Perspectives From Hard Rock

Lindsey Gallagher
I’m clinging onto small nodules of rock with a grip appropriate for a life-or-death situation. My fingers grasp a puny hold, my toes just barely rest on the rocks below me. I’m less than sixty feet up, but I’m stuck. I’ve been in the same spot for over five minutes desperately searching for a piece of rock my fingers can cradle to allow me to thrust myself upwards. I move my left hand and wrap my fingers around a protruding piece of rock. My left arm is now outstretched while my right hand remains near my chest refusing to let go of the hold I used to remain in my state of immobility. My toes are the only real balance I have in this unfortunate position. My forearms flex as I grip the rock. I’m over-gripping in attempts to compensate for the lack of security I feel on the open rock face.

I pause for many long seconds, unsure of what I’m waiting for. I’m sure it was the courage to trust the hold and continue climbing because I am not in this position to relax or enjoy the view. I don’t want to fall, yet it seems that either position I take brings me uncomfortably close to slipping off. I’m quite petrified. If I were to fall, the rope I’m attached to—the one anchored to not one, but two trees—at the cliff top will catch me. My dad, who stands at the bottom belaying me, will pull the loose rope connected to his harness through his ATC—Air Traffic Controller, that is—essentially locking the rope, preventing me from spending any additional time free from the rock, hanging curiously. I still have trust issues with the rope, though; any fall, even five feet, seems deadly to me. It’s hard not to feel vulnerable when the tops of trees are level with my vision.

This is the second time I’ve been rock climbing in my life. The first time, six years ago, I was there because my dad organized a guided climbing session, not at all because of any real interest in climbing. We were in New Hampshire on routes that were surely easy if someone so inexperienced as myself could complete them. I remember regretting wearing tight plaid shorts as my legs stretched over the rocks; I was more concerned about ripping my pants than the climbing. But, I also recall having a similar sense of fear, a fear rooted in my lack of trust in the rope’s strength and the unfamiliarity of clinging to a rock face.
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It was only quite recently that I became interested in the sport. Months ago, I saw the documentary *Free Solo* which chronicles Alex Honnold’s climb up El Capitan using nothing more than his body as equipment. Next, *The Dawn Wall*, a striking film about Tommy Caldwell and Kevin Jorgeson’s ascent of El Cap’s Dawn Wall. I knew three big names of the sport; that was it.

Then came a visit to Yosemite, the great National Park tucked into the vast California wilderness. Yosemite, John Muir’s beloved: the valley of lodgepole pines, their coarse, maze-like bark, cascading waterfalls, choirs of roaring water. The entire valley is surrounded by sheer granite walls, but only one—a three-thousand-foot wall—sticks out by its nose: El Capitan. It’s shadow towered over the winding park roads. From the backseat, I couldn’t crane my neck high enough to see its peak. As we drove, I craved a true vision of its grandeur. We stopped at a pull-off. I was simply awestruck by this mass; this mass of rock, slow-moving time, crushing pressure. It felt too big to even understand just how big it was. But, then I saw a speck in motion midway up the wall: a climber. Now, I was an ant. We were all ants saluting *The Chief*, this unmoving body. The mere specks struck me. I felt the impulse to put my hands on the rock—to feel its grooves and follow it up. We love to have our feet in intimate contact with the ground. We belong grounded, we tell ourselves. Everything pulls us down and we let it, unconsciously chained. We want to be grounded, yet I longed to be suspended.

When I returned from my thirty-three-day pilgrimage across the country, it didn’t take much to convince my dad—a Forest Ranger and climbing enthusiast—to take me to the walls. We drove four hours north from our home to the Shawangunks—”The Gunks”—and I watched as the forests grew thick, the flat topography of my Long Island home giving way to green, rolling hills. We pulled off the thru-way arriving in New Paltz—practically the best place in New York to be a climber. When we arrived at the Peter’s Kill climbing area, I followed my dad in a lost puppy dog sort of way as he unloaded various ropes, biners, and strange contraptions from the car into his pack. He handed me a rope of hefty weight and told me to sling it over my back to wear like a backpack. With every step, the rope unraveled from its knot making the straps grow in length. Quite unlike any other backpack I’d worn, this one fell apart as I
wore it. Luckily, it was a short walk to the base of the “Bunk Bed” wall. I looked up at it, noticing a series of ledges, sheer rock faces, cross-cutting cracks.

What I failed to consider prior to our arrival was what the set-up involved. Almost an hour passed by the time we hiked to the top, strung ropes around two trees for our anchor, flaked the rope out—feeling as it slid through our fingers for frays, tied the climbing rope into the anchor, slung the rope over the cliffside, hiked back down, untangled the rope from the tree that ensnared it on the cliff, put our harnesses on, forced our feet into the oddly-shaped, uncomfortable climbing shoes, tied our harnesses into the climbing rope, double checked our knots, and, at last, began climbing.

We climbed well into the day stopping shortly for lunch. Even at this point, I was exhausted from both the climbing itself and the extensive set-up process. We ate our PB&Js in silence, eating quickly out of hunger. A bit distraught, a pit in my stomach gnawed at me. Climbing wasn’t what I thought it would be. It was a lot more set-up, knot-tying, and preparation than it was climbing. The routes I completed in the morning were relatively easy even for someone of my caliber. I was let down; my pointed excitement weathered down as the rocks on the cliffs around me. It wasn’t until after lunch that my sullen mood took a turn. My dad and I watched another group of climbers attempt a more difficult route earlier in the day, and being that our anchor was close by, we wanted to give it a try ourselves. Watching the older climber before, it was obvious they were more simply a “dyno.”

