

Learning something new can be a scary experience. One of the hardest things I've ever had to do was learn how to swim. I was always afraid of the water, but I decided that swimming was an important skill that I should learn. I also thought it would be good exercise and help me to become physically stronger. What I didn't realize was that learning to swim would also make me a more confident person.

New situations always make me a bit nervous, and my first swimming lesson was no exception. After I changed into my bathing suit in the locker room, I stood timidly by the side of the pool waiting for the teacher and other students to show up. After a couple of minutes the teacher came over. She smiled and introduced herself, and two more students joined us. Although they were both older than me, they didn't seem to be embarrassed about not knowing how to swim. I began to feel more at ease.

We got into the pool, and the teacher had us put on brightly colored water wings to help us stay afloat. One of the other students, May, had already taken the beginning class once before, so she took a kickboard and went splashing off by herself. The other student, Jerry, and I were told to hold on to the side of the pool and shown how to kick for the breaststroke. One by one, the teacher had us hold on to a kickboard while she pulled it through the water and we kicked. Pretty soon Jerry was off doing this by himself, traveling at a fast clip across the short end of the pool.

Things were not quite that easy for me, but the teacher was very patient. After a few more weeks, when I seemed to have caught on with my legs, she taught me the arm strokes. Now I had two things to concentrate on, my arms and my legs. I felt hopelessly uncoordinated. Sooner than I imagined, however, things began to feel "right" and I was able to swim! It was a wonderful free feeling - like flying, maybe - to be able to shoot across the water.

Learning to swim was not easy for me, but in the end my persistence paid off. Not only did I learn how to swim and to conquer my fear of the water, but I also learned something about learning. Now when I am faced with a new situation I am not so nervous. I may feel uncomfortable to begin with, but I know that as I practice being in that situation and as my skills get better, I will feel more and more comfortable. It is a wonderful, free feeling when you achieve a goal you have set for yourself.

## Attitude Is Everything

Jerry was the kind of guy you love to hate. He was always in a good mood and always had something positive to say. When someone would ask him how he was doing, he would reply, "If I were any better, I would be twins!"

He was a unique manager because he had several waiters who had followed him around from restaurant to restaurant. The reason the waiters followed Jerry was because of his attitude. He was a natural motivator. If an employee was having a bad day, Jerry was there telling the employee how to look on the positive side of the situation.

Seeing this style really made me curious, so one day I went up to Jerry and asked him, "I don't get it! You can't be a positive person all of the time. How do you do it?" Jerry replied, "Each morning I wake up and say to myself, 'Jerry, you have two choices today. You can choose to be in a good mood or you can choose to be in a bad mood.' I choose to be in a good mood. Each time something bad happens, I can choose to be a victim or I can choose to learn from it. I choose to learn from it. Every time someone comes to me complaining, I can choose to accept their complaining or I can point out the positive side of life. I choose the positive side of life."

"Yeah, right, it's not that easy," I protested. "Yes it is," Jerry said. "Life is all about choices. When you cut away all the junk, every situation is a choice. You choose how you react to situations. You choose how people will affect your mood. You choose to be in a good or bad mood. The bottom line: It's your choice how you live life." I reflected on what Jerry said.

Soon thereafter, I left the restaurant industry to start my own business. We lost touch, but I often thought about him when I made a choice about life instead of reacting to it. Several years later, I heard that Jerry did something you are never supposed to do in the restaurant business: he left the back door open one morning and was held up at gunpoint by three armed robbers. While trying to open the safe, his hand shaking from nervousness, slipped off the combinations. The robbers panicked and shot him.

Luckily, Jerry was found relatively quickly and rushed to the local trauma center. After 18 hours of surgery and weeks of intensive care, Jerry was released from the hospital with fragments of the bullets still in his body. I saw Jerry about six months after the accident. When I asked him how he was, he replied, "If I were any better, I'd be twins. Wanna see my scars?" I declined to see his wounds, but did ask him what had gone through his mind as the robbery took place.

"The first thing that went through my mind was that I should have locked the back door," Jerry replied. "Then, as I lay on the floor, I remembered I had two choices: I could choose to live, or I could choose to die. I chose to live."

"Weren't you scared? Did you lose consciousness?" I asked.

Jerry continued, "The paramedics were great. They kept telling me I was going to be fine. But when they wheeled me into the emergency room and I saw the expressions on the faces of the doctors and nurses, I got really scared. In their eyes, I read, 'He's a dead man.' I knew I needed to take action."

"What did you do?" I asked.

