



AAC Publications

Fall on Rock – Belay Error, Communication Problems

Colorado, Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park

On October 24, Daniel Fullmer (34, over 15 years of experience) and I (32 years old, 15 years of experience) were climbing Scenic Cruise (V 5.10d). There was a party above us and at least another party within earshot on a nearby route. I was leading the Pegmatite Traverse (5.9+, pitch six). I was eight to ten feet shy of the anchor when I took an unexpected fall. I fell approximately 20 feet, hit a slabby ledge, flipped upside-down, and continued falling another 30 to 40 feet until the rope went taut. I had lost both my climbing shoes in the fall. I did a quick body scan and found I had minor scrapes on my ankles and left shoulder, a mild headache, and strong pain in my right ribs. I did not lose consciousness or feel lightheaded; my alertness was sufficient and I had no pain in my neck or back.

I began to yell to Daniel to let him know I was OK, but I did not hear a response. I tied a prusik around the rope, inserted the rope in my Grigri, and began to ascend. I jugged up about 20 feet to a ledge where I found an old 1/4-inch bolt, and clipped in. I put on my approach shoes and tried again to establish communication with Daniel, with no response. My ribs were really hurting, and with every extension it felt like they were on fire. Just as I began to ascend toward a higher ledge, I noticed movement in the rope and assumed Daniel was moving toward me.

A climber leads the infamous Pegmatite Traverse on the Scenic Cruise. Photo by Jediah Porter

I could see my gear at this point—a 0.75 BD Camelot had popped (marginal placement), but the rest of the gear had held. The failed piece had only added about five to eight feet to my fall. The last piece of gear, a yellow Metolius TCU, was bomber, but I did not want both of us weighting the piece, so I waited at the ledge for Daniel. He ascended to a big ledge, built an anchor, and lowered to me. We decided that we needed to bail, as I had lost my climbing shoes and was worried that I'd fractured my ribs. We proceeded to rappel the Cruise route, doing a total of five rappels. We ended up losing a few cams, nuts, and webbing, but overall we got down quickly and efficiently. I ended up with a several muscle tears, a mild concussion, and bruised ribs, but no fractures or lasting injuries. My new Black Diamond Vapor helmet took the majority of the blow, with an indentation the size of a softball about 3/8-inch deep in the right rear and bottom of the helmet. I'm lucky I was wearing this new helmet, as my old-school suspension helmet does not cover the full back of my head.

ANALYSIS

After debriefing the incident, I discovered that Daniel had clearly heard the command, "Daniel, off belay." Whether there was another climber named Daniel in a neighboring party or he had just misunderstood a nearby "off belay" command, he believed it was me who had shouted and took me off belay. I fell shortly afterward.

I had experienced something similar while belaying on the previous pitch, hearing some faint command, but I decided to keep the belay on, thinking that I would remove it once the rope was being pulled in rapidly, indicating Daniel was preparing to belay me. About five minutes later, I heard a clear, "Chas, off belay," confirming that the original, faint command had not been from Daniel. The brain unquestionably hears what it expects to hear.

In such a situation, when there is environmental noise, the climber is out of sight of the belayer, or other climbers are nearby, using names with shouted belay commands is essential, as is waiting for

confirmation before taking a climber off belay or unclipping from an anchor. When communication is completely lost, the belayer should wait until all slack has been pulled up before taking the leader off belay. (Source: Chas Robles.)

Images



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