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Uneven Terrain

By Jae Gruenke

GAINING IN ALIVENESS

I walk a lot all over the city for my job, and sometimes I feel like a walking machine. Picture a wind-up toy shaped like a person, with legs painted on a wheel going around and around - that's me on a busy day. Wind me up and off I go, hardly aware of what I do. But when I walk on First Avenue around 20th Street I switch from the sidewalk to the cobblestone island that buffers the stores there against city traffic, and everything changes. After my first few steps my legs go, Ah. They seem to relax, and I begin to feel my feet inside my sneakers, where for hours I have felt nothing but foam-encased flippers propelling me along the pavement. Shortly something like tingling spreads upwards from my soles, and it feels like the flow of information where there was nothing but a monotonous drone of sidewalk sidewalk sidewalk before. Naturally I can't walk as fast as on smooth pavement, but what I lose in speed I gain in aliveness. About a half block after the cobblestones end, my feet and my mind resume their closed-circuit hum of usual sensations and usual thoughts, much refreshed by the interruption.

This is the great pleasure of uneven terrain. It wakes you up and you can discover yourself, even if only briefly. Everybody has deeply embedded habits for walking on their usual terrain, and for most people reading this article that terrain is level (excepting potholes), hard, paved surfaces. On familiar ground all your usual muscles can fire their usual amount in the usual combination, leaving you free to think of other things. The more you walk, the more this is true; a useful feature of the human brain transfers activities performed over and over again to a very deep region that doesn't require conscious thought to function. Unfamiliar activities, however, absorb a great deal of your attention.

As necessary and reassuring as a familiar routine can be, it can also be completely numbing. Everybody has different preferences on this axis, but we all need some amount of both. To explore your potential and expand your ability to deal with the unexpected, you need to do non-habitual things regularly. Moving across uneven terrain is an excellent way to do this because each step contains new information. The muscles of your legs and torso fire and relax in slightly different proportions each time, and you learn how to shift your body weight in different configurations. You develop fresh mobility in your joints - particularly the parts of your spine that you don't normally move - which can be incorporated into your daily repertoire of movement so that the familiar becomes easier and the unexpected more manageable. This comes in very handy for when you accidentally put your foot down on a broken curb or in a pothole or realize you're about to step into a puddle or something else unpleasant and have to quickly change course. It helps you avoid ruts of another kind too: developing overuse injuries or just plain stiffness from doing only a few very familiar things day in and day out. Of course it's not a miracle cure, but it is an important preventative and a very helpful part of any long-term strategy to overcome such problems. To me, though, the greatest value of this kind of activity is that it wakes you up, so that as you move you experience yourself and your surroundings. It brings your awareness to the present moment.

THE NATURAL RESET

The premier activity on uneven terrain is hiking. New York's environs afford a wide variety of hikes for every level, from relatively level soft dirt paths to steep climbs over rocky surfaces that challenge

your strength and coordination. Winter hiking can of course be cold, but if you dress properly and keep moving you'll stay warm and have a wonderful time. It's doubly refreshing to traverse complex, information-rich terrain that's also beautiful. I've always loved winter landscapes without snow, because all the browns differentiate into shades of olive and tan and mauve against each other – uneven terrain for your eyes, too! So, too, with the way snow makes the familiar look strange and new. The whole experience of hiking is like hitting the reset button on your nervous system. I also find it really satisfying to feel far, far away from the big city when in reality I'm conveniently close to home.

The best way to get familiar with what's available is to join one of the many hiking clubs in the city. This is also a wonderful way to meet people. Here's a partial listing:

New York Hiking Club: Founded in 1922, the club organizes group hikes planned and guided by volunteer leaders. Membership is \$5 per year to cover the cost of printing and sending out schedules, and the hikes are free aside from whatever it costs for you to get yourself there. They offer hikes ranging from easy to hard, and almost all of them are accessible by public transportation. "I like to hike," says Marguarite Pagnato, the membership secretary and hike leader, "and I love having other people enjoy the things I enjoy." For more information, call Marguarite at (212) 246-9593.

