

# Climbing through the Ageing Barrier



A Phenomenological Study  
by

Dr Armin H Danesh



This study  
is dedicated to The Castle Climbing Centre:  
  
to those who initiated the idea, created  
and developed this facility  
  
and to all who work and climb there.



# **Climbing through the ageing barrier**

Exploring the lived experience of a 70-year-old woman  
while rock-climbing with others: A Phenomenological Study

**By Dr Armin H Danesh**



**Illustrated  
with Sketches by Jane Adams**

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## **Introduction**

How does it actually feel to be no longer young?

In the world today, our traditional expectations of the older generation are changing rapidly, due partly to high standards of health-care. The increasing range of activity in the elderly may sometimes reflect a sense of denial; in other words, do we regard our seniority as the adversary or as the wise friend?

Recently, an interest in the concept of ageing has emerged in various fields such as gerontology, psychology and futurology. This includes the study of old age in demographic, legal, political and cultural contexts. The term ageing here refers to the embodied awareness that our time here is limited. Unfortunately, societal attitudes towards ageing are predominantly negative (Ayalon and Tesch-Römer, 2018; Harwood, 2007). And yet, everyone will grow older, and if these attitudes persist they restrict an individual's quality of life.

I think there is a vital need to examine what underlies and shapes our negative attitudes about getting older. What are the cultural, social, economic and political factors at play in our society that cast a negative expectation concerning ageing? In my opinion those are the issues that don't receive enough attention. Our natural concern is for the way in which socially conditioned expectations could impact peoples' sense of what they are living and working for - their overall purpose in life.

Kate's story shows how attitudes about ageing - negative or positive - affect both physical and cognitive health. It is helpful to realise that as Labier (2016) describes, the way people picture their growth and development through the years affects their psychological wellbeing, their cognitive capacities, and their vulnerability to physical illness. According to Kate, developing our capacity within the acceptance that we are ageing may have a profound effect on the way we perceive ourselves. For instance, the freedom of balanced physical movement can enhance the whole person. Physical

reflexes may slow down, but the potential to reflect rather than to compete, enriches reality.

Kate is a creative artist, writer and student of consciousness. Here is a Phenomenological study of her adventure with rock climbing at 70. She said she achieved a fresh understanding of herself, and feels she crossed a barrier. What kind of barrier?

Using semi-structured interviewing as my method of data collection, I elicited detailed accounts, thoughts and feelings from Kate. On studying the data, three key themes emerged: her attitude towards ageing, the integration of mind, body and spirit and finally expanding her social environment. Conventional attitudes towards ageing reinforce the concept of limitation and may cause us to under-estimate our physical capability. Contradicting this, Kate feels her seniority in fact increases her quality of experience in everything. This study will focus on three domains: the period before she started climbing, her experience during the process, and her current impressions of life.

My aim is to invite the reader to consider afresh the concept of ageing, and its effect on mental, physical and cognitive health. I will focus on activity theory: a psychological approach designed to explain successful ageing. It suggests that those who take initiative and responsibility to maintain their creative activity such as keeping up hobbies or developing new ones, while remaining socially adaptable, are likely to age more successfully. These people are happier, healthier and probably live longer than those who do not maintain their interests (Harwood, 2007). Not everyone in their later years has the money or the inclination to pay daily visits to the gym, take up new pastimes or travel to exotic places. We are concerned here with the discovery of inner resources and their expression.

I will firstly give a brief description of the concept of phenomenology. This will be followed by Kate's background prior to rock-climbing, the challenges she faced while engaging with it, and her developmental process, physical, personal and social. I will then summarise my findings and their general

implication. Finally, I will highlight Kate's current impressions of life. I hope this study encourages readers to take responsibility for their ageing process and to enhance their quality of life.

### **Phenomenology in Context**

I shall not attempt to give a detailed academic account of phenomenology, but to familiarise the concept for the general reader in relation to Kate's lived experience.

Phenomenological study explores human interactions while preserving a lived relationship with reality (van Kaam, 1969). What is a phenomenon? The Greek word *phaenestia* means to flare up, to show itself. The origin is *phaino*, 'to bring to light, to place in brightness, to show in itself, the totality of what lies before us in the light of day' (Heidegger, 1977: 74-75). In Husserl's view, all scientific knowledge rests on inner evidence. In consciousness appear the phenomenal building blocks of human knowledge. (Husserl, 1931). Phenomenology is a study of structures of consciousness as experienced from the first-person viewpoint (Smith, 2013; Dahlstrom, D.O., 2015; Marshall, 2016).

Clark Moustakas refers to the experiential texture of situations, feelings and ideas. 'The task requires that I observe (them) ... always with reference to textural qualities – rough and smooth; small and large; quiet and noisy; colourful and bland, etc ... within an experiential context' (Moustakas, 1994: 90). An enormous amount of information is accessed, leading us towards the essence.

In our embodied experience, objects, events, tools, the flow of time and the dynamic of the self with others arise and become significant and symbolic within our life in the world. The process of awareness and its expression for each person is unique. It may extend towards embodying social initiatives, including linguistic activities. In order to learn from Kate's experience, we should be ready to let go of our own preconceptions.

The French philosopher Merleau-Ponty (2002) in 'Phenomenology of Perception' focused on perceiving our own body, its image and its significance in our activities. He developed a rich observation of the body's various roles in human experience. Consciousness is embodied in the environment; equally, our physical body is infused with consciousness and with cognition of the world.

As Kate describes herself as 'a student of consciousness', her 'ascent' through learning to climb again is an earthed expression of her spiritual path and her desire to reach 'beyond the box'. Her interest in her own responses and reactions as a senior person enriched her story and deepened her insights.

Phenomenology is not as many people imagine, a narrative study of our mere subjectivity. Following the process of human awareness, it enquires into the nature of what we experience. It teaches us a way of systematic observation and self-observation. Phenomenology is a philosophical contemplation of reality as it arises spontaneously; the emphasis is on receptivity and relatedness rather than hasty interpretation.

