

A LIFE CHANGING HIKE

Time dwarfs us. It outweighs our triumphs, our sacred days and our times of grief. We take the days for granted, one much like another, but it only takes one day to change our entire life's trajectory: The birth of a child, the loss of innocence, the death of a loved one, the loss of a dream, or the chance to realize a dream.

Today would be such a day and I adorned my pack with butterfly wings to celebrate it. I knew a long time ago that I was not making this journey through the Grand Canyon out of my ego, but because my soul pleaded. I have stood on this edge before, fantasizing about what my life could be, but only to willingly be led away by the false, yet comforting promises of Fear.

It was still dark and a little crisp when we began the hike. The lack of artificial light and clear sky revealed stars I didn't even know existed, I was struck with wonder, yet the only prayer I could utter was, "*Oh, wow!*"

Not far down the trail, however, the wind picked up and the blowing sand swirled like snow flurries in my headlamp. I strained to see the lights of the other hikers snake ever downward. My husband, Keith, and I were the last of twelve. We hiked with the sweeper, Lee who volunteered to stay in the rear and make sure that we all got out okay. Being afraid of the dark, falling and heights, I was already being challenged and we had only just begun our descent down the South Kaibab Trail.

This was something that I had been training for the past nine months, the same period as human gestation. Like giving birth, I was ready to get it over with and not ready at the same time. I was eighty pounds overweight. What was I thinking to hike to the Colorado River and back in the same day? The Voice was starting to wake up and it was telling me that it was not too late to turn back. I could use my Achilles as an excuse. Everyone would understand. Barb, an intense and intelligent earth mother-type, taped it for me last night. I tested it, but honestly couldn't find any pain. Whether the tape would help or not, I wasn't sure, but her care gave me the confidence to continue.

I was also thankful Lee was with us. She knew that I was a slow hiker, yet volunteered anyway. She must know I can do it. When I first met her four years ago, I thought she was a bit arrogant. Now I know that what I see in others is just a projection of what I try to hide in myself. This shadow-side of ourselves is our biggest enemy and our greatest ally. It took arrogance to get me here and I thought I would take it even more to finish the nearly eighteen miles before sunset.

Right now, I was looking forward to sunrise. Prior hikers said it is the one of the most beautiful sights they have ever seen. Appropriately, it greeted us around "Ooh-Aah Point," a little over a mile down. The two-way radio crackled with news from the hikers still on the rim that they were meeting for breakfast. It

was difficult to imagine that millions of people were getting ready for work or school at this very instant, at the dawn of this day.

The light changes the Canyon constantly and now the red rock seemed to glow. I drank in the magic and let it fill every cell of my body, giving thanks for all that has led me here and storing its energy for what lay ahead. The view stretches out in a complete panoramic in all directions and we can see other ridges, like the one we are following, along with hundreds of deep ravines and buttes with their sloping sides. A few formations have descriptive names like Isis Temple, The Battleship and Cheops Pyramid. Some have been illuminated by the sun, while others still sleep in shadow. The Canyon seizes the entirety of our being. It has captured every sense and is demanding all our strength. We cannot help but be humbled by the immensity and grandeur of it.

A jogger passed us at Skeleton Point and I shook my head in amazement as she glided down towards the river. I planted my poles and tested each step before moving on, still afraid of falling, but now knowing that I would do this. The trail got narrow with steep drop offs, and I talked to myself, *scary, scary, scary... no problem, I've got this*. If Lee was irked with me, she didn't show it. She said to only do 'what I was comfortable with.' We laughed at the irony. We have been out less than two hours and the National Park Service does not recommend hiking past this point on day hikes. On every map and at each trail head, the words are emblazoned, "**Under no circumstances should you attempt to hike from the rim to the river and back in one day!**" Exclamation mark included.

At Tip Off, the rim of the inner gorge, the jogger passed us again on the way back up. There is always someone to both put us in our place and inspire us as to what is possible. I said some lame, encouraging words. Tip Off is the beginning of the last series of switchbacks before we reach the black bridge that will take us 300 feet across the Colorado River. The Glen Canyon Dam has turned the Colorado from its virgin red to an unusual shade of green, but today it is the color of chocolate milk.

The trail is impossibly steep; the next 1.7 jarring miles will drop us another 1,600 feet. My quads tremble from the stress of keeping me upright and threaten to throw me over to the forces of gravity. I really couldn't blame them if they did revolt. This was a lot of ask of anyone.

Sean and Rose, young and like a breath of fresh air, find comic relief and point out a squirrel made green from the current layer of shale we're hiking over. This really is some kind of wonderland and the squirrel makes it seem even more surreal. The Canyon is a mile deep and we are nearly at the bottom. It is hard to fathom that we are really here and the sheer walls make us wonder how getting here was even possible.

I was thankful for the two mules trains which made us stop and give them the right of way. The first carried the people who stayed at Phantom Ranch the

night before and the second was loaded with their luggage. Most cannot fathom hiking the Grand Canyon; I cannot ever imagine taking a mule. I know that they are better prepared for this than I am, but still I chose to remain doubtful as I watch mule and rider take to the outside of the trail walking perilously close to the edge.

I pictured Phantom Ranch as a sort of Shangri-la, a mythical place that few get to visit. Second only to the Great Smokey Mountains in numbers, around 4.5 million people visit the Canyon each year and only twenty-two percent of them venture below the rim. Far fewer ever get to Phantom Ranch, which consists of a campground, a small group of cabins, dormitories and canteen. Those people with Phantom Ranch t-shirts are revered for making it. Before internet marketing, the only place to get one was at the bottom of the Grand Canyon.