The New York/New Jersey Trail Conference: This organization oversees maintenance and development of trails in New York and New Jersey. Various hiking clubs get involved with the conference to help in the task of trail maintenance. The Trail Conference also makes maps of all the trails in the area, which are sold at sporting goods stores such as Eastern Mountain Sports and can also be purchased online. Their incredibly comprehensive website can be found at www.nynjtc.org. It includes maps you can view and print, a full listing of hiking and outdoors clubs, an online store selling outdoor guidebooks, and information on every related topic imaginable. You can also contact the New Jersey Field Representative, Larry Wheelock, by phone at (973) 823-9999. The organization is in the process of moving their headquarters, but in the interim Larry would be happy to answer questions from New Yorkers.

Outdoors Club: In business for 27 years, the Outdoors Club offers group hikes as well as biking, wilderness trekking, canoeing, mountaineering, snowshoeing, skiing, nature walks, and city walking tours. The February schedule shows a number of easy to moderate walks in Harlem, various parts of Queens, Croton Point Park and Van Cortlandt Park. There's also a 7-mile hike in Byram River Gorge in Connecticut. "See green hemlocks on white snow along a rushing river..." reads the schedule. Sounds good. Membership to this club is also \$5 per year and hikes are free (not including transportation). Non-members can attend for \$3 per hike. To join the organization or for information about becoming a volunteer hike leader, write to The Outdoors Club Inc., Lenox Hill Station, PO Box 227, New York, NY 10021-0014. If you would like one complimentary schedule before joining, include a self-addressed, stamped envelope. If you have questions, you can also contact the club president, Alan Kaye, at alanhkaye@aol.com. Their website is at www.wso.net/outdoorsclub.

The Sierra Club: A well-known as an environmental organization, the Sierra Club also offers group hikes. The schedule for February and March shows a number of moderate to strenuous hikes over varied terrain, including Mt. Taurus, Pocantico Hills, Hook Mountain, and Blydenburgh County Park in Hauppauge. Some scheduled hikes may become a sledding party, snowshoeing, or cross-country skiing if the weather cooperates. There are also weekend ski trips to the Catskills and Innsbruck, Austria, and a cruise to spot seals in Long Island Sound. Yearly membership to the Sierra Club costs \$25 and allows you to receive their quarterly magazine and participate in the full range of environmental activities they organize. For an additional \$7 per year you can have the outings schedule mailed to you quarterly as well. Non-members can get one schedule for \$4 and are welcome to attend a few

events, though they will eventually be asked to join. Most outings are themselves free (not including transportation). You can contact the organization by calling the administrative office at (212) 791-2400 or going to www.atlantic.sierraclub.org/outings.

Shorewalkers: This organization is dedicated to promoting and preserving New York City's surrounding shores. They advocate for the Batt to Bear Trail, a 56-mile passage along the Hudson River from the Battery to Bear Mountain that's being created bit by bit. They also organize volunteer-lead group hikes primarily near bodies of water. Their February/March schedule lists walks along the East River, across the Brooklyn Bridge, and in upper Central Park; a moderate hike in South Mountain Reservation past cascades and waterfalls; a hike along a canal from Kingston to Princeton, NJ, and a walk in Mariners Marsh on Staten Island. The yearly membership fee is \$20 for an individual or a family, which presumably funds their advocacy of environmental issues in addition to covering their costs for hikes. Hikes are free to members, not including transportation. For more information call (212) 663-2167 or go to www.shorewalkers.org.

I'm also told that the **Appalachian Mountain Club** has a very active New York Chapter. Go to www.adkny.org, or call 1-800-395-8080.

VERTICAL DANCING

For an experience of moving on uneven terrain that is quite different from hiking, yet clearly related, you might want to give bouldering a try. Bouldering is the term for low-altitude, unroped climbing. It used to be considered training for classic rock climbing, but in recent years it's taken on its own identity. Partisans call it "the essence of climbing," because you focus completely on the process of travelling across the rock, rather than focusing all your attention on the goal of reaching the top.

I recently took a class in basic bouldering skills class offered by the Central Park Conservancy at the North Meadow Recreation Center, mid-park at 97th Street in Central Park. The facility has a couple of climbing walls where they offer instruction and open climbing to children and adults, as well as school-oriented youth programs. My teacher, Heather Palmer, warmed me up using active stretching techniques and then explained the basic principles involved: keep your weight over your feet, keep your feet turned out, and communicate with your partner (who spots you).

