

Ben Kahn

“The mountains are calling and I must go.” - John Muir

Ever since I was a toddler I've gone hiking with my parents. At age seven I scrambled over as many boulders as I could, making our spring climb up Breakneck Ridge as challenging as possible. I was eager to pass my parents and to find my limits. But last summer, when I took my first backpacking trip, I was sure I was over my head.

Arriving alone at Denver International Airport, I felt small and insignificant in that huge space. I saw a sign for a tornado shelter and thought, “What am I getting myself into? Backpacking for the first time and there could be a tornado!” Then I saw someone in the same camp T-shirt I was wearing, and met Rami, my counselor. By the end of the trip I was a member of a “family,” a name we created for our JOLI (Jewish Outdoor Leadership Institute) family.

Bent almost double beneath the weight of my pack, each step I took squelched into marshy earth; my socks clung to my wet feet. Hikes before had ended in the back seat of my parents' car, on the way to a home-cooked dinner. That day, we reached dry ground and I collapsed; however it was my responsibility to get the group moving. Slowly, muscles screaming in protest, I forced myself to stand and led the group in setting up camp.

The next day our legs were stiff as we looked at the cliff we had just descended. The lack of air at 11,000 feet was draining. Some kids were crying, angry, and bewildered, while others tried to help them. I had just finished attaching the bear bags to the strongest tree, when Jake called from below, “I can't go up that snow ridge again!” As soon as I climbed down, I reassured him that we would take the alternate route, which was flat. Jake was huddled, shaking as if he was freezing in the warm air. Remembering the Wilderness First Aid course I took a week before, I held his hand and squeezed it in a normal breathing rhythm. Our counselor helped me walk Jake to his sleeping bag, and I sat with him until he fell asleep. Only then did I allow myself to release my inner tension.

Back at camp, Saturday afternoon, the dining tent was abuzz, as my group was about to sing. I smothered the knot in my stomach that I had on and off since my arrival. That knot meant I was about to do something new, like joining in the sweet sound of an acapella group for the first time.

This reminded me of swallowing that knot as I faced oncoming pitches as a freshman on the baseball team, and now I can take that pitch for a ride. As a beginner, I voiced my opinion to the senior writers as we wrote our school play, and several years later became the senior writer. The first time my family hiked Mt. Katahdin, we didn't even summit. Now, reaching the peak is our annual summer tradition.

Mount Katahdin, the tallest mountain in Maine, is a strenuous 4,000 foot climb with miles of rock, and my favorite hike in the world. The highlight is when I stop to take in the view. My legs and lungs are burning, my vision is swimming, and the landscape dances for a few seconds. It is almost like the scenery isn't real, as

if that kind of beauty can be found only in the imagination. It comes into focus, and I realize it is real, vast and rugged. I feel small and insignificant, as if I am a part of something bigger and much more powerful. Then I turn around and keep hiking, because I know that the harder I work for it, the better the view will be.