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Pondering Graceful Aging on Table Mountain, South Africa

A septuagenarian rock climber reflects on his past and future

Douglass P. Teschner



CAPE TOWN, SOUTH AFRICA, HAS A REPUTATION AS A MODERN CITY ringed by mountains offering great rock climbing. But when I had the chance to go there in 2016 for a Peace Corps country director training event, I felt ambivalent. I was excited to attend the training in a city I had never visited but pained to think about going to a place with a reputation for good rock climbing given my declining abilities. I knew that even if I could find a willing partner, I would not be leading a rock climb.*

When I was young, mountaineering was practically the center of my existence. Then there was a longer phase when family and work dominated my time, but climbing was still a big source of physical, emotional, and spiritual renewal. In 2016, at age 65, I was well aware that my body had been gradually declining since age 50. My knees especially, which were calling louder for replacement surgery.

I could still hike and ski, but had lost the ability to lead a rock climb. Confidence and balance just weren't there anymore; in turn, their absence eroded the inner drive. With a certain stubbornness and unwillingness to totally let go, I occasionally put on rock shoes to try easy boulder moves close to the ground. When I attempted the "sharp end" of the rope (leading), I invariably backed off climbs where I once easily moved upward. While increasingly retreating from climbing, I missed the roughness of granite on fingertips, the intense focus when "runouts" raise the risk of a possible fall, the deep partnership when tied to another, and the satisfaction of coiling rope atop the crag.

Thinking about Cape Town, I contemplated two possibilities: hike instead of rock climb or do something I have always been loath to do—hire a guide. My resistance to guides is less about the money (although I am pretty cheap) and more about my philosophy of climbing. Figuring things out myself, doing the research and planning, and making the on-the-hill decisions have always been as important to me as the climbing itself—critical elements in my personal definition of a quality mountaineering experience. After pondering

* Leading is climbing first from the bottom up, placing protection to shorten the length of any potential fall. Leading a rock climb is more challenging and riskier than having a rope from above, whether "seconding" a leader or "top roping" from an anchor set by walking to the cliff top.

Douglass Teschner on a belay ledge along the Arrow Final route up Table Mountain, Cape Town, South Africa. ANTHONY HALL

possibilities for several months, I opted for some humble pie, plopping down money on PayPal to book the guide for an extra day after the conference.

I flew to South Africa, and the workshop went well, but I felt sad that nine years as a country director would soon end. I loved the job, especially mentoring the staff and volunteers, but Peace Corps limits how long you can work. Too soon after the conference, I would be headed home to New Hampshire to ponder my next life challenge.

October 1, 2016 (the day after the conference), a group of colleagues and I joined the crowd hiking the Platteklip Gorge Trail up beautiful Table Mountain, which looms so impressively above the city. Occasionally we looked back at the spectacular peak of Lion's Head, the blue Atlantic, and Robben Island where Nelson Mandela was imprisoned for so many years. The open summit was a bit of a scene as hikers, plus many more had who arrived via the famous cable car, crowded into a small café. I was cold and happy for rest and food, but, sooner than I might have liked, it was the preordained time to leave my friends to wait outside the cable car station for the promised arrival of my climbing guide.

I felt unusually nervous and doubtful, wondering if this plan I had hatched back in the comfort of my apartment was really such a good idea. Fortunately, the arrival of guide Anthony Hall quickly dissipated any concerns. We hiked downhill for most of an hour on the India Venster, a different trail than the one I had come up, chatting and getting to know each other like old climbing buddies. Then we roped together and headed up 500 feet of rock toward the top.

Anthony checked my knots and belaying technique, which I found a bit humiliating, but nevertheless necessary. After all, I was the client, and he was the guide. I was, however, quite agreeable when he offered to carry my pack! The first two pitches on the Arrow Final route were a mix of rock and vegetation, but I was happy enough to have a tight rope at two spots where I struggled—even though Anthony told me this climb was graded 5.5/5.6, well within the range I used to lead. It was also a classic “trad” route (without bolts), which I really appreciated.

Anthony said there weren't many climbers in Cape Town, and they all knew one another, which I soon found out was true. While I belayed him on the third pitch, Anthony disappeared around a corner, and I was by myself paying out rope through my belay device. I noticed two climbers on a steeper route to the right when one called down asking my name. I sheepishly admitted that I was a client of guide Anthony, whom, of course, they knew!

When my turn came to step around to the left, I was delighted to find myself on an impeccable slab—a classic setting all the more inspiring as the cable car swooped directly overhead. I moved joyously up perfect rock on good holds until confidence diminished at a harder section where I struggled and called for a tight rope. The fourth and fifth pitches were almost as good, and I managed well enough, but was happy for the final 50 feet of very easy climbing on broken rock. We coiled the rope just a few feet below the summit station where we could almost touch the passing cable car.

A short, unroped scramble led to one final move. I grabbed a megahold, following Anthony's instructions, noting that if I fell (however unlikely) it would result in dire consequences.

