



## Echo Valley / A Guiding Dilemma

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## DAN SHIPSIDES - Touchstone landscape text 2

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Well I tell you – it's interesting what you learn – what sinks in or what you have to keep re-learning. Well in my position anyway...

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A big part of my energy goes into being independent – so you forget where or when to take help and in the process of taking advice from you about where to put the hands and feet makes a huge difference to the whole experience because trying to do it without help – just leaves you hammered.

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*Early on in the project you talked about a sense of independence in the climbing – but only in the sense of a certain freedom in the type of movement in climbing – in that you were able to feel out what's ahead rather than be guided or having a sense of fear of bumping into something. It's a different form of movement unlike walking - in climbing all your limbs are in contact with the surface. I found that interesting but later this independence was seen and understood more in the context of a partnership.*

Oh yeah – the sense of independence with climbing. Well for me anyway it was an opportunity just to sort of stretch the body's ability a bit. To get a sense of what you're able to do in a way that you wouldn't do normally.

I'm interested in anything that I can do that challenges the other senses – outside of sight. And climbing meets some of those criteria - it doesn't meet all of them - it's a balance between dependence and independence.

*That's what we worked out in terms of communication during the climbing. In a way that was a big turning point in the project for me. At first we agreed not to include any communication – as we thought it was kind of cheating or bypassing an element of the activity. So you were left to search for holds completely on your own.*

That was okay at the start – on the indoor wall. But outdoors it becomes too difficult. There's a morale issue – because if it's too hard you just crack half way up a cliff – and it's a kind of 'sod that' situation – very frustrating for both of us.

*It's kind of about confidence and expectation – indoor you know there's a way up – but outdoors it's more difficult mentally. But for me this shifted the project because up to then I really came with an approach and idea which was quite mechanistic in a way – where I was attaching cameras to you and you were climbing....it was as if I wasn't there....as if you were climbing alone in isolation – more like some kind of clinical research where I was collecting data – interested in you climbing – but just your movements, stretching, searching, seeking out the landscape – with no connection outside of that. So quite a reduced simplistic idea really.*

Yeah that's a good point.

*But of course, I started to realize that 'that wasn't it' – because the whole thing in practice – away from the research's written proposal – had become about negotiating the project with you – and Gerard – and going to different places, conversations, jokes within the activity of climbing – and I realized that this was important to the experience of place and climbing – you can't really separate the parts – it's more than just hands on the rock. And I felt that this needed to be included in the 'research methodologies' as much as the cameras and technical climbing.*

*So early on in the project, as the whole activity became more personalized and human, I realized that this was too narrow an approach which treated you almost like a paint brush. We realized that the landscape was as much about how we all interacted (and Gerard and Voss the guide dog), and what our activity was in these places as much as it was about the 'finger-tip' footage.'*

I suppose no matter what two people are doing together there's an interdependence there for the project to work or the activity to happen – even to sit down and have a drink together. It's perhaps then just highlighted more if you're blind. There's an awareness of a dependence because you can't do anything as a blind person with a sighted person – without having certain things clear – as in “where's the door – is it slightly ajar?” you've got to inform the other person how this works – some basic things – but really it just highlights the interdependence of any two people doing something together.

### **Climbing as a team sport**

Outside the climbing is tougher, the rock isn't designed to get you up it – you need to plan and you need sighted information to plan – and that's about getting up the rock. So you need someone to tell you where the different holds are – and that to me is no different from using a speech system on a computer or any aid that can actually facilitate the activity.

*It happens in most climbing anyway – there's often a lot of communication to help get up or negotiate a section of rock. It's often part of the experience – and a social aspect of the activity.*

*But the “Leap of Faith” parts – as we called them – where holds were beyond reach and you had to get your feet really high and stand up without having or knowing where the next hand holds are. Stepping up and finding holds within the period of your upward momentum – kind of going for it. This demanded a greater level of communication and information because you don't have the time to search for the holds by feeling – so information there was really crucial and key to the activity – well key to getting up or not.*

Well you need that on the rock because one Leap of Faith too many that doesn't work out just saps your morale and strength – and moral is key to climbing

*I actually began to really enjoy that part of it. At Echo Valley where the climbing was very steep – where I know for anyone – you've only so much strength to stay on the this vertical surface – so you've got to be efficient.*

*So I was really aware I had to be very precise in communicating where holds were so that it was possible. So left hand - 6 inches - 2 o'clock and such ways of directing became interesting and fun – kind of a close mapping.*

*And also trying to figure out which holds would be useful and how to use them – what kind of moves and sequences.*

And how quickly you could describe them.

*Yes this all became a game in itself.*

Yeah well, that's how it's got to work. It's got to be a sport for the guide too. The fact is it's a pro prop joint activity – where the movement is enjoyable in itself and you've got to enjoy that. And the sight side of things is no good for this – sight doesn't get you there – sight doesn't provide the enjoyment here. But that's not the full package in climbing – there's an objective too where you need some “beyond reach” information.

So the guide has to be engaged in the activity – it's a partnership. Unless the two people

are actually into it - it won't work – it's a team sport. So blind climbing is definitely a team sport – it has to be enjoyed by both partners.

*Well on the whole aside from free or solo climbing (alone and without ropes) – climbing is about partnerships – between people but also between the climbers and the rock – well and also the elements but mainly between people and the rock. So blind climbing is not massively different in this sense.*

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