"Well, there was a big, burly nurse shouting questions at me," said Jerry. "She asked if I was allergic to anything. 'Yes,' I said. The doctors and nurses stopped working as they waited for my reply. I took a deep breath and yelled, 'Bullets!' Over their laughter, I told them, 'I am choosing to live. Operate on me as if I am alive, not dead.'"

Jerry lived thanks to the skill of his doctors, but also because of his amazing attitude. I learned from him that every day we have the choice to live fully. Attitude, after all, is everything.

# My Secret Place

What is your attitude towards loneliness? Do you think it is a curse when you are isolated from the rest of the world, left face-to-face with yourself? Or do you, on the contrary, seek it, appreciating each moment of silence you can snatch from the surrounding world? These small breaks can help you replenish your energy and reorganize your thoughts, so that you can start each day as a new one—not as an extension of a previous one. As for me, I am more of the second kind of person; solitude for me is a gift, which is valued less by people than it should be accorded.

In my childhood and teen years, I had a perfect place to go to when I felt like being on my own. In a small town in the center of America, where I lived back then, we had a steep hill on the outskirts. On its top, an old warehouse stood. No one, even older people, seemed to know who built that warehouse in such an inconvenient place, and what for. Some said smugglers used it during World War II for their own purposes; others told stories about local slaveholders who lived in our town a long time ago—those people were thought to have kept slaves in the old warehouse. For us children, that old wooden shack was a haunted place with a grim, bloody story of love and treason.

None of the townsmen had ever visited the old warehouse. Children were scared and adults did not feel like climbing up the steep slope for no reason. For most of the year, I was its only visitor. With my legs dangling from the attic's crossbar, usually with an apple in my hand, I watched the sunsets and sunrises, and tiny ants running here and there, and the birds in a nest above my head (for some reason, they were not afraid of me), and the life beneath my outlook point. During such moments, what was meaningful to me was only what I could see, hear, touch, or smell. My school worries, arguments with friends, unrequited first love, and even Mrs. Finch's cat that I accidentally ran over by my bicycle—all this, as well as many other things—did not exist. And now, when I reminisce about my childhood, I remember the warm golden light, soft shades in the attic, a smell of fresh hay, and the tile rooftops of my town.

Sometimes, as I visited the warehouse, I met other people there. Usually they were vagabonds, staying for a couple of days before moving ahead, or seasonal workers traveling across the entire country further to the west. When this happened, I behaved like a cautious animal, and fortunately I never had problems with them. If they stayed long enough, I would bring them some canned food, and in exchange, they told me their stories, or joked with me. I heard stories of loneliness and long railway trails; unpaid labor and failed marriages; crashed hopes and vehement dreams. In their voices, I could hear the wisdom and the ignorance of the world. They shared their fears, their grief, or their joy with a 13-year-old kid from an American no-name remoteness, knowing he will not spill the beans. Or even if I would (though I never did), still they saw me for the first and last time in their lives.

I believe that old warehouse determined my life. The destinies of other people—perplexed, complicated, but at the same time keen and full of real life—helped me understand myself and the world around me, providing me with answers to issues that worry teenagers. Who am I? Why is everything as it is? Who are the people around me? What should I do? How should I treat others? Those vagabonds, those people, whom people in our town contemptuously called “low-lives,” they taught me things much more valuable than what I could study in vaunted universities.

I still enjoy solitude, when I have a free minute. And, just like in my adolescence, I enjoy the company of unfamiliar random people, who appear in my life for several moments: in an airplane, in train, in a hitch, in a cafe. They tell me their stories and leave—and I carefully write them down.... I am a writer, you know.

## Red Marbles!

I was at the corner grocery store buying some early potatoes. I noticed a small boy, delicate of bone and feature, ragged but clean, hungrily appraising a basket of freshly picked green peas. I paid for my potatoes but was also drawn to the display of fresh green peas. I am a pushover for creamed peas and new potatoes. Pondering the peas, I couldn't help overhearing the conversation between Mr. Miller (the store owner) and the ragged boy next to me.

'Hello Barry, how are you today?'

'H'lo, Mr. Miller. Fine, thank ya. Jus' admirin' them peas. They sure look good..'

'They are good, Barry.. How's your Ma?'

'Fine. Gittin' stronger alla' time.'

'Good. Anything I can help you with?'

'No, Sir. Jus' admirin' them peas.'

'Would you like to take some home?' asked Mr. Miller.

'No, Sir. Got nuthin' to pay for 'em with.'

'Well, what have you to trade me for some of those peas?'

'All I got's my prize marble here.'

'Is that righ? Let me see it' said Miller.

