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Forward

Some personal experiences are so intense and unique they go beyond the boundaries of conventional explanations and force us into looking at/considering “other dimensions of existence.” This volume involves “knowing of the unknown” – what lies beyond our limited senses of perception. When Rob describes his experience “on the cliff”, he introduces possibilities of a reality that are not readily explained by traditional tools of science or language. This requires a readiness for knowledge not acquired through typical academic or scientific inquiry. There needs to be an acceptance of the value of the unorthodox in methods and outcome. Traditional tools of inquiry will not get you there. Narrow definitions of what is valuable and valued as “knowledge” will exclude these inquiries. To say these are “metaphysical” risks trivializing such inquiry into hackneyed clichés. Rather, they are explorations of experience without an endpoint in mind. They allow us to consider the “extra-ordinary” in a serious and personalized way. Perhaps considering this as an extension of “developmental readiness” through introspection of unusual, “unexplainable” phenomena is a fair description. Timing of such learning is critical. One needs to be in a place where pondering such phenomena without the need for closure is allowable. So be advised this volume will most likely raise more questions than it answers. If you are comfortable with that, you will find it stimulating and inspiring.

-Gene McCabe, Psy.D.

Preface

When I returned from the adventure described in these pages, I felt compelled to tell everyone I knew what had happened. Three of the first to hear my story were my three mentors who I meet with nearly weekly on Fridays for breakfast. Being in my mid-40's, I am the youngest in the group by over 20 years. We call ourselves "the Breakfast Club" and I couldn't be prouder to be a member. The members include Tom, a child psychiatrist who has become a best friend and chosen uncle to my children; Gene, a psychologist who is among the most genuine and wonderful people I have ever met; and Pieter, Tom and Gene's former professor of family therapy at the University of Rochester. Pieter has a cool South African accent and is a dead ringer for my father who passed away when I was 29. My connection to these men was the primary reason I felt it possible and worthwhile to write this story up, as they reinforced and contributed to my existential reflections on the experience, including the integration of concepts such as the One Mind, mindfulness, and the beautiful mess (more on these later). That's not to say I didn't struggle mightily with maintaining the confidence necessary to continue writing this story, especially when the details felt written, and it was time to make meaning of the experience as a whole. Tom, Gene, and Pieter were also the reason I was able to get through these periods of diminished belief in whether this story was a good use of my time. "You're sharpening your tools" they would say, comparing my writing efforts with a carpenter's responsibility to sharpen his/her tools.

After completing the first draft of my story and sharing it with The Breakfast Club I felt confident enough to ask another friend and colleague, Dr. Laurence Sugarman, read it and give me feedback. Laurence is a behavioral pediatrician with vast writing and editing experience who one can always count on to give useful, and sometimes painful, feedback. I was reassured by his and his equally talented wife's response after reading it: "This is not a crappy first draft AND you are not done." He also said, "I

think that this happened to you so that you can write about it.” So here I am, still writing this paragraph, months after writing the one before and probably months (turned out to be years) before sharing this second, expanded draft.

I teach my students in the graduate program of mental health counseling at St. John Fisher University about things like balance and preparing oneself for a career with one of the highest burnout rates. We talk about the constraints to effective long-term success in the field that includes avoiding prolonged exposure to a perceived lack of competence, hope, or connection with clients. The older I get the more important things like integrity seem to become. Maybe this has something to do with my need for a positive legacy. If I am to continue to teach these things to my students than I must be justified in “sharpening my own tools.” I’m glad that I listened to these wise men and hope to be one myself someday.

This story is my best recollection of the events on Moxham Mountain on August 24, 2019. Where necessary, I reviewed photos of the day and time stamps from phone calls made to first responders to stay as true as possible to the story. Be warned though that this story is arguably more about the space between the story than the story itself, as it is here that meaning is made and questions are asked. In my mind, there is certainly nothing like the wilderness to pull things into perspective.

