

## ONE DAY AT HARTMAN ROCKS

*Learning to trust the system.*

By Lee Burdette Williams

“DANGLE.” Now there’s a word I don’t really like to use when talking about myself. I don’t like to dangle while a decision is delayed. I don’t like tempting things to be dangled in front of me. I would hate to be accused of dangling a participle. And I certainly would not want to say, “I am dangling fifty feet above the ground, kept safe in my harness by an inexperienced student belaying me from below.”

And yet I was saying that out loud, but to myself, as I was indeed dangling fifty feet above the ground, and so on. I had jumped slightly to reach a handhold on the rock wall, but had missed and was trying to set my feet to jump again, listening to the seemingly sincere encouragement of two students, Sarah and Khalisa, who stood below. We were at Hartman Rocks, a well-known hundred-foot wall of rock near Gunnison, Colorado, where my students and I were learning and practicing top-roping, a style of climbing in which ropes are anchored to permanent fixtures above the climber while a belayer on the ground takes up slack and brakes any falls.

Long-time readers of this magazine may know that I often find myself in precarious positions, doing odd things, all in the name of education. They may remember me slaughtering hapless chickens on a hillside in West Virginia, or schooling some students in the finer points of using a table saw at an elevation of five thousand feet on Beech Mountain. Some escapades don’t make it into print, like the time I was caught in a stampede of frightened dairy cows, or when I drove a van into mud up to its floorboards in a rural “parking lot.” No, some things I keep to myself, lest I earn a reputation as the Pauline of student affairs, constantly imperiled through my own stupidity, hubris, or passion to provide those marvelous teachable moments that we have touted to death.

I had no great illusions that morning at Hartman Rocks, though I did carry with me a strong belief in the power of experiential education to teach in ways that could never happen in a classroom. I had journeyed to Crested Butte, Colorado, with twelve students and another professor, teaching a course called “Adventure and Leadership: Literature, Reflection, Application.” In addition to reading all about harrowing adventures, we were to spend part of our three weeks having some of our own—maybe not on the scale of, say, Sir Ernest Shackleton’s journey to Antarctica, or John Roskelley’s climb up Mount McKinley, but enough to introduce students to the fear that comes from extending oneself past a reasonable limit, and to the impact that fear has on leadership and group dynamics.

We split into teams of three and I found myself with two women, Sarah and Khalisa, both marvelous athletes who had never climbed before. We got the requisite instruction in putting on a climbing harness and helmet, learned some simple techniques of climbing and belaying, and then were sent to one of five ropes our guide had set up across this wall, which was 120 feet at its highest and stretched about 400 feet across. I’m not an experienced climber by any means, but I had done a little of this, so I volunteered to go first, hoping that by belaying me and seeing how the belay system worked, Sarah and Khalisa would be more confident when they tried it. As anyone who has ever learned to climb can tell you, learning to trust the system is what allows you to try risky moves. Knowing that the worst that will happen is that you’ll end up dangling safely

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from the end of the rope is critical to relaxing your muscles enough to actually move up the rock face.

I tied into the rope, had the two of them double-check my knots and carabiners as I double-checked theirs, and then started up. It wasn't a particularly hard climb, but I'm not the most nimble of climbers, and about halfway up, after the above-mentioned slip and finding myself with wobbly legs and tired arms, I decided to come down. I yelled that I wanted to descend, and Sarah lowered me, if not expertly, at least competently, and then volunteered to go next.

About thirty feet up she had to pause to plan her next move, and that was when the fear moved in. She was still for a long moment, clinging to a hefty handhold. Without an obvious next move, she was starting to freeze up. I could see it, as could Khalisa. "You can do it," she yelled. "Just take your time." Sarah didn't move.

"You're okay, Sarah. Trust the system. You're safe. Just try one move at a time," I yelled up. Trust the system—oh wow. She had been on the rope less than ten minutes and I was launching into clichés. How many times do I say that sort of thing without thinking? And how many times should I do exactly that and I don't?

I don't trust the system each time I begin a semester in a class and have to explain the service-learning requirement to skeptical students. Even though I know the pattern—that they'll gripe and moan about the "extra" work required, the hassles of getting off campus, and the hardship of working in groups, and then at the end of the semester claim that the project was the most meaningful part of the class—I will still ask myself why I've chosen to do this yet again.

When I hold students accountable for their poor decisions, requiring them to leave the residential college I direct because they have failed all of their classes, I'm trusting the system I've seen work time and again, but I still hate it and hate the way they blame me. Even though the other students, who witness the serious consequences of another's lax approach to academics, feel better about the program and about their good efforts, and even though students occasionally (but not frequently) come back later and thank me for getting their attention the hard way, I still agonize over each decision,

regardless of how obvious it might be.

"I need to come down. I think I might throw up." That certainly got our attention, since we were in the direct line of potential fire.

"Okay," I yelled up. "Just sit back in your harness, stick your legs straight out toward the rock, and walk yourself down." She did, and was on the ground in less than a minute.

