

BRIGHT SHOOTS
of
EVERLASTINGNESS

*Essays on Faith and
the American Wild*



PAUL J. WILLIS

INCLUDES AN ESSAY CHOSEN FOR
Best American Spiritual Writing 2004

“Turn to the piece entitled ‘Inspirational Romance’ and begin reading. You may begin mumbling to yourself, ‘This is so good. . . . This is *wonderful*.’ Then you’ll settle into the steady expectation of delight. Such is the charm of Paul Willis’s splendid essays.”

—JOHN WILSON, editor, *Books & Culture*

“Even readers who know nothing about mountain climbing will find these essays compelling for their humor, their deft description, and the fierce love of place that inspirits them all. No simplistic, spiritualized nature metaphors here. Instead, Willis gently deflates empty religiosity, all the while vividly depicting the forbidding mysteries and dangers of the mountain wilderness that slowly transform the soul.”

—DEBRA RIENSTRA, associate professor, Calvin College,
and author, *So Much More: An Invitation to Christian Spirituality*

“*Bright Shoots of Everlastingness* takes us on a journey of the best kind—an absorbing, honest, and always entertaining wander through the wonders and struggles of a life spent in realms that matter so much: mountains, literature and friendship. Through it all, under Willis’s self-revealing hand, we sense our own fallenness, and with him, we reach upward for grace.”

—LESLIE LEYLAND FIELDS, author, *Surviving the Island of Grace*,
Surprise Child, and *Out on the Deep Blue*

“How did the twin austerities of churchly religion and mountain climbing produce such a wise, lyrical, generous-spirited, fall-down funny, and profoundly human voice as the one we hear in each of Paul Willis’s stunning essays? I know you will like this voice. You will trust it when it is poking gentle fun at its own sacred cows, and yours, because you will feel its warm heart, and you will follow willingly as it takes you deeper into yourself and into the mystery and the beauty of the human spirit.”

—DOUG FRANK, professor, The Oregon Extension of Houghton College

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*to my father,
David Lee Willis,
and in memory of my mother,
Earline Louise Willis*

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Moody: “All the Way Down”

OE Journal: “But Basney Says,” “The Geography of Hope” (poem), and “New Seeds in California: The Contemplative Journals of John Leax”

The Other Side: “All the World” and “Care to Dance?”

Redwood Coast Review: “Accidental Admissions” (as “Hanging by a Thread”)

River Teeth: “Bright Shoots of Everlastingness”

Summit: “SWAGS: The Next Generation” (as “The Next Generation”)

SWAGS Newsletter: “Inspirational Romance” (as “The SWAGS Inspirational Romance”)

Verve: “Manzana Schoolhouse” (poem)

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SWAGS: The Next Generation



AS REUNIONS GO, we realized ours was suddenly in a family way. For countless summers most of us had guided trips in the backcountry of northern Yosemite. Sierra Treks was the moniker—Treks for short—and our Treks seasons had made us into friends for life. Until, that is, we started our drift into adulthood, and somehow became nurses and doctors and entrepreneurs and professors and wilderness activists. And parents.

That's what came home to us one Labor Day weekend on our annual SWAGS get-together at the horse camp in Tuolumne Meadows. (SWAGS stands for the School of Western Alpinism Guide School—a fictive but genuine para-Treks organization synonymous with our finest moments, e.g., bagging the wrong peak on a recon, enjoying another lightning storm from the security of a Sierra summit, rappelling off the end of the rope.)

SWAGS at the horse camp was a tradition. Only one of us owns horses, actually—my brother Dave, who left feet and hands on Mt. McKinley a long time ago now and has to get around by hoof. But even he comes mainly to climb—which he still can and does—and the horses are just to get us all admitted into the campground. (On Labor Day it's pretty crowded in the Meadows.) This year, however, the horses were busy most of the time giving rides to our many children.

Which can get boring after a while. Walking around the campground loop with halter in hand is good for only so long. After all, there's a trail that beckons a short two miles to Elizabeth Lake, and above the lake there's a cute little peak, right? Unicorn? Just a steep scramble at the top, isn't it? Something the kids might really enjoy.

So we talked ourselves into it—promising of course that at any point we could turn back—and pretty soon we were three families, a pair of horses, my brother Dave, and a couple of very sacrificially minded friends. Others, of course, went off to do some “real” climbing. How wrong they were.