In life we tend to interpret and therefore limit our experiences to suit our conditioning. There are for instance generalised ideas about rock-climbers. There is a general perception of how we age. In order to access Kate's lived experience in depth, we need to set aside our assumptions and let her voice appear. We should not let our own lens colour her view. Twenty persons of the same age and gender who also practice climbing may not conform to category. Kate's experience is unique.

## **Background**

In her 70<sup>th</sup> year, Kate took a short course of rock-climbing lessons, and began practicing regularly at The Castle Climbing Centre in North London. She loved mountains and her family had been keen "leisure" rock-scrabblers by the sea without ropes or equipment. However, she had not climbed rocks or trees for the past twenty or thirty years. The feeling remained at the back of her mind.

For Kate to learn to climb again as a senior felt like a reconnection to her childhood. She needed to retrieve that freedom and freshness. With no regular physical activity, and disliking conventional forms of exercise, she had lost some of her sense of balance and physical sureness.

About 15 years previously Kate visited a climbing wall with her niece but felt heavy and uninspired on the artificial surface. Her return to climbing demanded "the real thing", a spiritual contact with the natural world. When only the physical body is engaged, there is no flow. She was not ready at that earlier time, to make a new connection and start afresh.

Kate faced two challenges: to cross the age barrier and to recreate her past pleasures in the present. Could she generate in herself enough commitment to the hard, technical work of re-learning to climb? Her fear of risking injury and even death was real: 'I think I'm too old for this now'. Until she began to climb, these thoughts obstructed her.

The incentive came again from within Kate's immediate family. Her daughter's new partner Edward was a climbing instructor; his mother Julie, an active climber at 73, was planning to come and visit Kate. Kate wanted to support her daughter in the new relationship and to initiate a shared family enjoyment. She also didn't want to feel left out! When she went to look at the local climbing wall, she saw agile small boys high up on the ropes. *'And I thought, my God what fun! I want to do this! The lifting feeling through my spine ... suddenly I wanted to be eight-years-old again.'*

Kate had an early romance with rock-climbing as shown her by her mother and father. Clearly, the new activity was powered by strong social and family feeling. Instinctively Kate was drawn to climbing in the context of relationship, affection, mutual trust and recreating her childhood agility. She took the initiative.

Ageing is a mental construct: self-image can stop people from realising their potential. For many ageing people, society reinforces their implied restrictions. How do we perceive our mental age? We may desire not to be

typecast: to be open, joyous and to test ourselves. In a single day, we might be 25 years old, 7 or 90. That fluency awakens, and we become adventurous. *'That child was still alive in me. The way children climb, it's lovely to watch, because they're so free with it, and bold.'*

The real capacity to reawaken comes from doing something we love. Our opportunities to value life and take responsibility can empower others and create possibilities for them. Some of Kate's senior friends on hearing of her climbing became inspired to do it too.

At the time she began to climb, Kate was physically strong and fairly sure of herself. However, she was aware she should look after her health and not allow any problems to develop through being inactive. She didn't want to be a burden to others but to take responsibility. She was ready to take a risk and to enjoy moving her body. She saw what she wanted to be.

The impending family event had deep significance for Kate - a single parent - in her relationship with her daughter and the new boyfriend. This was the other strong positive motivation. In fact, the desire to climb was profound. She had fallen away, she re-encountered, and she began again. She was cautious however, of fitting a new commitment into her life.



### **Engaging physically with Climbing and Safety**

*Kate says, 'As soon as I saw those small boys going up and down, and met the instructors and smelled the atmosphere, the smell of climbing shoes, sweat, chalk and rope, I was hooked. I signed up straight away for a course of six lessons so that when Edward's mum came, I would be able to climb with her and even belay her so that she could climb, on the rope, and I could support her. I hoped we could all do that together so it would be a family event.'*

The new initiative invites the physical senses - including smell, touch and sound. Moving from daydream to the real world of climbing, Kate started to meet her own agency. She must tackle her resistance to the project: its unfamiliarity. She must confront her physical fear and lack of coordination; also, her fear of how younger people might judge her lack of skill. The climbing culture supports people in the confrontation with their psychological,

spiritual and physical barriers. There is a common goal - to reach targets in a self-determined way - and for some it is a form of Yoga; a dynamic meditation. Everyone shares the issue of challenge, failure, nervousness and starting again. It is also a safe and a protected environment. The resounding message is "being Safe". There are regulations to safeguard themselves and each other, to handle the rope and the belaying device. Each climber takes responsibility for him or herself and partners. To develop trust, a beginner must surmount the initial fear and awkwardness, and jump straight in. Watching others in the same movement, we learn we are OK, and we are encouraged; each in his or her unique path of strength, trust and coordination.

Trust does not develop from the thought only; it has to be active, and it is a product of caring. When we care, we develop trust. The body's built-in knowledge and centre of gravity becomes aware. Processes of the mind can potentially exaggerate the risk.

Each unfamiliar aspect of climbing including clothes, equipment and tools is considered:

*'I had no idea what to wear. I puzzled about it for a long time, then eventually found something. I didn't know what to wear on my feet, I didn't know about rock shoes, so I went along in a pair of soft five-finger soles. It was extremely difficult - I couldn't get any toe-hold.'*

Kate faced additional difficulties in preparing herself to climb and felt self-conscious. She felt handicapped by the self-limiting social attitudes to youth and age. She was able gradually to adjust.

