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Layton Kor, 1938–2013

The Bible says “do not be afraid,” or a variation of the same, 366 times. That’s because the writers did not look far enough into the future to know what it would be like to climb with Layton Kor. There are individuals who seem fated, or preordained, who have the charisma and all the natural enormity of spirit, to be stars. In boxing we think of Mohammed Ali, in songwriting Bob Dylan. In rock climbing, it was Layton Kor. The name held an aura of greatness from the day I first heard it. This tall man seemed the one person to have earned his acclaim instantly, from the start.

In the early 1960s we awoke into a canyon, to a kingdom of rock. If to climb was our world, and if such an Eldorado was real, Layton Kor was the personified ideal, a spirit of complete preeminence. We were jealous for his love. It was a special thing to be chosen as a partner to Layton Kor. The highest recognition for a climber was from those of our same vocation, to be elected into the cadre. That he should make me his cohort gave me a sense of who I was. Around Boulder, Colorado, back then there were only a few serious rock climbers. We found our way into each others' lives and became a motley crew. We needed only a good partner or two, and our small society was born. We had our own goals and lexicon, our kind of cult language. We patterned our clothes after European climbers, from photos in books, our pants knickered, with knee-length stockings.

Layton climbed with mad fury and did so with more natural skill than any climber I knew then or have known since. His ready and beautiful energy filled Eldorado Canyon, though in the early days he also could be a bit reckless. That was part of the adventure, to imagine what might happen a given day. I held a number of falls, any of which might have ended in disaster but for the smallest turn of luck or fate. The gods watched over our friend. Those mishaps that characterized his younger days made us all feel we lived charmed lives. Layton would get so scared it terrified us too. We laughed and shuddered. He seemed to enjoy it when he wasn't the only one frightened. And frightened we were at times.

My devotion to Layton must have been profound, for without reservation I was prepared to put my life on the line again and again. It was a strange attraction climbers had to this tall man of German-Dutch parentage who produced in all his rope-mates both joy and horror.

Every moment with Layton was an electrifying experience. His emotions gathered intensity when he stepped onto the rock, and then there was an explosion upward of grace and speed. Elegant on the rock, smooth, wonderfully charming, he sometimes raced past the point at which there were holds enough to stay on the rock. Down he went. One of the falls I caught happened when a small foothold broke off, another when he leaned back into a lieback on a large block and the block cracked away. That was a close one. For an instant both he and I hung with all our weight on a single angle piton hammered halfway in. I was on a tiny stance but swung sideways into the rock fast enough to get control of this spectacular, violent event. When my friend climbed back up the rope, he pinched the head of that lone piton with the thumb and first finger of his right hand and pulled it out. He shuddered, hammered the piton back in, better, and proceeded up the rock with no less fortitude and fury.

That was as close as we came to eternity, until the week in April 2013 when Layton's heart stopped on a hospital bed near his home in Kingman, Arizona. His long, tall body finally reached its mortal end. His spirit, though, has touched climbers throughout the world and so deeply through the years that he continues to be with us. We have him on so many climbs we do, or as we glance upward, say, at the

high wall of the Yellow Spur, in Eldorado. He is there forever in the beautiful rock of Yosemite or of the Black Canyon, and high in the sheer granite reaches of the Diamond of Longs Peak. He haunts these places.

No one needs a list of Layton's innumerable ascents. Any climber with an iota of knowledge of history knows, at least senses, the vast register. He was prolific. Try to find a climbing area in the western United States, any kind of significant one, where he did not leave his spirit. In the southwest desert, for example, the Titan, Castleton Tower, the Mitten, Standing Rock, the formidable West Buttress of El Capitan. When Layton arrived in Yosemite in the early 1960s he did the big walls in about half the time of the great Valley paragons, Robbins, Pratt, Chouinard, and Frost. He instantly won not only their respect as a climber but their love. His larger-than-life, comic presence reached back home to me in Boulder, through letters from Yosemite Lodge. In one of his missives Layton counseled, "Well, take care, and use plenty of protecting pitons, the more I climb the more careful I tend to be. Climbers have a hard and lonely life. It only takes one fall to end everything. Hope to see you before long, adios, Kor."

When Layton and I came together again after a sojourn of years through our individual lives, he made me laugh once more, which he always had been able to do. It put me right there in the energy and joy of his company, as in old days in Eldorado. He and I both felt some of those best emotions of the past. Layton had finally dismissed an idea in his church that it was unhealthy to spend a lot of time with people not of the faith. Layton simply had too big a family outside his religion.

Virtually destitute and suffering renal failure, his general health very dire, Layton was invited to give a slide show in 2008 at the American Alpine Club headquarters in Golden. The talk, a benefit for Layton, scheduled for early October, began to sell out. He was a legend, and the notion of seeing the fabled personality in the flesh became infectious. The event had to be moved to Macky Auditorium in Boulder, where over 1,100 tickets, at \$20 each, went quickly. It was one of those mysterious wonders, something spiritual perhaps, that a community should so immediately unite. Each of us, it seemed, was touched by an appreciation of this all-but-lost inspiration.

Before the show, Layton could not find some of his slides. A few of us helped him track some down. He worked on notes for each slide, in case his mind went blank. Layton and I spoke on the phone often. I was able to offer information, details, and dates of climbs. "You have quite the memory for all these things. There is a whole lot I've forgotten. It's difficult to remember things from 50 years ago," he said. In an email, he added, "I have trouble remembering dates, except a date with a peach."

He expressed worry, about his upcoming travel from his home in Arizona to the show, and about the show itself, "Gotten all notes done—plenty of time now to kick back and get 'nervous' about upcoming slide presentation to 1,200 people—perhaps you could sit on my lap and do the talking—have fun—later—L"

At the end of the show, as Layton bathed in a wonderful standing ovation, he started to leave but turned suddenly back toward the audience. He rose up on his toes, and waved. The applause turned to a roar. Layton was weak from the show, and backstage Jim McCarthy had to carry Layton in his arms. I could muse that Layton always had his angels 'round about to bear him up, and I could hope I had been one.

Layton is survived by his wife, Karen, their son, Arlan, and by his daughter Julie and son James from his first marriage with Joy. He leaves also many hundreds of admiring friends and companions who ventured with him up into that realm he described, in a musing way, as "Beyond the Vertical."

—Pat Ament

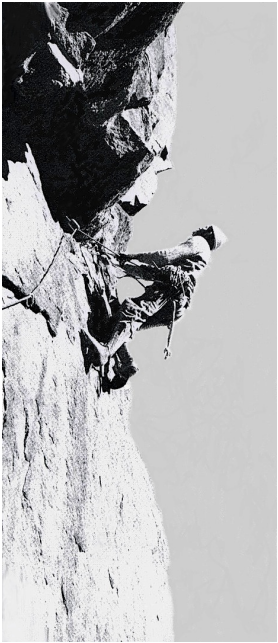
Images



Kor on Exhibit A, above the Upper Ramp on Redgarden Wall in Eldorado Canyon. Climbed in 1963, the roof has still not gone free.



Pat Ament (left) and Layton Kor in Boulder.



Layton Kor leading the Naked Edge during the second ascent. He is at the top of today's fourth pitch.

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