

Up, Up and Awry on Mt. Jefferson

About the Fear of Falling

Fear of Falling is the climber's equivalent - and offshoot, actually - of the fear of heights. What then, the casual reader may ask, is the difference?

The difference is that most phobics manage to avoid whatever it is that scares them. Acrophobics stay off flagpoles and high cliffs, claustrophobics stay out of closets, shoe boxes, etc., and agoraphobics stay at home.

But, acrophobia or not, climbing is done in high, and ever higher, places (hence, climbing).

Every piece of climbing equipment is designed with falling in mind - preventing falls, stopping falls, shortening falls - providing the phobic with a constant reminder that he or she should beware. Plus there are variables. A climber might take every precaution to avoid a fall, but is powerless to stop a dislodged rock from bouncing off his head or a large slab of snow - to which he is firmly anchored - from breaking away and sliding down the mountainside.

And there are the surprises: rain, snow, lightning, fog, snow-covered crevasses, high winds, dizziness, numb fingers, fogged glasses...any one of which can permanently cure a climber's fears by the best-known method - confrontation. But confronting one's fear of falling, especially when roped to other climbers, is considered a violation of climbing safety rules. Not to mention being extremely bad form.

In a nutshell, a fear of falling sufferer is not necessarily afraid of high places - so long as he or she has reasonable assurances of staying there.

The Climb

Climbing is resigning one's self to the long haul - steeling for a day of exertion, frustration and discomfort that any sensible person would

parcel out over a forty-hour week. Or at least put off until tomorrow.

As we trudge through the predawn darkness, having toasted the morning with a cup of freeze-dried coffee and I ecstatic over my bowl of mush, I think to myself, "This would sure be boring if I were in shape." But I'm not, and so I'm not. Bored, I mean. There's plenty to think about, mostly concerning some early warning signs of impending leg fatigue and a too-heavy pack. At this point my thoughts constitute what must have been Jim Fixx's inspiration for *The Complete Book of Running*:

"Left, right, left, right, left, right." Fearing copyright infringement, I slow my pace.

After two hours of slipping and stumbling in the dark, the sun rises and we put away our flashlights and slip and stumble along in full daylight. Puffing and panting, perspiring heavily and barely able to keep up the pace, I'm thinking to myself, "This is the life."

Falling is the furthest thing from my mind.

First light reveals an ominous cloud hanging over the summit pinnacle. Though nice to behold from a distance, such clouds usually indicate damp, windy conditions for the climber.

We are not daunted by the sight for long, however, as it soon engulfs us, too, confirming our predictions of wind and dampness.

Jefferson's South Ridge is a DOWN escalator with boulders. Two hours of toiling and cursing, two hours of slipping down and dodging rocks, two hours of what seemed like walking in place on the loose sand - that is the South Ridge. To make matters worse, the top of the ridge - Red Saddle - is obscured by mist and haze the entire time, making it impossible to measure our progress.

After two hours the scattered remnants of our party - that is, the slow climbers and the fast climbers - come together to puzzle over our exact location on the mountain. It is unlikely that we have strayed onto another ridge because that would have meant crossing a snowfield or glacier, so that is out. Climbing veterans point out that it is impossible to climb past the summit, so that theory is also discarded.

In the midst of the conversation, jutting through the mist like the prow of a grounded supertanker (Liberian registry, likely), the summit pinnacle appears to much ooh-ing and aah-ing and clicking cameras.

Relief. The end of the South Ridge. The beginning of the end of the climb. All that remains is the west side traverse and a quick 500 feet to the summit. A piece of cake.

Falling never even enters my mind. Much.

The fatigue that had been building steadily on the South Ridge disappears miraculously as we pass over Red Saddle and begin the west side traverse. Almost as miraculously, Fear of Falling appears in its place. Edging gingerly across the steep snow, I look back to see that a large U of slack rope has developed between myself and the following climber. Either I am going too slow or he is going too fast. It has to be the latter, because the lead man sets the pace. I pass this information on. Soon the rope is taut once more, the party struts jauntily across the remaining way and the Fear passes.