*'I hated the warm-up exercises, jumping up and down. I could traverse along the wall a little way but was afraid of looking stupid and clumsy, falling off and looking ridiculous. I did manage on a sloping slab climb to get to the top, and this was encouraging. Then I was shown how to be let down, and how to belay the other person. I trusted it straight away - but it took me weeks to learn how to manage the device. Some people get it first go. Those were the*

*early lessons. I worked very hard in them. Each time I went I was scared. My body-mind was scared, it said I shall fall off, I will hurt myself or be killed or crippled, and a burden on my daughter and everyone. I always had to overcome that rather sick feeling. It took me a long time to learn how to handle the rope and belaying devices and even to put on the hip harness. Yet, at the end of each lesson I came away with a feeling of uplift in my mind like a growing plant - a wonderful feeling of suppleness. I thought, that must be the endorphins! This is how people feel if they exercise in a way which they love.'*

The excitement, desire and motivation to achieve a peak or rock-hold in a controlled way is the engine which drives a climber. The motivation ascends through the barriers of age and fear. An outsider watches, but the insider engages deeply. Without trying it for herself, she is confined to her past expectation. The first step is taken with the decision: 'I want to do that with the others, I want to be with them' - including the investment of time and money.



### **Meeting the Challenges**

The learning process was sometimes physically painful and took Kate out of her comfort zone. Why did she persevere?

*'In one of the lessons I was much challenged, because the instructor was a speed-climber ... he pushed me up a difficult graded climb way beyond my capability, and I was crying, I can't do this, I'm afraid, I can't, and he said Oh yes you can. Just do it. He made me walk my feet up to my hands and struggle and reach for a tiny knob high up and get to the top. And I did get to the top with that encouragement and a good pull on the rope. It was way beyond what I thought I could do. When I came down again, I was shaking all over, but I felt uplifted. I'd gone right through where I felt weak.'*

When Kate decided to practice climbing, she made a conscious choice. She wanted to give up, but she didn't, because she trusted that the instructor knew better. He did not accept her protest. Climbing is teamwork: the team members impact the individual. The instructor saw she could do better. Breaking through her limited projection of herself, Kate gained a new perspective on herself and others. Her age was not relevant to that moment; in order to survive, she had to complete the climb.

Climbing with family members and friends brings it home. Being belayed encourages one to move beyond the comfort zone. The threat is not around the action itself, but where we undermine our own capability. There is the space to improve; to use and not to miss that possibility. The capacity to monitor ability is within our body's self-teaching. The body instinctively does not imperil itself.

Kate learned about the kind of tools and techniques she would need.

*'After the first lesson, I got my rock shoes. I managed fine with those. It was easier because you get the proper support for your feet on small holds ... Edward and his mum and my daughter came, and we went climbing together and I was pretty awkward but a bit better than when I started. I was very impressed with my daughter's natural climbing ability. I loved watching her boyfriend support her on the rope. They were not impressed with my local climbing centre. They said there's a much better one, called The Castle, near Finsbury Park.'*

Watching the others is normally a positive and encouraging part of teamwork. Kate sees her daughter move from one place to another: her daughter's competence in achieving the task increases her own desire to climb.

## **A period of doubt and reconnection**

*'After they went, I didn't go again for three months. I didn't want to go. I would have to push myself - the starting of a new venture on my own was a barrier to overcome. I'm going into an unknown place, I might hurt myself, I don't know the people, I might look ridiculous. Also, I felt too busy - how could I fit it in with the other things I was doing or thinking of. Finally, something prompted me, and I went along to the Castle and I signed up and filled in the form, capability and questions and so on. I don't recall what prompted me. The day came to give it a try. First, I went and visited the place, I met one of the staff there, and said Could you show me around? I'm a beginner, I want to come here on my own and develop some technique through bouldering and learn the movements. He said this is the ideal place for you. We have a lot of bouldering facility. So, he showed me, and I thought it was a wonderful place. I came back and started as soon as I could, I went almost every day for a while. I found it very difficult, but exhilarating and achievable. It gave me that uplifting liberated feeling inside. I taught myself by watching other climbers, skilful young people ... it wasn't so much the strenuous climbing that inspired me, it was the graceful dancer-like way they placed their hands and feet and moved their body, so it was in balance, sometimes through roofs and overhangs. Wouldn't it be wonderful if I could do that!'*

Practicing without the support of others can isolate and put one off. Going alone to an unknown place required a dedicated effort. Kate was afraid of looking conspicuously unskilled, and she could have stayed within her past, said she was too busy, and made excuses. However it was significant that she made a friendly contact with one of the staff. She now had an ally at the centre.

When climbing a mountain, we do not always ascend; but sometimes go downhill. Here is an opportunity to concentrate on the whole process: how to reach the peak? The common story of evolution might also be realised in Kate's progress as a climber.

The role of the staff within the climbing centre is crucial for a beginner. It helps him or her to make a connection with the sport and to engage. Watching the skill, competence and grace of other climbers was inspirational. Kate's goal was to be able to move like that. It was an additional incentive.

*'Everybody's helping each other there. Nobody is in isolation. You're watching and being inspired by somebody. If you can't do a climb, you watch someone else, and then you say how did you do that bit? And they show you.'*

*'The atmosphere is busy and cheerful. There's a bit of background rock music, not too loud - sometimes cool jazzy blues with a good slow dance pulse. The staff are friendly.'*

The Castle Climbing Centre is a supportive community environment, everyone helping or finding out from others. The continual inspiration in watching styles of climbing can ameliorate a negative conditioning. After watching – do it! Put it into practice – or remain a stranger to the understanding. Engaging with the climbers' strength and skill moves us out of isolation into recognising our potential. In society, others may manifest themselves as strangers or as problems to keep our distance from. Kate appreciated the way strangers invited each other to succeed - different ages, cultures, children, adults, parents and the handicapped - and to learn, hands-on.



## **Environmental contact and physical progress**

It is important in this connection to engage with and know about the place as a whole, and its ideals; to walk around it, learn its history and feel at home within it. The interest in indoor climbing in the UK began to develop from the 1960s onward. The Castle, an old Victorian water pumping station on the edge of two reservoirs near Finsbury Park, was originally built in the shape of a castle with turrets and towers. It was decommissioned and ceased operations in 1942. In the 1980s it was rescued from demolition and listed as a Grade 2 building. In 1993 permission was granted for it to be turned into a climbing centre and work began on the interior. It opened in 1995.