Some of the ideas discussed through this story are evidence of my own developmental process for making sense of life. For at least the past decade I have searched for some sort of truth that eluded me throughout my strict Roman Catholic upbringing. Over time I have found ways to marry my learned beliefs with my found beliefs in ways that leave open the possibility of a scientific answer to the things I needed to be true, including the continuation of consciousness and mystical coincidences. A few chapters in *Cliff Notes* veer into these areas, but I do my best not to let these chapters take away from the story on Moxham Mountain, rather, I hope they help support the meaning I made from this experience and provide context for the lens through which I viewed it. Chapter 10 (titled

Cliff Notes) goes into more detail on some of these concepts. Reading it is optional.

Living through several tragedies including the loss of a daughter, early loss of my father, mental and physical illness, has helped lead me down a path that is overgrown with questions and ideas about the meaning of my life. I often give meaning to my experiences in ways that might be considered superstitious or irrational, perhaps even delusional. I am aware of this. My experience on Moxham Mountain was no exception. I think that makes it a good story.

Chapter One

The Cliff

“You’re never more alive than when you’re almost dead.”

Tim O’Brien

It had been about 10-seconds clinging to the side of the cliff before my wife could be heard yelling from above. Answering her presented its own risk of disturbing our precarious position. After bracing myself, nervous to expend any energy to yell back, I softly but loudly said, “We are ok. I just need to figure this out.” Clearly everything wasn’t ok, but in that moment, I felt the need to soothe my daughters and worried that any word I uttered would cause me to lose my focus, and grip. I tightened Walter’s collar with one hand because it had a history of slipping off his head. I tried to step to my left, then right, but each move I made caused loose moss and rock to slip beneath my feet and fall undisturbed into the treetops more than a thousand feet below, spinning and twirling until it was no longer visible. I slipped and nearly fell trying to get back to the dead tree branch and crevasse that my feet had found when I mysteriously found my way to Walter, the cliff appearing steeper and taller every time I looked down. I froze and couldn’t see a way out for myself, especially with my 95lb dog in tow, and I sure as hell wasn’t leaving him behind. My fingertips were already straining to stay clutched to the cliff. They were bleeding and getting weaker. I loosened one hand at a time to give the other a short break. I could fall at

any moment, and it would all be over. The forest that helped to regulate my autonomic nervous system just moments earlier was now causing panic.

It had been about 20-seconds on the side of the cliff when I decided to do an assessment of my resources. As a type 1 diabetic, I also needed to make sure that any chance that we had of getting off the cliff alive wasn't thwarted by an untimely hypoglycemic episode. I checked my phone (still in my pocket) to see what my blood glucose was. My blood glucose felt like it was dropping, but I have tricked myself into thinking my sugar was dropping before and frankly, the feeling of rising sugar is pretty similar in some cases to low sugar or panic. My continuous glucose monitor showed that my blood sugar was at 85 and dropping. I probably had ten minutes max before hypoglycemia set in, causing more panic, profuse sweating, and weakness. There was no way that I could continue holding onto the side of the cliff of that happened. I yelled to my wife to ask if there was a Cliff bar left in the backpack. She knew what this meant and courageously scurried to the edge of the cliff where she was able to hold onto a small birch tree, look over, and see the top of my head around 20-feet below. She described the experience as dizzying and nauseating. My wife has never been much of a risk taker and would never get that close to the edge of such a daunting cliff unless there was no other option. This wasn't the first time that she demonstrated amazing calm under pressure and strength in the face of adversity. I was grateful that she was at the top of the cliff to handle the girls and communicate with emergency responders.

I can't deny the irony in my request for a Cliff bar, but I had learned that these were among the best options for raising my blood sugar and the shape of it seemed to lend itself well to a cliff-side pass and catch. My wife contemplated how to get it to me without it going over my head or causing me to lose my balance reaching for it. Realizing my competing priorities, I interrupted her to request that she have our friend call 911. There was no doubt in my mind that I needed a helicopter. Gratitude that Walter was still alive fueled my strength and eased my panic for a moment. It was time to settle into the idea of my new life on the side of the mountain cliff. This felt

better than the prospect of standing on top of the cliff, looking down at the corpse of my best friend.

