



Wellness Is a Grand Journey

by MARIE WALL



Achieving wellness is no small task. It takes effort, preparation, overcoming obstacles and enjoying the benefits. Whether it is getting fit, developing better communication or coming to peace with oneself and life, transforming old patterns into healthier ways of being is a challenge, and sometimes the inner terrain is hardest. In this article I will share an experience that encompassed all of this for me – an eight-day backpacking trip in the Grand Canyon.

I had never made such a journey, and never thought I could; yet with a combination of anticipation and fear I started the adventure. I had to prepare with the end in mind. If I wanted to be successful, I had to be ready. I could not do it alone, but I had an informal support team who encouraged me.



On the edge of the Grand Canyon.

The preparation took great effort. I knew I needed physical conditioning – better cardio, be stronger and lighter. To succeed I also needed the right equipment. The task seemed daunting, but I had four months to prepare. If I wanted to do this trek I had to be as ready as I could be. I had to walk, snowshoe, hike, eat right, and lose weight. I started walking and snowshoeing with my pack at 25 pounds, which I thought was very good. Little did I know that the pack would double in weight for the trek. Many times I doubted myself, but the dream remained. Slowly I got stronger and my pack got heavier. In a couple of months

I could extend my day trips from one hour to nearly three. My goal was to be able to hike 10 km with a 40-pound pack.

The thought of being in the Grand Canyon for a week was frightening, but I was still driven. I gathered my equipment, new and old. I needed new boots, which was a big deal in itself as they needed to be broken in. I wore them whenever I could, including to work on casual Fridays. The mix of anticipation and fear was constant with both taking the upper hand at various times. I didn't know what was drawing me, but the excitement outweighed the fear.

Survival instincts kicked in – in a way I could never have anticipated. Food for the hike became an obsession. Would there be enough? What would it be? How do we carry it and how do we prepare it? My focus around the food created new fears. The needs of food were very specific – light, compact, transportable and nutritious. Once the initial food packing had been completed and I could see the amount of food we would carry, my comfort level increased dramatically. I still didn't know how we were going to carry it all, but I had to trust it would be okay.

The closer I got to leaving, the greater my anxiety became. I had never thought of myself as panicky, but the waves of anxiety that washed over me were more than I had ever experienced. Doubts were paramount. Was I ready? Did I have the right equipment? Would I feel trapped? Could I do it? I had to rely on my support team to reassure me in ways I had never experienced before. The anxiety crescendoed and I wasn't even there yet.

The preparation was done and now it was the moment of truth. I arrived at our destination – the South Rim of the Grand Canyon. The Grand Canyon is a huge hole in the middle of nowhere. As I looked over the abyss, I couldn't catch my breath – the beauty of it, my fear of it and the reality of what I was about to do. It was the most breathtaking experience of my life. There were nine people in our party – seven participants, all from Newfoundland, and

our two guides. Each stage of the trek was essential and the day at the Rim gave us time to share out the supplies and pack our bags. I couldn't imagine how it would all fit, and I was right. My backpack was insufficient and not the right one at all. Fear stricken and embarrassed, I had to admit this to one of the guides. The cool response was shocking to my system. The two of us drove to the local general store, fully outfitted with groceries, tourist shop and hiking gear, to purchase a new, bigger pack. I experienced only moderate relief.

Finally, with the equipment packed in my new shiny bag, I tried to settle in for a night's sleep. I was in a tent with four strangers, on the rim of a canyon that I was going into for eight days and I was supposed to sleep. I eventually drifted off but the fitful night only served to feed my anxiety even more.

With a few glitches we managed to get ourselves to the trail head. The packs were heavier than I could ever have imagined and now I had a new worry. Could I really carry this for eight days? The packs were so heavy, around 50 pounds, that we had to hoist them up for each other. The guide reassured us not to be ashamed about needing help to do this. Finally, we started out to an unknown world with unknown demands. Unlike my other hiking trips, day hikes, all my treks started at the bottom and I worked my way up. This trek started at the top and we began the long descent.



A side trip through Cottonwood Canyon.

The initial day was on a well-traveled path that was carved into the canyon wall. With one of the guides in the lead and one holding the rear. I decided to hang back. It seemed daunting enough for me without trying to set the pace. I also knew the weakest part of my body is my knees and getting down would be a huge test. The first hour seemed to pass quickly. The vistas were out of this world and each corner had a new view to take in. There were lots of fellow travelers, both ascending and descending; this was the entry to the canyon and a popular day hike.

