

Angels in the Wilderness: The Value of Keeping Hope Alive

Hello, I'm Amy Racina. I am delighted to be here today, and especially glad to be alive. I'm a hiker, a backpacker, a mom, a self-employed businesswoman.

Four years ago, I faced one of the greatest challenges of my life. While hiking in a remote valley in Kings Canyon National Park, a hillside crumbled beneath me and I found myself falling, 60 feet, with nothing below me but solid rock. In the few seconds before I hit the rock, I was certain that my life was over.

I'd like to share that story with you, but first, I'd like to give you a little background about myself, and about how I came to love the wilderness. This is a reading from my book "Angels in the Wilderness."

I first fell in love with the mountains when I was 16 years old.

It was 1972. The summer morning was bright with sunshine. Standing with my family, my Dad and my 13-year-old brother Dan in the dirt parking lot near the trailhead in Mineral King, I was worried. I was often anxious in those days, concerned about nothing more specific than the unknown. But on that particular day, I knew what it was that troubled me. Unsure if I could face the rigors of the journey ahead, I dreaded the upcoming backpacking trip.

- From "Angels in the Wilderness" © Amy Racina 2005

I had grown up in suburban Baltimore. But my father had decided, in his infinite wisdom, that the perfect place to take his son and daughter on their first backpacking trip was to the Sierra Nevada Mountains in California. I had never in my life seen anything as tall as those mountains.

At 16, I was scrawny and shy. My Dad had dressed us all in men's clothing, with an eye toward thrift and durability. Our gear was sturdy and functional but did nothing to enhance the tentative self-image of a young woman.

From my customary position as bystander, I watched clusters of backpackers at their cars. I saw the easy way they swung their packs onto their backs, the cheerful camaraderie, the bounce in their stride and the strong, well-formed legs that would carry them and their gear away up fertile trails towards places of hidden beauty. I noted the laughter and bright smiles of the women, exuding confidence as they hiked off on long tanned limbs. I admired their tall, fit-looking companions. All of them had the strength and assurance that I lacked. I watched with envy and with reverence. They were everything that I was not.

My unformed images of who I wanted to be began to crystallize during those moments in the clear air. I wanted to live my life in places like that. I wanted to be with those backpackers, swinging along with nimble strength, capable and happy and unafraid. I wanted to be like them. I wanted to be one of them.

Up over 11,360-foot Franklin Pass we plodded that first punishing day, tackling a 3,800-foot climb and covering 11.5 miles. The straps of my pack dug painfully into my inexperienced shoulders. My leg muscles strained with protest. I panted in the thin air. I was exhausted and hungry and smelly and cranky. I hated the trip. I hated myself. I didn't think I could make it. But I went on.

Despite the hardships, or perhaps because of them, I began to appreciate life on the trail. The cold hard ground felt welcome after a rough day's hiking. Each ray of sunshine on a chilly morning was to be celebrated. Best of all, I grew stronger by the day. I felt the blood coursing through my body. I enjoyed using the new muscles in my arms and legs. I began to see the panoramic landscapes, the statuesque groves of Sequoia and Pine, the clear sparkling air that coaxed blades of grass and wildflowers into a luminescence brighter than I had ever imagined. And when, after 50 miles and ten glorious days, we arrived triumphantly back at the trailhead, I realized that the trip had been the most wonderful experience of my life. I've been hooked ever since.

- From "Angels in the Wilderness" © Amy Racina 2005

Revelation 12:14

And to the woman were given two wings of a great eagle, that she might fly into the wilderness, into her place, where she is nourished for a time, and times, and half a time,

And that is how I felt, after that first backpacking trip. As though I had been given a special pair of wings to carry me into the wilderness places, to heal what troubled me, to re-gain my own strength, to find peace and joy. Instinctively, I understood that the wilderness was a place where my spirit could be free, where I could be close to God.

My life went on, and I often sought the wilderness when I needed to find peace, a connection with myself, a connection with spirit. All went well until the year 2003. In the summer of 2003, I had planned a challenging 170-mile solo trek through Kings Canyon National Park. Up until day 12, my journey was everything I had hoped it would be. It was absolutely magnificent.

I'd like to take you with me now to Day 12 of my trip. This is August 4, 2003.

“So this is how it ends.” The thought resounds through my shaken body. I have not blacked out: I remember the seconds of the free-fall with brutal clarity. I took a single step, just one more step in hundreds of thousands of steady paces along the trail. Suddenly, without warning, I was falling. I saw the harsh slab of rock rushing up towards me from 60 feet below. There was no way to stop my descent, nothing to grab onto, no time to shift position, no action that could alter my fate as I plummeted through the air.

This was it. I was going to die. Now.

No gentle, easy passing into some brighter place. No life flashing gloriously before my eyes. No beckoning tunnel of light. Just this abrupt, thoughtless termination of life. I felt bitter disappointment at all that was lost to me. My mind screamed out in frustration, and my world went gray around me. I did not even have time to pray.

