



Bunny Slope of Killington Mountain, Vermont. Photograph by Peter Burnett

Calculated Risks

by Nicola Burnell

I recently went skiing for the first time in six years with my friend, Arlene, who had first introduced me to this challenging sport. Being only my second ski trip, I began the day on the 'magic carpet' of Killington's bunny slope. My youngest son patiently guided me down the two runs it took for me to regain my ski legs, then up to the top of the mountain we went.

Did I mention that I'm afraid of heights?

The ski lift felt precarious, at best, but once I'd accepted that I was stuck in that tiny chair until we reached the top I actually felt myself relax into the jerking rhythm of the metal rope above me.

"This is the only way to see the mountains," Arlene grinned, an expert skier whose confidence offered me a temporary sense of false security.

Disembarking from the chair was less than graceful but I managed to stay upright. It was only when my eldest son lost control, within the first two minutes of skiing, and headed straight for a cluster of trees that I collapsed into fear again. If he couldn't stay off his backside what chance did I have of getting down the mountain alive?

With no option but to go for it, I followed Arlene and my sons onto the slope and tried to keep up with them. Seconds later, my sons were out of sight and I was assuring Arlene I'd be fine, I just needed to take my time.

That's when I flashed back to the first time I'd attempted this same slope. I'd been terrified to let go and trust that I could navigate the icy terrain below me. No matter how much I'd tried to pluck up the courage to move forward I'd felt nothing but paralyzed legs and a chest filled with adrenaline. I'd flopped onto my side, took off my skis and bawled like a baby. Pathetic, I know, but I was REALLY scared!

The fact remained, however, that the only way down that slope was on skis. I knew I had to do it, eventually. I just wasn't sure how I'd know when I was ready.

Perhaps it was embarrassment that got me upright as I'd watched children whiz past me with determination on their wind-chaffed faces. I'd snapped my boots into my bindings and side-stepped back onto the slope. Before I could feel the fear again, I was skiing in controlled zig zags with increasing speed. It had felt wonderful and when I reached the foot of the mountain I'd skied over to the lifts for another ride.

That was six years ago.

This time, when I felt myself lose control and pick up more speed than I could tolerate I dug my feet into the plow position only to find that I kept on going. And going. Oh Shit!

I threw my weight to my right and spun around until I was facing the top of the mountain. Then I started skiing backwards and the fear REALLY kicked in. I tried the backward plow – nothing. I tried to stab my poles into the snow – they just dragged along the

surface. I threw my weight to my left and spun around again, now heading down the mountain on legs that refused to follow any instruction whatsoever. Are you kidding me?!

An ominous bump rose out of the snow a few feet ahead. A snowboarder caught some serious air as she flew over the jump. I had seconds to decide what to do.

My hips decided for me and took me to the left of the jump to where the slope evened off just enough for me to come to a controlled stop. I waited several minutes for my heart to calm down and the blood to return to my legs.

I needed to take a break. To give myself time to regain my courage and my strength.

Another snowboarder collapsed into the snow beside me.

"Have your muscles given up on you too?" I called out.

"It happens," he admitted, before taking a long sip from his energy drink. "Just gotta wait it out."

I leaned into my right ski and felt my muscles let go. As I inhaled, deeply, I realized just how beautiful the view was from my mid-mountain vantage point. It was definitely worth stopping for. My courage began to seep back into my veins and I felt a hint of possibility return to my mind. I can do this. I know I can.



Taking Time to Breathe, Photograph by Peter Burnett

My sons called out my name as the ski lift passed overhead. "Wait there for us," they yelled. "We'll ski down with you."

And there was my next challenge – to get to the bottom of the slope before my sons could reach me.

My legs were still heavy and I was still afraid that I'd fall and snap my neck, but I wasn't going to let my teenage boys outrun me. I'd skied this mountain six years ago so I could ski it again!

I did make it to the bottom. I even went back up the mountain for another run. This time my legs were even less cooperative and I found myself once again frozen in fear as I stared down a steep turn that I couldn't talk myself into skiing. Arlene told me I could do it, but off came my skis and I walked down the frozen curve until I felt safe enough to put them back on again.

I've walked on fire, several times, so I know how to face down fear. I also know that sometimes it's okay to be afraid and to say "NO!"

There is strength in making choices that may look like weakness from the outside but feel right on the inside. There is strength in admitting when we are scared while everyone around us appears so competent and in control.

I'm not sure if I'll ever go skiing again. I'm certainly not a natural. But I am happy that I at least tried to ski because I discovered what my limits are and learned that it's okay to accept them.

The sad P.S. to my story is the loss of X Games champion skier, Sarah Burke, whose face smiled from posters littering restaurant lobbies up and down the mountain. She had been scheduled to participate in the Winter Dew Tour at Killington, but lay in a coma after completing a jump that she had performed many times before.

A pioneer of extreme skiing, Sarah Burke blazed a trail with fearless competitiveness. When I heard of her death, a few days later, I wondered if she knew that run would be her last. But as she once said, "It's a risk you gotta take." Or not.

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