

Patty Somlo

NEARLY TO INFINITY

The trip was almost an afterthought. Long lovely summer days were barreling toward fall. The most difficult time of year, especially since the death of my husband Richard, was close. Days spent outdoors, hiking in perfect autumn weather with friendly companions, would push away the grief that, as days grew short and dark, inevitably invaded my heart.

Hiking above and below the rim of the Grand Canyon, I read, the briefest summary for a five-day stay in the country's second most-visited national park. My first thought was that I'd been to the Grand Canyon before. Why throw away precious funds to visit a place I'd already explored?

Then came another thought. The visit I'd made to the Grand Canyon nearly fifty years before was etched in my mind, with a score of enduring details. Unlike much of the past, I could easily place myself back there, as if I had visited in more recent times.

Two questions came up next that convinced me to go. Wouldn't it be great to make it at least partway down the Bright Angel Trail, which I'd followed to the bottom when I was still young? How might it feel all these years later, to trust this well-worn body to carry me up the steep, but unforgettable trail, when many people assume at my age this can't be done?

For weeks before the trip, I wondered, *Will I be able to do it?* Yes, I still hiked once a week during the good-weather months, moving uphill at a decent pace, even in steeper sections. This trip, though, would ask much more. Not only would the elevation gain and loss be greater on several trails than those I usually hiked. The altitude at the Grand Canyon was thousands of feet higher than where I lived, the air thinner and extremely dry, making the elevation gains even more grueling.

I joined my first group trip, to hike in Arches and Canyonlands National Parks, a year after losing my husband. More trips followed. Spending time with strangers who quickly became friends, climbing trails with views of lakes, waterfalls and mountains, was all I could think of doing that might usher in a bit of joy. The more times I stood in awe, taking in the splendor of this world with new acquaintances who felt as I did about the healing power of tall trees, mountain streams, water- and weather-sculpted rock, and the cascade of shifting color as the sun rises and falls, the more I saw these journeys as necessary to help me create some semblance of a new life.

Two weeks shy of my three-year anniversary as a widow, I boarded a plane at my tiny Northern California airport bound for Phoenix. After a short connecting flight, I reached the equally compact airport in Flagstaff. It was already dark. I had a reservation that night at a downtown hotel. The following afternoon, I would take a shuttle for the hour and a half drive to Grand Canyon National Park.

The year I hiked down the Bright Angel Trail to the bottom of the Grand Canyon, crossing a scary swinging bridge high above the Colorado River and sleeping outdoors on a thin blue tarp feet from Phantom Ranch, the United States was celebrating its Bicentennial. My boyfriend, Mark,

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and I had traveled around the country for weeks that summer, our orange Chevy Nova packed with everything we owned. We were making a move from Washington, D.C., to Albuquerque, New Mexico. Along the way, we camped in state parks and KOAs, stopping here and there to enjoy fairs and festivals, and visit friends.

When Mark and I decided to visit the Grand Canyon, along with my sister and an older professor friend and his two sons, our intention was to hike to the bottom of the famous chasm and then make our way back up. We didn't think of the plan as an attempt to conquer the trail. But from my current vantage point of age, I see that was the motivation. We were hiking to test ourselves, to learn if hiking down and up that famous trail was something we could do.

Over the years, I've certainly been proud to admit that I succeeded at what is a strenuous trek. But by the time I saw the description for this trip that lured me to fly to Flagstaff, I had forgotten how it felt all those years back to place one booted foot after the other, nine and a half miles down to Phantom Ranch, at an elevation of 2,480 feet, and then to climb step by step back up those nine and a half miles to the South Rim, at an elevation of nearly 7,000 feet, the following seasonably scorching August day.

What I did remember were the wondrous details -- the always changing color of the rock, the sure-footed mules passing on the outer edge of the narrow path, big-horn sheep leaping across cliffs high above our heads, and a swarm of bats that suddenly appeared after the sun dropped, but while there remained a thin layer of light.

In my recollection of the days we spent in the national park, none match my feelings after stepping off the shuttle bus that has ferried us from our hotel, where there's no view of the canyon, to the spot we intend to begin walking along the mostly level Rim Trail. It's early in the morning, the sun still low, the profusion of color in the canyon vibrant and pulsing, as if alive. With its mesas and formations of every height and size, the view contains foreground, background and every space in between. I walk and gawk, while taking in the landscape, trying to pay attention to where my feet land, so I don't fall.

Only later will I realize that I have come to the Grand Canyon for the wrong reason. Though I'd been here before and hiked down into the canyon's heart, wading into the icy Colorado River that hot August afternoon, I hadn't seen -- and more importantly, felt -- the magnificence of this place. I chose to come back, to honor and hopefully celebrate my ability to scale strenuous trails, at an age when I am considered *elderly*, only thought to have value and purpose, if spending time with grandchildren.

I've always disliked strenuous hikes that head downhill first. But to truly experience the Grand Canyon, there's no other choice.

