someone put him up to this? I’m flattered when people ask, and then are surprised by, my age—my hair somehow hasn’t turned gray yet—but I try not to advertise it. “Actually today is my 75th birthday,” I said. He professed awe that I was hiking here, with a full pack, at my age, while he felt like a tenderfoot with a water bottle and a jacket. I asked him where he was from and what he did for work. Atlanta. Computer design, software technology. I said I’d probably be in awe of skills he possesses that I can only dream of.

An athletic-looking couple were pausing to admire the 90-mile view. The guy wore a UMass T-shirt. I taught for 32 years at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst. Turned out that two of his rugby teammates had been my students.

Sunshine continued through the afternoon. I reached the Lakes of the Clouds Hut, now closed for the season. Three hikers were resting outside.

“How are you doing?” one asked me.

“Eighteen on a scale of ten,” I said. I wasn’t forgetting that Pura Vida was walking somewhere ahead of me with a banged-up leg, but if he was so far ahead that I couldn’t see him, he must be moving along at his usual strong pace. As for me, I was savoring the air, the view, and the satisfaction of being on top of the Presidential Range and wanting to be nowhere else.

“Nice!” One of them said. “It’s that kind of day.”

It was. Ample sun, moderate breeze, good view down the west side of the ridge. Looking at the rock-bound tarn that gives this hut its name, I
remembered stopping here in the summer of 2017 during the thru-hike, watching off-duty hut crew members splashing in the water that was icy even in August and discovering an American pipit plucking insects from the rocks and water from the pool.

I walked down to the hut’s lower level, near the door to the Dungeon, the grubby basement room that is open all winter as an emergency shelter, and looked over the expanse of valleys and lower hills that extend toward Bretton Woods and Crawford Notch. It was too late in the season to see smoke from the Cog Railway locomotive chugging up Mount Washington’s flank. Time for a snack. Clif bar, dried cranberries.

I had thought Pura Vida might wait at this hut so I could catch up with him for a bit, but there was no sign of him, and the other hikers didn’t remember seeing him. OK. He likes to move fast, arrive at the agreed-upon shelter for the night, and relax and enjoy the place. I’m willing to hike into dusk, get there when I can. He knows.

I continued along the path toward Mount Monroe, looking at the low, hardy vegetation in this subalpine environment, reading the signs advertising
the restoration of sensitive soil and plants and reminding hikers to stay on the trail, picked my way over more boulders on Monroe’s southern side, continued toward Mount Eisenhower, and calculated how many more miles I had to go to Mizpah. An agile young couple were following me; I stepped aside so they could go ahead. They told me they were doing the Prezi—the Presidential Traverse, the 20-mile all-day hike that begins at the base of Mount Madison, skirts Mounts Adams and Jefferson, summits Washington, and continues beyond where they passed me, going on to Mount Pierce—or Mount Clinton, depending on how new your map is. If you still use maps. Half an hour later, I saw them again.

“Whistler!” came some voices. One voice was Pura Vida’s. He was standing with four other people on a rise 100 yards ahead and waving.

When I reached them, I got the story. Teal and Rhonda, the hikers who’d just passed me, had come upon Pura Vida, who was lying on the ground in obvious pain. Two others, Ryan and Emily, showed up there about the same time. Ryan is a firefighter from Pennsylvania. The other three are all familiar with these mountains. They were convinced that we needed to abandon our hike, get off the mountains as directly as possible, and get Pura Vida to a hospital.

“You can take the Edmands Path right here,” said Ryan, “and hike down to the service road. It’s your best way out. Maybe three miles, all downhill.”

By my calculation, and having twice previously hiked between Mount Washington and Mizpah Spring, I knew the distance to the hut was less than three miles. However, I also knew that the trail to the hut is punctuated by a pitch where we’d have to climb down a rock face on a series of rebar footholds hammered into the granite. Not easy for me either of the times I had done it before. Pura Vida might find it painful even by his own stoic standards.

Teal knew. “Between here and Mizpah you’ve got a real hole to get through,” he remarked. Then, with brilliant tact, he added, “Just to be clear, we know you guys have been backpacking since before we were born. You’re carrying well-balanced packs. You know what you’re doing. If you just want to tell us to get lost, we understand.”