'Here 'tis. She's a dandy.'

'I can see that. Hmm mmm, only thing is this one is blue and I sort of go for red. Do you have a red one like this at home?' the store owner asked..

'Not zackley but almost.'

'Tell you what. Take this sack of peas home with you and next trip this way let me look at that red marble'. Mr. Miller told the boy.

'Sure will. Thanks Mr. Miller.'

Mrs... Miller, who had been standing nearby, came over to help me. With a smile she said, 'There are two other boys like him in our community, all three are in very poor circumstances.. Jim just loves to bargain with them for peas, apples, tomatoes, or whatever. When they come back with their red marbles, and they always do, he decides he doesn't like red after all and he sends them home with a bag of produce for a green marble or an orange one, when they come on their next trip to the store.'

I left the store smiling to myself, impressed with this man. A short time later I moved to Colorado , but I never forgot the story of this man, the boys, and their bartering for marbles.

Several years went by, each more rapid than the previous one. Just recently I had occasion to visit some old friends in that Idaho community and while I was there learned that Mr. Miller had died. They were having his visitation that evening and knowing my friends wanted to go, I agreed to accompany them.

Upon arrival at the mortuary we fell into line to meet the relatives of the deceased and to offer whatever words of comfort we could. Ahead of us in line were three young men. One was in an army uniform and the other two wore nice haircuts, dark suits and white shirts...all very professional looking. They approached Mrs. Miller, standing composed and smiling by her husband's casket.

Each of the young men hugged her, kissed her on the cheek, spoke briefly with her and moved on to the casket. Her misty light blue eyes followed them as, one by one, each young man stopped briefly and placed his own warm hand over the cold pale hand in the casket. Each left the mortuary awkwardly, wiping his eyes...

Our turn came to meet Mrs. Miller. I told her who I was and reminded her of the story from those many years ago and what she had told me about her husband's bartering for marbles. With her eyes glistening, she took my hand and led me to the casket.

'Those three young men who just left were the boys I told you about. They just told me how they appreciated the things Jim 'traded' them. Now, at last, when Jim could not change his mind about color or size.....they came to pay their debt.'

'We've never had a great deal of the wealth of this world,' she confided, 'but right now, Jim would consider himself the richest man in Idaho ..'

With loving gentleness she lifted the lifeless fingers of her deceased husband. Resting underneath were three exquisitely shined red marbles.

We will not be remembered by our words, but by our kind deeds. Life is not measured by the breaths we take, but by the moments that take our breath.

## The Climb

I have this fear. It causes my legs to shake. I break out in a cold sweat. I start jabbering to anyone who is nearby. As thoughts of certain death run through my mind, the world appears a precious, treasured place. I imagine my own funeral, then shrink back at the implications of where my thoughts are taking me. My stomach feels strange. My palms are clammy.

I am terrified of heights.

Of course, it's not really a fear of being in a high place. Rather, it is the view of a long way to fall, of rocks far below me and no firm wall between me and the edge. My sense of security is screamingly absent. There are no guardrails, flimsy though I picture them, or other safety devices. I can rely only on my own surefootedness—or lack thereof.

Despite my fear, two summers ago I somehow found myself climbing to a high place, while quaking inside and out. Most of our high school had come along on a day trip to the Boquerón, a gorgeous, lush spot in the foothills of Peru. Its prime attraction is the main waterfall, about 100 feet high, that thunders into a crystal clear pool feeding the Aguaytia River. All around the pool and on down to the rushing river are boulders large and small. The beach is strewn with rocks. On both sides of the fall, the jungle stretches to meet it, rising parallel to it on a gentler slope.

After eating our sack lunches within sight and sound of the fall, many of us wanted to make the climb to an area above it. We knew others had done so on previous trips. A few guys went first to make sure they were on the right path. But after they left, my group of seven decided to go ahead without waiting for them to return. I suspected we were going the wrong way, but I kept silent, figuring that the others knew better. We went along the base of the hill until we reached the climb. It stopped me in my tracks.

The climb ascended steeply above us. Along the right edge the jungle hugged the rocks; passage through its trees did not look feasible. The majority of my view was filled with rocks. Looming high to the sky, the boulders rose in a tiered manner. Peering back down toward the river, I saw a steep slope of rocks all the way to the water. All I could think about was how far it would be to fall.

My tense thoughts were interrupted by the realization that my friends were already beginning to climb! My anxiety increased as I watched them.

*Do I turn back? My whole being shouted, "Yes!" Will I regret it later? I really want to get to the top, but...*

I voiced my uncertainties to my friends. They dismissed my fears and encouraged me to stick it out. Questioning my own sanity, I decided at least to attempt the climb.

