

A Ritual Descent

The winning essay of the Waterman Fund contest

Jeremy Loeb

“There was a lot of excitement up on the mountain yesterday. The summit broke their record temperature for the day with a high of 56 [degrees] F (13 C), thousands of people flocked to Tuckerman Ravine, three human triggered avalanches occurred in the Bowl, people endured countless spectacular falls and several people were injured requiring lots of volunteers to evacuate their fellow mountain travelers. It was a classic day in Tuckerman Ravine.”

*—U.S. Forest Service, Avalanche Advisory for Tuckerman and Huntington Ravines,
Mount Washington, New Hampshire, April 26, 2009*

Halfway up the side of Tuckerman Ravine, on the eastern slope of Mount Washington, New Hampshire, I'm crouched in the lee of a cliff, sweating and shivering. My location, at the thin neck of an hourglass-shaped run named the Chute, affords a vertical view of the headwall. Blinding spring snow covers most of the broad cirque, interrupted only by dark cliffs and bands of ice, a waterfall bursting out from the snowpack and plunging into a crevasse near a center headwall run called The Lip, and the ant-like columns of skiers and snowboarders ascending the gullies. The exertion of booting up the steep face of the ravine soaks my face with sweat mingled with sunscreen, which seeps into my eyes. I shiver, not from the temperature drop in this shady spot, but from a gathering sense of danger. Tucks is rife with skiing accidents today, and I'm about to witness another.

A few days before, Mount Washington had caught a storm system that brought rain to the valley and over a full foot of snow at the summit. Winds at over 100 miles per hour churned through the ravine, loading gullies with snow and returning the mountain to full-on winter conditions. The blizzard departed as quickly as it had come, and this weekend beckons skiers with bluebird skies and balmy weather. By Saturday, the rangers have downgraded the avalanche forecast to “low” for all but the headwall, which they rate as “moderate.”

I did not begin today anticipating avalanches, but from my perch, I have witnessed two major skier-initiated slab avalanches that rumbled down the headwall with deadly earnest. The second avalanche caught my breath, as a river of snow engulfed the snowboarder who set off the slide. He struggled to stay atop the churning rapids as they swept him 500 vertical feet, where he arrived at the floor of the ravine alive, unburied, pumping his fists in the air triumphantly to the roar of the crowd.

Avalanches aside, the slopes today are a mess of hazards and accidents. Novice skiers and riders follow each other over the edge like lemmings. Accustomed to neither the corn and mashed-potatoes conditions of spring snow nor techniques for descending steep terrain, they lose their balance, tumbling and bouncing like rag dolls down the steeps. Somehow, with disregard to physics and human anatomy, no skiers have seemed to seriously injure themselves. Across the headwall, tremendous blocks of ice that adorn the cliffs are melting imperceptibly, ready at any moment to set loose and crash into the crowds below. Deepening crevasses lurk around the center of the headwall, hidden beneath the fresh snowfall and waiting to swallow reckless skiers. Woe to the incautious.

That morning we had skied down the summit cone and dropped into the run called Right Gully, a 35-degree pitch. He skillfully carved the run, while I followed with adolescent audacity, my jump turns barely retaining control. Halfway up the Chute, the incline of the slope rises from approximately 35 to 50 degrees, and I cave to my fear and urge for self-preservation. For reference, expert runs at ski areas top out in the low 30-degree range. Kick-step your way up a 50-degree slope, and you're climbing a ladder of snow. Climbing such precipitous faces belongs in the realm of technical mountaineering—except for the fact that no sane mountaineer would try this without a rope, crampons, and ice picks. At 50 degrees—the maximum pitch for approximately half the runs at Tucks—you become airborne between your jump turns, and if you lose your balance, you have virtually no chance of arresting your slide. Such extreme skiing requires a polished, aggressive stance. For the skiers tumbling down the Chute, there's little to do but cover your head and pray that you don't bounce into the band of cliffs to your right or tumble off the ledges to your left. Heights and exposure do not usually bother me, but on the steeps of Tuckerman Ravine, I feel an acute sense of vertigo. Skiing here feels like willfully plunging into the maw of some malicious mountain god that waits to swallow its victims alive.