The inner gorge is an average twenty degrees warmer than the rim and it was starting to get hot. The sandy trail made me ornery as it slowed me down further. We had descended 4,800 feet in the course of seven miles and I didn't care anymore about visiting here; I just wanted to move on, forgetting the work I had come here to do. But, this is why I made the journey. I am back in time. The rock exposed here is over 1.7 billion years old. Creation is laid bare. We have come back through pages of time. Like stacked books; each era is exposed and documented as a different hue and layer in the canyon wall. I break the silence and pointlessly try to stomp the red dust off my hiking shoes.

Near the bank of the river, we pass kivas, pits used for religious rituals, left behind by the Ancient Puebloans. I recognize and respect this ritual underworld. I have come here to retrieve fallen parts of my self that I abandoned long ago; to be made whole and the symbolic struggle of climbing up and out and dragging them along with me. I later realized that my butterfly wings had an even deeper meaning in this time and place. I was to learn that the word psyche in Greek means both butterfly and soul. This struggle is the purification of my soul, and healing of my psyche, the culmination of all my trials and tribulations brought together in this place to be transformed from the troubled sleep of unconsciousness to conscious wisdom. However, I was foolish to think that transformation is possible by just integrating a sense of the sacred into the mundane.

The rest stop is short as we need to be out of Phantom Ranch by 10 a.m. It will take us twice as long to hike out as it did down and our goal is to be out before dark, eight hours away. My husband has his own reasons for being here and purchased the coveted tee. He laid an offering of tobacco at the Bright Angel Trailhead and we set off again.

Under my breath, I called to the lost parts of myself and naming them one by one; creative, motherly, courageous, athletic, capable ... worthy, I apologize for their neglect and promise to honor them, bringing them to the surface and

reincorporating them into my life. I had hoped I would have time to be a bit more reflective, but the trail takes a lot of mental discipline. You are forced to be present in each moment by the sheer physical challenge.

I noticed the trail ahead was littered with rocks from a slide and I would have to use extra care, and like most things, failed to notice the one that tripped me up. Keith said it was a perfect lunge on my part, trekking poles going out to the side, but with my right knee coming down hard on a pointed rock. I swiveled on to my bottom, holding my bloody knee and trying to hold back the tears. The cut was deep but I didn't allow any thoughts of how am I going to make it out now, I couldn't. There was no other way except to walk out. Keith used the precious water from his pack to clean out the dirt and tried to hold back tears himself as he told God that this isn't the way it is supposed to be. He later told me that God answered that this is the way it had to be.

Lee administered anti-biotic ointment and bandaged it while Gary, a fellow hiker and kindred soul, documented it with his camera. I used my bandana to secure the bandage and slowly picked my way onward. Gary was a gentleman and stayed with us for the next 4.5 miles to Indian Gardens. I knew he was making sure that I was going to be okay and didn't want to leave me behind with Lee and Keith if I needed help. My entire leg below the knee was bruising and blood was pooling in my ankle.

There are moments of despair, like in the heaviness of grief, when you just can't take it anymore, when you don't think the pain will ever end. Coming up the switchbacks of Devil's Corkscrew, I wanted to give in, to give up, and again was tempted to abandon all that I had come here to do. I was exhausted and defeated. I have heard that old Indians would just lay upon the earth and surrender their soul when it was their time to die and allow the earth to reclaim their body. I could have done the same.

It was in this moment of humiliation and surrender that the real transformation took place. I could no longer deny that I was in need of community, or that I had it all under control. Having been ostracized and feeling rejected by life, I was leery of relationships and fiercely independent. Yet, on my own, I would never have attempted this hike and I wasn't going to make it out without the support of my, my what, my friends? I apologized to them, to myself and to the universe for falling, for putting the burden of worry upon them, for goofing up, for not being good enough, for my despair, and for all that I had ever done wrong. Lee said that there was nothing to be sorry for. It was the true meaning of forgiveness as it was immediate. To be in a state of acceptance and forgiveness is being in a state of non-judgment. You forgive before there is even the need. I was absolved.

Both Lee and later my dad knew intuitively my injury was a battle scar and with it came the victory that I was down here for. Spiritual milestones are not made in front of the alter on Sunday mornings. Faith gets us moving, but it is

action and its trials that transform us. As I emerged from my despair I noticed how green the desert was. Large white trumpet shaped flowers known as datura were in bloom along with asters, and beautiful delicate red flowers I could not identify. With the flowers, there were butterflies. We were reaching Indian Gardens, a virtual oasis, complete with a small creek and shade from huge cottonwood trees. I put my feet up and rested for a good while.

It was also grace that helped renew my energy, released the pain and lifted me the final 4.9 miles after Indian Gardens and through another series of steep and grueling switchbacks known as Jacob's Ladder. We were hit with a brief shower before the sun came out again and I turned to look back down the trail to see a rainbow arcing into the inner gorge. It was the promise that the worst was behind and the hope of new beginnings. This time I cried with joy and thankfulness for this incredible journey and the lessons it had taught me, the beauty of the Grand Canyon and all the people who were here with me.

Thom has hiked the Grand Canyon for nine straight years. His encyclopedic knowledge and compassion make him a natural teacher and I heard his smile come over the radio like a beacon, the first group had hit 1.5 mile house. It was well before sunset and we were almost home! We were rallied when he and Scott, another veteran hiker, met us a half mile down the trail and walked us to the rendezvous point where coach and the whole team were waiting to greet us with shouts of celebration and huge hugs. Lee's friend and natural cheerleader, Terry, embraced me in her arms and I just bawled. I told coach that we loved him. He has a huge heart that he wears upon his sleeve and he has made making dreams come true his job.

In the rich Kachina Tradition of the Hopi of this region, the spirits are personified in many forms, one of them being a butterfly. She is not thought of as strong, but her strength of journey and transformation comes from the earth itself, and from all of creation.