

GETTING UNSTUCK

There I was, one-hundred percent . . . STUCK. Muscles tensing, fingers clenching the trap rock, fear and desperation growing. I had free-soloed much taller and more complex cliffs than these before and with such ease. Free Soloing is a type of Free Climbing that relies only on the strength and skill of the climber's body. It does not employ the use of any type of climbing or safety gear.

Earlier that morning, an incredible sense of relief and freedom arose within me after finishing the last final exam of a demanding Spring semester. While driving home from school, my eyes were drawn to the familiar lofty cliffs of Ragged Mountain (Connecticut) rising up before me. I parked my truck at the base, stepped out into the fresh air and began to ascend.

About two-hundred feet up, I found myself maneuvering a very challenging vertical section of rock and gravity no longer allowed me to tilt my head back far enough to find the next hand-hold to hoist myself up. I realized that it was impossible for me to reverse my climb from there. I had to keep moving upwards. I was grasping as if blind in the dark ... reaching and stretching, hoping that my fingers would come in contact with even the tiniest crevasse that they could fasten onto. Nothing.

Twenty minutes that felt like twenty eternities passed as every one of my attempts came up empty. My body began to shake and sweat profusely, exhausted from the strain of holding myself in the same position for so long. The faces of everyone I ever loved began to flash one- by-one before my eyes and I started to cry. And as I cried, I began to pray over and over, "Dear God, help me Somehow please, God, help me."

In the midst of that desperate plea my body somehow stopped shaking and a palpable peace enveloped me. I stretched out my right arm and hand for what seemed like the thousandth time. This time, however, my fingers fell on a firm piece of rock jutting out from the cliff. I don't know how I ever missed it, but that no longer mattered. Now it felt like I had discovered gold! I latched onto it and pulled myself up, left the vertical cliff behind me, and continued onto a slab that would eventually take me to the top of the mountain. When I reached the top, I sat silently for several hours, taking in the surrounding vistas of beauty, counting my blessings that I was alive, and thanking God, again and again, for answering my prayer.

Today, I still love to climb, but since entering St. Joseph's Abbey nine years ago, my life has been engaged in a completely different sort of climbing.... Climbing the mountain that is God within the context of the monastic life. The Little Hours of the Liturgy, along with Compline, which we monks chant at different times throughout the day, all begin in the exact same way using these words: "O God, come to my assistance. O Lord, make haste to help

me.” In truth, there really is no time at any hour of any day that I am not in need of God's mercy. I may not always be physically stuck on some actual cliff, but figuratively, how often do I find myself stuck on the cliff of sin and temptation? How often do I find myself turning away from God and from prayer? How often, in so many of my relationships and commitments with God and my brothers, do I find myself unfaithful and unloving? How often do I find myself gone astray, lost and confused, unsure, at one dead end or another, without inspiration, direction or conviction, and not having the insight or the strength to move forward? Yet, this is the plight of being human.

These are the recurring rhythms of the human condition. And yet, all of these various situations are opportunities and gifts from God because they are all gateways to letting God in, to letting God come closer, to letting God enter our lives more deeply, to letting God answer the deepest longings of our hearts. It is in our weakness, our failures, our sins, our struggles, our helplessness that God is not only able to come closest to us, but it is in these situations that God longs to come close to us - as a merciful and forgiving Father, as a shepherd who celebrates finding His lost sheep that strayed.

Reaching out toward God in my vulnerability wins Divine Compassion more swiftly than all good acts put together. Martin Buber, reflecting on a scene in the Book of Genesis, writes that when Adam and Eve were hiding in the bushes after disobeying God, and God called out “Where are you?” it wasn't that God didn't know where they were. Rather, God asked the question because God wanted them to acknowledge where they were ... the truth of their situation. Only in such authentic self-knowledge, honesty, humility, and transparency, can we allow God to find us. God desires us to step out from behind the bushes, to stand naked before Him, to not let our pride and shame prevent us from acknowledging our infinite need and constant dependence on Him.

No matter my infidelity, my countless infidelities, God's fidelity never wavers. To hope and trust in His unconditional love for me in whatever situation I find myself, upon whatever cliff I may be stuck, gives God immense pleasure and leads me to the highest peace and freedom of communion. I am God's Dulcinea. I may not know, O Lord, why You continue to love me more and more, but I know in my heart that You do. O God, come to my assistance. O Lord, make haste to help me Help me to accept and love You as You have loved and accepted me.

- Br Jonah Pociadlo