

REVISITING C-13: A JOURNEY INTO THE PAST

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Our lives are bound inexorably to events of the past.

The number 13 has been associated with bad luck throughout history, and the Colorado Outward Bound School course C-13 the summer of 1965 was no exception. This particular program began on Sunday, July 11th, and ended on Saturday, August 7th. It was a standard 28-day Snowmass Wilderness mountain course for young men between the ages of 16 and 22. But it turned out to be anything but typical. That summer I was working for the school primarily as the program coordinator and living at our main base camp two miles outside Marble, an old ghost town. I was 31 years old.

During one twelve-day period between July 16 and July 27 our students and staff had to deal with three very painful incidents which those of us who were involved will never forget. First we took part in an intense, nine-day search for 14-year-old Bobby Rossetter, a camper from the nearby Ashcrofters Camp. His body was found in the Crystal River by instructor Peter Hildt's Outward Bound patrol on July 25th. Next we conducted a dramatic, all-night evacuation of COBS student, John McBride, after he suffered a massive head injury from a fall off the S-Ridge of Snowmass Mountain the afternoon of July 26th. And finally, the next morning the school learned of the tragic death of COBS instructor, Lou Covert, from a rock dislodged by a student while Lou's patrol was climbing 14,156 ft. Maroon Peak earlier that day.

Several years later, about January 1972, after leaving Outward Bound and while living in Santa Fe, I had to make an automobile trip to Denver on business. For a change of scenery I choose the long route home by way of Grand Junction and Durango. The weather was miserable. I was in my GMC Suburban heading west out of Denver in the early afternoon when I decided to take a coffee break before driving over snow-covered, stormy Loveland Pass. There was no tunnel cut through the mountain in those days.

Running in 4-wheel drive, I pulled off US 70 into a small town, either Idaho Springs or Georgetown, and stopped at the first likely place I came to, a drugstore. There was a counter inside with stools and a young man taking orders from a few customers who had come in out of the weather.

As he took my order the young man and I exchanged glances, the way people do sometimes when they think they may know each other but are hesitant to make the first move. This young man appeared to be about 23 years old. However, what I noticed most about him was a look of unfathomable sadness in his eyes. He was obviously a person who had been through some hard times and was still suffering. During our subsequent conversation I don't believe he ever managed to smile.

Finally, the young man walked over with my coffee and introduced himself. I did the same. He then said he thought he recognized me and inquired whether I had ever worked for Colorado Outward Bound. I replied that I had been employed at the school from 1964 through 1967. When he asked next if I had been at the Marble base camp during C-13, I knew immediately that our conversation was about to move into uncharted waters.

The drugstore was almost empty, so we talked. It turned out that he had been a member of Lou Covert's patrol during C-13 and that he was the student who had accidentally dislodged the rock that killed Lou. My response was underwhelming to say the least. I was so surprised that I really didn't know how to respond except to tell him the death was an accident and that he must not go through life blaming himself. This was not all I could have said. But having led a winter mountaineering trip myself up around Loveland Pass several years before, during which two members of my group died in an avalanche, I also was still suffering. And I was not yet back to that point in my own life where I felt capable of reaching out to try and help others.

Listening to the young man's story reminded me too much of my own devastating experience. All I wanted to do at that point was leave the drugstore and head for home. I had to cross, of course, Loveland Pass, where I had nearly died on January 7, 1967. The combination of reliving both events the same afternoon suddenly brought up long-repressed memories relating to my own accident. It was a long way to Santa Fe.

Looking back, I just wish that in 1972 I had been able to give that young man more support, wish I had gotten his name and address, wish at least I had sent him a letter after returning home. Now we have a nation-wide, professional support system (critical incident stress debriefings) for people who are involved in accidents resulting in serious injury or death. But in those days one had to suffer pretty much alone except for the informal help of family and friends. I don't believe this young man had received much help. And for some reason I had refused to accept available professional

support after my own accident. However, I do seem to remember that in the sixties males considered it unmanly to seek professional counseling.

It's all too easy in life just to let things you know you should do to help others sometimes slide. And then, when finally you do get around to offering support, it's often too late. That's what happened to me that long-ago January day in Colorado. I guess the only way to live with these personal failures and lost opportunities long-term is to recognize them for what they are, but at the same time resolve to make every effort to be there in the future when someone needs you. A few people seem to have almost from birth that innate ability to be able to reach out and touch those around them. Almost anyone can gain the ability with age and experience. We all need to practice it.

I would have to say that C-13 was one of those truly defining moments in my life. I moved on from Outward Bound in 1969 to live in New Mexico but have never forgotten Bobby Rossetter, John McBride, and Lou Covert. Their stories will live on in my memories until I die, as will the story of that nameless young man in the Colorado drugstore..... and, of course, my own.

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NOTE TO THE READER: Nothing written in this memoir should be construed as being critical of the Colorado Outward Bound School or its leadership during the years I worked there from 1964 – 1967.

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