Since then it underwent many upgrades and improvements to develop self-sustainability along with careful conservation of its original features. In 2015 there were 200,000 visitors.

*'It's an oasis. I leave behind the outside world and go into where people get to grips with their medium. For myself as an artist, it's a place with other artists at work: the focused concentration, and the enormous variety of different climbs. I discovered it is set in an acre of its own organic garden. They grow their own vegetables for the café and keep bees. It is totally self-sustaining, in the ecology ethic. I wanted to support this place - to bring my creative work here as well. The coffee in the café is good and so is the food - all out of the garden. In the garden there are outdoor climbing walls for bouldering. I talked to people who said it is their form of meditation. I became a member and settled to going twice a week.'*

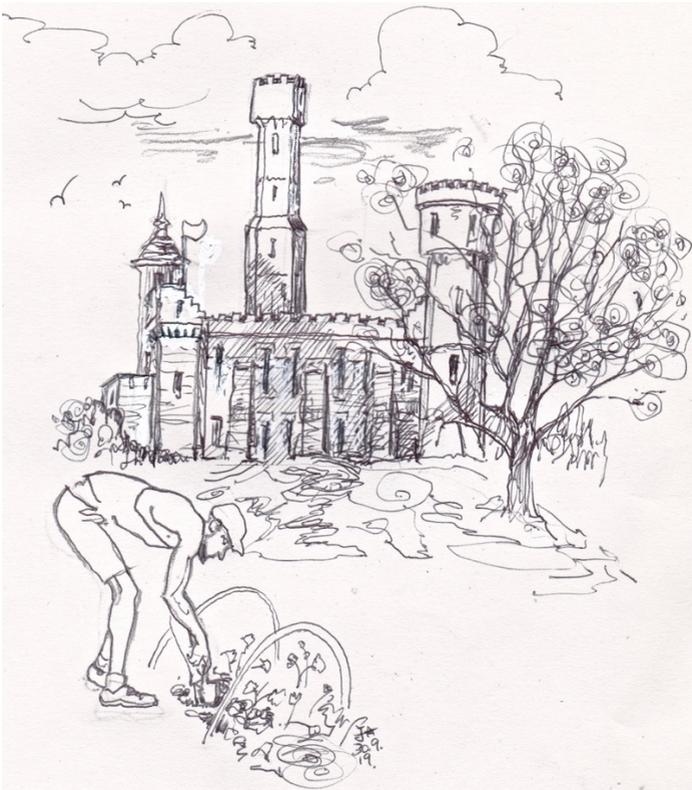
Kate's interest in the Castle Centre's history and environmental ideals further enhanced her physical skill.

*'Each week I made a tiny bit more progress, learning to arrange my hands and feet and to flex and brace my body through an overhang so as to move with less effort. That was as much through watching other people as trying to do it myself. At first, I thought I'd never be able to. But then it came, and I could.'*

*'I got blisters, callouses on my hands, which hardened and settled down. My big toes straightened out a bit, which was amazing, they became strong and I could stand on tip toe again. Using every muscle in my body in an organic, whole way made me feel creative and well earthed.'*

Kate says she is experiencing some intense pressures in life. Her personal response to this is to build a supple physical vehicle to support the spiritual input.

*'This was my intention week by week. I felt proud to do this at an age when most people might not dream of starting. Also, I was losing weight and getting stronger. It wasn't unnatural like weight-training. It was integrated with the physical element, the animal, plant and earthly bodies.'*



## Reflections on Kate's adaptation

*'I made a few contacts and climbed for a short time with a small group of younger women. But I couldn't always get there on Thursday evenings. It's easy to make friends and join groups of climbers. But I was focused on practicing by myself with the "bouldering" techniques to move diagonally or swivel like a monkey. I was at first scared of going up and down sheer walls or doing ropes.'*

The nature of the centre and the hard work within it generated a focus: a detachment from the outer world's distractions. The commitment is mental, physical and social. Kate didn't go there as a spectator or to keep on doing the same things. In her openness to receive impressions, she desired to support the positive aims of the centre. The working atmosphere invited her creativity.

She is conscious of her feelings and capacity to observe. She is there not only to enlarge her mind or engage in physical activity, but to enhance the totality of her experience in life. There are hundreds of routes, and they are reset regularly; she can exercise her freedom and eat well there also, out of the garden. Immersing her life style in this colourful environment, she created a second home for herself and adapted her finances to become a registered member. She became familiar with her reserves of energy and settled into a bi-weekly routine. The water in the flowing river is not stagnant. It was a fine way to dance, adjust and grow.

All aspects of her life were influenced. She had something to tell people; a development in her world to look forward to each week. Bringing the climbing culture into her life created new circles of friendship and transformed her from a stranger into a participant. Inspired by watching other climbers, she began to develop some physical fluency and skill; to stretch her whole body and to heal some problems. Her creative art was earthed into physical movement. The disciplined flow of a climb opens the gate. This level of connection was her choice, to create as she went along.

Kate continues to climb through her fear of unfamiliar terrain, and whether her strength is up to it: fear of injury. How can she know herself, except through setting the target? Everyone there is trying; this is inspirational. Often, we suffer because we think too much. The mind works at a different rate to the physical motor and is often out of synch. The act of climbing regulates the mental process to a concentrated search for balance and problem-solving where thought connects to physique. Kate describes a gradual strengthening process over about six months, after which she began on the high walls with the "auto-belay".

For Kate, her feeling for her daughter and Edward was embodied in this way. In her desire to support them she found an environment where she herself received the social and spiritual support on which she thrives.

### **The next step: Outdoor rock climbing**

The indoor climbing environment enables the climber to adapt herself to further challenges presented by the outdoor medium. The natural rock features require further skills. Stanage Edge is a dramatic escarpment in the Pennines near Sheffield. It contours along the moorland crest for a mile or two and attracts many climbers.

