

## Wilderness House Literary Review 9/3

*Kevin Pentalow*

### **Mountains of Emotions**

**M**y son Leonardo, only just turned four but has an endless amount of energy and never seems to tire, no matter how much we try to tire him out. Try we did, I'd have him to run around the house in a one man mock race. Leo as we like to call him, insisted every race would start with a countdown "3, 2, 1 ready set go!" After hours of this activity the short nap of every parent's dreams was still a parental fantasy. Leo always seemed to have a leftover cache of energy that would make Robin Williams at a loss for words. Everywhere we went someone would make the comment "can I have some of that" or "if you could only bottle that". I thought it was time to take him on the long waited climb up Cascade Mountain and put him to the test. This would be the last of the 46ers I had to climb to get my long awaited patch that would hopefully make me the envy of all my hiking buddies.

It was Leonardo's first big hike, he had been up Azure out near Saint Regis Falls and Owls head in Mountain View, but this was his first mountain that was part of the 46ers. The 46ers is a term used to describe the highest 46 peaks of the Adirondack; it is also the title of a club of all the people that have summited all 46 of them. Cascade Mountain's is number 36th on the list with the approximate elevation of 4098 feet. I had heard it was a very well maintained trail, as well as one of the better mountains for young children and it most definitely was.

Starting out the ground was wet with early morning May dew. There were still remnants of snow if you wanted to look hard in the shadows of the largest birch and striped maple trees, and if there wasn't then it sure felt as if there was. It was almost as if you could feel the recently passed winter in the mountain air around us. It was a 3 person hike; three generations of Pentalow's would be on the hike my father Kevin Pentalow who we call KJ, my son Leo and me Kevin Pentalow Jr.

We were weighted down by our heavy hooded sweat shirts, and started heating up as our bodies began to work harder. The sun started peaking up over the tall sky scraper like trees warming up the temperatures to high 50s. We gained lots elevation in a very short distance about 2,000 feet in approximately two miles. I looked down so psychologically I would be on flat ground and followed my father's boots that looked as if they were left over from his Vietnam days. I looked ahead at KJ as we made our way up the rocky terrain, and everything seemed to be in black and white as if we were in some classic movie. My son Leo was following 10 feet behind me, jogging to keep up with our large strides.

I noticed how drenched with sweat KJ and I already were, however as I looked over at my son he had not even started to sweat yet, despite the fact that he seemed to be throwing his tiny feet in front of himself as he jump and bounded along trying to keep up with our 6 foot plus frames. "We are in the tree tunnel now daddy", Leo said with excitement as we became surrounded by trees in a forest canopy with only a small picture frame size spec of blue sky in the end of the tunnel. I stopped for a moment and thought to myself, this is what it must look and feel it to walk into the pearly gates. KJ's figure silhouetted against the morning sky as he

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walked towards the light. Leo tugged and climbed on the roots that covered the trail shortly behind him. Leo looked up at me with his big blue eyes and said “the roots hold the world together daddy, right?” “I think they might, I think you might be right”, I replied.

After stopping to look at frogs in what I would best describe as a perma-puddle or mud hole, we picked up our pace. I began to jump and grab tree branches telling Leo I was playing tree basketball, and KJ rolled his eyes. Leo pointed to one of the huge boulders that dotted the landscape and asked if a giant had put it there.

Fellow hikers know the significance this hike had for me. Hiking with my dad and my son, was how I had always dreamed of ending my quest to be a 46er with them by my side. It was Leo’s first peek and for me, my last peek in the journey to check off every mountain on list of the 46ers. I could have gotten all 46 faster but it seemed like every time I had a hike planned everyone always pushed me into doing Marcy again and again. One more time, they’d say. Everyone wants to be number one after all. No one wants to go home bragging to their friends about hiking the third or fourth highest peak in the Adirondacks. I just climbed the highest mountain, has a nice ring to it. Marcy was the first mountain in the 46 that I did, and this single hike had a profound impact not only on me continuing to hike, but in the course of my life in general.

Every step I took, every time I looked into my sons eyes, full of endless wonder and joy, I couldn’t help but to drift back to that my own first hiking trip. I could still smell that warm spring air and feel the mud starting to harden on my blown out sneakers that looked like they were talking every time I took a step. If I closed my eyes and smelled the mountain breeze it transported me back to 1994. I had never met my father, KJ before that weekend and had only known him through a few awkward birthday phone calls. Growing up with a single mother can be hard at times for a boy. The lack of a male influence and the father’s day cards made in school art classes that were sent to no one still haunt my memories. The voice of a grade school classmate with good intentions saying “But he doesn’t have a father” to the 3rd grade teacher still rang in my head.

That weekend camping and hiking trip in 94 was the chance for us to bond. I thought to myself it is too late to have a father son relationship, too much time has passed. However, I was wrong. All those negative thoughts were in vain. It wasn’t something that had to be forced; it was a primal bond of son and father. It was a wolf and his cub. No words had to be said, everything just fell into place that weekend. Step by step the lost years seemed to fade and all that was left was the moment, the hike itself was the only thing real now. I remembered no past no future only the present, only the hike. The hike filled the void like a river being released from a dam. Somewhere on that mountain we became true family for the first time.

