

THE CLIMBING LIFE

In Defense of Soloing

But we little know until tried how much of the uncontrollable there is in us, urging across glaciers and torrents, and up dangerous heights, let the judgment forbid as it may.—John Muir

OCTOBER IN THE HIGH SIERRA, California: a man stands alone in the middle of a wave of granite. The rock goes on forever. It is far older than he is, as old as time. The rock is time, and it stretches on forever. It is cold, indifferent, and not in the least reassuring to a man who has been “suddenly brought to a dead stop, with arms outspread, clinging close to the face of the rock, unable to move hand or foot either up or down.” He is breathing hard. “My doom [is] fixed,” he thinks. “I must fall. There would be a moment of bewilderment, and then a lifeless rumble down the one general precipice to the glacier below.” Thoughts of

death loop through his head, growing louder. A faint breeze blows up the wall, and the thoughts stop. He feels as if he has acquired a “new sense. The other self, bygone experiences, Instinct, or Guardian Angel—call it what you will—came forward and assumed control. Then my trembling muscles became firm again, every rift and flaw in the rock was seen as through a microscope, and my limbs moved with a positiveness and precision with which I seemed to have nothing at all to do. Had I been borne aloft upon wings, my deliverance could not have been more complete” (*The Mountains of California*, John Muir, 1894, also cited in *Early Days in the Range of Light*, Daniel Arnold, 2011).

It’s 1872. On top of the 13,157-foot Mt. Ritter, the “king of the mountains of the middle portion of the High Sierra,” John Muir stands alone. The air chills. He is tired. He has no climbing gear, no jacket, no source of

light except the setting sun and rising moon. He carries only the clothes he is wearing, the boots on his feet, and the “hard, durable crust” of bread he tied into his belt that morning. Back at the pine tree where he’d slept the night before, there’s a small satchel with a cup, a notebook and more bread. No blanket, no tent and no stove. He is in the midst of a three-day journey across rugged terrain. And now he has to find his way down that same mountain by some other route than the harrowing one he just scrambled up. Whether such a route even exists, he does not know.

WHEN I STARTED CLIMBING in 2000, the pursuit meant little more to me than following taped hand- and footholds up an artificial wall. I remember lying on a blue mat at a Northern Virginia gym, looking up at the black and white paint splatters on a grey overhang, trying to imagine the beginnings of the sport. The idea





of doing anything difficult with the antiquated equipment that must have been around “back in the day” seemed terrifying. I imagined that the early climbers were much less intrepid than we are now. I assumed that free soloing was a modern aberration—some sort of next-level “extreme” that only a few nutjobs engaged in for publicity and attention.

Eight years later, looking down at death beneath my shaking legs, I realized I must be one of those nutjobs. Ropeless, halfway up the flared cracks of Osiris, on Colorado’s Lumpy Ridge, I couldn’t help smiling at the absurd intensity of my situation. I’d been trad climbing for a year, and I barely knew how to jam. I slapped up the twin cracks as if they formed a double, sloping arête. When I pulled up onto the ledge at the top, I felt about as big as the small pink crystals of decomposing granite around me. As the fear slowly subsided, I was overwhelmed by what I can only describe as a sensation of utter connectedness.

Free soloing, I realized, wasn’t ego affirming at all. It was ego shattering. High on the rock, everything dissolved except pure, unencumbered movement. If I couldn’t enter that clean, clear state of being, I would have to down climb or else risk a probably fatal fall. Even on known terrain, the experience took on all the nuance and mystery of exploration—long, meditative periods of pure, spontaneous, wordless motion. No companions except stone and peregrine, pine and stream. I moved over waves of rock as if in a dream, and at the dream’s end, when I came back down, something sweet remained in my memory. It felt like a day spent with a loved one.

I became less interested in reading about hard boulder problems and sport routes and more curious about tales of alpine adventures in the present and the past. As I finally started to learn the history of climbing, I understood that free soloing was essentially the norm for early American alpinists. Daniel Arnold notes of the Sierra Nevada pioneers: “This early lot of mountaineers had no ropes or pitons or special training. They had only their fingers, their boots, and an immoderate excess of boldness” (*Early Days in the Range of Light*).

In the days before nylon ropes, climbers knew that their fragile hemp or manila cords had little chance of stopping a lead fall. One individual’s slip could pull an entire team off the mountain. An awareness of possible consequences was an intrinsic part of all their endeavors. For some, this awareness also became a catalyst for self-transformation and transcendence.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, before Muir's daring ascent of Mt. Ritter, the British poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge developed a habit of what he termed "a new sort of gambling." After scrambling up a randomly selected peak, he would down climb, "where it is first possible to descend... [relying] upon fortune for how far down this possibility will continue."

In 1802 he reached the top of Mt. Scafell, in England's Lake District, in an oncoming storm. This time, his descent technique led him to a wide perch above a twelve-foot wall. Beneath it, the next ledge was so tiny "that if I dropt down upon it I must of necessity have fallen backwards and of course killed myself."

