

TRUE TO SELF

Lies and delusions in the mountains

By Majka Burhardt

I'M A MOUNTAIN GUIDE — which might mean I'm a control-obsessed thinly veiled masochist or that I'm a climber who likes teaching people how to stay safe in the mountains. It definitely means taking risks. I've guided thousands of pitches from 5.0 to 5.11, ice, big mountains, and long hikes. Although I'm not a full-time guide anymore, I've worked, loved, and lost in the guiding world for a dozen years.

As a young guide, I refused to admit fear or apprehension. Part of this was being a 21-year-old female guiding 50-year-old men around the glaciated peaks of the North Cascades. But guiding didn't give itself easily to me. Injuries, academia, and life always intervened so that I was constantly forced to question my choice.

Being an overly analytical person, I decided to tackle my apprehension from a logical angle: I would write an article on female guides. And so I interviewed nine top female guides and alpinists. In the end, I wrote a neat, tidy story that no one wanted to publish. Now it's four years later, and four of those nine women are dead. Sue Nott, Karen McNeill, Laura Kellog, and Christine Boskoff all died in the mountains within a year of each other, in 2006/07. None were guiding. You can say they were all pushing big routes, that all were taking chances, but when is climbing not taking a chance?

These women are not statistics. I have pages of notes from each. Quotes like, "Guiding? Me and guiding? Every time I think about it I realize I have a hard enough time taking care of myself" (Karen McNeill). And, "My philosophy about climbing and guiding? You need to carry your weight, be a good psychiatrist, and learn how to let things go" (Christine Boskoff).

WHEN I THINK OF DYING while climbing—about holds breaking and my body slamming into rock—my heart pounds, my palms sweat, and I can't catch my breath. When I'm climbing and these thoughts enter, I can barely hold onto the biggest jug. So what happens when my job is altogether to remove death from the equation, but the thoughts come anyway?

It's early September 2002 at Lumpy Ridge. After a long summer guiding, I'm out with my friend Jeff. We warm up on a 5.8, *Sorcerer*. On the second pitch, the crack disappears and a sticky face takes its place. Out on the sharp end, I cannot move—I cannot picture going up but only falling down and cheese-grating. I make a move, I come down; I make it again, I come down again. I regularly climb several grades harder than this; I regularly guide several grades harder than this. Today, I cannot make it. I lower off and hand Jeff the rack.

"Too much guiding?" he asks.

"How'd you guess?" I reply.

Jeff, once a guide himself, has climbed with enough other guides to know the glazed look when you finally let down and let it in. Maybe there is a limit to how many pitches you can do on which you're putting yourself out there, on which your belayer understands gravity in theory but still lets go of the rope to scratch her ear. I'd had more than 40 clients that summer and I wasn't even guiding full time. The numbers had taken their toll.

FIVE YEARS LATER: July 2007 in Eldorado Canyon. I'm on the sharp end, guiding the perfect client. "5.10 all day," he'd said on the phone. When he told me he led 5.9, I asked if he wanted to swing a few leads. "I'm on vacation," he said. "No responsibility."

What he didn't say but we both know is true is that I am the one being paid to be responsible—to take and manage the risks. That is my job. I am supposed to do this even though three weeks before, for the first time in my life, my foot slipped and I took a 25-foot sideways fall on the Diamond. That same weekend, another friend fell head first on the same wall, shattering a quarter of his teeth. And another friend helped carry a buddy with a shattered femur from a crag in Aspen. But none of this matters to my client. He signed a waiver. Nothing bad is supposed to happen.

This works... for two pitches. But soon I'm shaking on 5.10a. I'm placing a piece every three feet, climbing past it, reaching below to clean and place it again, sweating off edges as big as truck stops. I know my client sees this. I wait for him at the next belay, and then ask if he minds taking a break. I tell him about my fall, Pete's fall, Jonny's rescue. I admit to being scared. My client pats my shoulder and tells me it will be alright. And then, miraculously, it is... for that day.

ADMITTING WE ARE SCARED in the mountains is never easy. It's bad juju to talk about dying when you're on a climb on which you really might die. But what about finally letting in the dark realization you can always die climbing (or anywhere)? Most of us don't—it opens up the door of darkest possibility. Instead, we talk about it after the fact, after the danger has passed.



Twelve years ago, I'd tell my mother climbing was no more dangerous than driving. That was before I'd been to a half-dozen climber funerals in the same picnic area in Eldorado Canyon.

Part of the reason for my fear is that this community—in particular, the guiding circle—diminishes with every month. Twelve years ago, I'd tell my mother climbing was no more dangerous than driving. That was before I'd been to a half-dozen climber funerals in the same picnic area in Eldorado Canyon. That was before I'd spent one of those ceremonies watching the pregnant belly of a new widow, waiting to see her baby kick, as if that sign of life might make things OK again.

We fool ourselves that what we are doing makes sense. We go to funerals and tell

each other our friend died doing what she loved. We surround ourselves with climbers, call them "our people," because they understand us. But in the process of writing this essay, I've thought so much about death and responsibility and consequences that sometimes I cannot go more than eight feet above gear without hyperventilating.

I think daily about the climbers I know who've died. I see their smiles fading as they come to realize a snow-cave bivy has become a tomb. I feel their excitement at flying over their perfect alpine-ice objective, moments before their plane smashes into

the side of the mountain. I see them confidently kicking steps up blue-white snow that, without their knowing, hangs moments from catastrophic slide. I see them plugging a cam into a crack that is actually a rope-slicer block.

I see these things and I try my best not to see them. I see them and I make a choice. I see them and I decide to climb.



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