

No Fear *by Gary Goldenberg*

How and why I started climbing is a twisted tale. While I loved the outdoors, I loathed exposure. High trails and rock scrambles were ordeals when they should have been delights. So, following the philosophy of personal growth espoused by G. Gordon Liddy — the Watergate burglar who once caught, cooked and consumed a rat to overcome his terror of rodents — I decided to confront my own demon and enroll in a two-day climbing course in the Tetons with Exum Mountain Guides. Under the tutelage of Yosemite big-wall pioneer Chuck Pratt, I learned the rudiments of tying in, belaying and rappelling — and true, butt-clenching fear.

More naïve than adventurous, I also signed up for a two-day ascent of the Grand Teton via the Upper Exum Ridge. At sunrise on the second day, on my first real rock climb, I found myself at the end of the Wall Street Traverse. Stemming across the abyss, the Middle Teton Glacier easily 1,000 feet below my feet, I plunged into my own personal hell. Never again, I promised myself. Never, ever.

But farther up the route, near the famed Friction Pitch, that pledge had already begun to erode. If I could confront my deepest fear and survive, I realized, I could probably deal with anything life threw my way. Wow! Epiphanies like that do not happen very often in a lifetime.

At 9:40 a.m., I summited, and I cried, simultaneously triumphant and terrified. How odd. How intense. How schizophrenic.

The next day, sipping a cappuccino in downtown Jackson Hole, I reaffirmed my vow to never climb again. Absolutely. Positively. And then, as if on cue, a little voice asked, "Could you live the rest of your life without experiencing another rush like summitting the Grand?" Yes. NO! I — well, half of me — was already addicted to climbing.

That was in 1992. I'm still climbing, and I'm still afraid of heights, though not nearly as much as before. The early years were horrendous. I would quiver on belay ledges and grow queasy on traverses, persevering by narrowing my field of view to a small patch of rock and pretending I was inches off the ground. Sickening climbing nightmares (oddly enough, about dropping



my partner, not about falling) invaded my sleep. And yet I returned to the crags, week after week.

In time I started leading, slowly graduating to routes that once scared me on second. Eventually, I could relax on exposed belays and pause to soak up the views. I could actually enjoy climbing. (So that's what it's like for everyone else!) And, as I had originally hoped, I could revel on high trails and scrambles in mountains around the world, from the Sierra to the Himalaya.

I've had a few setbacks. The first came during a grueling, 13-day mountaineering course. On unfamiliar terrain, the fear crept back. Once again, the demon invaded my sleep. The first night back in my own bed, I half-awoke in ter-

ror, afraid to move, uncertain whether I was safe at home or still at our small bivy site high in the North Cascades. The scenario would repeat for several nights, and I decided that the only way I could get a decent night's sleep was to don my harness and tie in to the bedpost. Fortunately, it didn't come to that, and the nightmares soon faded.

Witnessing a climbing accident was almost the last straw. On an unseasonably warm January day at the Gunks, a climber plunged to the ground right next to me. He survived the 40-foot fall, but I'll never forget the sickening thud of his body hitting the rocks. After participating in the rescue, I packed my gear and told my partner, "I'm done for today." Perhaps forever.

But I would soon climb again. Like many other climbers, I crave adventure. In part, it's to test my limits. But the pull is deeper than that. Robert Reid, in *The Great Blue Dream*, touches upon something even more elemental in climbing: "In the curious playgrounds of their sport, mountaineers learn what primitive people know instinctively — that mountains are the abode of the dead, and that to travel in the high country is not simply to risk death but to risk understanding it."

So I have come to accept that climbing is part of me, and so is my old friend fear. We have reached a truce of sorts.

This fall, I realized how far I have journeyed since that day long ago on the Grand Teton. It was a glorious afternoon at the Gunks, and I was bringing my partner up to the first belay, admiring the remaining reds and yellows on the treetops below. To my left, a novice on a nearby climb trembled up to the ledge, fear dancing in her eyes. Sheepishly, she said she couldn't go on. "I know what you're going through," I tried to reassure her. "Believe me, I know." It was hard not to smile, though, seeing this ghost of my former self.

I have no idea what she was thinking as she stole one last glance at me before rappelling down. Perhaps she was wondering whether she could ever be at home in the vertical world. If so, I would like to tell her, yes, you can. It's wonderful and terrifying up here. Just like life itself.

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