

“LIKE A JUNIPER IN THE WILDERNESS” by David Sweetland

An ancient Jewish sage spoke these words long before the time of Christ. He painted a word picture of warning to his people in terms they would understand. The Israelites would soon be captives of the invading Babylonian Empire. Those who were strong and resilient, “Like a juniper,” would make it through. How does this phrase relate to us today?

“Solid as granite.” Todd Skinner, professional climber, spoke these words as he tried to explain in a magazine article the vital kinship he has with his rope partner. Todd’s long time sidekick was Paul Piana. Todd and Paul were the first to free climbing the Salathe Route on El Capitan, a feat two decades ahead of its time. They were junipers in the wild, anchored in the solid granite of their souls.

Have you ever studied a juniper attached to granite? This conifer is a rugged and indestructible tree. Junipers survive in the most inhospitable environments yet thrive in these extreme ecologic conditions. Juniper roots grow yards into the granite, tendrils following the cleft in the rock. A living juniper, rooted into the bedrock of earth, can be a thousand years old, and withstand gales, blizzards, and drought.

Are we solid as a juniper anchored to granite in the wilderness? I remember as a kid, my dad teaching by practice to follow his example when I became an adult: take a fearless moral inventory once in a while. Follow deep the roots of your soul and find out what’s there. Psychiatrist Carl Jung called this exploration, the “adventure of the spirit.”

If as an alpinist (or rescue or challenge course specialist), to be like a juniper in the wilderness or solid as granite, I’d better know what anchors my soul. I’ve roped up with many aspiring folk. I’ve been with them when they came to their first serious test. Too often their integrity wasn’t as they thought, maybe injured their mate in the process. At the end of the day they packed up their rack, or sold it, and left the crags for good.

Growing up climbing in California in the 1970’s, I was not the best nor the most promising, but I knew my roots, and how to safely support my rope mate. One time in Yosemite National Park, this twenty-year-old kid had the privilege of doing a rock climb with the great John Yablonsky (one of the first 5.12 climbers). Not knowing who he was more than an acquaintance of a mutual friend, I led a 5.10 route (tricky, the pitch was

devious and run out). Yablonsky belayed. After we rapped off, John said I was “Good.”

Good, coming from “Yabo,” was an endorsement. I had made it to the juniper-anchored-to-granite-league. What league are you in as a climber, rescue specialist, or ropes course facilitator? Do you feel you have *arrived*? Are you beginning to slack off in your training and goal setting for your next skill development evolution?

Is it time to take a refresher course or step up to the next level? Try tying in with a much better climber or rescue specialist and do something outrageously difficult. Recently I watched a world class climber and rescue technician learn a new rope technique, with his eyes closed. When I asked him what he was up to, he’s response was, “I may have to do this maneuver after dark.” I was reminded of learning to abseil with my eyes closed, then years later confidently descending a 5th class gulley on Mt. Stewart in Washington state, one cold and raining, windy midnight.

Moral to the story, never stop learning or quit being challenged, and add a little tried dimension to your schooling . . . Sometime education comes from others, or from books. Frequently the lesson is on-the-job training. Rarely, the learning goes to the nucleus of our personality. Try doing a fearless moral inventory. Begin by assessing your character defects – what do people say about you, what do you know your faults or weaknesses are? Where do these traits come from? How do they prevent you from being all that you can be? What is the soul-ution?

A juniper in the wilderness, anchored in solid granite, will slowly die if the roots weaken from lack of nourishment. Example, on top of Sentinel Dome, south rim of Yosemite Valley, is the oft’ photographed Jeffrey Pine (see the famous Ansel Adams image). This knarled old conifer is now dead. As a climber or rescue specialist, you’ll know if your roots are starving for vitamins or water when you start telling stories about past exploits, or do nothing to advance your skill level.