All Climbing Is Adaptation

Thoughts on Disability and Inability

In the early 1970s, Roger Breedlove was a full-time climber in Yosemite: teaching climbing, doing big walls, and putting up classic routes like the Central Pillar of Frenzy and Freewheelin' on Middle Cathedral Rock, and the first free ascent of Beverly's Tower at the Cookie. Roger had contracted polio as a baby, and his atrophied right leg forced him to adapt his climbing to succeed. In this essay, he reflects on how the Yosemite experience shaped his thinking about disability and capability.

When my friend Wayne Willoughby asked me to contribute an essay on adaptive climbing, I resisted: With a relatively mild disability, and having never used adaptive equipment, I do not consider myself an adaptive climber. But I've realized that while a physical disability is not the same as having a limited capability in climbing, overcoming either one requires a process of adaptation. Based on my own experience and on my knowledge of Yosemite climbing history, personal adaptation applies to all climbers at every skill level in every style of climbing.

When I started climbing in the mid-1960s, climbing gave me opportunities I could not find in any other sport. I had contracted polio in 1951 when I was 14 months old. The disease wiped out about 40 percent of the muscles in my right leg. When I was seven and nine years old, an orthopedic surgeon rebuilt my right leg from the knee down, rearranging everything that still worked so I could push down with my big toe—still the only motion I can control below my right knee. He also slowed the growth of my left leg, reducing my adult height by three or four inches. After the surgeries, I stopped wearing braces. I learned to ride a bike. But I cannot run fast, cannot jump high, and cannot stand on my leg without something for balance. I dance terribly. While my hip and knee work well enough, I cannot raise my foot or twist it, so, from a climbing perspective, my right leg contributes only about 3rd- or 4th-class capabilities to my overall ability. It turns out that in technical climbing that is plenty good enough. I climbed because it was the sport at which I could excel.

I moved to the Valley in the spring of 1970. Jim Bridwell and the Park Service had just formed the first Yosemite climbing rescue team in exchange for year-round camping. He had noticed me climbing at the base of El Cap the previous year—he admired my tenacity but did not think much of my technique. Nonetheless, he invited me onto the rescue team.

My ah-ha moment came in 1971 when I belayed Peter Haan on his first ascent of Secret Storm. Peter tried to talk me through the short offwidth crux. But I could not heel-toe with my right foot and did not yet have the skills to turn around or chimney against the corner or stem— all sensible adaptions, even if they would increase the climb's rating—so I flailed. It wasn't fun. While I could support my weight on my right leg, I could not really stand up on small holds, and crack climbing often involves actively twisting your foot, so climbing well required finding alternatives to these sorts of moves.

I learned to take advantage of all of the available holds, smearing with my right foot, pushing down with my hands, stemming against opposing face holds, creating chimney moves with my shoulders against small corners and my feet on the face. I was not the first climber to use moves like this: Chuck Pratt had been doing it for years.

But sometimes nothing worked. As an illustration, Moby Dick, at the base of El Cap, has a low-angle, straight-in, four-inch crack mid-pitch. With good heel-toe jams, this is easy 5.9. Since I couldn't do the heel-toe jams with my right foot, this part was always the crux for me; I could easily stand on my left

foot but could not move up. Ahab, the corner just to the right, is a flared chimney, mid-5.10, which can be climbed with heel-toe jams in the back and with chimney techniques farther outside. In pre-cam days, Ahab had a fearsome reputation, but there were lots of ways I could move up without using my right leg in an insecure way. So, Moby Dick was very strenuous and not very secure, but on Ahab, my disability did not have an appreciable effect on my climbing. This also illustrates why I rarely rated any of my climbs: My climbing adaptations created havoc with my personal relationship to the grading system.

What is the point of these observations? In my opinion, they show the mashup of adaptations available—and often required—to get up hard climbs. Whatever distinction a climber makes between disability and inability, I think that climbing itself blurs the line: Everyone has to adapt. If I had to learn new techniques to get up something, I was just like everyone else. If I found climbs that were beyond my capability or will, I was just like everyone else. To say that my disability kept me from climbing Mark Klemens' offwidth routes or Barry Bates' thin cracks begs the question of what kept most climbers from doing those fearsome early 1970s routes. My disability did not put me into a special category.

We all know that some climbs fit our bodies and capabilities well and others do not. I was tall, skinny, and very strong—positive attributes on many climbs. But I could not put my left foot under my hand while manteling. (This was not a result of polio; my left leg was unaffected.) Steve Wunsch could do this kind of move, and I was envious of his capability. I had to learn other ways to do such moves.

Like everyone else, as I reached my limits, I specialized. I learned to spot high-potential free climbing lines and work out the details of getting up them. I learned to keep a quiet mind on run-out slab climbs. While I do not think of myself as an adaptive climber, I am in a good position to sing the praises of adaptation.

The zinger is that the very best climbers, in every generation, drive climbing standards by focusing on what they do best. This is easy enough to see by comparing Tommy Caldwell and Alex Honnold. They are good friends, they climb together, and they are among the best ever. However, by their own admission, each cannot do everything the other does. They are both highly adapted to maximize their own capabilities. And, clearly, no one thinks either is in any way diminished.

So, would I have been a better climber if I had not had polio? Of course. But I would not have been a climber. Without the limitations of polio, I would have more likely been a basketball player!

About the Author: Roger Breedlove lives in Cleveland Heights, Ohio, with his wife, Marsha Dobrzynski, whom he met in Yosemite in 1975. He owns and runs a consulting business solving complex technical problems for manufacturers of highly engineered products.

Images

Roger Breedlove leading the Third Pillar, Dana Plateau, High Sierra, California, in 1974.

Roger Breedlove at a bivouac on Half Dome in 1974.

Jim Bridwell (left) and Roger Breedlove at the Cookie Cliff, Yosemite Valley, in 1971.

Steve Wunsch (left) and Roger Breedlove preparing for a rescue on El Capitan.

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