

Concept

a powerful, intriguing, inspiring, or perhaps odd idea distilled to its essential elements

I am 300 feet up a rock face, standing on two sloping footholds, my fingers curled around some small edges. The wall is steep, and my arms are tiring. From years of doing this, I know that staying in this position, in this place, means that I will eventually fall off.

Below me is the rope, my safety system, running down through equipment I've placed in cracks in the rock. Tied to the other end of the rope is my friend Pete. It's his job to stop me if I fall.

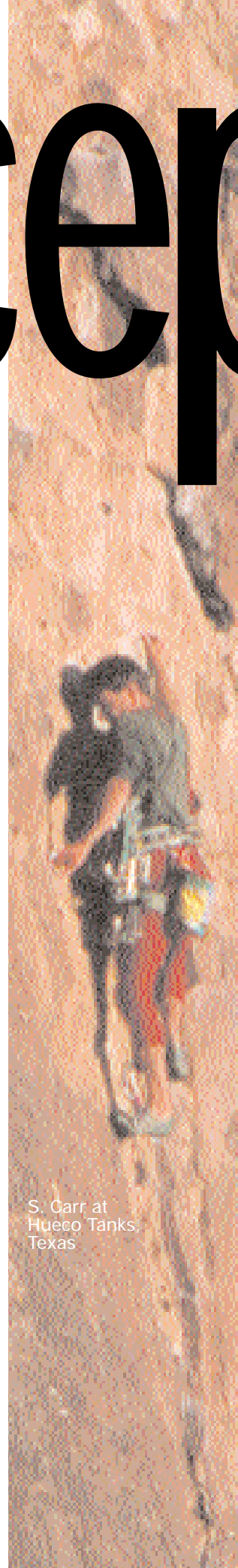
I start climbing again, focusing so intently that I have no consciousness of anything outside of my immediate vicinity. Time slows. With exaggerated care, I place my feet and hands on the holds according to the sequence I've mentally rehearsed. I make the last moves to safety and can relax now to take in my surroundings and admire the hawk circling below.

Why do I climb rock faces? Because it is the most continuously satisfying activity I've ever discovered. It is a sport that offers total mental involvement, along with the endorphins of physical activity, beautiful locations, and a frisson of danger to get the adrenaline pumping. The danger is more an illusion than a reality. Relatively few climbers die climbing.

Rock climbing is similar to playing chess, in terms of analyzing and planning. It's like gymnastics, in terms of the physical strength and coordination required. And it's like dancing, in terms of the grace of movement. Fundamentally, though, it's about commitment and a belief in your ability to succeed.

And so I try, in my flatland life, to remember that the apprehension I feel when trying something new is a natural physiological reaction to uncertainty. And I remind myself that mostly it's the fear of failure, of embarrassment, that stops me. There's no real danger in much of what we fear, and we can tell ourselves not to be afraid, to commit—just as I do when I'm on a rock face.

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S. Carr at Hueco Tanks, Texas

What It Means to Climb a Rock

Facing fear, committing, and, ultimately, achieving human performance.



By Simon Carr