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Up Versus Down: Thoughts from a Groundbreaking Climber and Caver

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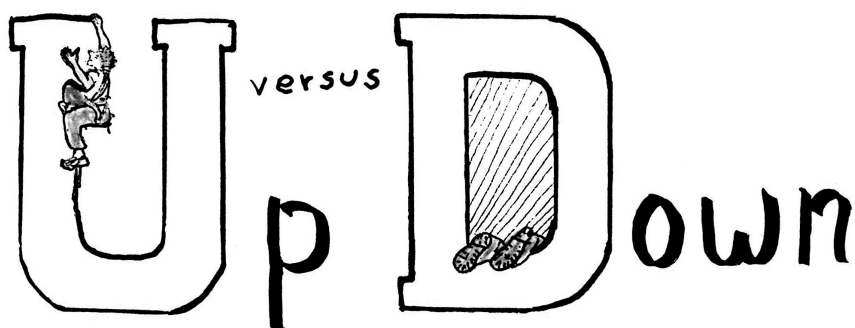
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Thoughts from a groundbreaking climber and caver

Jan Conn

C LIMBERS AND CAVERS HAVE MUCH IN COMMON.

Both need to be adventure oriented, willing to reach beyond the safe confines of familiarity and step into the world of unknowns. This means they are willing to risk—how much is completely up to the individual. Soon they are caught up in the marvels of where they are and the rewards they are having. Along with the fun is the growing appreciation of a new environment and the challenges that must be faced to overcome it. This gives satisfaction and a desire for more and bigger challenges in the future. Both cavers and climbers will go anywhere in the world seeking such adventure.

Those engaged in both sports have been in the forefront of developing equipment to fill their specialized needs. This sometimes leads to a means of livelihood that is a complete surprise. There are so many similarities that many participate in both diversions with equal enthusiasm. But there are differences also.

One basic difference is that a climber can gaze at his proposed route from below and get a rough idea of what he will encounter on the climb.

The caver knows only what the light he carries reveals. The fact that one can't see the overall picture gives caving its mystery and one of its basic lures.

Climbers have bigger egos than cavers. It may go hand in hand with the quality of leadership.

In climbing, the leader has the responsibility of picking the route and takes the greatest risk in leading it. In turn, he or she can safeguard those who come behind so that their danger and stress is less.

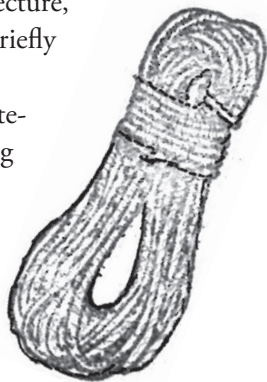
In caving, each member moves independently and faces the same obstacles. This does not mean that the challenge is the same for each. The small agile caver has a definite advantage. My late husband, Herb, and I were both little people. Dennis Knuckles, tall and rangy, followed us without difficulty until we met a right-angle bend in a narrow down-trending passage. Herb and I slipped into it from above, “sat down” at the right turn, and slid easily out of the bottom. Dennis’s longer bones balked at the tight bend, and it took several different attacks before he could make it through. The spot became known as Knuckle Bender.

Climbers can more easily make a living with their craft. We’ve read of climbers servicing wind farms, replacing lights on radio towers, and washing the windows of high-rise buildings. Herb did the maintenance work on the stone faces of Mount Rushmore for many years. It was just one week a year, which suited him perfectly. He also hung over the face of a high dam searching for leaks after dye had been applied to a suspect portion on the other side of the dam where water was impounded.

MOUNTAINS BY THEIR NATURE ARE UPLIFTING. YOU HAVE TO LOOK UP to see them. Those who yearn for the high places but lack the time and opportunity to seek them will attend a lecture, watch a film, or read a book that transports them briefly into another world. Climbers can satisfy those needs.

Folks see actual climbers on a local cliff or in a write-up in the paper. The nearby gym often sports a climbing wall. As a result, climbing has become “mainstream,” and folks will pay to experience the actual thing.

Manufacturers of outdoor and specialized climbing equipment can profit from pictures and endorsements by well-known climbers. The picture of a climber in a bright red parka silhouetted against a clear blue sky is appealing and will sell merchandise.



JAN CONN

Jan Conn's friend's drawing on the previous page underscores the fun she's had for most of her life in her two sports, rock climbing and caving. JEAN DOLAN

But let's face it: A caver emerging from a grubby crawlway gives an entirely different impression. Caves are hidden away from everyday life. They are dark and appear alien. To enter them, one must carry an unfailing source of light or be threatened by being marooned in the chill dark. In a place that never sees the light of day, the blackness becomes the first challenge that must be met. With adequate light, the underground can become as fascinating as the sun-drenched world. Those who venture into caves find a fantastic world of sights never seen on the surface.

