

RED ROCKS, GRAVITY, AND GOD

by Timothy J. Muise

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There are things that one does not see themselves doing growing up. If you would have told me in elementary school that I would be going rock climbing in high school I would have told you that you were crazy. You see I was a big, heavy kid who was afraid of heights. A few times my father asked me to help with some work up on the roof and just being a few stories up let me know heights were not for me. I lost all my strength and my legs became shaky. After that initial experience I avoided precarious positions of height like the proverbial plague. God wanted me close the ground

In high school I got in some trouble. My lifestyle was not conducive to becoming the valedictorian. I was a wise-cracking pot smoker who ran with the wrong crowd. That, coupled with a rebellious nature, earned me a spot in the behavioral problem program Project Adventure where we built boats, sailed, took camping trips, but also had to rock climb. I had no idea what rock climbing was all about but my commonsense told me it would involve my getting high up on a rock in some God-forsaken dark corner and I was none too excited about it. I expressed this unwillingness to my Project Adventure teacher, and future mentor, with phrases like, "It ain't happening!", and "You have a better chance of seeing Christ climb that rock.", but Jim said, "Don't worry about it. You will be fine." He did not know that I agreed with him as I was going to be fine; fine right on level ground.

Dogtown is a wooded area in the center of Gloucester. It was donated to the city as permanent public land to remain untarnished by development. Our school was allowed to build a "ropes course" up there just behind the Babson Reservoir which is named after the man who donated the land. This ropes course had two high Burma bridges in the trees, a high rope swing into a massive cargo net, a tight rope over a mud pit, and various other climbing based activities. Looked cool as hell, but just not my bag of tricks. Our training started small with some trust exercises. A cute girl, Nancy Swanson, volunteered to climb up onto a six foot high platform and fall back into the interlocked arms of her classmates. Then each member of the class did the same. They even caught my bulk without a problem. The next test was to walk tight wires that were only two feet off the ground; not

easy. After that our instructor set up the belay lines and we began climbing up one by one and swinging on the rope swing at a downward angle into the giant cargo net. Great fun and certainly a rare opportunity. Climbing up that platform from which you swung gave me that queasy feeling I remembered from the roof, but it was nice to know that I was also attached to a belay line and if I fell my descent would at least be slowed by the human controlled safety line. I got up to the two foot by two foot wooden platform, grabbed the large knotted rope, placed my feet on the bottom knot and swung toward the net with wreckless abandon! When I hit the net I grabbed onto the crossing rungs and laughed out loud! That was cool.

After the entire class, about fifteen of us, got the chance to swing into the net the next task was to attempt to negotiate one of the Burma bridges; the high one. A Burma bridge is a tight rope strung between two trees with two hand guide ropes, one on either side, at about waist height. The tight single foot rope wobbles back-n-forth quite a bit making it very difficult to keep your balance. Our teacher, Jim Schoel, told us he did not expect us all to make it all the way across the bridge, a span of about 40 feet, but expected us to fall. It was a way for us to learn to trust the belay. He in fact told us that anyone who did make it all the way across would be asked to then jump off the platform so they could also learn to trust the safety line. No one was climbing down from this 50 foot high tight rope.

My climb up to the perch was not an easy one. The installed foot holds on the tall pine tree are purposely placed at difficult distances. It was slow going for me and even slower going when I reached the high platform. I was a bit paralyzed and had to lay across the platform on my belly to get on it. I stood on shaky legs and took a look down. 50 feet looks a lot higher from the air than it does from the ground. I made certain the knot and carabiner on the belay line were properly affixed and then grasped the hand lines and took my first step. Unsteady would be an understatement in describing my advance but I did make three bold steps across the wire before it wiggled to and fro causing me to fall off on my fourth step. I was quite shocked Jim had no problem holding me in the air with the belay line. He

lowered me gently to earth and I must say I was relieved, but also quite proud as this was a real accomplishment for me.

The next few classes at the school consisted of rock climbing preparations: making Swiss seats, attaching belay lines, tying bowlines, figure 8's, and fisherman's knots, as well as hearing the details of the various climbs at Red Rocks, a cliff face in the high woods of West Gloucester. I had never been there but it was starting to sound like climbing Everest to me. One climb in particular sounded pretty gruesome. You had to climb up a thin crack, using tiny footholds and handholds to support your weight, for about 25 feet. You then had to pendulum swing (an actual rock climbing term) over to the right about 10 feet where another separate crack started. You would then climb that crack to the top of the rock about another 20 feet. There were other less significant Red Rocks climbs but this climb was the heart and soul of the rock face, and we had to complete it to get our physical fitness grade for the class.

My climb was a tortuous one. My weight made it hard to pull up on such small handholds and I had to find solid footholds to make my slow progress. It took me quite sometime to make it to the top of the first crack, but make I did. The crack I had to swing to looked more than 10 feet away and I was now truly convinced that all distances look greater from heights. I asked God to help me make it across, I can't remember what I promised him in exchange, but I felt I needed Divine intervention to "swing" my wide ass across this gap. I got up the nerve, dug my toes into the foothold, and leaped across the face. God was with me as I was able to get me fingers in the second crack and support my weight until I could find a decent set of footholds. The climb to the top was pretty easy as this was a wider more accessible crack and when I pulled myself over the edge at the top of the cliff I actually felt like a rock climber. I did the other mandatory climbs with little fuss but found real joy when I did my first repel on the face. Gravity was my enemy so it seemed on climbs, but it was my friend on repels.

I have to admit that I never did many more climbs, one or two, but over

the course of the next three years I did dozens of repels. I did some free repels at the Jones Creek rock face and even did an inverted repel there, stopping halfway down to watch a Great Blue Heron land on Ram Island. I was a rock "descender", not a climber, but that was alright with me. I was in the class with Jim for the next two years and became the permanent belay man. I even saved a girl who got her hair caught in the figure eight repel guider. I repelled down next to her, took her weight off her caught hair by grabbing her around the waist, and then used my Buck 110 folder to cut her hair to free her. It was a bad hair day for her but she was very grateful.

Life takes turns, no one knows that better than I, but if you have faith, if you believe you "can", then you can handle anything. I learned that in this Project Adventure class. God is in these efforts. His gifts of nature and beauty are ours to enjoy. Some go up rock faces, some come down, and some do both; He made us all unique. It is our destiny to find our place, whether it be at Red Rocks, on some fishing boat in the North Atlantic, or in a prison cell in Shirley, Massachusetts. Our place is not a destination, it is a state of mind. He wants us to strive for more, to take the narrow gate, no matter where we are. It is our obligation to make a positive impact in His world. He allows me to repel a new Red Rocks everyday.

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