The first afternoon we make our way to the start of the Bright Angel Trail. Our guides offer three choices -- short, medium, or long hikes. Though I yearn to choose the longest hike, to prove I can finish a decent stretch of what I did when I was young, I'm not able to silence the voice in my head, reminding me of the elevation at the rim, nearly 7,000 feet, dropping only 1,000 feet for every mile down. I am also aware of how challenging I found hiking at higher elevations in years past -- in California's

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Eastern Sierras, at Haleakala on the Island of Maui, and in Utah's Bryce Canyon National Park. My memory of those hikes is that I could only walk at a slow pace and not far.

I choose the medium-length hike. Our small group has a guide, a local woman named Sarah, with long gray braids, who looks about my age. Her knowledge of the canyon matches the vastness of this place.

We head down at a sharp angle. Due to its rocky, and at times, slippery surface, walking down this path demands unbroken attention. Leading at the front, Sarah stops us frequently to point out fossils or trees or any number of interesting marvels that, along with the views, highlight the incredible wealth of the famous canyon.

I marvel at the views the entire way down, reluctantly following Sarah's advice not to look around while walking, since it isn't safe to do so. I wish for more time, not only to take in the unending palette of colors, but to experience the emotions that this gift of nature keeps bringing up. Richard and I would have lingered, soaking in the sights, bathing ourselves in this beauty, eventually giving the unparalleled experience a round of applause. Being part of a group means I need to keep up.

At times, my thoughts brush against the terror of what the trip back up will be like. As a long-time hiker, I know how to translate the difficulty of a trail from the downhill drop. The steep descent takes a toll on my knees, meaning the climb up will be hard. I can't ignore the fact that instead of a plain dirt or rock surface heading down at a steady pitch, the trail is littered with raised steps. Wide logs are bolted across high cutouts, forcing me to use my trekking pole as a lever to help myself down. I'm not looking forward to having to pry myself back up.

Alas, when I start heading up to where we began at the rim, I face a series of high steps. These might not challenge a six-foot-tall guy. A bit over five-foot-three, I'm not built with legs long enough to overcome the height without effort.

One after the next, I heave myself up, my right leg raised at a ninety-degree angle, the black tip of the trekking pole dug into the ground. Conquering each step forces me to take more and more thin dry air into my lungs. On the one hand, I feel grateful for the squats I practice at home and in yoga, strengthening my thighs. On the other hand, I fear I'm not going to make it all the way back up. Will we need to summon an expensive helicopter to get me to the top of what I now view as a nightmare of a trek?

Two of my fellow hikers are ahead of me. Thankfully, they pause to catch their breath. They're as done-in as I am. Happily, I take full advantage of the rest to look around and soak in the splendor which I missed, while my eyes were planted on the bland beige dirt.

We continue on. Not long after that rest stop, the high steps end, and the trail angles uphill at what has turned, for me, into a very doable hike.

The trail we follow the next day is wide and muddy from a rainstorm the previous night. We start out downhill again, but at a less steep pitch. One of our guides, Ed, is leading the way. A *full-blooded Navajo*, as he labels himself, Ed keeps up a steady monologue as we walk, filling us in on fascinating aspects of Native American history, culture and life.

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Later, he reveals that the trail isn't a trail at all, but an unpaved road. By this point, we have entered onto land that belongs to the Navajo Nation. From a high viewpoint, we get a glimpse of the Painted Desert in the distance.

Other than the members of our group, we see no one all day. We are outside the national park, in the Kaibab National Forest. Ed hasn't revealed where we are headed, so we just continue to walk.

Hours after setting out, we spot the place Ed has led us for lunch. It's as if he made a reservation for a table with the best dining view of all.

Earlier that morning, in the easternmost section of the park, we visited the Desert View Watchtower, a several-story stone building whose design was influenced by the architecture of the Ancestral Puebloan people of the Colorado Plateau. From where I sit on a large smooth boulder, I can spot the distant Watchtower, rising up on the canyon's opposite side.

Several fellow hikers join me at this spot. We are famished and parched, relieved to finally rest and dig into the lunch fare provided by the lodge. Wrapped in silence, I'm mesmerized by the view, thrilled to enjoy this rare opportunity to look at and experience the canyon, without crowds of other tourists around.

On several previous trips, a highlight has been watching the sun rise or fall over an unforgettable sight. On the way to several lagoons on the Baja Peninsula to see California Gray Whales, we arrived at our hotel in San Quintín, Mexico, in time to enjoy the last orange glow over the Pacific Ocean. During a stay in Canada's Banff National Park, I climbed a rocky trail at dawn, to wait for the sun to rise above the turquoise water of Moraine Lake and light up the surrounding cliffs. For our lone free night in the Grand Canyon, the guides have urged us to take in the sunset, at perhaps the best view spot of all, Hopi Point.

An hour or so before sunset, a group of us hop on the shuttle bus across from the lodge, to make sure we don't miss the chance to see the canyon at what's probably its most glorious hour. After checking out the view all along the point, we take seats on a low concrete wall.