Finding virgin cave where no one has ever been is as exhilarating as any untrod summit. But a virgin cave passage has a completely unknown destination that pulls the explorer forward to—who knows what? The thrill of moving through virgin cave is one of the superlative experiences in life.

The mere existence of the cave prompts questions:

- Why is it here?
- How did it form?
- How far does it go? Surveying the cave can be an additional reason to explore it.

The contents of the cave are another puzzle. Rocks that look like icicles. Formations that defy gravity. At every turn, there are questions. Is it any wonder that geology is one of the frequent interests of the caver? It's all around them.

As a result, you are likely to find the dedicated caver teaching one of the natural sciences at the high school or college level. This directs them to a 9 to 5 job that leaves weekends and summer vacations free for caving. It also gives their caving a second and more serious goal than the excitement of sheer adventure.

The cave brings the explorer literally nose to nose with unanswered questions.

- What are those pale creatures that live here? What sort of animal died here?
- What of the pot shards found just inside the entrance?
- Did people live here at one time?
- Who were they? Why did they leave? Where did they go?

All these questions nudge the thoughtful caver in the direction of further study.

Like climbers, cavers would like to support themselves in a related field. Guiding in commercial caves is a good way, but it's not much of a livelihood to build for a lifetime. Although basically an inexpensive hobby, cavers who seek far places have miles, even oceans, to cross, specialized equipment to buy, and the expense of housing and food can be a financial burden.

Cavers do not as easily attract dealers in outdoor equipment to fund their efforts. Scientific organizations will help when they can but they are often strapped for money themselves. Funding can be found but often with considerable difficulty. If someone is willing to pay, it is reasonable for that person to feel he or she should have a say in the direction of the activity. Some cavers limit their caving to funded trips only. This can tie them in time-consuming bureaucratic red tape. At the other extreme are cavers who don't seek funding but prefer the freedom found in paying their own way. The National Geographic Society funds both caving and climbing ventures with no strings attached.

To Summarize

Climbers turn the spotlight on adventure and the outlandish places people can go.

Cavers are more enthralled with what they discover. Adding to the storehouse of knowledge that humankind seeks is an additional satisfaction.

So let your interests fall where they may. Enjoy the challenge of the natural world and the variety it presents. Either way, climbers and cavers alike seek the ultimate in their chosen activity, and both express their success with an exuberant shout of "It goes!"

Author's Note: Although these opinions are my own, I want to thank the following folk for their helpful suggestions: Climbers: Paul Piana and Lindsay Stephens. Cavers: Art and Peg Palmer. And, those who espouse both activities: Chris Pelczarski and Dennis Knuckles.

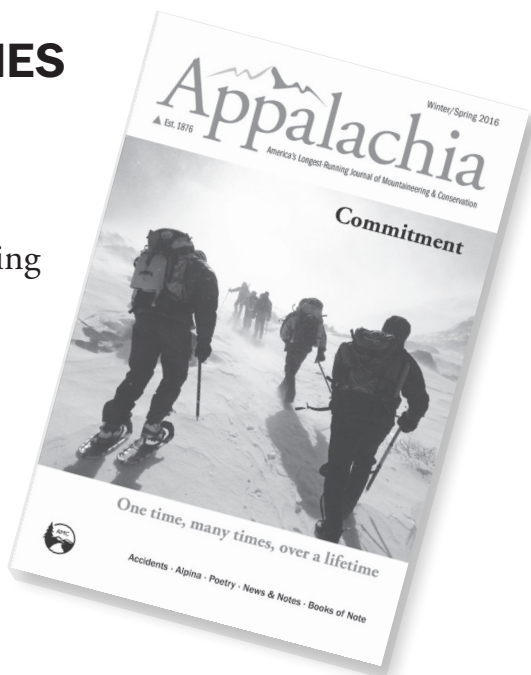
JAN CONN spent 17 years as a dedicated rock climber (see *The Adventure Climbs of Herb and Jan Conn* by Lindsay Stephens, Sharp End Publishing, 2008) followed by 22 years of exploring and surveying more than 64 miles in Jewel Cave in South Dakota (see *The Jewel Cave Adventure* by Herb and Jan Conn, Zephyrus Press, 1977). She lives near Custer, South Dakota. Her husband, Herb, lived there with her until his death at age 91 in 2012. Jan Conn's article about her record-making "manless" climb of Devils Tower, is collected in the *Appalachia* anthology *No Limits But the Sky* (Christine Woodside, Editor, Appalachian Mountain Club Books, 2014).

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