At the 10,400' level on the north flank of the summit pinnacle, the zeal of the climbing party begins to fade. As mist and fog envelopes the party, seeping under clothing and fogging glasses, it becomes apparent that there is no way

up. No safe way up, that is. The route - a virtual stairway under good conditions - is covered with a coarse, crumbly snow about the texture and consistency of a fifteen-minute-old snowcone (that's laymen's language. The technical term for it is "mushy").

So, the door is shut. Six long hours of slow, laborious trudging down the tube. One leg injury (not my leg, fortunately), a dented camera and near-terminal exhaustion, both mine, for nothing.

But little disappointment - except for a couple of obligatory "hot dangs" - registers on the faces of the climbers. Perched for half an hour on tiny footholds in the steep snow, cold and uncertain, many eyes had for some time been cast downward - 400 feet downward - to the base of the pinnacle and safety.

At last the decision comes down. Can it. Try again another day. Save our necks.

But getting down can be just as tricky as getting up, particularly in steep snow, and for one wild moment I flash on an image of three roped climbers hurtling over the precipice to the snow below, and a full-tilt, record-breaking descent down Russell Glacier (not a bad way to avoid the long walk down, except that it's on the wrong side of the mountain).

But, as on the west side, everyone performs flawlessly after a little coaxing and threatening and we are down in a fraction of the time it took to get up.

Back in camp we ponder an enigmatic, oddly disproportionate, snow-woman that has appeared in our absence. No signs of her builders remain - no sleds, no mittens, no galoshes. Nothing.

An inexplicable craving for snowcones persists through the night.

In Retrospect

I was once told by a veteran airline traveller that anything that you can walk away from was a good landing - this after a lurching, bone-jarring touchdown and rapid deceleration.

The same can be said of mountain climbing. The Cascades Range, stretching from northern California to southern British Columbia, is often underestimated by novice climbers who consider it's ten- to fourteen-thousand foot peaks a walk in the park.

For instance, search and rescue personnel at Mt. Hood - reputed to be the most-climbed mountain in the U.S. - each year bring a dozen or so climbers off the mountain's "simple" Grade I slopes. In the past two years five climbers have perished in Oregon alone - two on Mt. Hood, two on Mt. Jefferson and one on South Sister.

So, in this respect our climb was a good one. Considering the overall experience level of the climbers in the party, - from zero to quite a bit - it was pretty amazing that we got off as easily as we did (acute sunburn, cold feet and one badly bruised leg).

Not reaching the summit (by only a hundred feet or so) was the single failure suffered all day. To some this might render the entire trip a failure. But the group had already successfully navigated pitches that would be considered at least as difficult as the summit pinnacle under better conditions. The decision to call off the summit climb - almost unanimous - was purely one of safety. There is nothing overly cautious about avoiding possible danger.

Besides, there are other rewards in climbing other than signing the Mazamas official summit register. For one, there is no better, more spectacular view to be found anywhere.

Like the man said, anything that you can walk away from is a good climb.



Text and Photos By Olney Patt, Jr.

(Far Left) Warren Scaroni on the north flank of the summit pinnacle. The summit is just out of the picture on the right, about 100 feet up. It was at this point that the climb was halted because of poor snow conditions. (Left) South of the summit pinnacle, just below Red Saddle. The climbers are, from left, Rick Krause, Ron Recker, Debbie Johndro, Paul Krusic, Bob Murphy, Warren Scaroni, Rob Canora and Barbara Scaroni. All are employees of the B.I.A. Forestry Department. (Above Right) Warren Scaroni laces on crampons that will provide footing in the steep snow on the west side traverse and the summit pinnacle. (Below Right) The west side traverse. Soft snow made this a serious hazard on the way out, but it was crossed without incident.

