

Climbing

The cliffs of Hurricane Island face southeast and glitter in Maine's summer sunrise. As day brightens, rocks seem to reach higher and higher and shallow fissures look like claw marks on ancient bones.

To the sixteen members of our Outward Bound class, here was the final test of a two week journey into the Penobscot Bay archipelago. We had run, rowed, swum, and eaten off the land.

Now we had to climb the cliffs of Hurricane Island.

Our little group stood at the base of the cliffs, heads back, necks craned, gazes irresistibly drawn to the top, 120 feet above. As we looked, the sheer tan wall seemed to lean out over us, with a welcome and a challenge and a threat.

"Jesus, you'd have to be a fly to climb that thing."

"I don't know if I like this so soon after breakfast."

"Why couldn't they start us on something lower?"

"I don't see any handholds at all."

Walt, the chief instructor, stepped to the front. "It's not as dangerous as it looks," he said. "You'll be belayed on a safety line at all times, and your partner will hold the rope from the top. The main thing is to make sure your harness is rigged properly. Watch how I do it."

A voice from behind me broke in, "Be sure and watch, dummy. Don't let your mind wander like you usually do."

I turned in annoyance; it was Jack and Jerry, the father and son team taking the course together. They were off to one side by themselves – as usual. Jack was badgering Jerry – also as usual. Jack was a stocky fellow, muscular as a fireplug, swarthy, with bushy black hair and eyebrows. Jerry looked very much like his father, but slender – a Whippet to Jack's Airedale. Jack's head bobbed when he talked - giving the impression he was pecking at words as they escaped from his lips.

Jack continually talked to everyone within earshot. I was his favorite ear, probably because we were the senior citizens in the group. I had heard him expound on the relative merits of Mercedes and BMW, the problems of getting someone to care properly for a swimming pool, and real estate prices in New Jersey. But what he really liked to talk about was Jerry and Jerry's inadequacies.

Jack caught my glare, "What am I gonna do? The kid won't pay attention - he could get himself killed from lack of interest."

Outward Bound isn't competitive, inner strength and team spirit are its goals, but the two constantly competed - at least Jack did. Jerry never minded being a step behind his father. I was always far behind both of them and from that vantage point it seemed as if Jerry went just fast enough not to pass his father, but I could be mistaken, my glasses were usually pretty fogged up.

"No big deal, Dad," Jerry replied in his usual monotone. He stared at the cliff top, head back and mouth open, as if poised to snap at a passing fly. He looked directly at his father.

For his part, Jerry made it obvious that he was there under duress and found the rest of us only slightly less obnoxious than his father. He acted utterly bored with Outward Bound and his adult classmates. The teenager might have been odd man out among us adults, anyway, but his attitude compounded the situation. Jerry's favorite phrase was "No big deal." But for those of us trying so hard, Outward Bound **was** a big deal. Jerry was easy to dislike.

Walt was concluding. He held up a large black and white photograph of the cliff. The picture was tracked with dotted red lines. It reminded me of the diagrams of pigs and cows you see in butcher shops. Here are the ribs, the loins are in this area, and there are the chops.

"There are lots of ways to the top," he said, "but we're going to try these four routes. We'll start with number one – it's pretty easy – a real confidence builder." His index finger traced a red line. "Those who

complete that go on to number two, then three, then four. Each route is tougher than the last. Anyone who manages to complete number four gets an extra blueberry cobbler tonight.” We all cheered – Outward Bound provides precious few luxuries. “Everybody pair off – half of you take the ropes and hike around to the top. The others get ready to climb route number one.”

Jack and I were in the group at the bottom. As we wrapped the webbed belting of the harness around our shoulders, waist, and crotch, Jack continued, “It’s always been the same with Jerry. I got him into Little League, Pop Warner football, track, soccer, and now Outward Bound. Jerry always dropped out. You see, he says he doesn’t like to compete. I tell him competition is what life is all about – but what kid ever listens to his old man? I figured bringing him here would show him – and he sure as hell can’t drop out on this two-bit island.”

I watched as he looped the bright yellow and red Perlon rope through his carabinier and began to climb. Jack attacked the cliff, scrabbling and clawing. I knew nothing of climbing technique, but it certainly looked as if he was doing it the hard way. I could imagine rock chips flying off under his fingernails as he charged, but he made it to the top.

