

Up on a rope
in the wild blue,
fear can turn
into energy
and faith

SELF-DISCOVERY

HIGH HOPES

By Christine McPartland

ONE BRAVE and foolish Sunday last fall I stood halfway up Cathedral Ledge, in New Hampshire's White Mountains, with a rope attached to my waist and nothing below me but a few treetops dusted with morning fog. With my husband, Paul, our friend Dave, and Joe Lentini from the Eastern Mountain Sports climbing school, I was about to climb five hundred feet up a path nicknamed Refuse (after the trash-tossing tourists who gathered to gawk from above). The name couldn't have been more evocative for me. I kept hearing the accent on the second syllable as I spent twenty minutes backing up to the edge of the cliff.

We were to begin by rappelling—lowering ourselves down by rope—to a ledge seventy-five feet below, where the climb would officially begin. The day before we'd been told our climbing ropes were a lifeline you learned to trust, along with your leader, but I wasn't convinced.

"Will I know when I reach the ledge?" I asked Lentini. "Is it big enough for me to stand on?"

"It's big enough for you to park a Winnebago on," he reassured me.

I stepped off, my heart in my throat. A human body rappelling down a rockface is perpendicular to the stone, parallel to the ground. While staring into the empty heavens, you're supposed to be remembering to keep your feet a shoulders' width apart so you don't swing away from the rock.

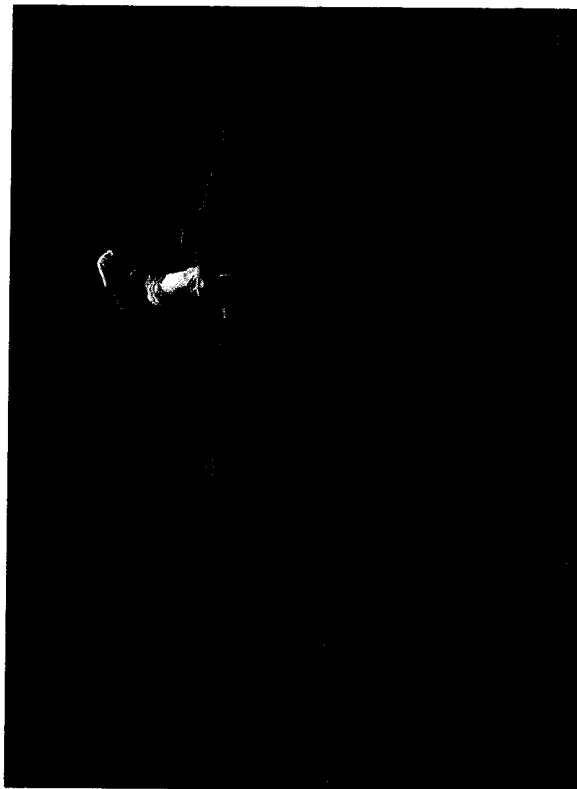
Somehow I made it to the ledge, and tried to remember the previous day's

Christine McPartland is a contributing editor at New Age Journal.

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high-minded talk about considering each move gymnastically, or like a chess game: studying the features in the rock and mapping out the best crevices for feet and fingers. As you climb, you're supposed to balance your weight on the edges and balls of your feet—no toes—body arched slightly forward, knees away from the rock.

The natural tendency, of course, is to flounder for a finger grip and throw



your belly flat against the stone, hoping to drag yourself up. Lentini called this "groveling." Rely on it too long and you not only incurred his wrath: you fell. Too afraid to care about his feelings, however, I became an instant groveler. Rather than search out my own niches and crooks, I struggled to remember which way *he* had climbed.

"Study the rock," Joe directed from above. "I can't climb it for you. Move your left foot."

I didn't budge. My right foot shook under the weight of my body. "I can't!" I cried.

"There's a great foothold right near your right hand," he insisted. (These great footholds measured about the width of a quarter and the breadth of a blade of grass.) Just such a one had held his weight, of course, but my fear knew no reasoning.

On the second pitch I was instructed to pull my body up to the next foothold by wedging a fist into a crack in the rock. I was wet with sweat; my knees were knocking; my head throbbed. I opened my mouth to squeak for help and burst into sobs.

Lentini began to talk me up with gentle humiliation. "The only way out is up," he offered helpfully. I clung to the rock for a few seconds more before my feet gave out. My knees swung with a thud into the stone as the rope pulled taut around my hips with a quick tug.

"You didn't fall far, see?" Lentini comforted me from above. "I've got you. Now trust your feet. Let's climb."