*'I first went rock climbing about three or four months after I started at the Castle. We went up to Yorkshire to stay with Edward and his Mum, and they took us to Stanage Edge, and we climbed on gritstone crags there. I found it very difficult, because the holds were sloping, and I didn't feel at home on the rock. I was used to indoor climbing by now. Even though I love rock, I felt uncertain and my balance was bad. They had to pull me up one climb: the other climbs I couldn't do at all, but they did. I tried, I tried, but I was frightened each time - please can I come down! Then I went back to indoor climbing.'*



Some months later, on a warm winter day, Kate stayed with Edward's mother Julie again. They visited the Huddersfield climbing wall and hiked through Gordale Scar and Malham Cove. They rock-climbed with two of Julie's companions.

*'The climb we're going to talk about is called Agden Rocher. It is a line of crags at the top of a hillside, very exposed to the weather. It was a different rock from Stanage - a hard sandstone, but not loose nor soft. The strata were horizontal, so though they were quite difficult climbs and very steep, you could get a hand or foothold on a ledge - a good sharp bit to hold onto.'*

For Kate climbing brings contact with the beauty of the rock and its natural setting: a connection to life, awakening agile childhood memories. She describes her feelings with excitement and affection:

*'You're using all your senses and your body - a loving contact when it goes well. When it's not going well, just like in a relationship, I feel separated and out of my element. When it goes well, I flow with it. I develop a sort of flow from my toes right up through my whole body. So, I don't start and then stop, I keep it going right through, straight up. In the old days when I was very young, I did a lot of boulder running - with my father particularly. We would be by the sea together, over big boulders. We would run really fast along them, planning five or six jumps ahead. I couldn't do that now, but I remember it well. I like now to climb slowly, to be controlled and graceful.'*

As Kate's spirituality combines with her physical movement, she enjoys the feeling of herself as a whole: *'It is the contact and the connection. Also, the obstacles - like getting physically tired after a strenuous bit - out of breath, pouring with sweat, heart hammering, have to rest, I've done enough, this is hurting - but then something in me puts me straight back. Maybe I just watch someone move, and that starts me off again. It's because of enjoying rocky places, moorlands, mountains, the sea. I feel the landscape in my body. In my childhood we combined it all.*

*'That feeling is when I am tuned in. It is beautiful. You can eat it. I was moving along the North Devon coast with my father. He was quite an old man by then, in his seventies. We went along a great beach of rocks, then climbed up a sheer cliff and got tangled up with deep gorse and brambles at the top, in our usual family way. The sun was setting on the sea. There was*

*the movement and fluidity of touch with rocks, the water and the sound of the waves.*

*'It's a music through one's being. To go in the water with the sun going down on the horizon and to swim in that path of the fire - it's like eating nectar. You drink it in through all the pores of your skin. It is a deeply spiritual, earthed feeling. I get small reminders of that today, when I go climbing and stretch myself.'*

The sense of taste is here also, in the sensory involvement with the natural world and companions to share it with. However, Kate said the thoughts which come to her mind while climbing are competitive prattle: can she cut a good dash in front of the others; what would such and such a person think; and she believes this is because she wishes to impress her family and for her parents to admire her. This suggests a further childhood connection; the small child's need to be noticed and praised. At a deeper level, climbing is contemplative, as confirmed in her conversations with other climbers at the centre. The mind quietens as thinking is embodied in problem solving through fingers, arms, hips and the whole body. This is satisfying and calming.

*'I would go there for the medicine when I felt upset about anything. I would go climbing and it would all settle down because I was spreading that energy through my limbs; releasing and exercising it, rather than it just hammering on.'*

This applies to confronting difficulties of any kind in life. Physical stretch and movement with the breath helps to release anxiety. First, we have to face the anxiety - to allow, accept and then embrace it.



## **Social dimension: team work**

*'I wanted to expand my climbing base, and Julie was eager to show me. I shared with her all my climbing news, as she did hers. After Huddersfield Wall and Malham Cove and Gordale Scar, we went out to the crag I mentioned with her two climbing friends who were elderly men, very strong and experienced.'*

What were Kate's feelings, on setting out for a new climb? What was on her mind? She hoped she might be able to climb more fluently and be part of the rope: a hint of anxiety - would she be safe. When they arrived at the rock face, Kate was eager to get her hands onto it: to touch.

*'It puts a spring in my step. Don't make it too difficult! I hoped they would find a nice easy climb so I could enjoy it. As soon as I see the rock, I start ...*

*'We walked down the path into the moorland towards the valley and the cliffs above a fringe of oak trees. They stopped in front of a sheer climb with very few holds and a crack going up the middle and said Let's do this one. I looked up. I've learned about cracks and laybacking, but I had no practice. I felt crestfallen. It'll be like last time. But I want to try.*

*'So, the lead man went up first and as he went up, he fixed what we call gear. It's called Trad climbing. He wedges pins into rock crevices and clips the rope through them as he goes up, to safeguard himself. He anchors himself at the top, then helps the others to climb up. The others take out the wedges as they come up and leave the rock face without anything on it.*

*'I thought - he seems to find it difficult; he seems to be struggling. I won't be able to do this at all. He's done Alpine stuff. But I think this was partly because he was putting gear in and making sure it was safe.'*

Kate's climbing companions were all three in their seventies. Julie's ex-husband brought his dog and didn't climb because he had sciatica; he helped with the rope management.

To follow the lead man is to trust him and to become a part of the team. Watching him do what appears difficult, Kate thinks she can't, but her body is shown the message that Yes, she can.

The leading man practiced what is preached. He safeguarded the route, and she observed his thoroughness. As he took responsibility for the safety of the others, she instinctively accepted and trusted his lead: she followed the evidence of her eyes.

