

An aerial photograph of a mountain range. The terrain is rugged and layered, with a central valley where a river winds through. The mountains are covered in sparse, dry-looking vegetation and scattered evergreen trees. The lighting is dramatic, with deep shadows and bright highlights on the ridges.

where the horizon meets the sky

*The Innaha River winds through a remote canyon
below Fivemile Viewpoint*



Testimony
article and photos by M. C. Reardon

FINDING COURAGE AT FREEZEOUT SADDLE



Anyone who knows me will say that I am deathly afraid of heights. So much so that I'll probably never gaze over the rim of the Grand Canyon, ride even the smallest of Ferris wheels or step out on the top landing of the Eiffel Tower without a wave of panic overwhelming me and making my feet stick to the lowlands like super glue. So when a writing colleague invited me to join her on a steep hike to Freezeout Saddle on the edge of the Hells Canyon Wilderness, I was at a loss.

Although she was nearing her mid-seventies, Janie had as much vibrant energy as a joyful ten-year-old. Although my initial response to her invitation was to backpedal my way out of the climb, her enthusiasm was infectious.

She started her recruitment by telling me, "I've led other women in their eighties on that trail and they made it to the top. I'm seventy-three, and this could be my last time. You look healthy enough...want to come along?"

I couldn't say no. Being a "young thing" at only forty-five, I felt compelled to pick up her challenge simply to save face. By the end of the evening Jamie had convinced three others at the writing retreat to make the climb with us too.

Next day, Janie checked the skies. Our destination was at 6500 feet and on the edge of the Wallowa Mountains, so April weather could bring an unwelcome surprise to any hiker; the most likely danger would be from snowy thunderstorms.

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But only blue sky, adorned with a few puffy clouds, hung brightly above the Imnaha River that morning, so Janie gave us the go-ahead. We packed our lunches, filled our backpacks with cold weather gear and set out on our journey.

As a long-time resident of Wallowa County, Janie knew the history of just about every piece of property along the way. During our drive she told us of barns moved across acres, piece by piece, then reassembled. She also shared stories of pioneers who traveled by horseback down the creek canyon to a small shack filled with flour and other staples, where they loaded their packs, then rode for hours back to the high vistas above the deep Imnaha river canyons where cow camps watched over grazing herds.

As we turned the corner into the parking lot at the trailhead, I swallowed my fear and placed my trust in my companions. We formed a small line as we made our ascent, switching back and forth across the face of the steep hills, taking note of gooseberry bushes and bluebells. Janie pointed to a set of large tracks in the dried mud. “Those are cougar tracks,” she noted, “probably wolf tracks, too.” Her comments reminded me of the wildness of the place we were traversing.

After hiking for about an hour, we discovered a flat spot under the ponderosas perfect for a picnic lunch. We laid out a makeshift table made of backpacks and towels and spread out our feast: roasted chicken, organic almonds, vegetables, biscuits and mangos. The group chatted

M.C. Reardon conquers the summit of Freezeout Saddle.

Photo by E.J.Cunningham

happily but I remained quiet, my mind focused on the task ahead. I worried whether I would really make it all the way to the summit or chicken out from fear. The jolly laughter of my buddies brought me back to center, reminding me that this journey would not be endured alone.

After we were done eating, two of our companions (as planned) left to return to the van and wait for us. They assured us that they would send a search party if we didn't return in a timely fashion, but planned to spend the day basking in the thick silence of the forest. Murmurs of their conversation as they headed down the trail floated up to us until they finally faded away into the landscape.

Resolute to continue on our journey, the rest of us entered the deep cool shade of the forest and approached a confluence where two creeks, grey with snow-melt, flowed across the trail. Janie, Liz and I picked our way across the cold water, handing our sole walking stick from one person to the one behind until we all reached the other side. Janie's hiking style made it easy for me to keep up. She stopped from time to time



so we could catch our breath and drink water. We watched the peaks of the Wallowa Mountains rise up one by one in the distance as we gained elevation, avalanche lilies nodding their yellow heads at us as we passed by.

