

## **Why I Didn't Cry on the Rock**

*Or How My Daughters Made Me a Better Adventurer*

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Until I had wedged my feet onto a narrow ledge high atop Canada's Whistler Mountain, my cheek pressed against the rock face and my hands gripping the granite, I thought that this story would be a different one.

When my 22-year-old daughter convinced me to climb with her up Whistler's Via Ferrata, a fixed "iron way" climbing route designed to get novice climbers out on the rock, I thought that this story would be about how The Kid becomes The Parent. How my strong brave daughter would coax me up the mountain as I hung from a cable, my fear-frozen limbs as immovable as the rocky peaks. That she'd say, "You can do it, Mom. Don't cry. Just keep going."

But that's not how the story unfolded.

As a child, I wasn't a natural adventurer. Cautious, shy, and a bit of a dreamer, I was that kid who was always immersed in a book. On the playground, I'd balance on the teeter-totter with my friend Jenny, each of us reading the latest tale of Nancy Drew, Girl Detective. I was active enough, playing hide-and-seek with a pack of neighborhood kids, ice skating in winter, and riding my bike around town from spring through fall. Yet the place I was most likely to go on my bicycle was the public library.

So when my twin daughters were born, no one was more surprised than I. Not only because they were the first twins anyone could recall in generations of our families. But because somehow, I'd given birth to two adventure girls.

When Michaela first pulled herself up to walk, Talia began to shriek. Though Michaela acted nonchalant about her newfound mobility, her sister – who'd been born much smaller and was not yet as strong – seemingly couldn't bear the thought that her closest companion had some physical skill that she'd not acquired.

From those first wobbly steps, which within weeks Talia had also begun to take, the girls hurled themselves into every activity they could. Gymnastics, soccer, circus, dance. Kayaking. Swimming. Rock climbing. While they'd cuddle up for nightly bedtime stories, they thrived on jumping, tumbling, and scrambling.

Which is how I found myself with Michaela on overcast afternoon in July riding to the top of the Whistler Gondola in British Columbia's Coast Mountains. "Are you scared, Mom?" she asked.

"A little," I said, trying to control the shaking in my voice.

We met our guide, Josh, outside the gondola station, and he led us into a musty shed, climbing gear lining the rough wooden walls. We each signed a waiver acknowledging that the activity we were about to do could cause significant injury or death.

Josh handed us white plastic helmets and fitted us for harnesses that strapped around our hips and legs. Michaela tucked her dark ponytail into her helmet and pulled her harness right on, but the unfamiliar contraption befuddled me. I eventually managed to step into it as if it were a pair of see-through underpants made of buckles, loops, and rope.

Dangling from our waist belts were two loops of springy red rope with a heavy carabiner on each end. Josh told us that these thick silver clips were what would keep us safe as we climbed.

On the mountain, we'll climb along stretches of cable, he explained, each about six feet long. We'll attach both carabiners to the cable, and when we reach the bolt at the end of each cable section, we'll unclip one caribiner and attach it to the cable ahead. Then we'll do the same with the second caribiner.

He demonstrated. Clip, clip. Then unclip, clip, unclip, clip.

"You have to stay clipped in at all times," he warned. "Never unclip both clips at the same time." He didn't say "or you can fall to your death," but he didn't have to.

"Ready, Mom?" Michaela asked. I swallowed hard and nodded.

Wearing our bulky gear, Josh, Michaela, and I, along with Maya, a guide-in-training, started out hiking through the rocky terrain above the gondola station. Worried that I'd be the slowest person to make my way up the rock, I was relieved that there were no other climbers in our group.

In a few minutes, we were tromping through patches of slushy snow. Josh stopped us in front of a silver ladder that was lashed to a smooth rock. A ladder that went straight up. And up. And up.

I started pestering Josh with questions about where we were going, what we were going to do, how everything was going to work. He looked at me, then at Michaela, and said,

“Why don’t you climb right behind me? That way, I can help you along the way. Michaela can climb behind you, and Maya will go last.”

He clipped both of his carabiners onto the cables that ran alongside the ladder and nimbly climbed to the top.

My turn. I clipped in – clip, clip – and started up slowly. As I reached the pin that anchored the two sections of cable, I stopped and thought through Josh’s instructions. Unclip, clip, unclip, clip.

Josh said, “Good, you’ve got this,” as I stood up on the wide ledge at the top of the ladder and caught my breath. Michaela and Maya clambered up quickly behind me.

We walked a short section along the cable, before the next climb. This time, there was no ladder, just rock, with iron steps anchored into the granite. I grabbed one step, then the next, focused entirely on my next move. Unclip, clip, unclip, clip.

I looked down to watch Michaela ascend a section of the rock behind me. She climbed steadily, focused, her muscled body balanced as she paused for an instant to consider her next move.

The next section was harder. Although there were iron rungs at the bottom, they were spaced farther apart, and we needed to find footholds and grips on the rock itself. At one point, I reached for a section of rock, but it was too far. I was stuck.

“Josh?” He was a couple of sections of cable higher up and leaned down toward me.

“I don’t know what to do next.”

He assessed the position of my hands and feet. “Try stepping up with your right foot. Wedge it under that rock,” he pointed.

My shoulders strained to support my weight as I lifted my foot and hooked my toe into a crack in the rock face.

“Concentrate on using your legs when you climb,” Josh said. “Your legs are a lot stronger than your arms.” I nodded, biceps burning.

And we kept climbing.