Months later it would come back to me, the sickening feeling of my own bones shattering as my body crashed like a rag doll upon the rock. But at the moment of impact, I felt nothing. Now I lie on my back on a slab of shale, legs crushed under me at an awkward angle, and look up at the wall of the ravine towering above me.

I am alive. I had not expected it to be so.

Reeling with the shock of the impact, I struggle to sit up. I begin to assess the damage. There is blood on the rock around me. My blood. I feel my face. A front tooth has snapped off. My nose is smashed. Several fingers stick out at odd angles. I look piece by piece at the rest of my body, patting it gently with my hands as though to assure myself that I am all still here. Multiple bruises and cuts cover my body. My left hip brings excruciating pain when I attempt to shift it. My own bone protrudes through the skin below my right knee, with muscle and sinew exposed to the air and flesh shredded around it. Worst of all, both legs are entirely useless. I cannot move either one so much as an inch.

I appraise my situation.

I am seriously injured. I cannot walk, crawl, or even stand up. I am in the most remote area of Kings Canyon National Park, deep in the backcountry of the Sierra Nevada. I am at least 25 mountainous miles from the nearest road access. I have not seen a soul for two entire days.

Only a handful of people hike in this valley each season, the rangers told me, when I got my wilderness permit. I had lost my overgrown trail shortly before I fell, so I am off-trail. Even if hikers do pass by, they will not see me. My friends and family do not expect me back for five or six more days, so they will not yet post a search. I am utterly alone in an untraveled portion of the backcountry. My chances for survival are grim. But I am still alive.

- From "Angels in the Wilderness" © Amy Racina 2005

Most people don't survive a 60-foot fall. I had fully expected to die during that fall, but I had not. The first thing I realized was that I had been lucky. Despite the severity of my injuries and the hopelessness of my situation, I had been given a second chance. A chance at life.

My backpack had fallen nearby, so I had the tools I needed to stay alive, at least for a while. The first thing I did was to apply basic first aid. I bandaged up the open wound, so I would not simply bleed to death. I cleaned the larger cuts. There was nothing more that I could do for my injuries. By then, I had started shaking uncontrollably, and I realized I was going into shock. I made hot soup and pulled my sleeping bag over me, and passed into merciful unconsciousness.

When I awoke the next morning, I found myself draped over a cold bloodstained rock, gear strewn about me, aching in every limb. The nightmare continued. The first thing I did was to make coffee, as I always do in the morning.

The next thing I did was to pray. I knew that I needed help from something or someone more powerful than I. I had lost the illusion of human control.

I had, by that time in my life, developed a good personal relationship with God. My questions were always answered, but my prayers were not. Sometimes I was given what I prayed for, sometimes what I most desired was denied to me. Occasionally, I was gifted with an outcome or a special blessing better than what I had imagined myself. I understood that divine intervention might not match my own desire. Prayer was not a sure thing, but I did know that it might help.

"Please help me," I pray. Please let me live.

In response to my prayers, I am not surprised to feel the compassionate wisdom and gentle irony that I associate with my dealings with the divine.

There is a message for me.

“How much you want to live might make a difference.” I realize that I have been brought to this juncture so that I may study the life that I have almost lost and might still lose. I have been given the exquisite opportunity to look at the life that I inhabit, and to decide definitively. How much do I want to live?

Although I have a fairly comfortable existence, sometimes I have experienced ambivalence. Is life a good thing? Why must we endure suffering and sadness? Is it worth going on? Now, faced with the ultimate question: I find that I do, very much, want my life. That sweet swift moment of total assurance becomes a treasure in my memory, because for one glowing second, I experience absolutely no doubt. My decision is made. I want to live.

Despite my understanding that there are no guarantees, armed only with the faint reassurance that my desire to live might make a difference, I determine to do whatever I can to make life the probable outcome.

Generally I am a goal-oriented person. I prefer to be doing something, to have some aim, some purpose. I usually have a course of action in mind. Sometimes I have been criticized for these tendencies, or I have criticized myself. I should be content to just be, not to do, to live in the moment, to simply wait and see what will unfold, to be more receptive, more passive, less attached, I am told, or I tell myself. Now, in the ravine, I give no thought to analyzing or modifying my behavior. I do what comes naturally to me. I make a plan.

My best chance for survival is to get to a trail. Only a few people hike in this area each season, but if I can get to a traveled path, there is at least some chance that I will be found before time runs out. Yesterday's trail is somewhere up above me, clearly inaccessible to me in my injured state.

The floor of my ravine tilts downhill, sometimes almost level, sometimes dropping steeply. The trickling stream next to which I have fallen flows happily away, guided by the sloping rock towards unseen meanderings below. My eyes follow the flowing water as I gaze longingly down the ravine, straining to see past trees and bushes that obscure my view.