Once on top the first mountain of the week end of ‘94 my father looked at me and said “how great it is spending this time together”. I realized now what I have missed. How bitter sweet this has been, so special, but gives me insight into how much special time I had missed. I had dreams and goals that I knew I could never achieve in northern New York. I thought I had a destiny and I thought all the signs were leading me to the

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bright lights of Los Angeles California. You never hear the stories of the failures and that is my story, the story of a broken man, who chased his dream only to find they were mirages designed to make me divert from the true path. Now I see there are more important things than money and dreams of fame. All these things are illusions, they are fleeting. Doing good things for others is the only true accomplishment. "Don't follow my lead, follow your heart." "Don't be a father like I was, you will never forgive yourself." At the time I thought to myself how silly that was. I was never going to get married or have kids. I was going to have adventure after adventure. How the seasons of change affect us all, I thought. I was brought back into the present by Leo jumping off a boulder yelling "I'm a ninja".

I held on to the words my father told me that day and now that I'm grown I have always remembered the sad tone of his voice as he spoke on the top of that mountain that day. The way his voice shook and cracked in sorrow as he had his cathartic releases. I looked over at him hiking up this mountain with his son and grandson and was glad we could do this together, if only in fantasy and in my own subjective reality.

We made our way through a gradually thinning forest. Leo said "my little legs are tired daddy". I picked Leo up and carried him for a while. As we got closer to the summit the trees grew smaller and smaller. To Leo's delight, he could now look over them off into the clouds. KJ fell behind and seemed to be giving Leo and I time to be alone now. We made our way up the rocks and soon stood on the top. I would not say it was cold, but there was a cool breeze in the air, however in our exuberance we felt almost numb.

Leo looked at me and said "I love it here daddy we should live here above the clouds. This must be what heaven feels like" I held him close and said nothing for I could not argue with those words. After all a happy family is as close to heaven as one can get. I felt blessed not to have just taken my son on his first hike up Cascade and to have fulfilled my dream of becoming a 46er, but the great happiness comes in knowing that this is just the first of many hikes we will take together as Leo slowly becomes an adult. I will be by Leo's side as he claims his next 45 peaks but I will also be by his side as he falls and trips on the trail as we all have and will. As in mountain climbing and in life there are many ups and downs and we must always try to climb as high and use as much of our abilities as possible. This however would be KJ's last hike with us. After this I would have to let him go.

I opened up my pack and took the zip lock bag of ashes from it. My dad KJ passed away a few months ago and Leo and I decided to scatter some of them on these mountains, where that great memory of him still moved with the breeze. I could almost hear the words he told me coming through my own voice as I talked to Leo. The time I spent with him, our long talks on the phone will never be forgotten. It's never too late to make up and reconnect with loved ones. Forgive them before it is too late. If you're waiting for the right time, there will never be a better time than right now.

I closely examined the ashes that were left in a tiny zip lock bag. I took the hand full of ash and slowly opened my hand, the wind grabbed up the

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ashes and they quickly spiraled up into the clouds. I saw the ash dissipate into the beautiful landscape around us. Leo and I just sat on the bald summit for what seemed like hours. We looked out at the 360 degree view into the endless miles of forest teeming with beauty and awe. We had a joint sense of accomplishment. We could see most of the peaks in the great range from here. I pointed north showing Leo where Whiteface was, then east to where Hurricane Mountain, Lake Chaplain and Vermont's Green Mountains could be seen. Then I looked to my side where KJ was standing and he waved and nodded with approval as his image slowly flickered in and out of vision, then it altogether disappeared into the landscape around us.

Leo and I watched as two hawks drifted and danced on top of the wind, soaring in and out of the clouds. I wondered if they were father and son, I wondered if hawks had desires and regrets. If they loved and lost, fought and searched for happiness as they drifted through the updraft winds of mountain life. They seemed to be flying in slow motion flowing like monastic monks in a rapture of divine ecstasy of the routine. I learned from the mistakes of the past and tried to spend all my free time with my son, daughter and their mother, finding a sort of matrimonial enlightenment, an evolutionary dream world of mundane mysticism. I never think the grass is greener on the other side for no grass is as green. There are no deeper shades of greens in the entire world! True happiness comes when we grow fully satisfied with what we have.

Leo and I walked down the mountain alone now. I had started this journey with a heavy burden and regrets; however I found peace, acceptance, forgiveness and prophecy in the cold North Country winds on the summit of Cascade Mountain. As we looked out at the numerous peaks and the valleys below, I think we both realized that nothing made by the hands of men can come close to the beauty found in nature and that family is the pinnacle of nature's masterpieces. My dad KJ was with us on this hike, not in the form of these lifeless ashes, he walked next to us in the form of memories and in the path my life has taken. We all hike with the memories of the past, with the essences of deceased loved ones. They live on in us, in the way we say things, their stories we retell, the things they showed us and the things we show our children. They live on in the things they taught us, especially to have appreciation for this life. They live on in the hike.