I felt my testicles shrivel – I was next. Standing at the bottom, looking straight up the tan granite, the rope looping down toward me, I was just able to see heads peering over the edge at me. With my toes against the sheer wall and my hands feeling the rock trying to find something to grasp, I wondered if the line would support my weight when I fell – if my partner would be able to hold on to the slick rope, to keep me from crashing to the ground. My fingers and toes sought their first grip and step as I began. To my surprise, the next grip and step was logical and obvious – the cliff almost seemed to be helping me find my way. Puffing and steaming in the cool, humid air I hauled myself upward. After an eternity that seemed only an instant, I was at the top, gasping for breath.

The rest of our group also made it to the top. Feeling immensely relieved – no longer afraid and just a touch heroic - we gave our partners some sage advice, then traded places with them and they rappelled down to begin their ascents of route number one.

As Jerry began, Jack shouted advice. It was totally unneeded. Jerry seemed to *flow up* rocks where his father had scrambled. Where others had labored, he moved easily, hardly deigning to touch the coarse granite face. He arrived at the top breathing easily, eyes shining with delight. His slender body was wriggling with excitement and eagerness for the next climb. He looked like a puppy meeting a new friend.

Jack was waiting for him; “You’ve got to work harder, lazybones. It looked like you were going to sleep on the rocks. How many times do I have to tell you – you have to **fight** to get anywhere. Watch me next time – you might learn something for once in your life.”

Jerry’s face showed pain, and then went blank, and his body lapsed into its familiar slouch, “Cool your tool, Dad. You make such a big deal of everything.”

The whole class succeeded on climb number one. We laughed and cheered as our comrades’ heads appeared over the rim of the cliff - but none had quite the same look Jerry did.

We switched places with our partners to begin climb number two. We were all confident. No longer a fearsome foe, the cliff was now a benevolent teacher and we were masters of the subject.

Jack again attacked the cliff. He made it, but I didn’t.

I was nearly to the top, finding hand and footholds nearly as obvious as on climb number one. The cliff was no longer quite vertical, in fact, the section looked easy, when I stalled. I could find no more grips – nowhere to go – no way to make the next few feet – the next few inches. My fingers and toes clung tightly to the rock, but they had a will of their own and wouldn’t move. I couldn’t go up. I couldn’t go down. I couldn’t even move my head to **look** up or down. My left ear was pressed hard against the warm, gritty,

and blessedly solid rock. Minute crystalline pyramids next to my left eye glittered at me as I hung there. Others shouted encouragement – but it might have been wind in my ears.

Walt called, “Shall we haul you up?”

My voice croaked, “Yes, please,” and up I went, like a fish on a hook, scraping over the rough stone. At the top, I lay on my face. Jerry grinned, “No big deal, man. You should have moved back down, then over to your left – plenty of holds there.”

Over half the class joined me in failure. Minor falls bruised bodies and spirits. Euphoria vanished. The cliff leered at us now, no longer benevolent, ready to punish. Only Jerry was unchanged by climb number two.

Climb number three began on a subdued note. No one liked to fail, or to see friends fail, and there was something humiliating about being hauled up on the rope. Our comrades were supportive, but they were climbing, and we could only watch and try to cheer from the bottom.

Jack charged into #3 as he had into #1 and #2, but this wasn't a time for charging. He moved slower and slower, pausing again and again to study his situation and find somewhere to put his hands and feet to gain a few more inches. He slipped and hung by one hand for a few seconds, but regained his hold and moved on a little more – then stopped completely. He hung there, stuck to the face of the cliff.

“Do you want us to haul you up?” Walt asked.

“No, I can make it!” Jack wheezed.

We saw him making small, tentative movements to his right and left, but he didn't back down an inch. And he didn't move upward an inch. We heard his rasping breaths. We saw the sweat spreading from his armpits over the back of his red flannel shirt as his chest expanded and contracted. But he didn't move upward at all.

He must have seen a handhold off to his right, because he gathered himself and lunged. He didn't have a chance. We gasped as he dropped about eight feet before being harshly checked by the rope, and in the blink of an eye he was swinging, his back to the cliff – a forty-foot pendulum crashing into rocks at the end of each swing. He grunted harshly each time he hit the rocks.