I chose a path that seemed easiest. My friend Tom was ahead of me. Then, suddenly, he slipped and slid backward about 10 feet! I watched, paralyzed, until he stopped himself and assured us he was all right. My heart was hammering.

Now those who had tried the other way came back; it had not worked. Consoling myself that my friend Seth would be right behind me, I shakily began the ascent. The "path" led up a narrow area between boulders. In it, we reached a place where there just were no good handholds. Seth braced my foot, and those above sent down words of encouragement. I was soon past the first challenge safely, but not feeling much better about the rest of the climb.

The difficulties only increased from that point on, with scary spot after scary spot. Though I knew I should not look down, I could not always ignore the long drop to the boulders below. My breathing sped up, but my heart pounded even faster, growing loud in my ears.

My friends kept right on climbing. But they did not forget me. Someone was always behind me to help hold my feet steady when necessary, and someone else was always ahead to offer a hand up. I trusted them more than myself; I knew my feet could easily slip. With friends supporting me by words and actions, I slowly gained ground.

Finally we came to the worst section yet. To me the slope looked very close to vertical. The slight handholds were few and far between. Being short, I knew the stretches would be difficult enough in normal conditions. In my current panic, it would be much worse. The alternative was to go back down. Which was more difficult? I didn't want to go either way, but obviously I had to go somewhere.

The trouble was, we were not getting any nearer to the falls. By now, we realized that this route was not the way most frequented! But knowing this did not get me any closer to safety.

Since getting up this next part was next to impossible, and waiting for a rescue helicopter was not an option, with fear and trembling I decided to go down, but not by myself. Melody agreed to go with me, earning my eternal gratitude. She paused to pray for safety; I did not trust my voice enough to pray aloud.

Now, with our backs to the rocks, the drop was continually in our line of vision. It seemed even steeper than before. The song "Angels Watching Over Me" ran through my head as we began, Melody going first. I kept up a steady stream of chatter, my trembling voice betraying my fear.

One of the first tough places we came to gave us trouble. Cautiously stretching one foot down, Melody could not reach the bottom of the boulder. A slip would mean an extremely long drop. So we tried a different route where a fall would be shorter. It was somewhat wet and would entail a short slide to reach the bottom.

Melody made it safely. I hesitated, unsure of my footing, and picturing myself at the bottom of the cliff, bones broken and pain wracking my body, if I still lived.

"You can do it! I'm right here," Melody called. She waited patiently, not pressuring me to hurry.

Inching carefully to the edge, I could see in the corner of my eye the boulders and river far below. As I started down the rock, my foot slipped! My heart jumped into my throat as the terror I had held just under the surface swept over me.

*I'm gonna fall!* I inwardly shrieked.

It had been only a small slip, however; I was not in midair! I took a few calming breaths, and my heart repositioned itself where it belonged.

With no further mishaps, we came eventually to the last troublesome spot, the stretch between two boulders that had given me problems on the way up. Thankfully, the rest of our friends had given up climbing to the top and had now caught up to us. There were two possible descents from here. One way included a short jump down. I decided to check out the other way. Seth was working his way down this second route when he fell a few feet and bruised himself! I again looked over the first option.

*Do I want to jump? There's a big drop if I jump wrong or don't stop on the ledge! But the other way...!*

I knew if I was to get down, it would have to be Seth's way. He was willing to help me however he could. I inspected the "path" he had taken. There was some low vegetation, matted down and sloping slightly toward the edge. Then came a drop down to a narrow inlet between rocks. That was not so bad. The hitch lay in the fact that there was no handholds or footholds, and my short legs would not reach to the rocks.

"Uh, I don't know about this. I don't like the looks of it!" I said, my voice quavering.

"You can make it, Amy! I'm right here. I won't let you fall," Seth promised.

Slowly, painstakingly, I backed over the vegetation.

"I'm coming down," I warned, my voice unsteady.

"I'm ready," answered Seth. "I got you."

His assurances gave me the strength to go on. I trusted him implicitly. Flattening myself onto my belly, I edged my feet into midair. Seth held them tightly and slowly lowered me, guiding my feet to a firm place as I let my body slide over the leaves, twigs, and rock. When my feet made contact with the solid rock, I heaved a huge sigh of relief. I could feel the fear draining out of me.

My arms and legs were scratched up; I was dirty and sweaty. But none of it mattered. I was at the bottom!

"Yaaaaaahhhh!" I yelled. I never felt so alive, and so thankful for that life.