When I'm learning a new skill, I'm always fascinated by how different it feels to do it than it looks like it will. Heather looked like Spiderman climbing the wall, for all the world as though she were suctioned to it with her hands and feet - especially her hands. But she explained that climbing is mostly a lower body activity that depends on moving your center of gravity from one foot to the other. She was right: I felt like I was standing against the wall, not crawling on it. The other surprise was that in order to use your upper body strength efficiently you should hang from largely straight arms and let your legs do the work. It's tempting to haul yourself from handhold to handhold by the strength of your arms alone, but that turns out to be just as exhausting as you'd think. It took me a while to get used to the straight-arm thing, but once I did it felt much more graceful and intelligent. I found it pretty natural to keep my pelvis in close to the rock; over my years as a modern dancer, I have learned to keep my pelvis (my center) close to a dancer I'm partnering. Nate Smith, Central Park Conservancy's Adventure Program Assistant, later mentioned a friend who calls climbing "vertical dancing," and it's not hard to see why.

I talked with Heather, Nate, and climbing instructor Eric Lee for a while afterwards. They told me that after you take a basic class or two, you do most of your learning by trying to get yourself from here to there across a rock or a climbing wall and then watching other climbers do the same. Heather

told me people learn to “read a rock” to find the natural pathways across it, but sometimes deliberately avoid the natural pathways to learn something new. Eric said, “Both [you and the rock] are changing, but the rock changes more slowly, so all the adaptation has to be on the part of the climber, and all those adaptations begin internally. By picking up cues from an outer reality through a variety of senses, you start mapping out an inner terrain of frustration, excitement, curiosity, uncertainty, doubt, confidence, sense of self, and loss of self. Sometimes you are trying to move and you can’t do it, can’t do it... and then you can do it. What changed? It wasn’t the rock. It was you.” He added, “I’ve never met anyone who couldn’t find metaphors in climbing for their own life.” As I was packing up to leave the center, I saw him climb the same route up the wall from beneath an overhang that I had attempted at the end of my lesson. He seemed almost to trickle up the wall, lightly, like a leaf being blown upwards.

Central Park Conservancy offers a variety of climbing classes, including single afternoon classes and a four-week series that will teach you everything you need to know to boulder and climb. Children’s classes and open climbing are free up to age 15. (There is a \$25 refundable deposit for classes). Adult open climbing is \$5 per session or \$50 for the year and includes all equipment. Adult climbing and bouldering classes are \$50 for a single 90-minute class (limited to 4 participants, so you get a lot of attention). The four-week series is \$200 for four 3-hour classes. The classes might seem expensive, but after taking them and buying yourself a pair of climbing shoes and some chalk, you’re all set for as much climbing as you want. For more information call (212) 348-4867 x14 or visit www.centralpark.org.

There are several good climbing rocks in Central Park. **Rat Rock** is in the southeast corner of the park near Wollman Rink. **Chess Rock** is behind the Chess and Checkers House, across from the Carousel in the mid-south park. **Worthless Boulder** is across from the Meer in the north park on the west side. You’ll know these rocks when you see them by the chalk marks from the climbers’ hands. **Fort Tryon** at the **Cloisters** are also known for good climbing, and the **Gunks**, or Shawgunk Mountains in New Paltz are also known for good climbing. The folks at Central Park tell me that one good rock can challenge you and keep you occupied for years.

In addition to the program in Central Park, there are several other climbing walls in Manhattan. Most of them offer classes. Once you begin climbing on a wall it’s pretty easy to make friends with other climbers and plan trips to outdoor locations (though you can also go alone, and often find other climbers when you arrive). Bouldering is a great social activity as well as a physical one.

Extra Vertical is located in the Harmony Atrium on Broadway between 62nd and 63rd. For more information, call (212) 586-5718, or go to www.extravertical.com.

City Climbers’ Club is located in the West 59th Street Recreation Center, at 533 W. 59th St. between 10th and 11th Avenues. Call (212) 974-2250 or go to www.climbnyc.com.

Chelsea Piers, on East 23rd St. at the Hudson River, has two climbing walls – a large one open to members only in the Sports Center, and a smaller one open to the public in the Field House. Call the Sports Center at (212) 336-6000, or the Field House at (212) 336-6500. The website is at www.chelseapiers.com.

Manhattan Plaza Health Club is located on W. 43rd St. between 9th and 10th Avenues. Their climbing wall is open to the public. Call (212) 563-7001 or go to www.mphc.com.