"I have a thing about heights," she said, bending over at the waist with her hands on her knees, gasping for air. "I don't think I can do this."

"It's okay, Sarah. You can try again later." But when she finally stood up, she looked unconvinced. She untied and switched places with Khalisa, who had a good climb, getting about two-thirds of the way up before tiring. Sarah belayed well, but she was quiet and had a look of discouragement instead of her usual confident smile.

I found myself wondering about the wisdom of subjecting students to such experiences. I thought back to times when the most well-intended actions had backfired, though I had to admit those were rare. More common were the times when students walked away from an experience with profound insights about themselves, the world, other people. I had to admit to myself that the best learning seemed to follow the most frightening dangling, the moments when students appeared to be hanging above a chasm of uncertainty,

or at least described themselves that way. But another glance at Sarah's face as she concentrated on lowering Khalisa smoothly and safely told me this hadn't been one of those moments. I tried to reassure her.

"Sometimes the first time is just really hard, Sarah. The sensation of being on an edge, of having to trust your harness and your belayer—it doesn't come naturally." She smiled half-heartedly and remained focused on Khalisa. What am I doing, I wondered? I'm talking to the university's cross-country star, an all-conference athlete who certainly had a better sense than I did of her limits and how to push past them. But I knew she'd be okay. That was, after all, part of the system. In a few days I'd read her reflections in her journal, and she'd outline what had happened on the rock and make some connections to other areas in her life where she had failed but still found meaning. She would connect the expe-

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rience to the course readings, perhaps having a better understanding of why some mountain climbers fail to summit despite months of preparation. And she would, being Sarah, redeem herself in her own eyes, maybe by trying to climb on another day, on another wall.

WE HAD LUNCH, then split up and joined other groups on different ropes, trying a variety of difficulties and techniques. I watched for a while from a shady spot as some of the more confident men in the group struggled to get up and over Buddha's Belly, the hardest climb on the wall. The women were sticking together on some of the medium-difficult routes. Khalisa called out to me.

"Come on, Lee, I've got a free rope here." I made my way down the path to the wall and tied in. The ritual began.

"On belay?" I asked.

"Belay on," Khalisa replied as she double-checked my knots.

"Climbing, Khalisa."

"Climb on, Lee," and up I went. It was a more challenging climb, after the first few feet, than my first climb had been. I scrambled and stopped, hoisted and shifted. I tried to do all the things our guide had suggested, using my legs more than my arms, balling my fist to wedge into a crevice, turning my back to the wall to get leverage on an outcropping. I sensed the presence of another climber on a parallel rope but was too focused to pay much attention until I realized that we were likely to intersect at a particular spot just above me.

"Go ahead," I yelled, and rested on a small ledge, pondering my next move. The other climber passed me, and I began to ascend a rather vexing problem. I stopped, retreated, started again. Dead end. I heard a voice from above, the other climber.

"Lee, just get around to your left, and there's a handhold straight above. It's hard to see." The voice was confident, helpful, encouraging. The voice was—Sarah's? What was she doing up there? Climbing, of course, on a significantly difficult section of rock, sixty feet above the ground.

I did find the handhold she described, and climbed another twenty feet, got the wobbles, and decided to come down. Khalisa lowered me and gave me an encouraging pat on the helmet. We then stepped back

and looked up. Sarah was eighty feet up, puzzling over a slight overhang. "I don't think I can do this," she yelled down. Our guide, Court, had joined us below, and called up to her.

"Sarah, slide to your right, come down a bit, and then use your legs on that ledge." She hesitated, then followed his instructions perfectly. The other students gathered near us, yelling encouragement to her. Khalisa and I exchanged a glance and smiled. No throwing up here.

"I think that's it for me," Sarah called again.

"Come on, Sarah," another student yelled. "You've got ten feet to the top." I could see from where I was that there were no obvious holds. She grabbed a smooth edge with her fingertips and shifted her weight. Another step up.

"You've got it, Sarah! A little bit more! Don't quit!"

Each student stared upward as Sarah maneuvered the last few feet and, with a final push, reached out and touched the anchor, then raised her fist in the air. The students erupted in cheers.

I was stunned. We're talking a difference of maybe four hours since she had pleaded with me to let her come down. Even in the best of circumstances, even when the system works to perfection, such amazing

growth surely, surely, takes a little longer. Where was the reflection? The journal? The self-assessment?

Obviously, this was a system I didn't know too well. But as Sarah descended, an enormous smile on her face, her classmates cheering, I became a believer.

Our three weeks in Crested Butte and the beautiful places nearby were full of as much fun, challenge, and learning as any time I'd ever spent with students. But nothing compared to the moment when Sarah raised her arm in absolute triumph. And nothing else taught me quite as profoundly that it's about more than trusting the system. It's about trusting the possibility of a system existing, one that I don't even know about, till something, or someone, introduces it to me.

In a few months, in search of more adventures, I'll be on a plane to Italy with twenty-four students and another professor. I know nothing about Italy, don't know most of the students, don't know the language. But I did look up the Italian word for "dangle": *Dondolare*.

I should be so lucky.

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