Two instructors grabbed the rope and hauled Jack to the top. Jerry held his father and they moved back from the edge of the cliff and Jerry held Jack's shoulders as Jack hunched over and the sound of retching reached our ears. Jerry kept his arm around his father until it was over. They stood together for some time.

Jerry descended and began climb #3. Once again, he seemed to *flow* up the face rather than seeking grips and toeholds, as the rest of us did. He caressed the rock with his hands and body as he climbed, not fighting it as much as loving it. He moved like oil slowly running up hill. With little effort, no hesitation, no doubts, and no slips, he was at the top. The instructors cheered. “No big deal,” Jerry told them, glancing at his silent father. Jerry was the only one who completed climb #3.

Everyone came to the bottom. For climb #4, an instructor would handle Jerry's rope and Walt would coach from the bottom. Walt checked Jerry's harness and pointed out tricky parts of the ascent on the red-tracked black and white photo. True to form, Jerry ignored his words. He looked searchingly at Jack – was there a hint of compassion in Jerry's face? Or was it contempt? I don't see how it could have been love. Jack didn't meet his eyes.

I asked Walt, “Do you think he'll make it?”

“I doubt it. Usually, no student even makes it up route #3. Nobody's made it up route #4 for two years. We don't try it very often. There's a bad pitch about halfway up, and you can really get hurt if you slip and there's too much slack in your rope,”

I was concerned for Jack. Since his accident, he hadn't said ten words. He hadn't even made the

grudging excuses he usually did when something proved too difficult. I thought he might explode if he didn't have someone's ear to bend, but he looked at his feet and said nothing. His face was scratched and bloody where he had scraped against the sharp little granite crystals. His deeply tanned features were so pale they had a greenish cast.

"That was a nasty fall. Are you OK?" I tried to begin a conversation.

His voice faltered and he would only look at his feet, but he began to speak. "God, it was horrible. I couldn't stop swinging. I couldn't stop shaking and puking. I even peed in my pants – at least Jerry doesn't know that. He kept patting me on the back – telling me it was all right. I felt like I was five years old. But Jerry didn't mind. He just kept telling me it was all right, let it out. God, what if he tells his mother?" He fell silent.

"I doubt if he'll make it," I said. "The instructor told me even he doesn't try it very often."

"I can't believe he made it and I didn't. He beat me. He wasn't even competing and he beat me. He wasn't even trying hard and he beat me."

"On belay!" came the shout from the top, and Jerry looked hopefully at his father. Jack scrupulously examined the toes of his boots. Jerry started up the cliff.

#4 was easy for the first forty feet and Jerry flowed as cleanly as ever. Then, for the first time, he hesitated. Only for an instant, then he started flowing again, but much more slowly. As he approached eighty feet, he was barely moving – but he was moving.

Jerry stalled approaching the hundred-foot level. He was motionless for several minutes. I said to Jack, "He's not going to make it."

Jack said nothing.

Walt yelled to Jerry, "Let them haul you up."

"Gimme a minute," Jerry replied in a discouraged voice.

For the first time, Jack raised his head. He looked at the silent faces around him, one at a time – and they looked at him. Then, somehow, he seemed to look at himself. At last he gazed up at his son, clinging alone to rocks a hundred feet above. He paused for several seconds, looking as if he had found the answer to a puzzle, then shouted, "Come on, Jerry! You can do it! I know you can do it!"

Jerry still hung there, only his head moving, calculating, looking all around him for possibilities. Jack muttered to himself. He had done all he was able.

Jerry called for slack on his rope. Remembering Walt's comments, I was concerned for the boy, but Jerry knew what he was doing. He backed down the cliff about three yards and moved a bit to his left. From his new vantage point, he surveyed the situation once more. He leaned far back out from the rock face to give himself a better view. He began moving, flowing once more, this time straight to the top. The instructors raised him to his feet. Eyes on the horizon, he lifted his hands in a boxer's victory salute, a benediction to those left below. At last he lowered his head and met his father's eyes. Grinning at Jack, he joyfully pumped a fist in the air.

His father echoed the gesture, saying softly, "You did it, Jerry, you did it."

I silently cheered for them both.