We met a Ranger part way down that morning, "I hear the creaks of the new equipment," he quipped. I responded, "that is not all that is creaking." That first day was torturous, more internally than physically. I fought with myself every step of the way. The first step on the path instantaneously turned my anxiety into anger. Where was this coming from I asked? But asking the question was of no use or relief. The anger was definitely mine. I was angry with myself for getting me into this and I was afraid. I knew once the descent began it had to be completed. With each step I took, I angrily thought of all the other things I could have done for a holiday, all the places I could have gone with the money I was spending to do this. Fear and anger cursed through me as I descended into unknown depths. This internal struggle contrasted the light chatter amongst the crew, leaving me feeling inadequate. I assumed I was the only one who was doubtful and I was isolating myself by assuming everyone else was completely prepared physically and psychologically.

Late in the afternoon we turned from the main path and made our way to one less traveled. An hour later we pulled into camp, the exhaustion in my bones mixed with the exhalation of accomplishment. I had struggled the entire day. I fought with myself for having decided to do such a trek. But at the end of the first day I knew I was ready, I knew I could do this.

My bedroom that night was a flat patch of desert shared with eight other people. The moonlit sky cast the most amazing shadows on the canyon walls. It was a fitful sleep and it worried me that I would not be rested for the next day's hike. I learned that the on again off again sleep was normal and enough rest was gained through the dusk to day bedtime.

The daily hikes were mostly uneventful. We would rest hourly and eat regularly. The terrain was surprising, hiking the plateau, with descents into a side canyon then ascent to the plateau. It was demanding. The vistas continued to be awesome, yet the immersion into the desert beauty permeated my cells to the point where it felt 'normal', common even.

Night four we pulled into camp for a two-day rest. I was weary and the layover was welcomed. The opportunity to explore the terrain and enjoy the stream. That afternoon a rain shower came through and a quick attempt to rainproof our site was initiated. Preparation that night included trying to protect ourselves and our gear under the tarp. We were only somewhat successful.

Throughout the evening there were a few light showers but it was later that the real storm came. I was awakened from my sleep, cold and damp. The rain was torrential and I could watch the movement of the thick storm clouds. The rain came in waves

with short reprieves. I lay in the dark watching as each storm cloud came through our camp. My fear returned with a vengeance. I imagined the worst case scenarios – getting flooded out, having to trek for four days in the rain, getting stuck at this camp and not being able to get out. I felt I was going to die. Waves of panic washed through me. Deeper and deeper into my own distress – panic and despair. Until I let go! Lying there cold and afraid I thought, “and there is nothing I can do about that!” I surrendered. I knew I had to do the same thing in the Canyon I did to prepare – take it one step at a time.

The next morning when we set out from camp it was damp and chilly but it was a fine day for a long trek. My body warmed and my sense of ease overwhelmed me. I let go and took it one step at a time. There were no worries because “there was nothing I could do about that.”

On day six we descended to the Colorado River. The blue-green waterway was huge, cold and loud, with the roar of Hance Rapids. The chilly rain showers followed us and we again had to sleep under the tarp. My dreams that night descended also. They reached into my psyche to teach me a lesson. I was a little girl being hugged and held. The love and security permeated every cell. I awoke feeling alive and knowing this is what life is meant to be. I lay there for the longest time, feeling and listening.

Morning came and the return to civilization began, but not before one more monumental challenge – the ascent. It was a two-day trek in steep terrain. We were all more fit, the packs were lighter and for me, I too was lighter. We climbed half way up the canyon, the hardest part being the Red Wall. Rising above the sheer cliffs was an accomplishment in itself. We set up our final camp overlooking another beautiful vista. It seemed simple that night. I guess there was another ‘letting go’, but this time of the Canyon itself, which had been my home for a week. The mix of sadness and accomplishment set the stage for our final ascent.

All of us have had many treks in our lives, some physical and others emotional. My sense is the two are always intertwined. Having a project that challenges and stretches us can be so rewarding. It gives focus and provides for many sweet memories. The Grand Canyon was for me one such challenge. What is yours?

.....
 Marie Wall is a Coordinator with the Employee Assistance Program for teachers. For confidential assistance contact Marie Wall (ext. 265) or Claudette Coombs (ext. 242).



Exclusive Newfoundland & Labrador dealer of Nike Sports Basics & Fundamentals

Newfoundland & Labrador Premier Dealer of REEBOK TEAM

ATTENTION: GYM TEACHERS

Great Deals on Gym Equipment & Team Wear:

(EC Sports Ltd is a Local Wholesale Sports Distributor)

Access to over 14,000 Team Sports Related Apparel, Equipment & Medical Supplies



Newfoundland Owned and Operated

Drop by our showroom at 44 Torbay Rd., Suite 200, (Nuport Building) to see what EC Sports can do for you!!!!

Check out our website: www.ecsports.ca and call or email for a detailed quote.

Tel: 709-576-6634, Fax: 709-576-6631

Toll Free: 1-877-888-6634

email: info@ecsports.ca