After a SWAGS alpine start, something around 10:30 a.m., we made the two-mile hike to the lake without much in the way of footdragging. There was a boulder to climb along the way, and once on top you could throw marmot dung down at the others. (*SWAGS Reporter*: “Why did you climb Mt. Everest?” *Sir Edmund Hillary*: “So I could toss Yeti poop on everyone else from the summit.”) The lake itself held an island boulder which also had to be swum to and conquered for lunch. But no marmot dung on top, a disappointment that threatened to erode morale were it not for a timely box of Cracker Jacks.

Early in the afternoon we turned our steps up the granite shoulder of the mountain. For a peak by the name of Unicorn, there seemed to be a lot of summits to choose from some fifteen hundred feet above us. But that decision hopefully would resolve itself as we approached. First we had to get there. As we ascended the broken slabs, the qualities of the members of our expedition began to emerge. The two eight-year-olds, Jonathan and Whitey, distinguished themselves by consistently choosing the hardest route available. Why trudge up a simple slab when vertical climbing is to be had? Nine-year-old Kate picked her way demurely behind, and her brother Clayton, just four, chose to ride on the shoulders of Sven, his more-than-generous stepfather. Which gave my daughter, Hanna, six, the distinct sense of her right to my own shoulders.

Halfway up we met my brother and his friend Faith, who had ridden there by some improbable and circuitous route. (Faith is a Methodist minister on the south side of Sacramento. She had just officiated at a funeral for a gang member, and partway through, she said, the girls in the gang had tried to pull the body from the casket.) Here the horses would be tied, and here we lost our first member. Kate and Clayton's brave mother, Kit, feeling weary, decided to call this niche on the shoulder her high point of ascent. Unwisely, she refused the offer of a novel to pass the time until we returned. The summit looked close, and we of course would be "right back."

Our diminished remnant pressed on, and of course the summit refused to be as near as it should. Only the timely intervention of M&M's and gummy bears, and the serendipitous discovery of a patch of snow in a shaded crevice, prevented breakdown and

mutiny. Clayton wanted his mother; his elders, however, wanted the summit—for the children, of course.

The slabs gave way to patches of scree, and a trio of pinnacles at last loomed close above us. We made our way to a ledge beneath the one in the center and saw before us a narrow and exposed traverse to the true summit on our right. Serious men with ropes and helmets were descending the pitch with professional care, calling all the proper signals. (“Dang it, Herb—you put this nut in *way* too far again!”) When they reached the bottom they took stock of our team and pronounced, “This summit is *not* for children.”

“Oh yeah?” said Whitey. “I can climb 5.8, you know.”

The handful of men to match this mountain remained unamused. Their problem was, if we could climb it, they would have nothing to brag about. It’s hard to see your whole day wasted like that. They bid us an ominous farewell and left us to our foolhardiness.

We broke out a rope and a handful of slings and harnesses, and Whitey’s father, Jim Percy, led the pitch to the summit block. I say Jim Percy since that is his full name and suggests his actual descent from the English Percies heroically featured in Shakespeare’s history plays. (Remember Hotspur, in *Henry IV, Part 1*?) To look at Jim makes me want to believe in the reality of noble blood. Part nurse, part cowboy, part climber, he carries himself with a strength and poise in whatever he does. No wonder his son climbs 5.8 in the third grade.

Not that any of us really wants to push our children up or off the high cliffs. Recently, Sharon and I had taken our kids climbing for the first time down in Yosemite Valley. I set a belay halfway up an easy niche in the Church Bowl, and Hanna and Jonathan

gamely tried to negotiate the well-worn rock. Jonathan finally managed to make it, knees and elbows wildly flailing and eyes glued to his wristwatch (since, he said, he was timing himself). Fifteen years before, I had witnessed a father urging his son up the same pitch without a rope from above. “I want to go swimming, Daddy,” the boy had whined. “Son, I know you can do it,” said the man. What a jerk.