When we took a short break to look out across the ridge of mountaintops, still covered with snow, I thought about how, as Michaela and Talia grew, I tried to offer them my own kinds of adventures. Together, we explored restaurants around the city where we’d sample Chinese dumplings, Dominican-style fried plantains, or skewer after skewer of

grilled meats in a Brazilian *churrascaria*. Once, we spent the night in a local hotel downtown, where we swam in the pool all afternoon and ate breakfast in bed the next morning. When they were ten, we crossed the country on a six-week mother-daughter road trip.

Yet I needed to learn that the activities I enjoyed weren't always what they wanted to do. That sometimes, I'd have to let them decide what adventures they wanted to pursue – and whether I could, or couldn't, be part of them.

High on Whistler Mountain, I was finally starting to find a rhythm, looking for my route up each section. Right foot up. Left foot up. Unclip, clip, unclip, clip. Right arm reach. Left arm reach. Unclip, clip, unclip, clip.

We came to a ledge, with the cable anchored across it horizontally. I mentally measured the ledge and saw that it was narrower than my hiking boots. Below this strip of rock, there was nothing but air.

I was momentarily immobilized, trying to envision how to scoot myself sideways across this rock shelf without losing my footing.

Josh interrupted my thoughts. "Here. Let me show you."

He clipped onto the horizontal cable and said, "You think that the way to stay safe is to press yourself onto the rock." As he stepped onto the ledge and flattened himself against the mountain, he swiveled his head toward us.

"But if you're leaning into the rock, you can't move. When you're trying to hang onto the rock, you can't move your feet."

He suddenly leaned his upper body out backwards away from the ledge, and I tried to muffle a gasp. "If you lean away from the rock – I know it seems like the opposite of what you'd think – but if you lean out, you can walk right across the ledge."

The red ropes held him as he tilted back into the air, and he waved his arms out into a T to show us that he was secure. Then he turned and stepped across the ledge, like a gymnast tip-toeing across a balance beam.

"Come on," Josh coaxed me. I unclip, clip, unclip, clip, so I had both my ropes attached to the horizontal cables. Instinctively, I squashed my face against the rock, and I realized he was right. I couldn't move at all.

Michaela was quiet behind me.

The rock was cold against my cheek, and my knees were wedged uncomfortably against the mountain. My hands were in a death grip on the cable.

“Lean back,” Josh said. And he waited.

I tried not to think about the endless space behind me. I knew that if I stayed clipped in, the cables would hold me, but I also knew that I could still fall. I imagined myself dangling by my harness, smacking into the rock as I swung back and forth.

Then I thought about Michaela, waiting and watching. I was terrified, but I wanted to believe, really believe, that I’m an “Adventure Mom.” The kind of mother who’s willing to dive into new experiences, drive myself to try new things, and show my daughters that life, despite its quite literal ups and downs, is one big adventure. I want to be the mom who encourages my kids to face their fears, to keep going on those days when everything feels hard, to push themselves beyond what makes them comfortable.

I was definitely not comfortable suspended on this ledge. Yet hanging from the mountain, with my daughter clipped in behind me, I found that, while I was scared, I was just as inspired. Inspired to show her that I could do it. That we both could conquer whatever fears we had, whether it’s phoning a stranger or climbing a cliff on a 7,000-foot mountain.

I looked at Josh on the far side of the ledge, took a step, and leaned back. And suddenly, exactly as he’d said, I could move. Holding the cable lightly with my left hand, I pivoted slightly, and in a few seconds, I found that I had walked across.

I dug my toes under a section of rock and turned to watch Michaela, as she scampered along the ledge. “Good job, Mom,” she said, as Josh snapped a photo of us. Later, when I look at the image, I’ll see that we’re both grinning.

As a parent, you’re hard-wired to feel proud of your children, from the moment you hold their tiny bodies and applaud their first mewling cries. But there’s nothing genetic that makes kids – particularly teens and young adults – feel proud of their parents.

I’m sure that someday The Kid will become The Parent and take away my car keys or tell me that I told her the same thing for the twentieth time. That’s not the story today, though.

Today’s story is that sometimes our kids will inspire us to do the things we thought we couldn’t do. And when they tell us, “Good job, Mom. You did it,” we’ll feel just as pleased as when they got an A on their algebra test or scored the winning soccer goal.

The rest of our climb seemed to pass in an instant, as we reached the summit, unclipped from the last stretch of cable, and posed for more photos together. When we started

our hike back down toward the gondola station, my daughter asked, “So, Mom, was it fun?”

“It was, mostly,” I said, examining the lines of bruises that were already snaking around my elbow and marching across my knee. “And except for a few times, it wasn’t nearly as scary as I expected.”

I don’t remember if I thanked her then, as we walked along the slushy trail, and she said, “Thanks, Mom. That was an amazing day.”

But I’ll thank her now – and her sister, too. For being my adventure buddies and sticking right behind me.

For pushing me to try something new.

And for letting me make my own way, out across the rock.

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*Based in Vancouver, British Columbia, travel and food writer Carolyn B. Heller is the author of several Canada guidebooks, including Moon Vancouver + Canadian Rockies Road Trip. Her travel and food stories have appeared in publications ranging from Lonely Planet, Atlas Obscura, Forbes Travel Guide, October Magazine, Canadian Traveller, Edible Vancouver Island, The Insatiable Traveler, and FamilyFun to Perceptive Travel and Roads & Kingdoms. She has eaten her way through more than 50 countries on six continents, but she was unreasonably proud when her twin daughters once ate pig ears.*