

The Torrent: Facing Our Greatest Fear & Risking Living

BY HAROLD STEARLEY

The Torrent can take many forms. It can be the day-to-day grind. It can be the Mitote (MIH-TO-TAY)* in our minds. It can be the loss of a loved one, or the betrayal by a loved one. It may be an overall feeling of being lost.

Or it may be an actual physical event, with spiritual ramifications. Such is this story from many circles of the sun ago.

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The water was rising faster than we could climb on the smooth granite boulders that lined the steep gorge we had descended. Just one of the many hundreds of tributaries feeding the Colorado River below.

We had only seconds. And if we failed to get out of this gulch, we were destined to be mixed with the other rocks and sediments that eternally grind and cut this steep channel. Only we wouldn't be the grinder, we'd be cut and smashed to pieces in the grinder. Only our remains would reach the watercourse some half a mile below.

My brother and I were soaked from the abrupt downpour and my hiking boots were slipping on the polished stone. The quartz, feldspar, mica, and hornblende of the granite, now wet, were glistening as if they'd been given a coat of mineral oil. Beautiful, yet deadly in this situation. I hung on as best I could.

There wasn't enough of a ledge to get around the last boulder

I was clinging to. Safety was just out of reach. I was frozen, and the water was now completely over my feet. I yelled back to my brother, who was perched behind me frantically yelling at me to move on...

. . . .

The day had started out uneventful.

My brother and I were hiking the Grand Canyon for the second time. Like the first time, we had chosen the Bright Angel Trail on the South Rim because there were water stations about a mile and a half apart before you got to the Indian Garden campsite. That meant less weight to carry and better hydration.

Of course, we wouldn't be camping at Indian Garden.

The bottom of the canyon would be about 20 degrees hotter than the rim's 91 degrees, and that arid draft around us evaporated our perspiration so fast that we didn't even appear to sweat. Our clothes were as dry as our mouths, and we lost more fluid with each exhalation. The water stations were a must.

Unlike the first time, where we had planned and prepared for a month prior to the descent, this was a spur-of-the-moment adventure. We were traveling light, over-confident. We knew what we were doing, or so we thought.

Joining the only 1% of the visitors that actually traverse into the canyon, hiking there is essentially mountain climbing in reverse. Steep switchbacks down can appear to provide an easy stroll, but you must remember, you're going to have to make that rugged climb back out. On our first trip, we made two-thirds of the climb out at night when it was coolest. Slept on the trail for a couple of hours and pushed the rest of the way out at dawn.

But just going down is tough enough. You better have the right

gear. On the first trip, I was wearing steel-toed boots. A big mistake as my toes were crammed over and over again into those leather-covered steel plates on that sloping gradient. Fortunately, I had brought a first aid kit on that trek and my blisters were padded for the climb out.

The “developed mule trail” had about an inch or two of powdered dirt above the hard surface and if you stepped on a loose rock hidden in that dirt it was like stepping on marbles. Better learn to keep your balance quickly.

An omen perhaps this trip, they had just helicoptered a woman out who had been bucked from a mule and hit her head against the rock wall where the trail had been cut by miners a century ago. Had she gone the other way, it would have been over a cliff to the switchback below. She was taken by mule farther down to a landing zone as that was faster than trying to pack out.

Mule trains have the right of way. If you’re hiking and one comes upon you, you have to move to the edge of the precipice. They get the inside lane. And you hold still as you wouldn’t want to have a mule startle and bump into you, sending you over the edge.

While it’s about a mile straight down on a plumb line from the rim to the Colorado at the bottom, it’s 7.8 miles of winding trail to get to the river. We would bed-down the first night a little past Indian Garden at a place we discovered on our first hike – some 5 miles or so down and then off the trail.

Some Native American ruins on the back side of a low mountain peak protruded up from that part of the canyon's varying elevations.

Terraced floors. Each one lower, another step back in time. Isolated peaks at different elevations created from the differential erosion as veins from the watershed spread out like a spider's web before cutting through and finally exposing the bottom surface from a billion years ago.

Respect. That's what you better have before taking on this challenge. That's what you better have before entering sacred native grounds. Places where our ancestors lived in harmony with Mother Earth. What they built seems to be a simple design, but it's one of perfection. Semi-circular stone masonry in front of cave-like depressions in the mountain. Shaded from the sun in daylight, remaining cool. And with the surrounding rock and the walls heated by the sun all day long, you have radiant heat throughout the night.

We offered our respects upon entering. Never lifted a stone. Left without leaving a trace of our passage in the morning. You pay homage to the spirits or maybe they'll decide to keep you.

Maybe we weren't respectful enough. Maybe we were just too arrogant.

We had intended to head straight down for the river once we returned to the trail. But we spied something out of place in a wadi. A normally dry watercourse. There was a sparkle in the distance and we were intrigued.