Jim called back that the rope was fixed across the traverse, and he retreated partway to assist at a high step. We asked him what the pitch was like, and he told us it was “interesting.” Yes, we thought, but will it hold the attention of a four-year-old? We sent Loie next to test our theory. She’s actually forty or so, not four, but our kids get along with her best so we trusted her to report back more accurately. In her adult life, Loie teaches social ethics at the University of San Francisco. Right now she was supposed to be speaking at a peace conference in South Africa at the invitation of Nelson Mandela, but the peace conference had been called off on account of violence. So she was here, our unofficial good-times nanny. She tied into the line with a sliding safety knot—a prusik—and set off briskly, hesitating on just a few moves and saying things like “Whoa, Mama, this is *something*.” When she got to the summit she struck her trademark cheerleader pose and laughed down at us nervously. This was not encouraging.

It was decided that Jonathan and I would go next. I climbed just below him, helping him with his trailing prusik. We went up a crack and then past a corner into sudden and serious exposure. From our narrow ledge, it looked as if we could swan dive into Budd Lake, many hundreds of feet below. I looked fondly across the lake basin to the southeast buttress of Cathedral Peak, which Sharon and I had climbed on our honeymoon years ago. Awash

with nostalgia, I was thinking how much I liked the idea of family and mountains. “Daddy, that’s a long way down,” said Jonathan. He was quivering. “I’m really scared.” I put my hand on his shoulder and said, “We’re going to be okay, pal. I know you can do it.”

What a jerk.

Our route swung up to the very crest and now became double-exposed, dropping off in two equally fearsome ways. But for some reason my son believed my assurances of safety, the sort I had offered nonchalantly to a generation of other people’s sons and daughters. (Now I wondered if all these years I had really been lying.) So we made it to the bottom of an overhanging nine-foot block, where Jim was positioned to help us. I boosted Jonathan up into his waiting hands and then found a way to negotiate the step on my own. According to our guidebook writer, the route was only class 3 in difficulty. Perhaps after the climb we could have him arrested for child abuse?

Once over the block, Jonathan attacked the final scramble with increased confidence and not a little bit of pride. Loie welcomed us to the summit and clipped him to a loop of rope anchored next to the register, in which Jonathan took an immediate interest. To write your name and better yet to draw a picture on top of a mountain were pleasures he had never conceived of. He was even more delighted to find two pieces of candy that someone had left in the tube—a sort of alpine trick or treat. I felt a huge relief, a giddiness. A real summit with my son.

I positioned myself to watch and help and photograph the others as they ascended in pairs. Jim brought Whitey up, and Deb Percy, the funniest woman in America (okay, Yosemite maybe), came up with Kate. Both kids were just as shaky as Jonathan had been. “What’s the matter?” he called down. “You scared or something?”

Sharon accompanied Hanna to the point at which the exposure began. “I want to go down!” Hanna said. I looked at Sharon and we both nodded. Here, at least, some sanity was setting in. Hanna returned to the bottom with Faith, who prefers the perils of gang violence to roped climbing.

But sanity was not going to carry the day. Here came Sven up the rope, with Clayton strapped awkwardly across his chest in a tight harness. (“My penis!” cried Clayton. “What about your penis?” said Sven. “My penis hurts!”) Sven is the inventor of Clif Bars, created in his Oakland bakery. He always brought us lots of them, and we helped him concoct advertisements to combat his evil rivals, the Power Bar people. One of his latest, in the *Utne Reader*, of which we were all justly proud, touted Clif Bars as the only truly postmodern energy bar on the market. To get Clayton up the mountain, however, Sven would need all the postmodern energy he could get. Like Jim, Sven was always supremely confident and competent on a hard climb. But not now. When Sven reached the nine-foot block, I saw him look rather worried for perhaps the first time in my life. When marrying a woman, it is not good strategy to drop her four-year-old son off a peak. As for Clayton, he was alternating bouts of screaming terror with calm reflection on his favorite breakfast cereals. Somehow they got over the block and onto the summit. Dave followed, pawing the rock offhandedly (as he likes to say), and everyone who was going to be was suddenly there.

We took many pictures, of course, and recorded the ages of one and all in the register, and the kids drove Loie wild by pretending to unclip from the anchor. In the mottled sun of late afternoon I looked out across the Meadows to Sawtooth Ridge on the north horizon. In a few years the children would be there too, deep into the backcountry we felt was ours, and peak by peak they would be there still as we safely watched from the shadowy canyons.