Above timberline, the vistas opened up, the steep hillsides covered in bunch grass with splashes of colorful Shooting Stars, bluebells, Indian paintbrush and even a lonely *Penstemon*. Liz wrote down each of the plant names and took pictures. We noticed a rock next to the trail that looked like a pictograph of Raven Woman so we named it “Raven Rock” and used it as a landmark for the rest of our hike. High above us, I could see where the horizon kissed the sky. It felt so far away, yet Freezeout Saddle waited patiently there for me.

I enjoyed the views, but the steep grade — and a sensation that we had already traversed the entire trail length — made me fear that I had bitten off more than I could chew. Yet something deep within pushed me on. I took the lead as Janie began to tell us stories of other journeys on this trail, occasions when her companions had lost steam halfway up the hill. She encouraged us to continue. “See?” she said as she pointed ahead, “The path goes around that bend, so it looks farther than it really is. We are so close.”

We stopped for a break and noticed that there were no signs of animals in these hills; only the

lonely cries of chukars and hawks, quiet cheeps from small birds that fluttered in the grass and the chatter of a few robins.

An hour later, I reached a physical threshold beyond my previous experience, and began to lose heart. My breathing in the high altitude was labored, but my drive to reach the top overcame my discomfort. “We are so close,” Janie repeated when she saw my strained expression. “We will be there soon.”

And then, just when I was sure I couldn’t take even one more step, the trail stopped climbing and we found ourselves at the summit. There our path met the Western Rim National Recreation Trail, and the massive chasm of Hells Canyon spread itself below us. Enormous snow-capped ridges towered on all sides as the frigid wind knifed through me, the Seven Devils peaks visible on the horizon.

I was acutely aware of the blood pulsing in my veins and the crystalline air rushing past my face. I felt completely alive, but I also instinctively understood the reason for the name “Freezeout Saddle!” I asked my companions to take photos, knowing that no one would believe that I had made such an epic journey without evidence. We celebrated with hoarded Junior Mints™ and high-fives.

Yet suddenly, as I surveyed the barren landscape all around me, the sense of being vulnerable so far from civilization hit me hard. We

*M.C. Reardon and
Janie Tippett smile
for the camera
before heading
back home.*

photo by E.J.Cunningham

had not seen even one fellow traveler on our journey, just a white tent pitched on a flat spot below a snowfield. We were far enough into the wilderness that being rescued quickly in case of emergency seemed unlikely. And, perhaps most importantly, it was already ten after five and the sun was heading for the horizon: time to head back.

We hurried down the switchbacks, being careful to not slip and tumble downhill. My calves were taut, my arches screaming, and my backpack leaden. Taking inventory of what was left in my pack as we scurried along, I wished that I had included more survival gear — some matches, aspirin, more water and a Mylar blanket — and found comfort in knowing that I was not alone. We were in this together and would survive whatever happened.

As the sun sank below the rims of the canyons, I couldn't stop thinking about sitting in a comfortable chair. My stomach



grumbled as I obsessed about potato soup with fresh baked bread; my reserves were completely depleted and all I really wanted to do was lie down and sleep.

I turned my attention to the forest, taking in the deep peace of the natural environment around me. I listened to the breeze dancing on the tops of the ponderosas as we came closer to the end of our trail. Around one last bend, we sighted the parking lot below us and made our way down to the van. There we found our patient companions, who had spent the afternoon talking, playing cards and writing. We grinned like school kids, pulled out our cameras,

Poetry

Body Memory

I am twenty-four,
floating
on my back
in a turquoise
swimming pool.

Lifting my gaze
to the maple tree
towering above
I hear him murmur,
“Remember this. Your body
is a vehicle for bliss.”

So,
I surrender.
Sun and water
caress skin;
pores open,
portals to the Divine—
I breathe in.

Three decades pass:
marriage,
children,
a career, and
I've forgotten,
but a glance
at the glimmer of sunshine
on the icy windowpane
conjures
that moment long ago.

I close my eyes,
sigh,
hear the voice of my maple
whispering.....

Marie Lavendier



and excitedly told them all about our big adventure.

As the forest rushed past our minivan's windows I smiled to myself. I'd made it to the summit and back down safely, despite my trepidations. In that moment, Janie's patience and support helped me realize that I had the courage to live my life like a spirited mustang — just get in the saddle, do your best and live to tell the tale. ©

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