*'They said to me, you go up next, so I tied on. I got up just a few feet, then I said I can't do this, let me down; but Dick at the top kept a strong pull and tension on the rope, he wouldn't let me off. I felt uncertain and cross and scared, there were very few holds. I tried to think and not panic, to work it out, what is the best way to put my body and to balance? With quite a bit of help from the top, I got myself up, using the palms of my hands to push. They said trust your foot on that tiny little crack. It will work, it will be alright. They encouraged from the bottom and from the top. So, I got up that difficult bit. Then I started to climb like I do in the climbing centre and was surprised! Fluidly, from side to side - right up to where an oak tree grew out of the rock face about two-thirds of the way up. A 90-foot climb, I suppose. I had watched Dick struggle up through this tree and work his way back out onto the wall.'*

Facing her fear of failure, Kate overcame it through the help and support of the others. The failure of a member is the failure of the whole team. The lead man believed the team as a whole is capable of the ascent. Kate wasn't yet sure. Focusing on oneself invites failure! Relying on the team and on others invites her ability to go ahead. 'Self for others' in this context suggests she set 'herself' aside, to meet the task.

Within the team, offering positive input and encouragement is a key factor. Recognising the strength of other team members is crucial. Their weaknesses belong to the team as do their strengths. We climb through our small-self world into the higher collective world with and for others. The indoor climbing-centre environment transformed to the natural world.

*'As soon as I discovered I could move on this beautiful cool rock, my feet were in the right place and I could find a thing to curl my fingers over; the rock became my friend. It was russet and grey with patches of lichen. It felt like the cliffs we used to climb by the sea. Also, I was getting a lot of encouragement: "Oh you're doing this well. You know you've improved so much since last time!" - that was uplifting.'*

Connecting with her physical self - toes, feet, fingers, her core stability – Kate could function as a whole person. In daily life we tend to forget or ignore our physical body. Now it demands total reliance! The rock became her friend; its substance was her tangible task. Firstly, the lead man was the friend. The rope manifests the team's empathic relationship.

*'When I got up to the oak tree, I had an opportunity to combine my two great loves - the tree and the rock. I found I shimmied into that bit of oak tree easily, like a small boy. It is psychologically helpful to have that rope above you and to trust the person who's sitting there and working it. So, I got up into the tree.'*



## **Trust**

Earlier at the climbing centre Kate had met a group of friends about her age who invited her to join them: *'I already watched other people. Then I started to belay my new friends and they belayed me. For me this was incredibly trusting to start with, and I discovered how reliable the belaying device is - you don't have to worry about it not working. You concentrate, and it works, and I could hold a big heavy man on his way down from above. That is remarkable. And he does the same for me. So, I already knew the special relationship with the other people on the rope, as if you knew them all your life - because you put your life in each other's hands. I was moved by that. I found it for real, having read about it in mountain books. I knew that in the hands of another climber I am safe. I was touched that the experienced climbers trusted me to belay them too. It worked.'*

Being a team member means both giving and receiving help, like a conversation. You can be led, and you can lead. The teamwork develops leadership qualities. The amount of responsibility we can take, develops self-esteem. In turn, she began to develop confidence and to advise and even to guide others; a fresh start in life. Using and creating possibilities for others – like telling them where it is possible to put their feet - is a developmental process.

*'So, there it was. I was going up the oak tree. It was quite a puzzle, you had to straddle your legs and get your foot onto a branch, and your hand onto the rock, rather wide apart; and you go up and up, and they make suggestions and then they said Oh you did that better than me - and that sort of thing. I managed to get myself over onto the rock face probably by getting my back onto it first and then turning round on a small ledge. So, I was off the tree and back on the sheer crag. The oak tree felt lovely. It was a young oak. Then there were some difficult moves up the crag, to get to the top. I got stuck a few times.'*

## **Moving through stuck-ness.**

"Stuckness" is a time to assess herself and her ability, to look around and explore, to test what might be possible, and find the way. Stuckness is a moment of "unknowing". Give it time and presence, including the awkwardness and fear. Getting stuck forced Kate to focus on finding a way. It is a gate. Develop the skill and courage to open it. Getting stuck is an essential incentive to growth.

*'I would shout up to Dick, "Wait, give me a bit more slack. Give me more time. Stop!" I would keep still in that place, try to calm down, and look at each possibility around it. I felt the rock with my hands and groped around, switched my feet to a different position, experimented with my hips to one side or the other, to change the centre of gravity. I was very exposed, it was sheer. If I really couldn't find a way, Dick would give me a pull. How did it feel? I felt - I managed that bit down below when I thought I couldn't, and I didn't fall off; so, I'll manage this. The rope will catch me. This rock has become my friend.'*

The friend is in the connection not only with group members but with nature. When Kate feels the connection, it moves her.

*'Yes. The Friend invites me all the time, to solve a problem. Something from above yields and helps to bring me up. And something from down below looks up and gives a push. The push and the pull is a philosophy of life, of past and future actually. It is life embodied. The help from above is a pull from the future. The past pressures, and they work together. As soon as I got to the top, I told Dick "I feel wonderful, I didn't think I could ever do that, it is so beautiful. What a view from here." We could see right out across the Pennines, the colours of the sky and the moor. He spoke of the beauty of the view, the blend of fear and problem solving, and said he was impressed.'*

In her new understanding with others while engaging with the natural world, Kate could contact her higher Self, enjoy the victory of the team and connect

with them at a higher level. After the climb she felt younger and less “conditioned”.

### **Expanding the Connection**

*“It was no longer me alone doing a climb. The climb was being done and we were a team. That was the best feeling of all. When you are a team, a rope, there is a combined trust. It’s a way of life. It is connected with the sensuous touch of my hands, feet and whole body with the rock: with my childhood. I sat down and watched Dick bring Julie up. I watched his hand movements, his concentration, care and thoroughness. He was anchored to the rock by a rope sling.*

*‘I felt safe with him, and great affection. I felt relaxed with him and the others. I wanted to paint their portraits. I admired their tradition, their work and discipline.’*

Testing this quality of higher relationship, what did Kate learn? She appreciated the team work and to let go of her small self into the greater measure of what the team was doing. It brought confidence to her body to move in this way.