His words, and the attitude of all four of these strangers, gave me a particular kind of confidence I needed at that moment. Many times I hesitate; this was not one of those times. I can be obsessive about finishing things as they were originally planned, but I’m also sufficiently aware of this tendency that I can overrule my own first responses and do the sensible thing. I knew that we must get off the mountain the quickest way possible.
Communication was brisk and direct. Ryan asked me, “Whistler, can you carry some of his heavier stuff?”

“Sure.”

Teal, who sometimes did search and rescue, asked, “Pura Vida, can you walk OK, slowly?”

“Mm,” Pura Vida said.

“I’ll follow,” Ryan said, “then I’ll pass you. I’ll stash your pack by the sign at the bottom of this path.”

We unloaded some of the heavier things from Pura Vida’s pack and put them into mine, which had been on the light side. Pura Vida would start down the Edmands Path. Ryan would carry Pura Vida’s pack, with jacket, snacks, and an elastic bandage. Needing to get off the mountain and go elsewhere promptly, he and Emily would pass Pura Vida at some point, make sure he was all right, and continue to the trailhead on Mount Clinton Road, where they’d leave the pack for him.

I’d follow. At the road we’d either find a ride or walk out to Route 302 and hitch to my car at Pinkham Notch. Teal and Rhonda would continue past Mizpah Spring and down to the highway, where their own car was, and then they’d drive around to the trailhead to check on us.

If the footing on the descent was comparatively easy, the walking seemed endless. Perhaps that was simply because we had already hiked so much that day, but with every step I took, time seemed to slow down and distance to grow. On Tuckerman Ravine and on the ridge south from Mount Washington, visibility was unlimited, but where the Edmands Path took me below treeline, visibility consisted of endless forest, occasionally punctuated by small streams.

Abruptly I remembered that one of the things I was carrying from Pura Vida’s pack was his nearly full water bottle. He’d want it before I could get down to where he was. Even limping, he would keep walking faster than I could.

In the same instant I heard voices behind me. Two young women, day-hikers wearing fanny packs, moving easily. I turned toward them and explained the circumstances. Would they be willing to take Pura Vida’s water bottle and give it to him?

They would. Glad to. They took it, and in two minutes they had disappeared down the trail. I continued after them.

Trees, rocks, streams, more trees. From time to time I looked at my watch, trying to reckon how much farther I had to go. Ryan said Edmands Path was
three miles. The map confirmed three, or maybe a bit more. Had I done two miles yet? How much longer would half a mile or a mile feel like? The more I tried to do the math, the less certain I felt. Fatigue was distorting my sense of the passing of time.

After what seemed like at least two hours, the trail became a bit less steep. A good sign. The dirt road must be close ahead. Must be. I kept walking.

The phone rang. It was my wife, Louise.

“HAPPY BIRTHDAY! HOW ARE YOU DOING?”

“Fine,” I said. I thought about explaining to her that Pura Vida and I were abandoning the hike because of his injury, but I dismissed the thought. She knew generally where we were, she could tell I was OK, and I could tell her the details of the story later.

We chatted briefly. I walked some more. The phone rang again. It was my daughter. “Happy birthday, Dad!” Julia said. In person or on the phone, she’s a great hiking partner. A few years earlier I had accompanied her for some of her thru-hike of the Pacific Crest Trail. More recently she and I had backpacked in Zion National Park. She knows the Whites, and she could picture me there. She’s also a certified wilderness first responder. I told her briefly about the accident with the boulder, and she offered appropriate encouragement.

“You know,” I said, “time seems to be slowing down. I’m losing my sense of it.”

“Yeah,” she said. “That can happen.” She wasn’t worried about me.

I kept walking. The phone rang again. At least cell service was all right here. It was Pura Vida.

“Whistler, where are you?”

I gave him my best guess. “Maybe a mile to go. Maybe less?”

“I thought you were going to hike down with me.”

It occurred to me that Pura Vida might be getting mentally disoriented, fatigued by the extra effort it required for him to keep walking despite pain. His leg muscles and his endurance got him a track scholarship to college. Thirteen years younger than I, he could hike faster than I under almost any circumstances, even with a hurt leg. However, I had seen him get disoriented a couple of times during our thru-hike four years earlier.

I wanted to say, perhaps slightly defensively, I'M DOING MY BEST. YOUヘADED DOWN THE PATH AHEAD OF ME, AND I THOUGHT YOU WERE DOING OK.

