

## Lessons I Learned on the Side of the Mountain

"I can't do it. I can't continue. Go up without me." I turned around, clamored over to a boulder and sat down, defeated and disappointed in my inability to finish the climb to the top. It was September 2006 and I was on an annual hiking trip in the high country of Yosemite National Park. I wanted to accompany my husband on this day's "little climb" to the top of the mountain overlooking our lakeside camp; but when faced with the last leg to the summit, I was jolted by the steepness and ruggedness of what lay ahead: several hundred feet of boulder and shale-covered rocky terrain, seemingly straight up, with no discernable path. Climbing any further could require grappling and groping my way along using my hands and feet over what seemed in my mind like a slippery slope.

"Darn it. Darn me. Dummy, why didn't you train harder? Who are you kidding...you're not a kid, you're not in shape! You can't climb like this at such a high altitude. You're just a lump. It's your own fault." It was my shrill inner voice of "The Defeater". On and on The Defeater went: "You're not good at anything, you can't even finish this."

My husband continued up without me. "He doesn't care about me. He's selfish. I'm all alone on the side of this mountain. I'm scared. I'm lonely. I'm sad. There's no one around. What if I can't find my way back to camp? "Yada yada yada. On and on they went...the sorry-ass laments of The Defeater. "Shut up", I said out loud.

I yelled for Ron, but he was already out of voice range. I grappled my way to a boulder near a scraggly tree which I could use as a landmark. Trying not to cry, I took a deep breath, closed my eyes and relaxed, the best way I have learned to quiet the voice of The Defeater.

I made a conscious choice to focus my eyes, ears, and mind on what could enrich me in this moment. I opened my senses and my heart to see the blue sky, to tune into the sounds of nature, to listen to the breezes and birds, and to notice the vastness of God's landscape stretched around me. I drank it all in, and began to appreciate the abilities of my body to get me this far. Feelings of gratitude, plus renewed energy and empowerment began to fill my being. Slowly the landscape seemed to change, as well.

"Well, kid, here you are. What are your choices in this situation?", the soft inner voice asked. This is the voice I call The Lover...the voice you can't hear when you're frantic. Hmmm. Taking stock of my situation, I decided that I had 3 choices: to quit and wait for Ron to return, to quit and go back alone to camp, or to continue to the summit. "I'm not a quitter", I heard myself exclaiming out loud. I chose to listen to this, and repeat it as my "inner fuel" to the top.

"Good for you", The Lover said in my head. "You know you can complete this, and you deserve to feel good about yourself. Go for it."

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I turned and surveyed the area surrounding me. Hikers often create trail markers for other hikers by piling rocks on top of another, forming little towers, called "cairns". Suddenly, I spotted one of these markers. Because of the rockiness of the mountain, this could be easy to miss (especially in my frantic state!), but there it was! I rejoiced in this sign to continue my trek. With renewed energy, and a prayer of gratitude for the unknown "cairn builders", I started in the direction of the trail.

"I'm not a quitter", I announced as I clamored a few feet toward the summit. "You're doing great", The Lover said to me. I stopped, looking for the next cairn. There it is! Then, another prayer of gratitude for the cairn builders. "I'm not a quitter", I'd say. "You're doing great!" The Lover affirmed.

Once again I stopped, looking for the next cairn. There it is! Then, gratitude and, "I'm not a quitter". "You're doing great!" Over and over again this sequence played out, carrying me up the side of the mountain. "Stop, look, listen", I started telling myself. The clarity of pathway and ability grew.

Fears would assail me: "What if I can't find Ron at the top, what if I can't make it back down the rocky terrain, what if, what if.....??" "Stop, look, and listen. Everything will work out", The Lover said.

I don't know how much time went by, but with great exultation, I made it to the top...to the wonderful, broad summit, with spectacular views, refreshing winds, glacial formations, little meadows and flowers, and even more trails to explore. It was a feast for the senses and the soul! As I looked down at the lake far below, our camp at its edge, I was nourished and enthralled by what I'd accomplished to overcome my doubts, my fears, and the voice of The Defeater. Ron and I celebrated at the top together.

"Stop, look and listen", The Lover said. "Stop, relax, and open your mind to possibilities. See what's around you...what gifts can you enjoy right now? See how far you've come. Look at what it took to get there. Look at how many people before you marked the path for you to follow. Look at what you are grateful for in this moment. You're doing great, you're able to do this, I love you, you're special, you're worthy of wonderful accomplishments and feelings". YES!!

This experience crystallized a way of dealing with life. I've found that when faced with a seemingly overwhelming challenge, one of the wisest ways to handle it is stop, look, and listen.

First, stop. Oftentimes NOT doing anything is the most powerful way to deal with a situation. I love the twisted saying that goes, "Don't just do something...sit there!" Stop trying to be so darned busy! Breathe. Bathe mind and soul in quietness. This provides space and time for possibilities to emerge, to inspire, and to empower. Take this time to express gratitude for what you do have in this moment...and let gratitude empower your spirit.

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Then, look. What can inspire and feed your spirit right now? Who has gone before you, leaving little "trail markers" toward your goal? What processes, pathways, or possibilities have you missed? Relax, think, and carefully review your environment.

Finally, listen. When we stop, breathe, relax, express gratitude we invite that "small still voice" of love, guidance, comfort, wisdom--that voice of truth--to be heard. Start speaking to yourself via THAT voice, and let it be your encourager, your guide.

You know, no one ever said that life was going to be easy; and, Lord knows, I've had other challenges to face since that day on the mountain. But, by taking time to stop, look and listen, we'll each quietly, slowly, surely find the strength, and the path, to the top.