From the ledge below, David and Paul did their best as backseat guides. For every "I can't" from me the three insisted I could. And sure enough, by the fourth pitch I was climbing! The fear hadn't gone away, but I was moving with it, using it as energy, laughing with every step, euphoric.

IT TAKES PEOPLE time to realize that fear is a part of them, an energy they can use," says Hilary Ziven, a former director at an outdoor adventure studies center in New Hampshire called Sargent

Camp. I hadn't expected my weekend in the mountains to be an adventure in self-discovery, but in fact experiences such as mine are the basis for High Ropes, a course in physical challenges taught at Sargent Camp.

High Ropes is exactly what the name implies: swinging rope bridges, tunnels, and ladders strung between trees up in the wild blue. Some activities require arm strength, others balance, patience, and pure trust. The finale is a tiny platform in the trees from which ropers leap down a zip line to the ground. The courses have been part of Outward Bound, Project Adventure and other physical education programs for years, but only recently have they gained widespread use as tools for personal growth rather than fitness competition.

"We're taught two basic responses to fear," adds Leslie Silver, another Sargent Camp veteran who is finishing a master's degree on the psychology of outdoor adventure and fear. "The first is to ignore it, not to feel it, to barrel through, telling ourselves we aren't scared. The second is considered the typically female reaction—to be totally overwhelmed and freeze. What I try to teach is that there is another way of being. Not how not to be scared, but how to use fear and feel it too."

THE PHYSICAL FEAR you experience on the ropes or on the side of a mountain provides a clear and powerful metaphor for the fears each of us faces all the time, says New Yorker Gail Straub, who conducts personal growth workshops nationwide, some of them exclusively for women. "You're shaking in your shoes. Your heart is beating, your palms are sweating. It's more than cerebral. You can feel the fear."

Straub, Silver, and Ziven suggest that people prepare to tackle a mountain or ropes course with a symbolic issue in mind, something they want to solve or rid themselves of. "It can be work, a relationship, some jealousy. Anything you feel you need to work on breaking through or letting go of," says Straub. As they let go of the rope on the platform and prepare to zip to the finish, participants are encouraged to scream "Goodbye, job!" or whatever, combining the physical and mental release.

The zip line is the most frightening

part of a high ropes course, the move that demands complete trust. "You may be only twenty feet above the ground but there is this incredible perception of falling into a void," says Ziven. "It's a beautiful feeling when you finally do let go," says Straub. "It's like flying. As soon as you're able to take the leap of faith—literally—and let go, you feel exhilarated."

It's that leap of faith that people try to learn from and relate to their own lives. "They'll be in a life situation where they're afraid, and thinking back to the ropes experience gives them the inspiration to let go, to push themselves ahead when they might just have given up," says Straub.

Marijke Holtrop, for instance, lived in Boston for fourteen years before deciding to move to Montreal for a coveted job as a bone researcher. She says the ropes course helped her do it. Wobbling on the Spider Web and freezing on the zip line taught her that she needed to learn to move through life one step at a time, rather than trying to see so far ahead that she scared herself into paralysis. "It's also better to concentrate on where you're going and not where you've been," she adds.

BEYOND the inner experience and the changes outdoor adventure can inspire, there is also the bonding it encourages. Dave, the fourth member of our rock-climbing party, was almost as frightened as I was. As we watched Joe and my husband scale each new group of rocks, Dave would be rubbing my back or shoulders in encouragement. As friends in fear we gained a new respect and deeper affection for each other.

Straub generally sets up what she calls "team energy" for her climbs. "While you're up there sweating it out, there'll be eighteen people on the ground cheering you on," she says. "Most people don't have that kind of support in life when they're making frightening choices, or they don't think they do."

Most structured workshops that use high ropes courses offer lead-in activities in group support and team-building—"trust falls," exercises in getting your group across a mud ditch without anyone falling in, forming a human chain on a rolling log, and other problem-solving

situations. Without the added pressure of fear and height, the on-the-ground exercises allow people to see how they—and others—react when asked to cooperate in a group, and how well they can trust each other.

For businessmen who take part in Sargent Camp's Executive Challenge program, the team energy is often a graphic reminder of how much easier it is to work together than as competitors. Dick Roessler, a divisional training administrator at Polaroid, took forty-two middle managers through a two-day ropes course last summer. "The whole corporation was looking to cut costs," he said. "My staff had some tough decisions to make and they needed to learn how to make them." Part of that learning involved teamwork. "We're a disjointed staff with more than one office. Sometimes people feel like fingers out there, like they're not really part of anything."

