

Thought and Action

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By James MacDougall

On a particularly crisp mid-summer's night, two college aged men meet by chance at the Mount Washington Hotel. The two strangers are the only guests out on the porch, each nursing a steaming cup of black tea. They sit in silence, listening to whimpering leaves and far away crickets. One of the strangers grows uncomfortable in the silence and cuts the tension with a question. He asks the other man if he's ever summited a mountain. Neither had. A conversation about their mutual interest in exploring Whites ensues. Both men have little experience in the wilderness, but are eager to summit the majestic mountains that dominate the landscape before them. At first glance these two men appear to have nothing in common. The first man is a strapping, gregarious fellow—perhaps an athlete. He reeks of hubris and self-satisfaction. The second is a quiet, diffident man with an active mind but a propensity for thinking himself into corners. After about an hour of conversation they decide that they will each plan a solo-backpacking trip across the Presidential Range, staying a night at each of the three AMC huts along the ridge (the Madison Spring Hut, Lake Tear of the Clouds Hut, and the Mitzpa Hut). Their tentative plan is to cross paths in the middle of the trip, on the second night of the three-night journey, at the Lake Tear of the Clouds Hut below Mount Washington. The trip is to begin in two days time—an ambitious goal.

Each man approaches planning his trip in concert with his particular disposition. The first man, the bolder of the two, is a man of action---the type that likes to do first and ask questions later. The type that hurls himself into everything he does. The second man is more cerebral. He is a man who likes to consider every angle, every possibility, before acting. At times his thoughts can take him prisoner, leaving him unable to act, so much as speak--some might call him a worrier.

Early the next morning the first man, the man of action, decides to buy all of his food and all of his gear for the trip. He even procures a brand new White Mountain Guide—but of course he's too stoked to sit down and read it. By the morning of the second day he packs his bag in haste and eagerly ascends the steep Webster Cliff trail. He climbs quickly, his mind clear and his heart racing.

Meanwhile, back at the Hotel the second man, the thinker, agonizes over all of the details of the trip, running ever possible disaster through his mind, from a summer snow storm, to freak rock slide, to wool socks that don't match. And naturally he decides to read the entirety of the White Mountain Guide three times—just to be sure. Due to both his careful planning and severe preoccupation with troubling thoughts, he is unable to mobilize in time to leave on the predetermined day. Instead he departs midway through day number two.

Anywho, back to our industrious friend, man number one. Following an ethereal evening spent enjoying a panoramic sunset atop Mount Webster; he retires to the hut for a deep, restful sleep. The next morning he comes to the gut retching realization that, in his haste, he forgot half of his food in the Hotel refrigerator... He also notices, much to his chagrin, that he neglected to bring along his wallet—so buying food is not an option. The man who prides himself on action is forced to abandon his journey and hike down.

The second man, our thinker, departs on the afternoon of the second day fully equipped for the trip—leaving no stone unturned. He makes a careful, steady ascent, up the Valley Way trail to Madison hut. By the time he arrives, the beautiful weather has past and all that remain are stubborn clouds and forgotten views. For that night, and throughout the following day, he hardly leaves the hut. He spends his time pouring over his trail map and checking the weather each hour--thinking and thinking some more. He desperately wants to climb mount Adams, but he lacks the courage and initiative to make it

out the front door. After a sleepless night at the Hut he decides to head back down Valley Way—distraught and full of self-pity.

The two men meet again on the back porch of the Hotel after four arduous days. Each reluctantly recounts his tale of woe. After a few cups of coffee and much discussion they decide to give the trip another go, this time together. The first man's bold temperament is curbed by the second's tactical thoughts, while the second man's incessant worries are calmed by the first man's confidence. Each man benefits from the other's strengths, fusing decisive action, careful thinking, and their shared experience. The first man learns the importance of taking a moment to think before acting and the second man learns to take ownership of his decisions and to act decisively. Over the course of four days and three nights the two men summited all nine of the Presidential mountains, soaking in each awe inspiring view, feeling each granite rock underfoot, and enjoying wonderful conversation. After that trip the two men went on to become loyal lifelong friends.

So, what are we to make of this fictitious tale? It is evident that both men were plagued by their weaknesses. Blind action and idle thought are a means to the same end—disappointment. Only with the marriage of thought and action did each man finally achieve his goal. In life there exists a delicate tension between physical deeds and mental activity. Blending the two is a difficult task, but it is the key to a strong, proactive, and fulfilling life. A life where *you* are the architect of your fate. Friends and loved ones can, and should, offer support along the way, but a well rounded individual is one who can take ownership of his thoughts, bring them to life, and learn from his great successes as well as his miserable failures (for you will have plenty of each).

On this Hillside we are fortunate to live in a community that encourages deep thinking and rumination on powerful life lessons, while simultaneously providing for us a forum to bring those very thoughts, those invaluable lessons we so carefully consider, to life. If you frame your conduct with timeless values such as HONESTY, COURAGE, LOVE, COMPASSION and SELFLESSNESS—the rewards will be bountiful. All the good we learn here at Pasquaney, all of the sermons we absorb, all of the conversations we have, all of the knowledge we gain from each other and from the magnificent natural world, are for naught if we stand idle. There is no greater tragedy than standing on the sidelines and watching as your life passes you by. Thoughts and actions are as codependent as a strong couple or faithful friendship—one supports the other and together they are stronger than they ever were apart. If we hesitate to present our true selves, our best selves, if we live in fear of failure our lives remain shallow and unfulfilled. And without careful reflection on what we do choose to do, we are apt to repeat past mistakes.

So, I implore you: Listen to teachers, listen to your friends, listen to everything, and listen to everyone. Listen to the quietest person in the room. Listen. Absorb the world around you and then decide what inspires you—decide what you want to think about and then make it your reality. Your mind is yours and yours alone. Feed it with information, nourish it with new experiences, and keep it wide open so that it can catch everything that comes its way. Cross-train your mind.

The seeds of inspiration for this tree talk were planted on morning of my graduation. It was a rainy day much like today. Our commencement speaker, a man named Gregory White-Smith, delivered what I consider a wonderful speech. He spoke slowly and quietly. Although his delivery was far from captivating, his words were ripe with wisdom. I was mesmerized for the entirety of his forty-five minute speech—I even teared up at times. Following graduation I was shocked to find that nearly all of my friends and their families hated the commencement speech. It is alarming that a supposedly open-minded class of liberal arts students would hold such uniform opinions. Here is a short excerpt of what he had to say...

“So in this world of fluid careers and frequent self-reinvention, it seems that, really, serendipity is the new security...A particular person, a particular professor, a particular moment, a particular experience, and that was their aha moment, when they thought, that’s what I want to do, that’s what I want to be, that’s the path I want to follow. So I’m partly here to be a spokesperson for serendipity”

The two men from our story met by chance—serendipitously you might say—and the result was a lasting friendship.

So, be prepared for your aha moment—that’s the real ticket. If you haven’t experienced it yet, don’t despair (I haven’t either). As long as you keep an open mind, serendipity is your friend for life.

What will you think about? What will you do???

Thanks you.