It had probably been about five minutes on the cliff when my wife yelled back down to tell me that it was going to be an hour before help arrived. “An hour for a helicopter!?” I thought. My head sunk and my spirits dropped. I was going to have to find a way to stay alive for an hour. I began to imagine which direction the helicopter would come from and contemplated scenarios including one where the first responder asks me to get pulled up first, leaving Walter on the ledge. I assured Walter that I would not leave his side and that I would tie him directly to me with his leash if necessary. My sugar was still dropping so I called to my wife who was still on the edge of the cliff, watching the whole thing, envisioning her husband and dog falling to their respective deaths beneath her. This outcome seemed uncomfortably likely at this point. Her best way to help in this moment was to find a way to get me that Cliff bar. She began looking for something to tie to it so she could lower it to me slowly, minimizing the likelihood of it flying over my head, or worse.

The next five -minutes felt like an eternity. Each moment was dominated by an enhanced awareness of everything. Every detail was clear. The gratitude for Walter’s living was still at the forefront of my mind. The feeling resembled that of driving on a busy five lane highway in the middle of a snowstorm. It required a constant scanning of the surroundings and small adjustments related to where to balance my weight, and which muscles I was using to keep me from falling. I periodically adjusted Walter’s collar and my grip on his leash, as it occasionally interfered with my ability to grip the rock and I was worried that if I slipped that I could accidentally pull him off the small ledge that he was on. I made every effort I could to connect with something greater. To leave my body and see my predicament from above. Out of body experiences had been a theme of my reading and I desperately wanted to experience one. Perhaps if I did, I would see a way out that I could not from my current position. I was confident that if I had something to hold onto the whole way that I could pull myself up, but

having Walter in tow made this prospect far riskier. I began considering the types of materials that might be available to the group above to fabricate a rope. At this point I felt better about my chances with a root rope than holding on and waiting for a helicopter in an hour.

It had been ten-minutes on the side of the cliff and visions of which angle the helicopter would take to perform the rescue were replaced with the thought of thousands of dollars in bills and fines for needing such assistance. Concocting a story for how Walter got down on the side of the cliff in the first place became a priority to avoid liability for my irresponsibility. I was sure that I would be held accountable because my daughter was not holding his leash at the time of his fall, and I didn't even have her in my sight. I told myself that if I got out of this alive there were two things that I was going to be sure to say to my family as soon as I reached the top of the cliff: 1) "Be sure to tell anyone who asks that you were holding Walter's leash when he quickly pulled away from you" and 2) "We are finishing this effing (but I would use the real word) mountain." Perhaps as much as I worried that I could not hold on for an hour, I also worried that waiting that long would certainly set our trip behind schedule. Even on the edge of a terrifying fall to my certain demise I was concerned about my damn plans! Perhaps it would have been too difficult to be fully open and present (mindful?) in these moments. Perhaps the natural tendency to overthink future details was a way to cope with the likelihood of my impending death. Either way, I was not going to pay for the helicopter, and we were getting to the summit, if I could just hold on for another 50-minutes.

After calculating the price of fuel and other resources, I decided that the helicopter rescue was likely to cost me around \$8,000. Add this to the value of my life insurance and I started to question my own value for a few moments. How could I let this happen? God damn school loans! I couldn't even afford my own helicopter rescue! My fingers momentarily lost their grasp on the ledge, and I had a moment of panic that elevated my heart rate from then on. These momentary slips were becoming more frequent, and I

was starting to lose confidence in the small dead tree that was supporting my left foot. I wondered if its roots were supported entirely by the moss and cracks in the rock, and what I would use to support my left foot if the branch gave way. Looking down and to the left for other places to put my foot if necessary occupied the next couple minutes of my time on the cliff. There weren't any. In a moment of panic and poor judgement I tried to put both of my feet in the crevasse that my right foot was shoved in. I momentarily slipped and had to return my left foot to the nearly dead branch with more force than it could reasonably tolerate. It cracked. Now I most certainly had reason to question its stability. The panic was building even more quickly now. There wasn't even a ledge further down the cliff that I could see and moving with Walter on my shoulders wasn't an option anyway. Our situation felt impossible.