Daunted by the increasing pitch, and having run out of water besides, I choose to stop at this halfway point to film my buddy's descent. He's a much more agile, aggressive skier than I, and we're comfortable with this arrangement. I squint upslope through my camera, filming a succession of skiers, any of which might be my friend. The majority of them maintain control of their edges, cutting the snow with skill and quickness. Every third or fourth skier, however, tumbles and slides through the notch of

the Chute like a race car spinning out of control, their skis, poles, goggles, gloves, clothing, tearing off and scattering. With every display of rag-doll acrobatics, a roar comes up from the crowd lounging the rocks below, offering much kudos and empathy. After the skiers' tumbles finally halt, they pick themselves up, assess their wounds and squint upward to where their gear lays scattered hundreds of feet above.

At that auspicious moment, my camera shuts off and I start fussing with the batteries, so I only half-notice my buddy tumble past me, no longer attached to his skis. From the corner of my eye, I see a snowball of blue Gore-Tex streaking downhill, uselessly trying to grab onto the slope. He reaches the bottom, and I wait for him to stand up and give the camera a victory wave. Instead, he lies on his side a crumpled fetal position, moaning. Moments like these feel surreal, where a wave of possible dilemmas and unforeseen consequences are suddenly manifest. I feel as if the wind has been knocked out of me; I can feel my adrenaline surge and my blood pound. "Just ski down there and check on him," I tell myself. "Don't panic until you have to."

As I strap on my bindings, somebody below cries "Medic!" Of the thousands of people who have hiked Tucks today, and the hundreds who have crashed their way down the slopes, this is the first real injury I have witnessed. By the time I ski down, U.S. Forest Service rangers and volunteers have arrived at his side and are examining his left leg. We first note the dislocated patella on his bruised and swelling knee, but it takes a few moments for us to realize that his quadriceps muscle has twisted grotesquely, suggesting a fractured femur. The femur happens to lie dangerously close to the femoral artery, the main supplier of blood for the lower body. If the jagged edge of a fracture ruptures that line, massive internal bleeding ensues. If fatty tissue seeps into the

bloodstream, it risks forming a blood clot that could lodge itself fatally in the brain or the heart. I forget about my dehydration and my clammy clothes. My fear and nausea disappear. I now devote all my attention to helping my friend get down alive.

Somewhere in those stretched-out seconds, two thoughts resound through my mind. First, that we are idiots who underestimate this mountain. It's been said often that there are two types of people who ski Tucks: those who are foolish and injure themselves, and those who are foolish and have the time of their lives. Which brings me to my second thought: Why on earth is skiing Tucks worth risking our lives?

Tucks as Wilderness Experience

That question gnaws on me long after rescuers carry my buddy on a sled down to the valley and load him into the ambulance. What is so precious that draws us to join in this madness, this blatant peril and excitement that is Tuckerman Ravine?

It's tempting to reduce this type of extreme sport to an adrenaline rush, the sensation of being totally alive in the face of danger. But skiing at Tucks also partakes of a much grander tradition of high adventure in wild places. In a century where most of the world's frontiers have been mapped, traveled, settled, or paved, we have come to seek adventure in those places that can never be domesticated by man, the far corners of the earth that still hold us in their power. The more perilous these places, the more seductive their allure. Like high altitude mountaineering or big wave surfing, skiing Tucks offers a taste of wild nature at its most extreme, beautiful, and deadly.

If you ask skiers why they ski at Tuckerman Ravine, you'll likely hear echoes from across the past few centuries of wilderness philosophy. The concept of wilderness and its evolution in American history has been vividly documented in Roderick Nash's

seminal classic, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (Yale University Press, 2001). The wilderness once held negative connotations in the minds of early Americans, who saw it as a place of chaos and darkness beyond the order of civilization. As the American frontier began to close in the 19th century, that sense of fear gave way to appreciation and nostalgia. Romantic and transcendentalist thinkers like Henry David Thoreau and John Muir led the way in persuading the public to see an American asset in the wilderness, its monuments symbols of our nation and its unspoiled condition as a natural cathedral. In the 20th century, writers like Aldo Leopold and Rachel Carson popularized for Americans the principles of ecology, which demonstrate that man lives not above nature but within its web. In the 1960s and 1970s, seeking wilderness became a countercultural pursuit, a way to escape undesirable civilization and find a greater reality. Today, wilderness recreation has become widely woven into the complex tapestry of American culture.

