

Mount Motherhood Is Steep Enough for Her

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EVER since I finished reading "Into Thin Air," Jon Krakauer's book about the disastrous Mount Everest expeditions of 1996, I have been thinking about adventure. Or more specifically, about being adventurous and why I apparently am not. I was fascinated by the enormous difficulty of climbing Mount Everest, and by the climbers' willingness to suffer horribly for the experience of standing on top of a mountain. And yet, groaning up the rock face of daily life with small children, which can leave one feeling hypoxic by dinner time, I simply can't imagine choosing a vacation of pain and uncertainty, no matter what the eventual high.

Of course, adventure has always meant being uncomfortable and somewhat disoriented, even if only metaphorically. What puzzles me is why it's not the other way around, why this syllogism doesn't seem to work:

All adventures require some discomfort.

My daily life is often uncomfortable.

I am having adventures.

Perhaps the problem lies in defining adventure, which tends to be classified along with terms like tenacity, courage and heroism. Although a day spent as the parent-helper at my older daughter's preschool involves just such qualities, most people would not recognize scrubbing the Play-Doh table, supervising six little boys in the bathroom or double-knotting 20 pairs of sneakers as an adventure. Should they? Should climbing Mount Everest, kayaking through the Everglades, riding a camel across the Sahara be considered adventures while taking the kids to Discovery Zone be only an excursion? Where does adventures really lie -- in the trip or in the approach?

When I was just finishing college and still believed I could do anything if I really tried, I briefly attempted to become adventurous.

My boyfriend at the time was one of those taciturn types given to despising domestic life. He loved everything outdoorsy, physically demanding and hygienically limited. He loved Hemingway and Jack London. He loved quiet acts of self-denial. And I loved him, with a passion that shocks me now because it required so much energy.

Yet no matter how I tried I could never play a proper Jane to his Tarzan; the most I could muster was Jane Austen with a backpack, stumping wryly along the Appalachian Trail, my true parlor nature only slightly obscured by a sweaty T-shirt and the reek of insect repellent.

Don't get me wrong: I like backpacking. But what I wanted from those weeks spent hiking in the mountains and canoeing in Canada and sleeping under the stars in a mildewed sleeping bag wasn't communion with nature. What I really craved from all that exertion and privation out there in the wilderness was my boyfriend's approval. I wanted to be a good sport, so that he would love me.

Unfortunately, I sulked one rainy evening in the Adirondacks when we had to eat peanut M&M's for dinner because we couldn't get a fire going. Then I cried when I fell into a stream in the White Mountains with my backpack on. I wanted to take sugar-free hot cocoa on our canoe trip because I was on a diet. Worst of all, I was afraid -- of tick bites, bears, getting lost, drowning. And I admitted it. "Let's be careful," I would beg. "Can't we be a little more careful?"

Not surprisingly, it wasn't long before my boyfriend dropped me for the star of our college Ultimate Frisbee team, a woman who had spent a semester working construction, who was as tall, sinewy and intrepid as I was short, soft and squeamish. Out of utter humiliation, I decided to prove that I, too, could be adventurous. A few months after my boyfriend told me our camping days were over, I signed up for a monthlong summer backpacking trip in the Grand Tetons, along with 2 other women and 17 men.

To participate in this expedition, I carried 65 pounds on my back -- quite a bit more than half my own weight -- for 92 miles of bushwhacking up and down mountains, scrambling through boulder fields, fording rivers and inching past scree slopes. I carried an ice axe, rock-climbing ropes, a shovel, a Coleman stove, fuel for the stove,

a cook pot, a first-aid kit, a compass, a map, wool clothing, two pairs of underwear, a poncho and a toothbrush. I also carried (forbidden) deodorant and my contact lens paraphernalia because I refused to wear my glasses in public.

The first night of our trek we camped by a creek in the foothills. I recall standing around a smudgy fire wearing gloves and mosquito netting over my hat, trying to eat tepid baked beans without getting bitten on the chin every time I lifted my net to poke my spoon in my mouth. When night fell, I began glancing at the tents we had pitched, assuming that my tent mates would be the other two women on the trip. Our leaders, however, had grouped us according to size. And I, being the smallest person, was assigned to tent up with two large men, one of whom had played football for Indiana University; the other happened to be training for the Olympic Winter Games. His event was the biathlon, and that first night he asked me to sit on his feet while he did 150 sit-ups. By the time I crawled into the tent, after spending 25 minutes trying to clean my contact lenses in the dark because I couldn't find my flashlight, both my tent mates were snoring, having thoughtfully left just enough room for me and my sleeping bag, right between them.

I won't bore you with many details from my trip, which was predictably arduous, but I will tell you that every time a plane flew overhead I fantasized that my mother had come to rescue me. At night I was so exhausted that I forgot to worry that my toes might get frostbitten or to care that I hadn't washed my hair in two weeks. And I forgot to think much about whether my ex-boyfriend would approve of me up there at 9,000 feet, now an old hand with an ice ax. After all, the Tetons were distractingly beautiful. With certain adjustments, my tent mates and I became friends. I was a better cook than they, which earned their gratitude. I was also rather fastidious about our cook pot and utensils, with the result that we were the only ones on the trip not to contract some form of dysentery.

Of course, the story should end here: with me flexing my powerful quadriceps, wearing my rock-climbing helmet at a jaunty angle, planning an expedition to the North Pole by dog sled. But unfortunately I never got particularly rugged on that trip -- I spent an inordinate amount of time nursing my scratches and blisters, and I was often frightened. What I did develop, however, was a healthy

survival instinct. Never again, I told myself, will I try to prove that I am adventurous -- at least by someone else's definition.

Which is why you find me now, in my pink bathrobe, reading the ending of "Into Thin Air" for the third time. This is the part where numerous people freeze to death or fall off the mountain. I originally bought the book because a friend assured me I wouldn't fall asleep over it, even if I'd been up half the night before with a teething baby. And I figured a story about people having a bad time outside might console me during the wild, uncertain, demanding days I was spending inside, as winter closed around me, and civilization sometimes seemed very far away.

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