

Dangling Relationships

Article by Lisa K. Harris
Photos by: Lyda S. Harris

I focus on the sheer rock wall visible between my well-worn leather hiking boots, key in on the reddish brown veins crisscrossing the cliff's face. My boots lightly touch stone as I dangle in a sitting position 130 feet above the boulder-strewn beach. Behind me, out of site because I am too scared to look, is the Bay of Fundy, off Cape Enrage, New Brunswick. My daughter, Lyda, hangs next to me. She bounces from one point on the cliff to the next.

"Check that out," she said, springing left again and points to something in the water behind us.

I don't look. My heart races. Inside my climbing gloves, I can feel the moisture from my sweaty palms. I concentrate on a narrow vein in the rock. There are chunks of rocks in the rock. I deeply inhale. Hold. Then exhale. Again: breath, hold, exhale. I can do this ... I tell myself.

Lyda lets out line and rappels along the sheer cliff face.

My eyes study the same rock vein. Inhale. Hold. Exhale.

My decision to accompany my daredevil daughter surprised her as much as it did me. She has rappelled several

times, as well as rock climbed, sea kayaked and whitewater rafted. Anytime there is an opportunity to participate in an adrenaline-producing activity she raises her hand and jumps forward. She did not inherit her lust for death-defying stunts from me.

I'm scared of heights. Not just sweaty-palmed, "oh-woe is me" scared, but heart-pounding, breath-seizing scared; the type of fright that affects my ability to think or move.

On this warm Saturday, where curly wisps of cotton-ball clouds play in the bright blue sky - weather the locals say occurs rarely - I busted through my comfort zone and told her I'd go with her. What was I thinking when I agreed to lean over the abyss and step off the wooden platform protruding from the cliff's edge?

I stepped off because I wanted to share an experience with my daughter in an activity she loves and excels at. I stepped off because I am tired of living within the cramped space that my fear of heights dictates. I stepped off because my heart got the better of my brain.

I exhale, nod goodbye to my friend the rock vein and I take another bunny

hop, my third from the top, and realize that as long as I focus on the rock in front of me, the rock my feet touch, my breathing and heart rates approach normal. I also know if I dare look up toward the platform or down toward the beach or behind, out to sea, I'm a goner. They'll have to haul me up or down, and Lyda will never let me forget my frozen moment. I can almost hear her voice ricocheting in my head, "Do you remember that time at Cape Enrage where you lost it and couldn't even navigate a simple rock face?" as in, "How stupid can you be?"

On the short hike through the spruce and balsam fir trees to the cliff's edge, where our boots crunch on dried needles and the woods smell like Christmas trees, I asked our instructor if any former students were frightened.

"You wouldn't believe the stories I could tell," said Tim, the instructor. I encouraged him to elaborate, hoping he'd tell me something that would make me see my fears were unjustified. Maybe something along the lines of "you're one of the few that made it this far, the rest is easy." But I was wrong.



Rappelling off Cape Enrage in the Bay of Fundy, New Brunswick.



Safely at the bottom of the cliff.

Tim recounted about an army sergeant who cried when he stepped off the cliff; of a man who was so upset he vomited halfway down (if you must, Tim warned, make sure you don't throw up on the ropes; nylon doesn't last long after its been bathed in stomach acid); of a girl whose hair tangled in the ropes and she had to rip it out by the roots; and, of a woman who screamed at the top of her lungs during the entire descent. By the time we reached the platform, I wished I hadn't asked.

I take another step along the now-familiar cliff face. The rock flakes easily and pieces fall to the beach below. I focus on breathing. I stare at the wall, let out some line, and take another step. One step after another, I literally "walk" the cliff, until the cliff face disappears and I am suspended in the space below an overhang.

"This is so cool," Lyda says, reaching the dead space. She turns herself upside down on the rope, her legs pointing toward the platform and her head toward the beach. "This is not cool," I think. I will never hang upside down, like a spider in its web, over an abyss. My pulse rate zooms and my brain locks.

"Let out more rope," Lyda says. "Slowly."

I let the rope slide through my right hand cupped behind my back, too quickly. I can feel the heat generated by the friction through my thick leather gloves. I sail toward the ground, past Lyda, who gives a "thumbs up" from upside down.

I land intact on the rocky beach and realize I held my breath for the final descent. I gulp in humid air. It smells and tastes like the sea and seaweed. My heart rate slows.

Lyda bounces to the ground and unclips the rope from my harness.

"You did it," she said. She slaps my hand with hers.

I smile. Yes, I did. .

She runs toward the stairs that lead to the top of the cliff. "Let's do it again," she yells over her shoulder.

I look up at the cliff face, to the platform, a speck against spruce trees. It seems far away. The sunlight sparkles off the water — it's smooth as glass, not a ripple splashes the rocky beach. A lobster boat chugs into the cove, its bow stacked high with wooden traps and nets. This time I will take in the view beyond the reddish brown rocks of the cliff. This time, I will let the line out slowly. I take a deep breath and run after my daughter. Here's to another go. ✍