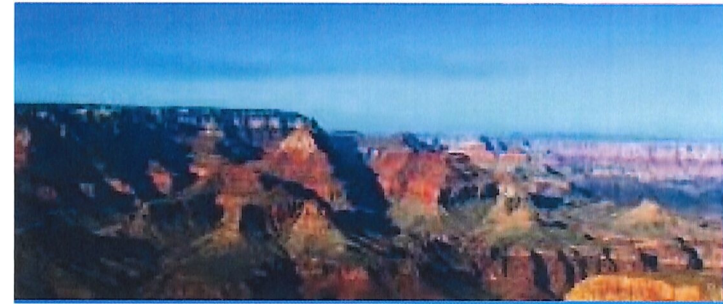


Over the Rim



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it, the only way we *can* appreciate the 'bigness' of anything is to get closer to it. I had been content with a postcard God, or somebody confined to my Sunday School stickers. It was time to go over the nm.

I also heard with different ears the message about following Jesus. As our guide, he will untangle our messy situations, adjust our 'stirrups' to make the journey bearable, and pull us back onto the right track. And all we have to do is say, "Um.....excuse me....." - or words to that effect.

None of my reasoning had brought me to that point of taking the plunge, so to speak. Only my Grand Canyon experience gave me the incentive to, like the Nike ad says, 'JUST DO IT!'

That was some time ago now. My life with God has become exciting. My prayers are more frequent and more conversational, now that I know God better. Now I know I can talk to Jesus about anything, and getting to know him has been a treat. Yes, I'm proud of how far I've come in my spiritual life, but humbled by the knowledge that the country I am exploring is never ending, and rich with possibilities I never dreamed of.

And when in church I'm challenged to get closer to God, I remember what the man in the souvenir shop said: "That's what you came here for, isn't it?"

I've always been a church goer. From my baptism at three months old until now I have faithfully occupied a pew in my local church every Sunday (the same one each week). In Sunday School I learned about little baby Jesus who was kind to children when he grew up. In church I learned about what it meant to follow him, which I did.....sort of. Week after week the sermons would wash over me and I heard what I wanted to hear and then went home to say my prayers each night before bed. I even volunteered for the soup kitchen once a week.

I was comfortable with that.

But then I began to feel an itch. The term 'follow me' seemed to come up an awful lot, and it was irritating. And then there was the sermon about deepening our relationship with God and Jesus. Like I said, my relationship was nice and comfortable so why take any risks? Besides, when I thought about it, I reasoned that I was doing all the right things - church attendance (check ../), prayers (check ../), good works (check ../) - but something was missing, and I couldn't figure it out. While I was mulling things over, I took a trip to the US, where I found myself standing on the South rim of the Grand Canyon.

It looked exactly like the picture postcards I had seen many times, and I thought, 'Yep, this is the Grand Canyon. It's just as beautiful as the pictures.' Then one of my friends said, "Hey, let's see if we can get into a mule trek down the canyon tomorrow." I wasn't exactly enthusiastic. I could barely ride a bike, let alone a mule. It sounded very risky to me. Nevertheless I went with them to the souvenir shop to book our places. The man behind the counter said, "Go for it! It's the only way to appreciate the canyon. After all, that's what you came here for, isn't it?"

So the next morning I reluctantly joined my friends at the corral and was allotted a mule, Neva. Once on the mule (second mule behind the guide, who rode a horse, with three mules behind me) I began to feel more courageous. Perhaps it had to do with being higher off the ground.

Then we went over the rim.

We were led onto a switchback path cut into a cliff, not, it seemed, much wider than the mule. There was a sheer drop of about 2,000 feet to the bottom. To top it off, when we stopped, the mules were trained to stand with their hindquarters to the cliff face, and heads over the rim of the path. And there was always a bit of greenery growing out of the side of the cliff to tempt them. So they would lean forward for a nibble, so that you slid forward in the saddle and found yourself staring into an abyss, clinging to the pommel. Did I mention that I prayed regularly? At that point I felt that even an avowed atheist would do the same.

So our adventure began, and, from my point of view, it was eventful. Firstly, we had each been given a willow switch to tap the mule's flank if she slowed down too much. This I dutifully did when Neva got a bit dozy. Her response was to flick her tail up, which got tangled in the switch, so I had to call on the guide to come and fix it. "Um....excuse me....."

Secondly, western saddles are designed for the bow-legged, which I am not (completely the opposite, in fact) and the stirrups were too long. I was uncomfortable, and slipping in the saddle. So another call went out. "Um....excuse me....." Another session of hanging over the abyss. But at least I could do it more comfortably.

We finally arrived at Indian Gardens down on the plateau, fell off our mules (at least I did, - I could barely stand up, my knees were so sore) and ate our packed lunches. Looking back up to

where I had come from, I felt very proud of myself for making it so far. But there was more to come.

After lunch we remounted and rode a mile across the plateau to the lookout. It was there that I discovered that we were only two thirds of the way down the Canyon.

So much for pride.

Since a full trek to the bottom of the Canyon took two days, and our journey was only for a day, we turned back to travel across the plateau towards the cliff face. It was then that Neva got it into her head that it would be good to do something different to the others, and veered off onto one of the many animal tracks that criss-crossed the plateau, throwing the mules behind me into confusion. So it was (yet again) "Um....excuse me...." The guide yelled back, "Pull her head around!" So I did that, which only resulted in Neva walking sideways down the track. I had to be rescued yet again.

From then on the journey was much easier. For one thing western saddles are much more comfortable going uphill than down.

For the next few days I was so stiff that even my teeth hurt. But I kept thinking about that day. If I hadn't taken the risk of going down into the Canyon, I would never have experienced its immensity and grandeur. I would never have felt the achievement of completing the journey, even if it only got me a part of the way into its depths. I also began to see my religious journey as being insipid. It seemed that I stood very comfortably on the 'rim', content with the familiar, never wanting to risk anything.

When I got back home, the first sermon I heard was about getting to know God by getting closer to him; actually moving deeply into God. Then I knew what it meant. When you think about