And so, I did it—barely. Again, I had to make my next move fast for my weight rested on my weakening left arm. My right hand kept me pinned to the rock, but it remained useless in moving me up. It now became about finding footholds to raise my body to a less compromising position. Only then could I move my right hand to meet my left and restore balance. I moved upwards, by “smearing” or just tapping my feet against the rock, not touching any particular holds, using the front of my—actually my dad’s—slightly-too large climbing shoes and friction. Moments later, I pulled myself up over my hands, ungracefully rolling over the ledge at the top of the crux—a “mansion move.” Hard part done. I looked to the ground with a certain ardor. Sweat dripped down my forehead. It ran over my back. Lungs heaved. My arms felt drained, zapped of any strength. My hands, interestingly, felt as though they couldn’t grasp a thing. Yet, I had done it. But, then I looked to the top; my short-lived celebration ended. I had not yet finished. So, I located a hold for my foot and stretched my arms up, running my hands across the wall feeling the coarse rock for a divot, a hold, a nodule, anything, large enough to grip.

After the crux, the climbing seemed effortless. Each move brought me further up to my goal; no more did I have to pause to search for a hold or plan out moves in advance. This continued for about forty feet,
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top. I'm fearful beyond a comforting limit, and to add to my terror, my
calls for strength from my arms went unanswered, the grip strength in
my hands almost none. But, this route—the most difficult one of the
day—made me fall in love with climbing.

Since an early age, I was a runner. Much of my middle and high
school experience were centered around the sport. Being decently fast—

enough so that I won a few races—I naturally loved it. I adored hard
days of training, memorizing times, following the professionals, and
doing anything that made me faster. I grew up in the altogether familiar
world of running. People knew me as a runner, I knew training concepts,
prestigious races—you could ask me any question on the sport, and I
would passionately spew back an answer.

So, coming into rock climbing—a sport I knew nothing about—was
strange. I felt out of place, helpless in a way. I couldn't go off climbing on
my own in the same way I train for my cross-country seasons in solitude
during the summer months. I relied on my dad and his expertise. Knowing
little, I spent much of the time I wasn't climbing asking questions. How
does this piece of gear work? How do you tie that knot again? How does
it work when you climb on your own? What kind of climbing is this
we are doing, again? What does “sport climbing” mean? When do you
use “pro”—protection? My mind whirred developing, I'm sure, the most
obvious questions—which I often felt quite stupid even asking. Sure, I
over-gripped the rocks in fear of falling. I didn't yet trust the ropes to
keep me safe. I hated leaning back into the open air and belaying down.
The various knots and protocols for set-up were intimidating, seemingly
impossible to one day remember, let alone reproduce on my own. I felt
awkward. I moved with rigidity and timidity, looking always to my dad
to make sure I was doing everything right Undoubtedly, a beginner. Yet,
I loved it.

While climbing, I felt free. In a sport so inherently different from
running, there were no expectations. None from others and, better yet,
none from myself. I simply tried routes with no perception of too hard or,
even, too easy. I didn't know that using specific techniques would make
the climbs easier. I just went, using my limbs in any way that brought
me skyward. I learned to celebrate the small victories. Remembering
how to tie a knot. Belaying my dad slightly faster than the previous
route. Knowing the name for a particular move. I'd smile wide when I
accomplished even the most pathetic of tasks. I was inspired knowing
I had so much more to learn, so much strength to gain, so much of a

climbing culture to discover.

When I climbed, everything escaped my mind. Except the rock.
Once on the wall, no desire became greater than wanting to reach the
top. Go up. Counter the forces pressing the opposite way. Go up. Keep
going up in spite of all pulling down. It felt natural, cathartic, liberating.
It is so simple, yet somehow so meaningful. Climbing is little more
than puzzling over a rock in search of places to position oneself so as to
continue upward. There was a certain kind of frustrating exhilaration
from repeatedly falling off the rock while trying to figure out a problem.
There was a painful burn in the finger, hand, and arm muscles so
infrequently used. There was a palpable rush of adrenaline in trying to
cling to the rock to avoid falling off. Life wasn't truly endangered, but
there was something invigorating—fun even—about feeling like it was.
Clinging on to the rock, investing all possible strength to avoid falling
off, one realizes their incredible want to live, an overwhelming awareness
of what it means to be alive.

The rock has an unforgiving nature. It exists with its cracks, ledges,
and bumps without any particular desire to make itself easy to climb.
As a climber, you cannot change the rock on which you depend. As a
climber, you do not question this stagnant mass, you accept, even cherish
the holds that exist and create a way up. As a climber, you are at the
mercy of the rock; it does not care in the slightest if you fall. Despite
this, I found myself smiling enough that my cheek muscles began to
throb like my arms. I'd struggle up a route for countless minutes, only
to spend mere seconds at the top before belaying down. Then I was back
on the wall, in pursuit again of the top. It was a meaningless task, yet an
honest undertaking. Unfailingly, it delivered a deep satisfaction when the
perplexing, near-impossible seeming was completed. Now, all I needed
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