Instead I said, “Did you get the water bottle?”
He had it, thanks. “There’s a guy here with a pickup truck who says he’ll give us a ride out to the highway. He says he’ll wait until you get here.”

“Right.” I said. “I’ll be there in a bit.”

I kept walking and looking at my watch. More trees, more path, nothing else in sight. Gradually I wondered whether I had moved into another dimension. I began to imagine that I was going to spend the rest of my life walking through these woods; that my existence might be transforming itself into something not bounded by any map, nor by roads and trailheads, nor even by my own normal needs for food, sleep, anything. I might just walk and walk. Never mind if I knew rationally that this path led to a road that led to a highway that led to the rest of the world; what if, somehow, I had wandered through a warp in the universal ether and into a state of eternal being in a nameless forest, solitary on a path with no end? I mean, really, what if? Perceptions seemed inadequate to encompass the possibilities.

Then intellectual override set in. Sometimes people think I overintellectualize things, but I’ve found that in an emergency it helps to trust my head rather than my gut. My gut says “Brmzpluquekoordcxi!” or something to that effect. My head says, You’ve hiked this long before. You’ve hiked in darkness safely before today. You have enough water. You’re not all that tired. Keep going. Too bad it’s taking so long, but everyone will survive. OK, OK.

I also pointed out to myself that it was starting to get dark. Come to think of it, the day had been growing darker for a while now. How soon should I stop and pull my headlamp out of my pack? I came to a stream. It was much wider than the cascading brooks I’d had to walk through higher up. A tree had fallen across it, but a bit higher above the water than seemed useful for someone trying to ford here without the risk of slipping and falling in. Were there enough rocks to step on from one side to the other? The dusk made it hard to tell which rocks protruded above the surface, which were entirely under water. OK. The brain was still working. In the extreme case, I could stop here for the night, pitch the tent, sleep, figure that Pura Vida would know I could take care of myself, and find my way out by daylight. But only in extremis, and I figured extremis hadn’t quite set in yet.

I put on the headlamp and studied the stream, which seemed to offer two or three possible routes for crossing it. I phoned Pura Vida.

“Do you recall crossing a stream?” I asked. “There’s one in front of me. Do I have to cross it, or does the trail continue on the side where I am now?”

“I think you need to cross it.”
I braced a hiking pole against the fallen tree, found some rocks that were slippery but manageable, got across with mostly dry feet. But now where was the trail? In full daylight I could probably have seen it, but my headlamp showed what seemed like undifferentiated woods.

With exquisite timing, two other headlamps appeared in those woods, strapped onto two people walking toward where I now could see that the path continued.

“Hi. Are you Whistler?” they asked. “We met your buddy Pura Vida. He told us you were out here, and we figured you might like some help finding the way.”

The last quarter-mile was a stroll, enhanced by discovering that the woman in the couple was from the small western Massachusetts town next to my own. Pura Vida was standing next to a pickup truck at the trailhead. With him were Teal and Rhonda. They had to drive off in the opposite direction from where we’d need to collect my car, but they had stuck around long enough to make sure we were all together. They repeated their opinion that Pura Vida needed to get to a hospital right away.

The man sitting in the truck introduced himself as Friedel. I tossed my pack and poles into the rear bed and climbed in. Pura Vida, in the back seat with sufficient leg room, was in discomfort but dealing with it. Friedel drove us out to Route 302, thence down to Bartlett, and then, explaining that he had a house in Jackson so it wasn’t that far out of his way to drive a bit more, he took us to Pinkham Notch and AMC’s Joe Dodge Lodge, where he dropped us off next to my Subaru.

Notwithstanding the intelligent and friendly assistance we had received, and despite how much I respected the judgment of those assisters, Pura Vida and I both had the same thought: We are tired. A bed and a shower are more immediate needs than anything else, including finding a hospital.

OK, so . . . where? The Joe Dodge Lodge desk was still open. Did they have any room left for that night? Nope. Sorry. Can we get online to look for a place that does? Sorry, no internet signal. Should we just drive either north to Gorham or south to North Conway and hit every motel we see until we get a room? We had already passed an impressive string of “No Vacancy” signs on Route 302. Right: It’s a Friday night in the White Mountains in the middle of fall foliage season and on a major holiday weekend.

