

Fear and Learning on Notchtop

A beginner faces demons on a harrowing 14-hour climb

By Avery Stonich

I was perched on a ledge above a steep cliff, facing a sheer rock face, and I was stuck. Poking around with my crampon, I couldn't find anywhere to lodge my foot. Trusty handholds evaded my grasp. I slipped and got a bit rattled. I slipped a second time and adrenaline kicked in. Poisonous thoughts flooded my head, despite my efforts to tamp them: "I'm not cut out for this," and "If I get out of this alive, I'll never put myself in this type of situation again."

I've always been good at conquering the demons of fear. Challenges entice me. So imagine my surprise to be nearly paralyzed with fear now, seven hours into a technical climb. I felt trapped, claustrophobic, and terrified—unsure if I could keep going, but there was no option. I had to make it to the top of this damn rock, then navigate a harrowing descent.

My husband and I were climbing the Spiral Route on Notchtop in Rocky Mountain National Park with a guide. Typically this is a summer route for sticky rock shoes. We did it in early May, ascending snow and rock wearing crampons—not easy for a beginner like me. We had picked Notchtop to get some experience under

our belts since we'd signed up to tackle the Grand Teton later in the year. Before dawn, giddy anticipation dominated my thoughts as we skied to the base of the climb. Then Notchtop came into view, an intimidating 1,500-foot crag. I gasped inside but quickly pushed back my trepidation.

Switching to crampons, we climbed a steep snowfield and some challenging rock pitches. I felt my muscles warm and welcomed the thrill of pushing to the edge of my comfort zone. That was when things went off track.

After six falls on that ledge, I started questioning if I could do it at all. Each time the rope caught me, but it couldn't catch the slip of my brain. Panic gripped me. My breath became short. My muscles shook. After what seemed like an hour, I figured out the route and finished the pitch—barely.

"That was a little over my head," I told my guide. "I didn't think I could do it. Are we almost there?"

He gave no answer. *Uh-oh.*

It became apparent that not only was the summit far away, but that there would be no easy way down. We continued climbing, a cheerful

bright blue sky mocking my dark inner demons. My thoughts were more in tune with the gale force winds that kicked up and threatened to blow us away. Finally, we reached the namesake notch and scrambled up to the twin tops.

One of the peaks was so tiny that I felt queasy looking down. I choked down some sandwich but had no appetite. My stomach was already full—of fear.

Climbers say the summit is only halfway, which rang true this day. Notchtop's descent is the scariest part, with technical downclimbing and exposed traverses. Websites describe it as "dangerous and confusing" and "even more of an undertaking than the climb."

My wheels came off. I'd been focused and afraid for so many hours; I wasn't sure I could take it anymore. At one point during the descent, I had to wait for the guide on a tiny ledge alongside a steep gully that disappeared over a cliff. I struggled to control my mind.

I let myself turn inward, silently staring at the rock wall to my right, focusing on a drip of ice that clung inside a little crack. Terror bubbled up in my throat. I fought back tears. This was unfamiliar territory. I was accustomed to nerves, but I'd never experienced borderline panic. I wanted to be somewhere safe and comfortable. I wanted out. Badly.

It wasn't my proudest moment. I felt weak. My confidence crumbled. I was letting myself down.

After what seemed like an eternity, we made it back to the car. I collapsed with relief, my mind and body spent. I wasn't sure I wanted to do anything like that again. But I will.

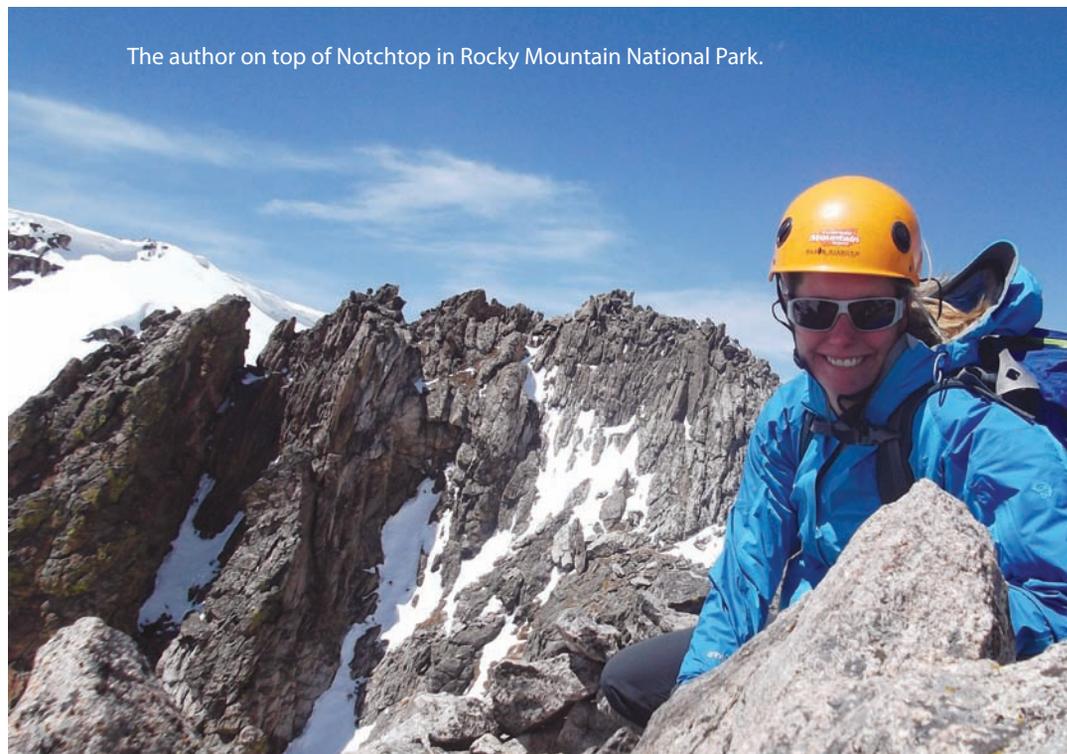
It took some time for my trauma to transform into triumph. Climbing Notchtop was the kind of fun that's more enjoyable in retrospect. Now, I think back on this climb with pride. It was the hardest thing I've ever done, and I met the challenge and came out with a smile on my face—well, kind of.

A few weeks later, I asked a friend how Notchtop compares to the Grand Teton. "You'll be fine," he said. "Now that you've done Notchtop, the Grand will be no problem."

"Do you ever get over the fear?"

"You don't get over it," he said. "You just get used to it, or even thrive on it."

The author on top of Notchtop in Rocky Mountain National Park.



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