He says the outdoor experience changed all that. Solving the problems that came up on the ropes offered a new approach in which the managers had to pool their skills. The debriefing that followed the physical challenge made the connections very clear. Back in the office, "Our meetings became more effective," Roessler said. "Rather than sitting around the conference table saying, 'Where do we begin?' people admitted they didn't know how to tackle a problem . . . Just like on the ropes, they learned to look for the best resources to ask for help."

The team play also demands feedback and communication, important factors in both work and personal relations. For many adventurers, teamwork also points out the question of trust—in the ropes, in other people. "Some people find it much easier to rely on themselves," says Silver. "They hate relying on someone else. So we ask, 'Do you always put the pressure on yourself? Are you capable of letting others help?'"

OF COURSE, not everyone comes off the ropes happy and satisfied. A lot of people don't make it to the finish. Some climb down on their own power; others have to be rescued. For many, the barrier is psychological—a fear of risk-taking. For others it's purely physical, a realization that they're not as young—or

limber—as they used to be. “Suddenly, they’re facing their changing body image,” Ziven says. “They find they can’t lift a leg as high as they could four years ago. They can’t make the final climb.” The ropes then become a training ground for coming to grips with a new self-limit that is going to influence every phase of life.

Silver tells the story of one heavysset woman whose arms gave out right before the zip line. “She started up the ladder two or three times and she just fell on her safety ropes. We finally had to bring her down and I could see her getting mad at herself. She didn’t give herself credit for what she *had* done. That told her something about how she treated herself in tough situations.”

Tom Jordan, current director of programs at Sargent Camp, has a foolproof system for heading off the self-flagellation people inevitably experience when they fail to finish the course. “I ask people to choose three goals,” he says. “The first is something they know they can do. Maybe it’s just putting on the harness or climbing the first rope ladder. The second is something they’re pretty sure will be no sweat but there’s a speck of doubt. The third tackles their fears, something they feel they can’t make themselves even try... In this way, everyone meets at least one challenge. It reinforces some personal satisfaction, no matter what, and that’s what this experience is supposed to be all about.”

Ziven adds that so-called “success” on the ropes is a personal thing. “For some people, like those who have always followed the crowd, having the strength to say no, to refuse to go alone, is an even bigger breakthrough,” she says. “The actual climbing isn’t really important,” says Silver. “It’s learning how and when you give up and why.” Not everyone, after all, meets every goal in life. Set back, we redefine our aims and try again. Many frustrated first-time ropers do the same, coming back for a second shot and zooming down the zip line in ecstasy. “There’s the challenge of coming back and saying, ‘This time I do it,’” says Ziven. “People find they grow with their fears from one time to the next. It gets easier.”

“The only way to change that habit of holding back,” says Silver, “is to accept where you are to begin with and work

through the blocks.” The outdoors adventure, she thinks, is a doubly appropriate context for such self-acceptance. “So many of our fears come from not knowing, and the wilderness is always called the unknown,” she says. “But nature is also strength. Trees yield and don’t break in a windstorm; water is both forceful and soft. We can draw power and energy from the outdoors and the wide-open. We constantly judge ourselves, but in nature there’s total acceptance.”

WHAT MAKES working through those mental and physical blocks while dangling on a mountainside or wobbling on a rope ladder such a profound experience, says Straub, is that it seems so solitary. “Nobody else can take the steps for you. There’s not even the ground to rely on. It’s all up to you, and that’s how it is in life. You’re out there alone.”

Or at least you think you are.

I maneuvered the last stretch of our rock climb on hands and knees. Peeling off my sweat-drenched helmet, I reached for the railing just ahead, only to look up into half a dozen unfamiliar, smiling faces. In unison, they began to chant: “Yeah, Chris!” After four hours of solitary struggle, what was this?

“We were watching you from down below with binoculars,” one graying man announced. Thanks to the echoes in the valley, the tourists had heard Joe yelling my name, coaxing me into motion. “Then we saw you fall, and we could tell you were crying,” said his wife. “We had to come up to make sure you made it. We figured you deserved a welcoming committee.”

We may be out there alone, but our lonesome fears are shared even by strangers. There’s warmth and heart in those cold, hard rocks and stiff ropes after all. 🐾

Many holistic education centers incorporate personal growth workshops through high ropes and rock climbing into their classes, often in weekend sessions. Although Boston-based, Women Outdoors has regional contacts and workshops nationwide. Write Curtis Hall, 474 Boston Ave., Medford MA 02155, or call (617) 381-3278. The national office of Project Adventure, P.O. Box 100, Hamilton MA 01936, (617) 468-1766, which certifies ropes leaders, also provides contacts. Or write Sargent Camp, c/o Boston University, The Human Environment Institute, 143 Bay State Rd., Boston MA 02215, (617) 353-3202.