Off trail again, but this time walking down a dry ravine bed, we saw a trickle of ground water emerging. It carried for a short distance, widening out and then dropped over a crag. Just below that rock face, about twenty feet down, was a carved-out basin. A natural stone bath tub about four feet deep to receive that shower of water from above. Water that

fanned out into an opaque curtain of white.

We were hot and covered in trail dust and that clear blue pool at the bottom of that thin wall of water sure looked inviting. We would have to climb down some massive granite boulders to get to that level, but that was doable with our light gear.

On the way down, I foreshadowed what was about to happen.

As we hugged the rock, I noticed how smoothly worn these boulders were. A millennium's worth of rapid water carrying stones and sediment had polished these surfaces smooth. And in the distance, maybe a week away, was a spotting of clouds. I remarked to my brother that if it rained and those boulders were wet, we'd be screwed. Too slippery to navigate, we'd be trapped below. And the gorge would fill and sweep everything out of it.

What we didn't understand then about this desert weather, was that spotting of a few clouds were actually major thunderheads. And those storms were not a week away – more like an hour.

Having succeeded in reaching the pool, we stripped down. I pulled a bar of soap from my half-pack and we thoroughly enjoyed a nice bath. A good thirty minutes or so passed, but then I felt the first rain drops. Realizing my observation had turned into a prediction I yelled at my brother to *move!* He was puzzled by my outcry at first but then he realized it too.

We dressed, packed up our gear and were scrambling in mere minutes. But it was still too late.

Later we would call these storms "thunder-boomers," but to the residents who knew the region, these were monsoon rains. Intense cloudbursts that may rain one or two inches of water over several square miles in a matter of minutes.

The desert sand that is baked hard like concrete cannot soak

up water quickly. There is little vegetation to help. So a dry waterbed can become a raging torrent, sometimes creating a wall of water ten to thirty feet high. In a matter of minutes. As it turns out, more people drown in this desert than die of thirst.

We didn't face a wall of water, but we were about to be overtaken by a rising torrent. Raging water. Water forced into a narrow and deep gorge. The power and speed of which we had never witnessed. The same ancient forces that carved this masterpiece of a canyon were now threatening to end our lives.

. . .

I yelled back to my brother that I couldn't move any further. Thinking quickly, and realizing we had no traction with our hiking boots, my brother took his off, handed me all of his gear and his boots. His hands and bare feet now like that of a frog, he could cling to that slick, wet surface, and he climbed around me and that final boulder. He was safely out of the path of the rising, rushing water.

He then took his belt off and threw one end to me. I grabbed tight with one hand, wrapped that belt around my wrist while clutching our gear with the other hand and draping my brother's boots around my shoulders. I took that leap of faith and my brother swung me around that final boulder. Both of us sitting now, safely out of the gorge, and gasping for breath, we gave thanks for having survived.

We asked for forgiveness for any offense, and we knew we had to leave the canyon as fast as we could. So it wouldn't keep us.

As we sat there breathing a sigh of relief, we looked back up to the not-so-distant trail. A small crowd of people had gathered and were watching us from afar. We just sort of looked at each other dazed as they now tuned away and walked off. I guess the show was over. No one had offered help or

stayed around to see if we were injured. It's not that we were anyone else's responsibility. We had made the decision and took the risk. Knowingly or not. It was just an odd feeling of us having been their momentary spectacle that was weird.

There was no longer any idea of continuing down to the river. It was time to begin the hike out. We just knew it. That five-plus-mile climb lay before us. My brother called cadence as we walked, and we not only made it out, we passed other hikers on the trail with a rejuvenated energy. We were young men then.

And I still wouldn't trade the experience.

It is said that humans resist life. That the greatest fear is risking living. One may take many breaths, but never have lived. To be caged or restrained or hide is not life.

I've learned. I've returned. I've hiked. I've prayed. I've given thanks each and every day.

I've learned to listen to my inner voice. To pay attention to a greater sense of awareness. A spiritual radar. And I've never felt so alive knowing every moment is to be lived. Every heartbeat cherished. Every love is the love of a lifetime...

For you never know when the spirits may keep you.

. . .

*The "Mitote" is the word used by the ancient Toltecs to describe the fog in one's mind. The human mind is essentially in a state similar to "a dream where a thousand people talk at the same time, and nobody understands each other." It is basically part of the illusion produced by our domestication.

It can prevent us from discovering who we really are.

For more self-study, [The Urban Howl](#) recommends [Women Who Run with the Wolves](#)  .

Sip a little more:

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***f Your Soul Is Open, Nature's Spirits Will Speak
To You***

***Bear Wisdom – Venture, Awaken & Emerge From The
Den***

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DANIELLE DULSKY

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