The Dryfall Perplexity, January, 2000 *The Rest of the Story*

Wells Shoemaker

In the *Water in the Canyon and the Allegory of the African Queen* essay, I mentioned revelations to be shared in another place. This is a good place. Composed in August, 2025, 25 years after the events, these memories do not dim with time.

In my second day of the backpack up what I thought was Phinney Wash, I headed up beyond the rocky gate at the apex of the alluvial fan into the progressively steeper, darker, and narrower canyon. The rocks kept changing texture as I traveled through sequential epochs, traversing centuries with every step. I was carrying less water weight by then and making steady progress uphill. In retrospect, cruising on marathon-capable legs at age 54 was an earned benefit. (I'd love to have that physiology back!)

The book *Backpacking Death Valley* described Phinney Wash as a crown jewel hike, not merely for beauty, scope, and ardor, but also the virtue of passing unobstructed all the way up to a crest on the flanks of Grapevine Peak. That comfort transformed into a rude surprise when I came around a corner to face a sheer dryfall. An implacable forty vertical feet of polished stone loomed with no ledges, footholds, or apparent bypass scamper. I wondered whether the authors actually got up this far.

The real reason was simpler, as time soon revealed. I was hiking up a different canyon.

Not yet fully grasping this reality, I backtracked several hundred yards and found a steep talus fall that reached the floor. It seemed plausible that the talus "ladder" would take me above the level of the dryfall. That route demanded more altitude than I hoped before I could find stable ground to traverse. I aimed to reconnect with the main canyon floor above the dryfall, but found my path blocked. I discovered that to get back down, I needed to scale roughly 25 feet down a vertical wall into a small, dark hollow. There were some sketchy footholds on this one, but I had never descended a scary pitch laden like this. I was not carrying climbing rope, but I did carry 3/16" braided nylon cord rated at 250 pounds.

I believe that's when the buzzards woke up.

I've lowered packs before, but never one this heavy, nor with such small caliber rope. The pack started out fine. Then it briefly snagged, suddenly released, and gravity took over. It started tumbling and accelerating. The rope burned through my leather glove...and kept going. The pack smacked on the gravel below. Peeling back the damaged glove, I got a view of the exposed artery and nerve of my index finger. It wasn't bleeding badly, but my autonomic nervous system was turning the world green.

I needed what was in that pack—water, clothing for the coming sub-20 degree night, shelter, and my headlamp. It was already past noon, and the truck was 10 miles away, and there would be no moon. I wrapped the finger, waited for my pulse to subside, and picked my way down to the gravel and the forlorn backpack.

I felt triumphant, if still queasy, to have reunited with my pack without meeting the buzzard clan, after all. Shouldering the pack, I headed uphill and...after rounding two bends...stared directly into the face of another dryfall. This one was taller...with no way around this time. I had told the ranger at Furnace Creek where I was going, as recommended for backpackers, but I didn't see him write anything down. I realized by then I was not in Phinney Wash after all. There was no credible way I'd ever be found in this tortuous canyon terrain, although I figured the buzzards might be interested.

There was no solution I could envision other than trying to get back over those obstacles with a bad hand and some residual shakes, and if successful, slink back to walkable territory.

I free-climbed back up the cliff I had just descended. That was dream time. Then I then hoisted my pack with the same rope...with no incidents. The next step required getting down the unstable talus field I had ascended earlier. That was an adventure in its own right, as this rock was so hard and brittle that it broke with sharp edges and jagged points.

The fragments were the size of a Labrador Retriever, and they all shifted when disturbed. Instead of croaking when they grated against each other, they chirped. Not my favorite melody.

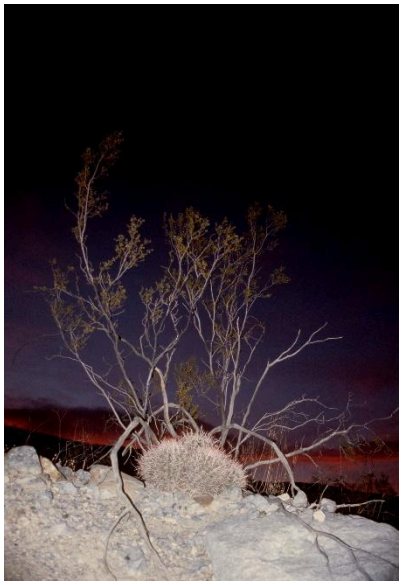
I made it down safely, suffused with relief but probably smelling ripe.

The wash below the first dryfall...porphyry gravel and greenstone beauty in the rocks.

Most welcome...walkable footing.

I posed the camera to take my picture in front of the dryfall when it seemed like the surprises had abated.

I didn't register the time hiking back down the canyon to my same campsite as the first night. I felt foolish for easily divined reasons. I also felt resourceful in getting out safely. Mostly, I felt grateful for all that reading and wilderness medicine courses, and some Utah slickrock time. I sat on a rock and enjoyed the play of lights, the changing colors, and the whispers of the wilderness. I slept like a rock for 14 hours.



Dawn light bathes the Western mountains of Death Valley...from my campsite.

The next morning, I took my time hiking down the fan to the road. Robin's truck awaited untouched, and I drove back to a civilized destination.

Upon Further Review...

I found the real Phinney Wash several years after the events I just described.

Fifteen years later, once again in January, I went back up the original canyon with George. No trauma on this trip, just joy and curiosity.

George humored my request to take this “after” photo at the dryfall to compare to the one above.

The dryfall had accumulated a load of softball sized rocks and gravel, but it looked just as scary. You can see a peek of blue sky at the very top of the photo.

It’s the same shirt, a lighter pack, a bigger tummy (lens artifact), and respectable grays.

A harsh “moral of the story” could be: “*Better lucky than smart.”* I’d venture that *“Be Prepared”* would be more constructive. Clint Eastwood’s admonition may have applied: *“A man has got to know his limitations.”* Fair enough.

I’ve mentioned in other essays that I began this winter trip with emotional baggage. Because of a disagreement over a fundamental principle with my boss, I had resigned from a job that I truly felt would make a constructive difference in the health of thousands of people. I was miserable. I was also carrying what I call “red anger,” which corrodes the health and judgment of the holder without offering any realistic chance for recovery. I returned from the desert with “blue anger”...colder...with a steely edge. Blue anger can be planned and applied purposefully like a sword, but it should not be squandered on peremptory trivialities or unprincipled revenge.

The experiences of that day at the bottom of these daunting obstacles, including the buzzard speculations, required the ability to jettison all the mental clutter, making room for only essential motivations and decisions. I remember feeling scared, but not sad, angry, or despondent. That would have been wasted time and energy. I had plied that path in medical emergencies for 30 years by then, but this was more expansive. That ability has come in handy off and on ever since. When I read Laurence Alvarez’s *Deep Survival* several years later, I felt a visceral wave of *déjà vu.*

2014 at the mouth of Moonlight Canyon

Glad to be back.

Wells Shoemaker MD, August, 2025

Acknowledgements and Appreciation

Backpacking Death Valley, Chuck Gebhardt & Tom Willis, 1975, 1985, 1996
Desert Solitaire, Edward Abbey, 1968

Subsequent relevant reading:

Deep Survival, Laurence Gonzalez, 2003
The Solace of Fierce Landscapes, Belden Lane, 2001
Secret Knowledge of Water, Craig Childs, 2001
Hiking Death Valley, Michel Digonnet, 2004