

Dissect Route

FEAR OF FALLING



When was the last time you failed on a route because you were afraid of falling off? And how often is fear of falling a reason for failing on a route when it was really an excuse for not finishing it? You know how it is, you have thought about and talked about some of the routes you definitely want to do. You may have even self-edited some of your conversations because you thought some of your wish list sounded unachievable. But what is really going to stop you achieving your climbing goals? Many climbers will cite fear of falling as the key barrier to their progress. This is quite reasonable because, after all, moving up the grades can often mean moving away from gear that appears to be rather less than bomb-proof. Of course, there are also the issues of skill, training, work, and of not living the life of a peripatetic vegan climbing monk, but fear of falling is the one we all come back to time and time again; I'm pretty sure it's not just me.

But what if we're wrong? What if we have allowed the idea of falling to grow so large in our minds that it eclipses every other small improvement or commitment that we could make? Falling is certainly a very real and understandable worry. Yet out of it we have made a bogeyman: a

monster of such proportions that we are blinded to what else may actually be going on as we fumble our way upwards.

It could be argued that the prospect of falling (and its cousin, the search for good gear), can play such a large role in the climber's mind that it allows a host of tiny anxieties to lurk out of view in the shadows. Not recognising and addressing these apparently minor points is the real barrier to progress. For example, I still consider heel hooks to be quite a new-fangled way to make progress and really struggled to learn how to place and, more importantly, trust them.

That was until I realised two things: first, there is a very definite technique to placing your heel in order to make it grip. And second, what prevented me using this technique was not that it is particularly difficult, but that I was worried about either leaving my foot behind or grazing my ankle if it came off. You may be thinking this sounds like the neurotic reaction of a delicate wallflower, but ask yourself this next time you can't get a heel hook or a smear to stick: why aren't I weighting my foot? Maybe you can't shift your balance across, or it's too high a step. Or is it possible that both of these thoughts really conceal a shadowy thought about what will happen to your ankle

if it comes off? Only you can make that foot stick; neither your foot nor your shoe can make it happen independently as if by magic. The key point here is to try to observe what is going on in your mind as well as your body when you can't do something: what do you observe and learn from the failure?

Humans are very good at grabbing the first 'acceptable' answer when musing on our actions rather than exploring the inner reasons for their failure. Even though there may be many other factors at play, fear of falling is one of our key acceptable reasons for not continuing on a route.

Some specific techniques such as finger locks and monos can hurt a little when they go well and a lot when they go wrong. So let's not underestimate this as an inducement for failing on a move, but not making that move may well have

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been internalised as fear of falling rather than an expectation of stinging rock rash. How acceptable is rock rash as a reason for failure to you, your friends, your peer group?

Of course, you may have a concern about a recent injury, or having the strength to get to the end of the pitch. I don't want to go all Zen on this (there are books you can buy for that) but focus and reflection are important tools for learning. To return to my heel hook, it was only by reflecting on why I kept failing to execute them that I was able to commit to and apply what was needed to make them work.

Understanding progress in climbing is a bit like good footwork: superficially, it's all about your feet but actually it's about your core, which is really about balance, composure, and moving around your centre of gravity.

Fear of falling is your get-out-of-jail-free card, it is an acceptable reason for failure that looms so large everything else fades away. But is it the real reason? Next time you bail from a route because you didn't want to fall off, think of that as a trigger to reflect on what was happening whilst you were climbing. Don't be blinded into accepting a lack of progress through fear of falling without honestly checking with yourself that there weren't some other, more important things that should be addressed. There will be.

Top British trad climber Hazel Findlay has wisely observed that 'When you fall off a route, you should try and work out why it was that you fell off'. Equally, if you can't fall off, you should try and find out why that is, and work through it. Progress will only begin from there.

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