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The Long Way Home: The Last Few Steps

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The Last Few Steps

MY MOTHER HAD A GOAL, WHICH I KNEW SHE WOULD NOT FORGET, because she is a very determined woman. She does not want to live in a wheelchair, but her brain won't let her move in the way she still expects. That day she wanted just to get dressed, so that she could attend a family graduation party for her granddaughter Shannon. We must plan and execute the steps carefully. I coached, and my mother responded as if she were in training. Together we would get her standing. It was just like climbing a big mountain for the first time. Mom was pushing beyond what she normally could do.

I would help. I bent over her as she got ready. We leaned together, straining muscles. A few deep breaths. "OK. Let's do it. One, two, three." Our objective was that we'd get her higher—stepping up, using all of our remaining energy. I leaned down more and grabbed onto Mom's right arm and shoulder.

I said, "*Believe.*"

In a burst of energy, she moved partway. Almost.

"Shannon is counting on you."

And up she went. She stood up.

For a moment I could forget that the majority of my mother's hours those days included frustration, anger, demands that we get her out of there and take her home. Home—a goal less attainable for her than the top of Mount Washington.

We often tell her that if she works on getting stronger, then we can see about the next step. How many times have I told myself this on a long hike? I peer up through sunrays on an incline, hoping they mark the trees thinning out and the beginning of the alpine zone. I try not to think about the actual top, my objective. I try instead to take one step and then another. Maybe my own sense of ambition will carry me forward. Or perhaps these assumptions stand in my way, blocking my appreciation of those tiny spruce branches brushing against my right elbow.

Usually I reach the top, but my mother rarely does anymore.



A small rock holds up the big rock on Middle Sugarloaf Mountain, in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. CHRISTINE WOODSIDE

“I just have to retrain my brain,” my mother announced a few months ago. “I will walk again. I just have to work on the brain.” I listened politely. And dreamed of getting out onto a mountain.

A few weeks later, my sister, Annie, my niece Shannon, and I clustered around Mom at the door to a restaurant where we’d just eaten. Annie opened the car door. Shannon flanked the wheelchair’s right side. I stepped in front of my mother and wrapped my arms around her. I tensed every muscle and together we rose.

“We’re dancing,” I gasped, desperately.

And this woman who nudged me up my first mountain a half-century ago began singing. “Shall we dance?”

“Ha, let’s sing!” I panted.

“Shall we then say, ‘Goodnight and I mean goodbye?’” It’s a song from “The King and I.” “When the last little star has left the sky, shall we still be together?”

—Christine Woodside
Editor-in-Chief