When I asked fellow skiers about what drew them to Tuckerman's Ravine, their responses echoed the classic tenets of wilderness philosophy. Many come to the mountains for that sense of rugged individualism that allegedly disappeared along with the frontier. Others are here to find the divine that has been lost in the confines of civilization, or to gain connectedness with the land, to shake off that sense of alienation that comes with a modern, consumerist lifestyle. At Tucks, surely they invoke, experience, and appreciate many of these classic wilderness values. To carve a graceful arc down the side of a rugged backcountry slope is perhaps to touch the very essence of individualism, divinity, and connection to the earth. Yet Tucks is not a pristine wilderness area but the site of a long, colorful history of human recreation.

Skiers have traveled to Tucks in hordes since as long ago as the 1930s, when the introduction of a transportation infrastructure and trail building made access possible for weekend jaunts from as far away as Boston. Since then, on sunny spring days the ravine has invited a constant crowd, what looks like a conga line from Pinkham Notch up to the top of the ravine. Skiers, snowboarders, and climbers mill around Hermit Lake, where the U. S. Forest Service posts daily assessments of the ravine's conditions. These postings describe in intricate detail the dynamics of snow conditions in the ravine. They always include strong notes of caution but stop short of expressly forbidding travel. This warning system seems to be a laissez-faire style of risk management when compared to earlier decades, when the Forest Service would shoot down dangerous avalanches and ice formations or close the ravine whenever they found conditions too dangerous. Nevertheless, it's a heavily patrolled area with multiple rangers on hand to educate visitors and to coordinate medical situations. For all of Tuckerman's natural beauty, the ambiance during the spring ski season feels less like wilderness and more like a bustling arena.

Wilderness, as the classic formulation goes, ought to be a place in the natural world where man is but a visitor. Not a place where man can buy a Snickers bar and some sunscreen, use the public restroom, or check his Blackberry, all of which skiers can do easily at Hermit Lake near the floor of the ravine. The Northeast has its contingent of writers and activists who feel the impinging crush of humanity sapping the wildness of these hills. Whether it's the system of backcountry huts, the overreliance on search-and-rescue, the crowded summer summits with hikers yapping on their cell phones, or insensitive visitors trampling delicate alpine plants, wilderness and wildness are under

siege in the White Mountains. Tuckerman Ravine, the most traveled part of the most developed mountain in New England, could be the poster child for this debate over wilderness ethics. By most classic measures, Tucks represents not the epitome but the degeneration of the wilderness experience.

Yet in the past few decades, a new vein of environmentalist thought has emerged. It seeks to relocate the experience of wilderness as an inner attitude, not an outer environment. In his persuasive essay, "The Trouble with Wilderness,"* William Cronon argues that by creating a duality between civilization and wilderness, Americans define the latter as a place that spoils with any human contact. The American imagination thereby allows for no middle ground where humans might live within wilderness, using its resources but respecting and preserving its integrity. Cronon suggests that with a reorientation of our concept of wilderness we can find it in the most unlikely places, even in our backyards. The poet Gary Snyder goes even further, positing that the power of wilderness is an intrinsic quality of being, not an extrinsic landscape: "A person with a clear heart and open mind can experience the wilderness anywhere on earth. It is a quality of one's own consciousness."

* The essay appears in an anthology Cronon edited, *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature* (W.W. Norton & Co., 1995).

* Roderick Nash quotes Snyder in *Wilderness and the American Mind*.

If we believe Cronon and Snyder, Tucks remains an effective wilderness because its challenge and danger allow us to access the wildness in our hearts, to confront the unknown inside ourselves, and to develop our own inner strength in the face of chaos and confusion. Viewed this way, mass incursions of humanity do not tarnish the wildness of Tuckerman Ravine. In some ways, humanity augments its natural wildness by

introducing a wildness of our own. This is not an easy concept to swallow—we tend to see nature and human culture as opposites. Cronon and Snyder suggest, however, that the fecund, animating, creative, and destructive forces that we call wildness are the matrix for all creation, humanity included. Such a concept of wilderness breaks down the divide between humans and nature—rocks, plants, animals, and *Homo sapiens* make up a single pattern, expressing a common, wild essence.

