

Room for a view

The incredible thinness of air

There is a gorge, hidden in the forest, far from the complexities and heat of summer. The air is pungent with boreal spices, and I can hear the whirr of cascading water in the distance. Through root-tangled corridors of stone I follow a path that leads to an escarpment. I've stood at this point before; from here, you can see the gorge and the series of waterfalls and pools that step down through the Ordovician rock. The water plunges and shimmers through basalt so perfect it might have been fabricated for a Disney theme park. In fact, this rock is volcanic: 400 million years old and incredibly tough.

From where I'm standing I can see the second pool. It looks about the size of a hot tub. The last time I was here, many years ago, two barefooted boys in cut-off jeans emerged from the woods and began to scramble nimbly up the side of the gorge. The first arrived at a notch 30 feet above the second pool. He stood poised on the edge, his hands stretched out in front of him, balancing, waiting for the moment of perfect readiness. Then, thrusting his arms downward, he launched himself into a graceful swan dive, straightened out, and cut the surface of the pool like a knife. Up he surged, in the cauldron of bubbles he had created. Laughing, he shook his head in the waterfall and splashed to the rocky ledge. Then his



friend gained the notch; he pivoted, and with his back to the water, raised himself up on his tiptoes ...

Today the notch is empty. I can see, at the bottom of the gorge, the resolution of all the turbulence: the final, placid pool. On the far side is a 60-foot rock face; there, at the base, two young climbers are preparing their gear: harness, clips and rope. They have already secured a double line to the top of the cliff. One of them hooks the rope to his harness while the other, the belayer, pulls the line taut. The climber reaches behind to his chalk pouch, dusts his fingers and looks for a toehold, a finger purchase. The rock wall protrudes at this point, and he can't get around it. He explores to the left and finds the tiny indentation he needs. Gripping with his right fingertips, he finds a secure tip. Blindly, he explores with his left hand. His muscles contract in the shaded light. Kneeing, shouldering, fighting the rock, he tacks his way laboriously up the face. At 45 feet his right hand straightens suddenly. A tiny ledge has crumbled, and he falls back into thin air. The belayer pulls on the rope as the climber sways securely, gently bumping against the cliff as he reaches back for more chalk. He resumes his climb. Five minutes later he is scrambling over the top of the cliff. He straightens up, turns around; triumphantly, he pumps his right arm.

I was not much older than this exultant climber during my final year in medical school. That year I lived in a rehabilitation hospital and was responsible for admissions, discharges and night call. I soon found out about spinal cord injuries, the levels of paraplegia, high and low quadriplegia and the level of freedom that each level of paralysis takes away. I learned about bladder dysfunction, bowel care and the incapacitating war between flexor and extensor muscles. I witnessed psychological turmoil: the sad transition from the former to the present self. I became part of the struggle to redefine hope, the incredible effort to adapt and cope.

The drunken party, the late-night drive, the dive into dark water took on new connotations for me.

Later, working in an emergency room, I saw the pain of last words, the bloated, ashen face in traction, the pool of tears, the grief-stricken parents. "Mom, Dad, I love you ... I'm sorry."

I find it difficult at such times to consider the mathematics of risk-taking. Knowledge, preparation and fitness seem meaningless. The freedom to attempt the impossible is such a vital concept before a challenge, but it is cold comfort when

Illness and metaphor

Holy Sonnet X

Death be not proud, though some have called thee
Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so;
For those whom thou think'st thou dost overthrow
Die not, poor death, nor yet canst thou kill me.
From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be,
Much pleasure; then from thee much more must flow,
And soonest our best men with thee do go,
Rest of their bones, and soul's delivery.
Thou art slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men,
And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell;
And poppy or charms can make us sleep as well,
And better than thy stroke; why swell'st thou then?
One short sleep past, we wake eternally,
And death shall be no more; death, thou shalt die.

John Donne, 1633