Far below, the chiseled cliffs appear to go on nearly to infinity. A muddy ribbon of burnt sienna, the Colorado River, winds its way across the canyon bottom. At this point in the late afternoon, the canyon is lovely, of course. But the sun is low, and deep shadows have spilled over large sections of the rock, not the sunset vista we've been hoping for.

A woman in the group, Carla, suggests we try a different overlook. A moment later, two of us, Dave and I, agree, then join Carla in leaving Hopi Point.

We board a shuttle bus, then hop off at the next stop. We do this several times, checking out the view, determining it isn't quite what we want, then hopping back on. Finally, we step off the shuttle at Powell Point and instantly know this is the exact right spot to witness the sun set over the canyon. A narrow peninsula juts out over the vast chasm. Views can be had at the end and on both sides.

The last of the sun's rays paint a wide swath of rock some combination

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of rose and orange. Fat clouds shoot out from a crimson mesa, dark gray at the base, lightening to a bright egg-yellow further up, and finally turning to white at the top. I lift the phone to my eye, noticing the twisted bare branch of a dead pinion tree in the foreground. Those gnarly bare branches are surrounded by lively forest green leaves on healthy trees, the background a canvas of vibrant color, a world having caught fire. The scene changes repeatedly as I move from one vantage point to the next, gasping with amazement, much as I did climbing the Bright Angel Trail. On the canyon's opposite side, smoky gray clouds hover low over the rock. Suddenly, a ragged white streak of lightning bursts through the clouds.

Before I know it, the sky has darkened. Light remaining from the day is nearly gone. I meet up with Carla and Dave, who I've almost forgotten about since we arrived at this point. We have no idea how late the shuttle buses are running. Thankfully, there's one waiting when we reach the stop.

People often say that the experience of being at a natural wonder like the Grand Canyon makes them realize their own insignificance. The great naturalist, writer and activist John Muir, who fought for the creation of the first national parks, experienced a spiritual transcendence when in Yosemite, a deep connection to the trees and wildflowers, the Merced River, the waterfalls, and the rock.

I too feel a deep connection to this place and something akin to the sacred. Weighed down by grief these past three years, smothered with loneliness and loss, I am grateful for the inexpressible delight that has washed over me here, sweeping from my mind the sense that my life has lost all meaning and purpose. For a time here, I, like the great John Muir, have experienced a oneness with the world, and a wonder that I can still be so astonished by it.

Our last full day, we plan to tackle what some say is the most difficult hike in the park, the South Kaibab Trail. After a thunderstorm the previous night, the air is cooler, perfect for an uphill climb. Once again, I have chosen the medium-length hike, though I wonder if I'm being too careful and could do the long.

As happened on the Bright Angel Trail, the often funny, super-smart Sarah is leading our group. Her mostly quiet husband, Bill, brings up the rear.

Having made it up the Bright Angel Trail, I'm a bit less worried about the uphill climb. There are high steps here to be sure, but I am more acclimated to the elevation.

Though I've been in the park now for five days, taking in the canyon from various angles, it doesn't stop amazing me. I'm convinced I could hike here for decades, as Sarah and Bill have done, and never lose the sense of wonder I feel observing the water-sculpted rock or quit being grateful to the people who struggled to save it all from mining, damming of the Colorado River, and every other commercial development and desecration.

I hike back up behind Jim and Amelia, the same couple I followed on the Bright Angel Trail. Though the three of us are *elderly*, we keep up a good steady pace. In fact, at one point we take a break next to a tired-looking, much younger couple, who say we're doing far better than them.

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In these three years of widowhood, walking and hiking have served as the best therapy for my grief. This trip has been the most healing journey of all.

When Jim, Amelia and I reach the canyon rim, we congratulate one another, as we slap hands. In a quiet moment, while we sit and wait for the rest of our group to arrive, I feel as if this stunning place has wrapped its arms around me, like an old pal.

Instead of meeting for dinner at a private room in the lodge, our group climbs into two white vans and heads to a restaurant. After leaving the vans, we still have a short distance to walk. The canyon beckons one final time.

The sun has set, and the rock is glowing, in shades that vary from an irresistible yellow to magenta. We are lured to the edge of the walkway, feet from where the land begins to drop. The beauty acts as a magnet. On this, our last night, we must be sharing the same thought -- that we somehow want to take the feeling this landscape has ignited back home with us, to linger, long after we have gone.

The next morning, the air is cold and the sky free of clouds. As I've done all week, I follow the rock-strewn path through the trees, from my room to the dining hall. I'm trying to place the feeling of this quiet walk carefully in my mind, so I might be able to recall it, at times when the grief strikes.

There's a freedom I experience on these trips, out in the open, away from home. The loneliness shifts to a serene solitude here and a sense that I have everything I could possibly want.

I take in the sounds of birds, the crunch of gravel under my boots, and the stillness that lets me hear such soft sounds. *Life goes on*, I think, with both joy and sorrow. *Life goes on*, ending and beginning, breaking apart and building, as this canyon has so easily taught.