Aside from the dazzling spectacles on the slopes, part of what makes the Tuckerman culture feel wild is the party attitude of many of its users. Where else in the backcountry do you hear a crowd sending up cheers that could rival Fenway Park? Skiers have even been known to hike up to the ravine with beer kegs strapped to their packs. This style of wildness thrills at casting off conservative social mores, at living large and indulgently. It bears more than a passing resemblance to other rituals where the cultural order retreats, like Mardi Gras. Is this bacchanalian form of wildness really in keeping with that imagined by Cronon and Snyder? It's difficult to equate the wild of the backcountry slopes with the wild of a frat party. Perhaps the two concepts are irreconcilable. Yet both types of wildness at Tucks—whether in the form of extreme skiing or extreme revelry—find room to coexist within an evolving outdoor ritual.

Tucks as a Challenge Ritual

America's understanding of wilderness is largely a history of how we have valued and symbolized wild places, but in its latest evolution of extreme sports and high adventures it serves increasingly as a foil for seeing ourselves. We pit ourselves against the elements not so much to see them, but to test our own mettle. This ritual of self-imposed challenge

uses danger as a tool, as a way of guaranteeing that the challenge is real. Without danger, we would have nothing to lose, and therefore nothing to gain.

It's true that everyone arrives at Tucks with a different set of motivations, which could be grouped broadly as serious or playful. For the serious faction of Tucks skiers, the ravine is their chance to test their judgment and skill. As weather and snow conditions shift rapidly, they continually reassess whether runs are feasible. They might pull out their snow saws and shovels to test the strength of a snow column. They scout their runs with care, and when they make a flashy run, you can be certain that they've analyzed the safest route. The serious skiers have seen enough accidents to hold a healthy respect for the mountain. They pick their challenges carefully and do not take stupid risks.

The other, perhaps larger, faction of skiers acts more or less oblivious to the ravine's dangers and are here to play. Generally, they are the ones you notice bouncing and flailing their way down the face. They take unusual risks at Tucks in part because they know they can be rescued. They accept the challenge on different terms: not to test their abilities but to test their limits. When judged through the criterion of safety, these skiers' playfulness is reckless at best. But perhaps it is this very quality of being ill prepared that lends power to this ritual.

Several summers ago, while I was serving as a caretaker at Crag Camp for the Randolph Mountain Club on the northern ridge of Mount Adams, a group of hikers failed to return from a day hike up Mount Washington. The blue skies of morning had vanished with that classic lack of warning. Soon after, thick fog and chill drizzle inundated the peaks. Disoriented, the hikers followed the wrong set of cairns over the headwall of King Ravine, a wild and boulder-strewn wilderness several thousand feet below Crag Camp.

Realizing their mistake as the sun set, they chose to spend the night in the ravine in the drenching rain, with neither sleeping gear nor shelter, rather than attempt to recover their path. I, meanwhile, spent most of the night searching adjacent trails for them and initiating preliminary search and rescue protocol. They returned to Crag Camp the next morning, soaked to the bone and decidedly hypothermic. From the perspective of a caretaker and medical first responder, I was tempted to upbraid them for their mistake. Yet they hiked out alive, with an indelible impression of the mountain's wildness. For all their misadventure, they received a keener taste of the danger and challenge than most hikers.

Later that summer, I attempted a similar day hike. I left the floor of King Ravine and began bushwhacking up its steep slope toward Crag Camp a thousand feet above. On a lark, I was hoping to find the remnants of a disused hiking trail printed in some ancient AMC topographic map. I never did find that trail, but I did discover a secluded gully with a pretty waterfall. Then the rain arrived. I almost took a long fall while scrabbling up a slick arête, and next I found myself in the lower bands of krummholz where the ground disappeared beneath a tangle of tree limbs. I made my way from limb to limb up the slope, feet slipping on the wet bark and hands grasping at boughs for support. As I ascended, the trees grew dense and murky with shadows. No longer able to slip between them, I proceeded on hands and knees, tunneling through a primeval forest of stunted spruce. After a full afternoon in the bush, I finally intersected a trail on the ridge. My knees were thoroughly bruised, my rain gear soaked and shredded, my hair a mess of needles, and my hands bleeding, gummy with tree resin and caked in soil. I crawled out of the krummholz onto the trail like some creature emerging from a primordial womb.