A mile or two below me, I know from my map, my little creek will flow into the Middle Fork Kings River. Next to the river is a larger trail. If I can somehow drag myself to that trail and lay myself across it, I will have at least a chance of being found. Willing myself to take hope and determined to have a plan, I seize upon this improbable possibility.

It was not a bad plan. It had remote chance of success. My plan gave me something to focus on instead of the fact that I was probably going to die, in terrible pain, alone in the wilderness. It demonstrated both to myself, and to God, how very much I wanted to live. And most important of all, having a plan kept hope alive.

I packed up my gear and tied my pack around my waist with a rope. I still could not move my legs, so I sat on my butt, pulling myself slowly along with my hands, shoving my useless legs in front of me.

All that first long day, I dragged myself down the rocky ravine. I covered about 50 yards before I passed out from exhaustion. The second day, I was perfecting my technique, and I covered 100 yards. But by the end of the third day, I had reached a place where I could go no farther. My strength was failing, and a barricade of rocks and sticks prevented me from continuing my journey.

Doubting that anyone is out there, but craving the sound of human words, even my own, I call out one more time. Now my voice is one of despair. I don't believe that anyone will hear me. I haven't given up, but I can no longer imagine my own salvation.

Help! Help me! I'm tired of this! I'm ready to be rescued now!

A scream of agony becomes instead a cry for help.

And then I hear it. So faint that at first I think it some trick of the winds that are my only companions, whispering their wordless voices through the ravine. I hear it. Two tiny toots of a whistle.

That is all I hear. Two tiny toots, so faint that they might be a dream. Had I imagined the small sounds? Were they the whispers of the canyon spirits, growing seemingly closer by the day? Or perhaps it is a group of hikers in a festive mood, simply tooting for fun.

I become manic in my need. I know that this is my only chance. I become frantic. The fear that hope will be snatched away erases the calm that had served me so well during the previous days and nights.

And then I went absolutely crazy, shouting, screaming, banging on my pot, doing anything I could to attract attention. About two more hours go by. Sometimes I can hear voices, sometimes I think they can hear me, but I cannot be sure.

I hear the voices, and then they cease. There is only silence from the wilderness.

The stench of despair is heavy upon me. Bitterness drags at my spirit. They are gone. I am ready to admit defeat. I sit there by the embankment, shorts soaked in mud and urine, bugs crawling over me, tank top stained with rings of sweat and splotches of water. I smell dreadful. My face is blackened with bruising, body smeared with dirt and covered with scratches, puffy feet still encased in soggy, sour hiking socks, right knee swaddled in a bundle of sodden rags, both legs now swollen hideously.

Then I hear a noise. Someone is there. They have not left. Somebody is scrambling down the hillside across the ravine from where I sit. I burrow in my pack for my comb and toothbrush. If I am going to be rescued, I want to look good.

The hillside is very steep, a treacherous scramble with an overlay of loose dirt and leaves providing little foot purchase. A peppering of scrubby poison oak offers unfortunate handholds. The fear from my own sudden plunge still fresh within my memory, I worry lest my rescuer slip as well.

Some minutes later, I peek through the trees and catch my first glimpse of the person who has climbed down the slope, now standing on firm ground.

I cannot begin to say what that first sight of humanity meant to me, after the solitary desperation of those long days and nights. I had thought that I would never see another human being. Now, I am no longer alone. Overwhelmed by the totality of my relief, I burst into tears. It is the first time that I have cried since the fall.

He is built like a hiker, lean but fit, dressed in hiking clothes and wearing a daypack.

It doesn't matter what he looks like or who he is. He is surely an angel in human form, sent to find me. Somehow, in hundreds of thousands of acres of empty wilderness, he has heard me, felt the

desperation of my situation and the intensity of my need. He is the miracle that I have been hoping for.

Jake climbs carefully over the rocky ground towards me, pausing to honor the moment with a Buddhist gassho, placing his palms together, and bowing briefly over them, a nod of reverence to the moment, to my salvation, to his own part in this most miraculous circumstance. We both feel the sanctity of the occasion.

“I’m not going to leave you.” Somehow he knows just what to say. I cry still harder, smiling through my tears. I am not alone any more.

“I’m Jake.” He says.

“I’m Amy.”

- From “Angels in the Wilderness” © Amy Racina 2005

I believe that my salvation represents a synthesis between the power of perseverance and the power of prayer. If I had elected not to drag myself down the ravine, I almost certainly would not have been found in time, and would have passed into death within a few days. Jake does not think he would have heard me if I had stayed where I had fallen. And yet despite my plan and my persistence, everything that I could do to help myself would not have been enough to save me.

I needed the answer to my prayers, that final blessing, the miracle of Jake, my wilderness angel, to complete my salvation.

May your blessings be many, and may your own miracles always find you in time.

Thank you.

© Amy Racina 2007