*‘Life will never be quite the same after this. I’m 70 and I don’t feel any age at all. One is partly conditioned by society to believe certain faculties are closing down and don’t work so well - the brain starts to lose cells, you’re physically more tired, less coordinated, the sense of balance isn’t what it was. And yet I found a way to climb up through all that.*

*‘The implication while climbing is that you might fall. You climb through that fall, that implied death or injury. That itself is exhilarating. Yes, I think I face death all the time while climbing. It makes me very careful.’*

Touching on her fear of death and injury, Kate found herself able to remain with it and then climb up through it successfully. That sense of liberation deepened her philosophy and vision of life.

*'Facing death can be invigorating, life enhancing. Death is this beautiful rock form I'm climbing up. To be facing, embracing, understanding that so I can move my body up it - that is quite an experience. It usually takes several months to sink in, in a transforming way. But I have felt happy since. I go out in the morning with a long stride. As far as my relationships go, that is more subtle because there's a lot to work through there. I think the climb helped me a lot.'*



### **The Second Rock-Climb - Being on the Edge**

*'We did one other climb after that. Again, I thought I would never be able to go up, because it was the biggest climb on those crags. For me, it was extremely steep, up a corner, with overhanging roofs jutting out. When I watched Dick go up and negotiate those, I thought I might get just a third of the way up. As soon as I got onto it, I started to swivel from side to side up*

*the corner, like an old hand. My body knew how, and I could use the heels of my hands to press up. Then I got to a part which was very exposed, a hundred-foot drop into the valley through oak woods. This feature stays with me. It was right out on the edge. I didn't know where to go next.'*

Being on the edge is similar to being stuck.

*'Then there was that pull from above and I could trust it. The steady tension takes you up where you cannot go unaided. It doesn't do the climbing for you. It just makes you safe enough to. I'm aware of this also when I belay someone - to keep a steady strong rope. I got right up into and under the overhanging roof. I went around it. That was much easier than it looked from below, it was just very exposed. Then I got into a big corner chimney and had to wriggle up it. I used my spine and shoulders and feet to wedge myself up. There was a hand-hold just above my head. I wore a climbing helmet which got in the way. It kept bumping against the rock, I thought God these things are a nuisance, but my hand found the hold. Then the last bit was really tough, and Dick looked over the edge and said Well, try that, or try your hand just there. It's a conversation all the way up.'*

Has the climb changed anything? Kate feels she has more confidence in speaking her truth. She said, *'I couldn't have done it without the others.'*

### **The Inner Life**

Concerning her age, her spiritual path and her feeling for the rock, Kate likes to prove she is fit and strong and can do what she needs to do in life. Going deeper into her awareness of the pressures on herself and on the world collectively during a time of massive change, she aims to work with this, and to see the bigger picture.

*'It's been quite challenging for me over the last two years. By next year, I hope it will start to ease off. I feel the alignment with the processes going on in the world. I feel I am doing the right thing microcosmically, to develop a physical instrument which isn't rigid or inert but can move and be flexible with*

*life. That means a lot to me and to serving my spiritual life and the community.'*

What is the connection between Kate's inner life and rock-climbing? She stated that it is very close indeed.

*'In a way they are one and the same. At twelve, thirteen, I first started to read mountaineering books on my parents' bookshelf, and the spiritual dimension broke open. I had my first revelations while reading about and identifying with the early climbers on Everest's north face and on Annapurna, and what happened to them. They write vividly of their feelings, and the metaphysical dimension, which opened up at high altitude, and what they suffered - the sacrifices they made. They went right out into the unknown. The word 'spiritual' that they used, came into my everyday vocabulary. That was my awakening, but I always had it as a child and as a young artist. In my family the ideal of beauty and of core values was very strong.*

*'Yes, I'll try to home in. On this particular rock climb - I identify with it my life. I always pictured my inner life as rock textures and traverses, hills and landscape. The natural movement grows up the rock face like a tree. It is symbolic, the small tree in that rock face.*

*'Yes, particularly when I am stuck. In those moments I doubt myself. I want to give up. If I stay with it, keep within it, I try to find a solution. When the solution comes, through my effort or because somebody gave me a good pull, it doesn't matter whether it's me or the other. It's the teamwork. It's the finding of the solution. That for me, is the core of community work.'*

The teamwork factor transcends the small enclosure of personal anxiety, inflation or ability. Rock climbing can be highly competitive. For amateurs and explorers however, the emphasis is on the team's quality of experience as a whole. Rock climbing and mountaineering balance the competitive instinct with cooperation. Climbers tend to be individualistic, and often unconventional; and Kate is no exception.



Climbers on the Rope - 1964

## **Experiential Values**

What message would Kate convey from her recent experience?

*'I would say whether or not you climb, or however the face of life presents itself to you, get to know it. Become familiar with it; breathe into it. Then it will show you what to do next and where to go. The tendency is to tense up against it. There's a lot of fear in life and in relationships - try to acknowledge and then relax with the fear. Even if we can't relax because human fear is so deep: value it. This was the lesson to myself all my life: to value the experience for the dimensional depth behind it. As soon as I learn to see it afresh, neither good nor bad but just as it is, I am fully alive. I had these*

*moments many times in the past. I would know instinctively it will resolve, the way it starts the wheel now, in the present. It is a moment of deep connection. It happened while portrait painting also and trying hard to get a likeness. There would be a connection, and then I could trust the process to complete itself.'*

## **Vulnerability**

On the issue of openness: facing difficulties, we are vulnerable. Vulnerability is rooted mainly in a feeling of isolation. Perceiving our own vulnerability within relationships, we may accept it, and empathise more with others. We might also exaggerate our vulnerability because it highlights our small self and isolates us from the world, like digging our own grave. We want to move on, but we go on digging. To make a change in our life, we need to admit our vulnerability in relation to others and being with others.

