

SPECIAL FEATURE: MY METAPHOR

My Big Wall

by Paul Espinosa

"Rain! Rain! Why today?" I cursed to myself.

It was June and I was in Yosemite National Park in California, 2,000-feet off the ground. I was climbing El Capitan, a majestic 3,000-foot high, mile-wide granite monolith--one of the most sought after and spectacular rock climbs in the world. After three days of climbing on its sheer face, and having completed the most difficult part of the route, my partner and I were heading down. A thunderstorm lasting all night and into the morning had soaked our tiny perch and all our worldly possessions.

We began rappelling down the vertical wall by sliding to the ends of two 50-meter ropes tied together and looped through a set of fixed rings bolted into the rock. At the end of the ropes was another rappel station consisting of a set of rings, placed by previous climbers for retreating parties, which we used to anchor ourselves to the rock face. We then pulled the ropes down from the rings above, threaded the ones in front of our noses and started down another rope length.

Everything we brought up for our five-day climb to the summit we had to bring back down with us: ropes, climbing gear of every sort, sleeping bags, extra clothes, food, water, and other essentials. All this we either stuffed into a haul bag (an oversized reinforced duffel bag) or slung over our shoulders. The retreat was slow and methodical, akin to a train backing down a mountain, giving me ample time to think.

My situation made me think about my work, mostly, about all the projects I have managed, or been involved in managing. As a NASA project manager, I have worked on a number of successful projects. I have also been involved in a number of projects I never saw the end of. I thought about all the projects I transferred off of for other opportunities, projects that were in full stride and ran out of funding, and ones put on the shelf because they would not meet a flight date. Oh yes, I have had many success, to be sure, or I would have burned out years ago. Lessons from both the successful and not-so-successful projects have taught me valuable lessons, but it has always been the failures where I've learned the most. This is the thought I held onto as I headed down El Capitan, trying to keep in perspective the immense disappointment I felt in retreating.

We were about half way down the cold wet wall, coming down from out of the clouds, when the rain began easing up. By now each of us had experienced our



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own personal despair, shivering, wondering if we had made the right decision: should we have tried to stick it out just a little longer? To counter the self-doubt, we swapped tales of climbers swimming for their lives in torrential waterfalls, freezing to icy walls like a child's tongue on an icebox, or slowly dying of hypothermia. We knew we had made the right decision to head down, but it was still hard. Good judgment sometimes means cutting your losses lest you lose everything, and in this case "everything" was no mere figure of speech.

Retreating was made worse by the fact that this was not the first, nor the second time, I had been on this route, but the third. I have successfully climbed many other "big walls" (technically challenging rock faces usually requiring more than one day to climb), including another route on El Capitan; however, this particular route is my Holy Grail. It is called the "Nose" route because it runs down the center of El Capitan.

On my first attempt to climb the "Nose," I was ill prepared for the enormity of the task. In spite of weeks of planning and preparation, and years of climbing between my partner and me, I did not understand what was involved in a climb of this scale. Climbing a 3,000-foot big wall entails inching one's way up crack systems amidst dizzying exposure while hauling 150 pounds of supplies with you. On the second day, my partner dropped a bag of gear, requiring us to retreat to the ground, and the climb ended for us there.

My second attempt was two years later with the same partner. He had completed this particular climb since our failed attempt. I also had two extra years of climbing experience, including a different big wall climb under my belt. I was well trained, had made careful preparations and was fully ready to follow my partner's leadership on the climb. There was however one thing I was not prepared for. In the year prior to the climb my partner had lost a loved one. He had not climbed more than a day or two since then. This climb was going to be his way of "getting back into shape."

By the middle of the third day we were only one-quarter of the way up the wall. The pace was torture, and there was the ever-increasing certainty that we would run out of food and water before reaching the top. In spite of my experience and meticulous preparations, I was not prepared to take the leadership roll and the initiative to speed up the pace. I was frustrated, he was frustrated, and a trip to the ground was in order.

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My Big Wall (cont'd)



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Yosemite National Park is a rock climbing Mecca. Conquering El Capitan, the rock pictured here, was NASA project manager Paul Espinosa's objective on this mission.

So here I was on my third attempt, another two years later. I had trained physically for the climb, practiced numerous shorter routes, and was prepared to climb as an equal with a new partner, one who was very competent and climbed at my

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level. The climb had been going wonderfully. For two days we swapped leads, working together to compensate for each other's weaknesses. By the end of the second day we made it to 2,000 feet. We fell asleep under the stars, looking forward to the remaining 1,000 feet of climbing we figured to take another couple of days.

At some point during the night I heard raindrops. We both had waterproof covers over our sleeping bags, and were prepared for a storm, as long as it didn't become too severe. Unfortunately, severe is what we got. Raindrops came at us from all directions, even blowing directly up at us from below by the wind. To top it off, our granite "camp" was covered with 1/4 inch of flowing water. Luckily the lightning stayed about 5 miles away, but at 2,000 feet up the wall with all the metal of our gear around us, we still felt like sitting ducks.

Everything that was not in our individual sleeping bags got soaked. We peered out of our dry cocoons in the morning's first light to our new watery world. And three hours later with no letup in sight, we decided to head down.

Below 1,000 feet the rest of the retreat got easier as the rain turned to drizzle. We passed another party of climbers whose retreat was not going as smoothly. When we asked them how things were, they answered with a raft of expletives.

By two o'clock in the afternoon we were on the ground. I was happy to be safe and looking forward to hot cocoa and a shower. Still, I was saddened over the defeat. For future climbs, this kind of experience helps one keep success in perspective. Things happen that you can't always control in such unstable environments as a 3,000-foot rock climb. On projects like this you can never control all the objective hazards you may face. But this is what makes it such a thrilling challenge, and why I keep coming back.

My triumph on "The Nose" route of El Capitan will come eventually, I'm sure of it, and at that point I will certainly have earned it.

Lessons

- A can-do attitude and willingness to take risks should not distort your judgment to know whether to abort the project in midcourse.
- In project life, we very often learn more from our failures than our successes.

Question

Have you seen projects where it was clear they would fail because their leaders lacked the fortitude to abort before the inevitable?