The short hike back to the cabin had never felt so easy by comparison. As I stepped inside Crag Camp, fellow hikers taking shelter from the storm shot me looks of “What the hell happened to you?” But all I could do was smile back. I had encountered true wilderness in the mountain and felt happy and alive.

Perhaps these days we seek danger in wilderness precisely because we have come so far in adapting to, and thereby domesticating, its challenges. We no longer beat ourselves up in the backcountry unless we are wholly unprepared. When our detailed topographic maps, high tech fabrics, and ample food supplies offer easy solutions to the problems of navigation, comfort, and sustenance, it’s difficult to experience the sensations of true trepidation and awe that earlier Americans sometimes felt. The antidote to this taming of wilderness lies in tackling the big challenges—big mountains, big cliffs, big waves, big treks, big depths, big heights, big exposure. To venture into wilderness is no longer enough; now we throw ourselves into it, sometimes with skill, sometimes with abandon. If so, American wilderness philosophy has come full circle. At first, our ancestors feared the dangerous wilderness and extolled civilization. Later we began to fear civilization and admire wilderness. Now, having driven much of the danger out of both society and the wilderness experience, we fear domestication, and we head off in search of danger. Danger becomes a tool for removing our acquired mental constructs; demanding our full attention, it allows us to devote our undivided attention to our immediate experience, the essence of the present moment, and perhaps the essence of our own being. Paradoxically, it is at crowded places like Tuckerman Ravine that experts and idiots alike find a suitable degree of danger to reveal their inner wildness.

It's instructive that the most heralded ritual each spring at Tucks is the modern incarnation of a classic race called the Inferno, a modern pentathlon that's big in every sense. Racers run, kayak or canoe, bike, hike to the summit of Washington, and finally ski Tuckerman Ravine. In its original form during the 1930s, the Inferno was solely a grand slalom race from the summit of Washington to its base. Of all Mount Washington's storied history, perhaps none is more famous than the race of 1939, when a young Austrian contender named Toni Matt misjudged the location of his run and schussed the headwall, beelining it to the bottom at death-defying speeds of over 80 mph and finishing in 6 minutes and 29.2 seconds, more than halving the previous record. The legend of Toni Matt has become the proverbial sword in the stone for subsequent generations of headwall skiers who vie to rival his courage or stupidity. Although few athletes today attempt to schuss the headwall like Toni Matt, or boast the endurance to compete in all five events, the ritual of challenge hangs like a veil over the ravine.

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On the slope, a team of medics and volunteers set to work on my friend. One volunteer stabilizes the leg while I support his torso. A USFS medic slips a splint around the injury and fastens it in place, providing immense relief to his pain. We measure his vital signs, offer him a fistful of Advil, and make preparations for the two-hour evacuation to the valley. At this moment, I'm wholly relieved that Tucks is not your classic wilderness area. I'll happily trade skiing isolated, pristine peaks for an uncomplicated and life-saving rescue. I think my buddy would agree.

As the sun sets behind the rim of the cirque and the snow begins to harden, I boot to the top of the Chute to retrieve my friend's skis. Seven hundred feet up, I gingerly kick

my way out into the middle of the run, and pull the blades from their sheaths of frozen snow. The sky is taking on hues of purple and the sun bathes the summit of Washington in yellows and golds. Looking over my shoulder into the darkening abyss below, I get a whiff of one reason we love the danger and the challenge. It is wildly beautiful.

Wilderness isn't simply a place on the map, but also our attitude toward that place. We can find it equally by refusing to domesticate the backcountry and by refusing to domesticate ourselves in the backcountry, by choosing the routes that challenge our skills and test our limits. Hopefully, we approach its dangers as calculated risk while retaining competence and sound judgment. But it is that wild edge of adventure, fraught with danger, that best reveals to us modern Americans the truth of wilderness. In that edge is an alchemy that brings us our senses and seals our ritual with danger's beautiful kiss.

Since graduating from Marlboro College with a major in Asian Studies, JEREMY LOEB has worked a variety of jobs, from ski bum to trail crew to carpenter to bartender, in order to fund his outdoor adventures. He aspires to become a successful writer and perhaps even embark on a respectable career, so long as it doesn't interfere with his serious hiking, cycling, and skiing obsessions. He can be reached at firewindwaterearth@gmail.com.