Crossing a railing, we were quickly mobbed and photographed like celebrities by a group of Chinese tourists. A few moments later, we were rapidly descending via the cable car. Anthony gave me a ride back to my hotel, the final touch in a perfectly executed guiding assignment.

I was glad to have done it, but my limitations colored the experience. The quality of the experience just didn't match the competence I felt as a longtime climber making the key decisions along the way. Despite the superb work of Anthony, struggling to climb the harder sections left me without the glow of satisfaction and sense of mastery and control I had always associated with climbing.

But, at the same time, I also understood that, if I was determined to age gracefully, I needed to identify a better thought paradigm.

Driving though Franconia Notch a few months later, I felt a knot of pain in my stomach gazing up at Cannon Cliff, which I will likely never climb again. I recalled past adventures perched high on the airy Whitney-Gilman route on Cannon, belaying and taking in the view of Mount Lafayette across the notch. I recall feeling tired but deeply satisfied up there, a glorious experience that is hard to match. Yes, maybe a guide could "drag" me back up there (although as the years pass—I am now 72—that seems more and more doubtful). Anyway, I know there would be limited satisfaction compared with leading that classic climb myself. I needed to let go . . . but maybe not completely.

So far, I lack the resolve of Bob Weekes, who wrote so poignantly in this journal about taking his old climbing gear to the landfill ("A Lament Inspired by a Visit to the Local Landfill," vol. 67 no. 1, 2016, pages 136–137).

Under pressure from my wife to get rid of stuff, I did chuck the wool knickers I wore on Denali back in 1976. (As a convert to fleece, I know I will never wear them again anyway.) But the ropes, slings, carabiners, nuts, ice

screws, and such remain safely stored in the basement. Trashing these would be too psychologically painful. I suppose my two sons will eventually be stuck disposing of what's left along with my human remains—hopefully recalling good memories of the old man taking them off to the crags.

In the meantime, I embrace a quote in this journal (vol. 62 no. 2., 2011, page 72) from Alpina editor Steve Jervis: “I often think I should retire, but climbing is living, so I cannot.”

So, in recent years, I have occasionally pulled out musty equipment for little adventures like “ice bouldering” in Kinsman Notch and a solo snow climb up Huntington Ravine’s South Gully on a fine early April day. There is a certain pleasure to wearing crampons and whacking a tool into low-angle ice, providing a sense of security you can’t quite get on the rock.

In 2018, I roped up with a young man (whose parents I met in Africa) to lead New Hampshire’s Willey Slide, a long, but technically easy, ice slab I used to climb each winter unroped. As for rock, there has been some top roping at Artist’s Bluff, where I ran into another old-timer who can still lead rock. When we later did a few pitches on an obscure rock route in Crawford Notch, I felt grateful just to be there.

Then I got knee replacements, which slowed me down some more. My therapist suggested organizing occasional Zoom calls with old climbing buddies, and during one such event, I was sharing a framed photo of Whitney-Gilman Ridge on Cannon Cliff when my mood suddenly shifted from the sadness of knowing that I will never climb that classic route again to a glow of gratitude for all the times I had done it in the past.

I am trying to embrace this spirit as a daily graceful aging practice: to find the right balance of letting go (but not too much), pushing (but not too hard), going with the flow (but also sometimes swimming against the current). It is vital to fully appreciate the half-full glass while also working to sustain as much of it for as long as possible. A little gratitude can go a long way. And hiking and skiing in the woods are pretty sweet, too.

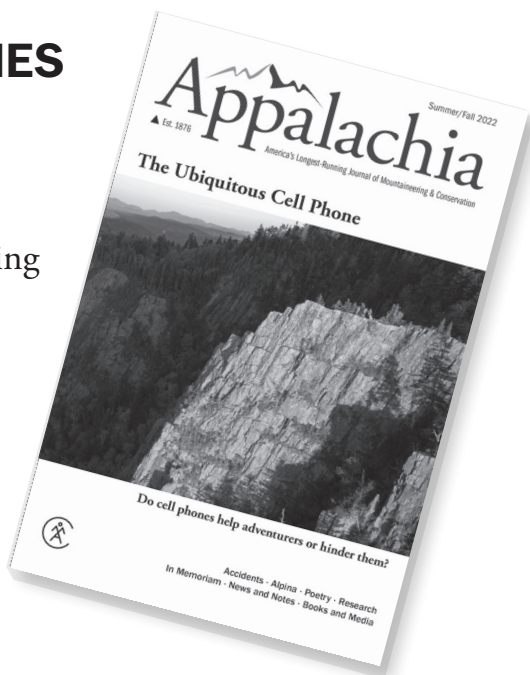
DOUGLASS P. TESCHNER has published many adventures in this journal over the past five decades, most recently “The Hancock Loop Trail, Then and Now” in Winter/Spring 2021. Doug serves on the Appalachia Committee and works as a leadership trainer and coach. Contact him at dteschner@GrowingLeadershipLLC.com. He lives in Pike, New Hampshire.

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