It was somewhere between ten and fifteen-minutes on the side of the cliff when Walter started to whine and become increasingly antsy. The stability of his legs was in question, and I wondered what the first responders would contrive to get him off the ledge. I yelled to my wife, asking her to keep her eyes open for hikers who may be carrying rope and once again considered how to use said rope to hoist us out. No ideas emerged that did not require the assistance of at least one hero. I looked Walter in the eye and tried to communicate to him without using words that I would not leave his side. He was doing the same to me. In Oliver Sacks' book *The River of Consciousness*, Sacks argues that dogs have a lower level of consciousness than humans and that this can be evidenced by their inability to recognize themselves in a mirror. I would argue the exact opposite. A dogs' inability to recognize itself in a mirror is evidence of a higher level of consciousness. The self is not important to dogs. Dogs understand connections much better than humans and connections are the essence of consciousness. I was there because of Walter, and he was still there because of me. There is a South African word *Ubuntu* that I was taught by one of my mentors that means exactly this. We were connected on multiple levels,

and I trusted his sense of connection. If he wasn't panicking, I hoped that I didn't need to panic either.

The next five-minutes or so on the side of the cliff were populated with at least four near falls and concern that my blood sugar would continue to drop despite the stress of the situation. While my wife was still contriving a way to get me a Cliff Bar, I contemplated how I would stay relatively secure on the side of the cliff while unwrapping and eating the lifesaving morsel. The white chocolate macadamia nut Cliff Bars that I liked the most and brought with us on the hike had approximately 40 carbohydrates. I am constantly doing calculations in my head for how many carbs I need to keep my blood glucose stable and if my calculations were correct this time, the Cliff Bar would be more than enough to keep me going until the helicopter arrived. My wife and I had to communicate how she would get me the Cliff Bar, but it scared me to talk too loud on the cliff for fear that it would somehow destabilize my position. Even breathing too heavy added to mine and Walter's instability.

After carefully examining the crevasse that stretched from just above my head to about halfway up the side of the cliff, I contrived a half-baked plan to get Walter and I off the cliff. All I needed was a strong hiker with about 22 feet of rope to walk by and I was 85% confident I could carry out my plan without falling to my death or dropping Walter. My main concern was securing Walter well enough so that he could be lifted to the top, likely against his will. From experience, I knew that this would not be easy; Walter is like a 95-pound toddler when he doesn't want to be moved.

We needed the universe to send us a hero. Despite becoming more jaded in many ways since being diagnosed with diabetes, I had grown more confident in recent years that there are good people in the world who are willing and able to help a person in extreme need. One of my mottos, "Almost everything can be fixed," emerged from one of the many other times in my life prior when I honestly thought to myself in the moment, "This is the worst thing that could possibly be happening right now." Admittedly, this sentiment tends to arise more often than is reasonable and

always passes like a stubbed toe. Thank God emotions are temporary. I am grateful that this has become easier to remember with age and experience. An awareness of the temporary nature of emotions is perhaps one of the most influential components of wisdom.

By now the pain in my fingers from clutching the rock behind me was replaced with numbness. I was no longer concerned by whether I could withstand the pain of holding on but remained hyper-focused on my weakening finger muscles. I knew that I was only as strong as my weakest digit in that moment. My body was functioning as a team, with every player responsible for their own critical job. My mind was the coaching staff, becoming aware of each muscle that needed attention and reminding it that the team was counting on it. There was no room for a missed assignment. Every player had to be united with the coach and be willing to provide the effort necessary to carry out the game plan. I must have been more in touch with each of my extremities in those moments on the mountain cliff than I had ever been before in my life. If you think about it, we barely pay attention to our hands when we aren't using them. They basically don't exist in those moments. For this reason, popular psychologist, author, and podcaster Sam Harris argues that our hands might be less real than real. I would almost never take my hands, fingers, feet, or toes for granted again. These moments on the cliff would make sure of it.