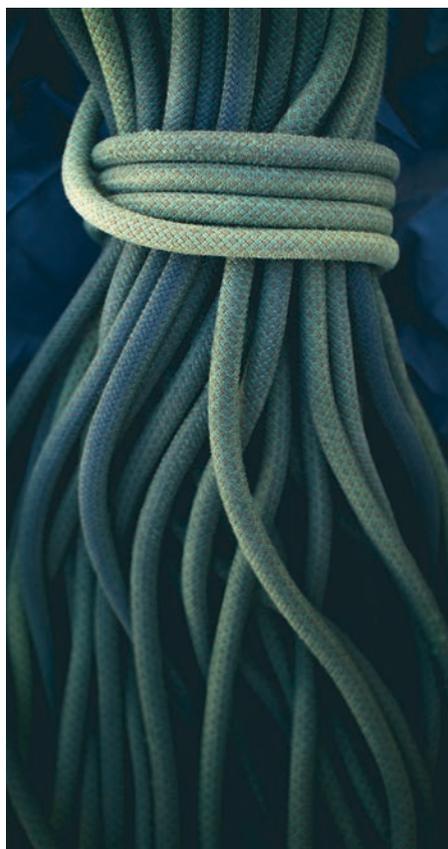
Instead of despairing, Coleridge lay down to take in the beauty of the view: "The sight of the Craggs above me on each side, and the impetuous Clouds just over them, posting so luridly and so rapidly northward overawed me. I lay in a state of almost prophetic Trance and Delight—and blessed God aloud for the powers of Reason and Will, which remaining no Danger can overpower us! Oh God, I exclaimed aloud—how calm, how blessed am I now—I know not how to proceed, how to return, but I am calm and fearless and confident" (*The Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 1956–71, also cited in *Mountains of the Mind*, Robert Macfarlane, 2003). Upon closer inspection, he saw a small opening at the end of his ledge that he could chimney down to safety.

Perhaps Coleridge needed to lose himself in an experience of the sublime in order to discover his way. I found this paradox of losing yourself to find yourself to be common among the soloists I knew. It resonated through my first experiences in the mountains, and it still echoes loudly in my mind today.

DURING THE DECADES AFTER Coleridge's unroped descent of Mt. Scafell, some influential climbers rejected the technological aids that eventually became part of standard use. "Every change aroused resistance," Joseph Taylor explains. "Pitons, carabiners, crampons, tennis shoes, bottled oxygen, bolts, chocks, cams and sticky shoes triggered heated debates about fair play. Every clash revealed an intense desire to preserve risk" (*Pilgrims of the Vertical*, 2010). The early twentieth-century New England mountaineer Miriam Underhill (1898–1976), editor of *Appalachia*, claimed that using lead protection diminished opportunities to build

"reserves of strength, skill and control" by lessening "the penalty for failure" (*Yankee Rock & Ice*, Laura and Guy Waterman, 2002). Austrian soloist Paul Preuss (1886–1913) renounced both pitons and ropes. By relying on any "artificial aids," he argued, we fail to cultivate those internal "reserves that even in immediate danger conduct us safely back into the valley again" (*Mauerhakenstreit*, 1911).

In its nascence, I realized, climbing was not so much about mastering a section of stone or a physical ability, but about fathoming the depths of the wild and the soul. Nylon ropes, cams, bolts, modern belay devices and har-



nesses all greatly minimize the chance of death or injury from a fall. After all, Preuss died in the midst of one of his free solos. But these tools can also create a new danger, one that would make the progenitors of our sport wary. Despite the advantages that come from modern technology (I certainly use it myself), it can shift climbers' focus from experiencing the sublime to conquering it. Reinhold Messner described the results as the "Murder of the Impossible": "Now anyone can work on a rock face, using tools to bend it to his own idea of possibility," drilling bolts to impose a vision

of human dominance on a mountain wall, rather than learning to harmonize our movements with the natural features of the rock (*Mountain* 15, 1971).

What has happened to the custom of going into the mountains not to feel big, but to remember how small we are? Today, many of us inhabit a world of climbing gyms and competitions, superlight equipment, aggressive downturned shoes and multimedia coverage of everything from the most ordinary to the most daring ascents. Climbing now seems to have so much to do with being strong—and often with being stronger than someone else. In the process of redefining the possible, we may have lost some of the early soloists' bravado; and worse, their joy.

Alone, on top of Mt. Ritter, Muir saw not the inscription of his own new line, his ego or his personal fame, but something much greater: "Nature's poems carved on tables of stone." Amid the fading light and the utter solitude, these were his thoughts:

The deep, brooding silence [in which] all the wilderness seems motionless, as if the work of creation were done. But in the midst of this outer steadfastness we know there is incessant motion and change. Ever and anon, avalanches are falling from yonder peaks. These cliff-bound glaciers, seemingly wedged and immovable, are flowing like water and grinding the rocks beneath them. The lakes are lapping their granite shores and wearing them away, and every one of these rills and young rivers is fretting the air into music, and carrying the mountains to the plains. Here are the roots of all the life of the valleys, and here more simply than elsewhere is the eternal flux of nature manifested (*The Mountains of California*).

To me, John Muir is saying that mountains are the cradle of life, and I love this idea. Maybe this is why we are drawn to them: from up high, we're afforded an uncommon view of the whole, creative works. We get the divine opportunity to look at all that lies below us, and contemplate where we come from. This is as good a defense of not just soloing, but climbing as a whole, as I have ever discovered. That we have Muir's story today is testament to his survival of that brave journey in 1872. That his love of the mountains still resonates deeply in his words—and in the reader's soul—is testament to something else.

It is the distinct privilege of all of us who follow in Muir's footsteps to figure out what that *something else* is on our own.

—Chris Kalman, Seattle, Washington