In such circumstances, might as well shoot for the moon, maybe even for Jupiter. The nearest lodging place next to Pinkham Notch was only a mile farther north: the spiffy new net-zero-energy Glen House, of which I had
observed some of the construction on previous trips to Mount Washington. Normally I’d look elsewhere. This place is beautiful, and beautifully situated with a panoramic view of the Presidential Range, but it’s also expensive. Aha, said the intellect again. *It’s after 9 p.m. Never mind what it costs. You and Pura Vida need to stop traveling, get somewhere comfortable and sleep. Just ask if they have a room.*

The desk clerk was a bright, friendly young woman with a nametag identifying her as Jamie. They had one room left. Pura Vida sat on a chair in the lobby while Jamie handed me the plastic key-cards. I couldn’t resist remarking that this was some way to celebrate my 75th. She smiled sympathetically. As I started to pick up our packs to carry them to the room, another young woman appeared, introduced herself as Samantha, and explained that in addition to working at the Glen House, she was an emergency medical technician. She offered to examine Pura Vida’s injury.

Conveniently, our room was on the first floor, just around the corner and down the hall from the front desk. I carried our packs there. By the time I returned to the front lobby, Samantha had calculated that possibly Pura Vida had broken something, but that in any case his condition needed more medical attention.

“There could be some internal injury,” she said. “Also, he could go into shock.” I thought Pura Vida looked as though he was in his normal good shape except for the hurt leg, but Samantha added, “I’ve seen it happen. Someone is injured and goes into shock not right away but later.” She thought Pura Vida should get to a hospital that night.

We talked with Jamie and Samantha about where the nearest clinics were and decided that the likeliest bet was the Memorial Hospital in North Conway, a 45-minute drive. We had visions of Pura Vida sitting in a waiting room, while COVID-19 restrictions would oblige me to wait outside in the car for who knew how long.

In a quiet aside I said to Pura Vida, “I think we can go find the hospital in the morning. I mean, I can drive us there now if you want, but—”

“I want to lie down,” he said. “Let’s go in the morning.”

Leaving Pura Vida in our room to shower and then to rest with his leg elevated, I returned to the front desk to thank Jamie and Samantha and to make sure I knew where we’d find the hospital in the morning. I talked with Samantha about her work as an EMT. Jamie disappeared for a moment, then reappeared with a brownie sundae on a plate, topped with a birthday
candle. Together they sang “Happy Birthday,” splendidly off key and utterly wonderful.

In the morning I phoned Louise to let her know where we were, explain the accident, and tell her how comfortable our room was. She was glad to know we were having as good a time as possible under the circumstances. Driving to the hospital by daylight was easy and, incidentally, afforded the opportunity to enjoy the scenery along Route 16 as it winds and swoops down to Jackson. More fun than driving the same road at night while watching for moose that might wander onto the pavement.

The X-ray confirmed a fractured tibia. Pura Vida emerged from the hospital wearing one of those plastic immobilizing boots, and I drove him to Boston for his flight home to North Carolina. Outside the terminal, I got a wheelchair he could use to get to the boarding area. Someone would meet him at the other end of the trip.

Driving home, I mentally replayed our conversation with Teal, Rhonda, Ryan, and Emily at the top of the Edmands Trail. Especially I remembered Teal’s remark about how Pura Vida and I had been backpacking in mountains a long time and knew what we were doing. When he had said, “If you want to just tell us to get lost, we understand,” he had meant it.

So much the better. Too often, I’ve let people tell me what will be good for me, what I should do, what the solution to my problem is. They haven’t always been right, and I have kicked myself for meekly doing what they urged me to do. Not this time. Out here in the mountains, on this exposed ridge of broken boulders, at 3 o’clock in the afternoon three-quarters of a century after I first emerged into the world of air and rock and people, the balance between my sense of myself and my sense of connection to whoever happened to be sharing the space around me was, for once, perfect. We had followed Teal-Rhonda-Ryan-Emily’s advice exactly, and I was glad we had. We had followed Samantha and Jamie’s advice with our own modification. I had relied on those two young women to find Pura Vida and hand him his water bottle, on those headlamped hikers to help me find my way along the last half-mile of the Edmands Trail, and on Friedel to get Pura Vida and me to my car. The experience, the feeling of easily accepting other people’s help without losing any respect for my own judgment, was liberating.

John Stifler is a writer, editor, and writing coach who lives in Florence, Massachusetts.
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