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A toehold on courage
So much to be gained from sharing an intense experience

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For a thousand reasons it shouldn't have worked.

It was improbable. It was untested. It was expensive.

Three mid-life women, each of them in a state of personal transition, came together with an idea and in a blaze, merely two months later, were marketing the Rock to Grow experience to corporations.

One of these women is a former investment banker who for 16 years had been at her desk before 7:00 a.m. (Asia was her market, and she needed to be on top of the night's day half a world away.) Two years ago, she walked away from the pressure and the money, and began to refashion her life and mission. That last word is one she uses a lot today, and she is totally focused on helping other women change their lives in midstream for no other reason than it is midstream.

The second woman has always been a seeker. Trained in kinesiology, she has explored therapeutic touch, brain gyms for kids, running, biking, teaching yoga, vision questing, stretching all her boundaries in search of a universal truth and its practical applications.

The third woman is the "detail guy" of the trio -- reinventing her entire life after a rare drug reaction had left her permanently disabled. She has yet to deal with the 20 suits in her closet.

What this trio possessed in enthusiasm for their idea, they more than made up for in lack of experience. Inviting other women on a highly compressed, intense

48-hour journey way outside their comfort level usually requires a reassuring answer to the inevitable question: "How often have you done this before?"

Not these women. After an evening seminar with one of Canada's top woman mountain climbers, off we went for a day of rock climbing on the cliffs two hours north of Toronto. Getting to the top and then back to the bottom safely was only half the exercise. We then had to apply what we'd learned ("Never get a manicure before you go rock climbing?") to the stern realities of the office.

But Rock to Grow wanted to pamper its clients as well as challenge them. So, back from the rocks, dirty and tired, we took respite at an inn that can only be described as your very wealthiest friend's weekend retreat nestled in the finest linens. For the second evening, there was a wine tasting, followed by an "interactive dinner" where one of Canada's most renowned chefs cooked up a feast using the women as his sous-chefs. This is creativity and challenge of a very different kind. But is it more than just high-tone fun and games?

I was skeptical beforehand. But I'm a convert now, and I think the reason is that women who share extreme experiences (whether on the rocks or in the kitchen) use them and grow through them in ways that are mysterious.

In a previous encounter with Outward Bound, I had experienced the bonding that comes from embracing a physical challenge designed to stretch you beyond all expectation. Doing so in the company of others who are equally terrified, you find, at the very least, soulmates for life. When, after being out in the bush for five days in the dead of winter, we boarded the small plane home from Thunder Bay, we asked the flight attendants to fasten us to the wings. We were certain we could fly home that way. There aren't many opportunities to feel that kind of exhilaration as we get older and the occasions are memorable for a long time afterward.

This adventure on the rock was different. It was more compressed, woman-centric and, from the outset, focused on a clear set of goals. Our efforts were consistently directed and marshalled to reach those goals and while the leaders acknowledged that highly emotional states might arise from the experience, they encouraged us to accept it and move on.

So what did the women bring to the venture that ensured such success?

I think it was an obvious readiness to change, something mid-life women seem to thrive on. My experience is that women aren't likely to ante up for the challenge of doing something of which they have no experience or are terrified, unless they are ready to have a different outcome in their behaviour or self-esteem. Still, most of the women in our group were unprepared to lean on other women in order to achieve that goal. These particular women pride themselves on being self-reliant, self-made, independent -- sole proprietors of their success.

As we stood under the rock face encouraging them upward, two of the women were clearly petrified of the height they found themselves at. Despite all our admonishments and shouts of "one more toehold and you've got it," what got them to the top of the cliff was their own gumption to go "one step beyond your fear." What gave them this courage to push ahead was the chance to take a break or to take a boost, both options provided by the rope that held them. And as for the strong anchor that was "your buddy" as you hoisted yourself upward on the rock face, we all felt an inordinate sense of responsibility, especially for those who were most frightened or doubtful of their capacity, or their courage.

Granted, lots of women these days climb cliffs, real or metaphorical. What made these ones so meaningful was not what happened on the rock face, but what happened afterward.

We did something much more daring and consequential.

We talked to each other. After the cliffs, the wine tasting, the dinner, we started talking about our hopes and fears and, under the gentle prodding of our trio of leaders, we confessed the nature of the one thing we needed to do in our personal lives, the one "action item" we had to deal with in order to move forward and not stay stuck in our old patterns and resentments.

One woman came forth with what was really keeping her from reconstructing her business.

Another, who had dreams of writing, explored her option not to return to her national sales job.

For myself, I was visited with a panic attack on the drive back to Toronto, something I had not experienced in at least 10 years. It took a few days to sort out. But in the end, it became clear that the time was right to open old baggage and move off some of my old fears.

All of us knew how to make these changes. We just needed other women to witness and to help us keep our courage up after we'd all gone our separate ways. And that's what happened. There was a two-hour conference call two weeks after we'd scattered, with everyone checking in on their progress. Not everyone did everything they'd committed to. But enough did to testify to the incredible catalysis women create just by creating an intensive experience together.

To learn more about the Veriditas Group Rock to Grow program, call Gail Heney at (416) 423-8640, or e-mail: gheney@visioncoaching.net