

walk up the East Side of town because the East Side is calmer, cleaner, more spacious, easier to stride about in. Yet, I seem always to find myself on the crowded, filthy, volatile West Side. I don't exactly know why this happens, but more often than not, an afternoon on the West Side feels positively thematic. All that intelligence trapped inside all those smarts. It reminds me of why I walk. Why everyone walks.

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## Stuck with Strangers

**I**n going about my winter business in the country around Brattleboro, Vermont, I have gotten stuck in the snow and ice about fifteen times. That is not a lot for twenty-five winters' worth of driving in Vermont, much of it up and down a rugged elevation of some local fame called Newfane Hill, on whose side I live and whose ancient Algonquin name, I am told, means "Oil Trucks Put On Chains."

No, in these parts hitting the ditch an average of 0.6 times a year isn't bad at all. But more surprising to me than my relatively untroubled career in winter driving is the fact that of those fifteen or so mishaps only one has required a tow truck. One dark night I slid off Route 5 just north of Putney to such good purpose that I had to call the wrecker. But every other time I have come to grief, I have been put right without benefit of clergy, so to speak. Why? Because I have been

helped by my fellow man. Friends, neighbors, perfect strangers, have stopped, lent a hand, and gone on their way.

Like every other longtime winter driver in Vermont, I have had many helpers—though to be honest, I should say more helpers than help. Through the long winters up here the icy mountain roads bring out some of the best, most altruistic instincts that people can have, but they bring them out by an elliptical route. For there is something in the sight of a car pathetically stranded on a snowy shoulder that inspires otherwise sensible men and women with the spirit of debate, the spirit of controversy. Getting helped out of a winter ditch by passing Good Samaritans, one finds oneself not only the grateful recipient of generous aid but also the object of a certain hill-country ritual of assistance.

A case in point:

On a bright January morning a couple of years ago, I was coming home up the hill, driving carelessly along trying to remember what, exactly, happened in the Defenestration of Prague, when suddenly I felt the hindquarters of my wagon begin to describe a counterclockwise arc—speedily, irresistibly, in a classic rear-end skid.

In this situation the advice of the experts is unanimous. You remain calm. You don't brake. You steer deftly in the direction of the skid, so that the momentum of the car can straighten it out. That is good advice—but I seldom follow it. I find that what works for me in a skid is to hit the brakes as hard as I can, shut my eyes, and repeat certain words at increasing volume until I land wherever I'm going to land.

So it happened that morning in January: the rear went east, the front went west, and the whole show, with me in it, wound up half on the road, half in the ditch, pointing back down the hill, and stuck, stuck, stuck.

At this point in any such debacle my procedure is always the same. I turn off the motor and get out of the car. I then walk around the car, examining it closely but dispassionately, as though it were no car of mine but one I have discovered inexplicably abandoned by persons unknown. Doing this introduces an element of disassociation into the episode which prepares me to receive help when it arrives.

Help arrived that morning in the form of two fellows in a truck. They stopped, got out, and joined me in surveying the problem. We agreed that the road was slick, the car was mine, the car was stuck. (Here and in the next several paragraphs I reduce a fairly prolonged and complex exchange to its essentials.)

"Not bad stuck," one of the men said to his partner. "He's headed downhill. He ought to start up, straighten his wheels, and just tickle the accelerator. Just ease it out."

"He doesn't want to ease it," the other said. "He wants to punch it. Get in. Start up. Straighten out. Then punch it. Punch it."

"He doesn't want to punch it," said the first. "He punches it, he'll dig in. He'll never get off. We'll have to pull him."

*Pull him?* I thought. *Yes.*

Another car came up the road and stopped. A young woman got out. She wore a red woolen hat with a pompon. She came over to the car, got down on her knees and looked underneath, brushed snow away from the ditched rear wheel, and looked some more. She stood.

"He ought to ease it," the first man said.

"He ought to punch it," the second man said.

"He's only spinning one tire," the young woman said. "He ought to throw the wheel hard left, put it in reverse, and back it up. That will make him roll off the patch he's spinning on. Then he gets into forward and drives right out. Easy."

"He doesn't want to reverse," the first man said. "He reverses, he'll get so far down in there he'll never get out. We'll have to pull him."

*Pull him? I thought. Why not?*

"Nobody's going to pull anybody," the young woman said. "Just do it," she said to me.

I did it. It didn't work. We had a storm of flying snow and dirt, and we had considerable screaming of tires, but I ended up a couple of feet farther down in the ditch than I had been, with my front end tilted now at a jaunty angle to the horizon. I got out of the car.

"It was worth a shot," the young woman said.

"I guess now we'll have to pull it?" I said.

"We can't pull it," the second man said. "We've got no chain."

"I've got a chain," the young woman said.

So the two fellows got her chain and hooked me up to their truck, and with them in the truck pulling, the young woman beside the car pushing, and me driving, we got me back in business easily enough. There followed the unhooking, the stowing of the chain, the thanks, the offer of payment, the offer's refusal, the return to the vehicles, the beep, the wave, the parting. Time elapsed since help arrived: twenty minutes. Time required for effective help to be applied: two minutes. Time required for advice: eighteen minutes. Exactly 90 percent of the transaction, therefore, was occupied not with practical assistance but with . . . what?

What was served? I'm not sure, but I suspect that these hurried rural negotiations of suggestion and advice, assertion and doubt, amount to a kind of ceremony affirming a principle that many people—including, I'm afraid, me—prefer to neglect: Nobody does anything alone. Even those people who

think they do—those people especially—need help, get help, take help gratefully, but never quite on their own terms. When your helpers arrive, they give what they have, in their own way, in their own time. Your part is to receive, to accept, and to learn, so that when you come to the same ceremony in the opposite role, you'll know what offering to bring. Someday the adviser will be you. What will you say?

I always tell them to punch it. "Punch it," I say. "Just punch it."