

## You Can Do Hard

By Bo Lozoff

In the mid '80s, when my son Josh was fourteen, I was asked to accompany a small group of kids from his school on an Outward Bound wilderness training course. I had heard a lot about how great those courses were, so I jumped at the opportunity to do one for free.

Off we went to the mountains of North Carolina for five days of ropes courses, rock climbing, rappelling down cliffs, and backpacking. I've always seen that Outward Bound experience as a good reflection of the spiritual journey.

For one thing, the events themselves—all physical challenges—may be what demand your attention during the course, but they're virtually meaningless except as the ways by which you develop your *inner* qualities. It's the same way in our lives—the daily, practical world may require all our attention, but it would be crazy to forget the spiritual purpose behind every situation we face.

Picture signing up for the Outward Bound course, then spending the whole time just trying to get out of the damn woods—not learning how to keep dry in the rain, or use a compass; not taking advantage of the opportunities to build courage and let go of fear.

On the other hand, if I were to say, "I must develop courage," and then sit in a chair to think about courage, that's not going to accomplish much either. But the ropes course—climbing a skinny rope ladder forty feet up a tree, then walking across a narrow, slippery log during a light drizzle, and then grabbing onto another rope to swing all the way to the ground—gave me a lot of opportunity to look at fear and courage.

There's nothing very important or noble about climbing a tree, or swinging down a rope. Who cares? How does that help the world? Yet *courage* definitely helps the world, and it can't be seen, heard, or felt by itself. It's like trying to see a color: Color is real, isn't it? Yet we can never see it by itself. We can see red *paint*, black *pen*, blue *sky*, but we can never see pure redness, blackness, or blueness by themselves.

Our lives are *solely* a journey into our Divine Nature—Love, Godliness, holiness, however you want to say it. That's the important part, like courage on a ropes course, or redness on a piece of paper. Every person and situation in our lives is merely an "inward bound" ropes course, or boulder, or cliff, designed precisely to bring out the best in us. So what's the point of signing up for the course and then complaining that the events are too hard?

Years from now, we may hardly remember the challenges or the objects of desire, fear, or anger that once may have seemed important enough to lie, cheat, steal, or even kill over. All we

will have at the end of our lives will be the inner qualities, bad or good, which those situations gave us an opportunity to develop.

In the rock climbing event at Outward Bound, we were asked to climb a very sheer boulder about thirty feet high.

I remember looking up at the top of the boulder while I was on the ground waiting for my turn. The handful of people who had made the climb were standing around the top, looking incredibly happy, radiant, and exhilarated. What an easy mistake it is to think, “Wow, they look so happy; there must be something really great on top of that boulder!”

Of course, there was nothing spectacular at the top of the boulder. Those people were enjoying the rewards of a tough climb. But how many times in our lives do we forget that, and merely try to get to the top of that damn boulder by every other means *except* going through the same effort and risks that the people at the top went through?

I caught myself doing that awhile back, in a conversation with one of my favorite spiritual elders, Father Murray Rogers, an Anglican priest who lived in India, Israel, and China for many years. I had just returned from India, and we were talking about my meeting with His Holiness the Dalai Lama of Tibet. I said that His Holiness was probably the most profoundly simple, deeply happy person I have ever met. Father Murray’s response was, “Yes, and just *imagine* the pain and struggle he must have endured in order to become so thoroughly happy.” I was seeing the Dalai Lama at the top of the boulder, and Murray’s response reminded me that it was the climb, the climb, that had produced the happiness. What we see in saints is the result of a long, hard climb, not a lucky break or an avoidance of difficulty.

You and I have every opportunity to make that same climb. And of course we’re doing it all the time, whether we like it or not. It’s just that we can climb with ignorance, fear, avoidance, denial, complaining, whining, and so forth, or with excitement, gratitude, respectfulness, perseverance, and rock-solid faith.

The purpose of spiritual practice is not to get to the top with less effort; we will be called upon to expend **tremendous** effort—to forgive the unforgiveable, bear the unbearable, surmount the insurmountable; we will be called upon to develop loving kindness in response to ignorance, hatred, fear, and persecution.

We have a saying around Kindness House: **You can do hard**. The reason we say this is that in modern times, the words “it’s too hard” have become an anthem for giving up. The message is: Have an ache or pain, reach for a pill; get depressed because you lose your job, take Prozac. A friend once confided to me that she regretted divorcing her husband. She said the only reason

she did it was a prevailing attitude among her friends that “If it gets really hard, why make yourself suffer?” Maybe we have become convinced that we can’t do hard things.

*You can do hard* is a way of reminding yourself that you need not run away in fear just because something is greatly challenging. You can do challenging. It might even be scary, but you can do scary. You can do hard. Really, you can. Don’t let a shallow culture fool you into thinking you’ll crumble when the chips are down. Human beings were designed for the chips to be down sometimes.

Imagine a runner who begins a race and, after running twenty yards, has to jump over a hurdle. *Damn it, what’s this thing doing here? It’s in my way!* Another twenty yards, another hurdle. *Damn!* Then another, and another. His annoyance grows into anger; he loses focus; he risks injury; he loses steam.

But knowing from the outset that the race is actually a hurdle event puts everything in a completely different perspective, doesn’t it? The same effort is required, the same hurdles need to be jumped, but now they are part of the challenge instead of being unwelcome obstacles. Bad habits and qualities or situations that need to be changed are hurdles in our lives, not obstacles. We waste enormous power if we misunderstand this.

Looking around, we see that there are far too many wars and prisons, far too much poverty and hopelessness; but also many great things are happening among committed spiritual seekers and social activists. You and I have an opportunity to be on either side of the balance. The world really needs us to become joyful and enlightened human beings. What do you think? I beg you, for the sake of us all, to step into your life with renewed commitment to yourself and the world. The teachings, principles and practices are right here within your reach. And the need has never been greater.

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*Suggested Reading from Indicorps-Toolkit for Being the Change ([www.indicorps.org](http://www.indicorps.org))*