As in Judo or a martial arts class, accepting and valuing the strength of others, itself brings strength and lightness: the way Kate felt while roped with her companions. If we are weighed down and heavy with our situation and alone, how can we move?

*'When I was in the climbing centre there was a particular route I did, with a pair of holds about half way up. Each time I got up there I would stop and think about it and I was afraid. I can't do it. I was stuck and climbed down again. The next week I went up over that place without thinking about it. I just did it. So, the thought gets in the way of the flow.'*

In ordinary life we do not often dare to stop thinking and put ourselves in another's hands: to trust in life itself. Too much thinking undermines capability, we cannot move fluently. When a little bird sees a snake, the fear stops it from remembering its wings. As soon as it moves its wings, off it goes. Being stuck anywhere is basically that fear when we forget we have the wings! We need to use them.

## **Implications for therapeutic practice**

How would Kate advise people who suffer from chronic anxiety and depression? Whether they go for counselling or try to live a full life and heal themselves, is there any message for them?

*Kate replied: 'it helps to find something physical or creative, which the person can do; and to learn to do it as well as they can, and to love doing it. This for me is a way through depression and anxiety. On the whole, it keeps a momentum. We should learn to handle the world and our environment physically as well as psychologically.'*

*'As to challenge, the thing is to get to know the challenge thoroughly first. Come face to face with it. Perhaps make a picture of the obstacle.'*

Would Kate have had her rich experience of life if there had been no challenge; if she'd just gone with Julie for another easy stroll on the moors? What is its nature? How do we challenge ourselves?

*'There are certain fears I may not want to face yet - it's not the time. But if I deal with those which I do face, I think they will help me with the others, as things turn out.'*

The challenge arises when conditions are ripe for a difficulty to be met or returned to. Psychological and spiritual attitudes can disable us massively. In fact, mental or emotional disability is often more painful and difficult than physical, to overcome. When a physically handicapped person goes climbing out of a desire to free themselves, he or she relies on skilled support. Though disabled people have much to contribute, my focus in the present study is to hear what Kate's rock-climbing adventure meant to her as a senior.

*'My positive attitude with any difficulty in life is to value it. That has brought me to places which are beautiful because it is accepted and is real. After that the difficulty seems to unwind itself.'*



## **Summary and conclusion**

Confronting her fear of failure, Kate did not give up. The potential embedded in herself was an unknown factor until she tried it out. There was some negative conditioning in her comfort zone about the ageing process. This feeling naturally bothered her and exaggerated her limitation. Her daughter's new relationship however, provided a turning point. When Kate decided to risk the leap into a relatively unknown area, her potential awoke and opened the gate also in relating to others. The light of 'I can' began to free her from the box, helping her to raise the bar and to discover what she could do.

Her view of herself changed. Her relationships and her life in general were enhanced; a new success story in the ageing process. Accepting reality, she met her potential. Kate feels she is an activist in developing the quality of life.

### **I asked Kate to reflect on her journey and what she learned and her message for others. She began by asking:**

*'How to respect my freedom and be adaptable with it at seventy? How to let go of comparing myself with others? These are all lessons for life. Facing uncertainty, I move from an unknown edge to a self-knowing position. Become visible and accept what you are. What isn't known is very difficult to accept. The idea of competing makes ageing painful - the competition of old with young. It is very important to develop what I can do well, and surprise myself, rather than struggle for the impossible. Climbing allows great individual scope and freedom for that.*

*'For me, the ageing process increases my sensitivity; it compels me to take more care to keep my activities in balance. Life is a rich canvas. Be realistic. I don't have the power a younger person has in fingertips, swift coordination and confidence, so I need to be cunning with what I have, be an old sailor. The old sailor has something the youngsters might not. Fear is a psychological state - command it and be flexible.*

*'The community belongs to everyone. A conditioned mindset excludes - the environment includes. The ongoing challenge is my application of rock climbing to all areas of life: to how I walk, dance, write, see a friend or cook the dinner. It contributes even to my piano playing; my fingers grip strenuously while climbing and yet become more sensitive as messengers. The interior sense of 'I can do this' increases my dynamic range and makes it less inhibited. The spirit awakens with the interior connection and assists us.*

*Rock climbing is said to engage the nervous system, the subconscious and the body's instinctual and bony framework in coordinated ways which few other activities can approach. The flexibility expands its 'lesson' into any field of life, including growing old more gracefully.*

*Finally I should like to touch on a very important point: when I reach a barrier - any impasse in life - the way through it is found by reaching out to the other; into relationship. Step out of the box into the human landscape all around it and watch that self-important box diminish as the horizon widens.'*

*'I would like to pass on this message, forwarded to me by Julie, who encouraged my climbing adventure:'*

*'As I've aged, I've become kinder to myself, and less critical. I've become my own friend. I will dance with myself to those wonderful tunes of the 50's, 60's & 70's, and if I, at the same time, wish to weep over a lost love, I will. I will walk the beach, in a swim suit that is stretched over a bulging body, and will dive into the waves, with abandon, if I choose to, despite the pitying glances from the jet set. They too, will get old. I know I am sometimes forgetful. But I eventually remember the important things.*

*'Sure, over the years, my heart has been broken. Broken hearts are what give us strength, and understanding, and compassion. A heart never broken, is pristine, and sterile, and will never know the joy of being imperfect.*

'I am so blessed to have lived long enough to have my youthful laughs be forever etched into deep grooves on my face. So many have never laughed, and so many have died before their hair could turn silver. So, to answer your question, I like being old. It has set me free. I like the person I have become. I am not going to live forever, but while I am still here, I will not waste time lamenting what could have been or worrying about what will be. And I shall eat dessert every single day (if I feel like it).'



Woman in Hastings, 1967





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