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WHEN HEROES BECOME HUMAN



When Heroes Become Human: Sitting Alongside Emilie Drinkwater

By: Pippa Biddle (<https://www.altitude-seven.com/contributors/>)

When I was a young girl, my hero taught me how to build an anchor. Hanging a few pitches up a cliff face in the heart of New York's Adirondack mountains, she showed me how to equalize the load and how to create built in fail-safes, so if one part broke, the entire anchor wouldn't unravel. She taught me to always triple check, and to keep my knots and gear neat – not because it was necessarily any stronger when it looked pretty, but because it'd be easier to spot an error. She told me that to make mistakes is human. It's about catching yours before they become (potentially deadly) problems.



I've made a lot of mistakes since then, both on and off rock, but those conversations with Emilie Drinkwater (<https://www.emiliedrinkwater.com/>) have served as guides along my route. To her, I was a client, but to me, she was everything I wanted to be when I "grew up" – brave, confident, trailblazing, and she didn't take shit.



Over the years, I'd hear about where she was, and how she was doing, but as she was taking the outdoors world by storm, becoming only the 9th American women to achieve IFMGA/AMGA certification, the highest level of training and certification for mountain guides in the world, I felt like my relationship with the woods was stuck in a holding pattern. I've traveled around the United States living out of my van, but my climbing rope has sat in the bottom of my pack for stretches far longer than I'd like

to admit. I love hiking, but I haven't gone out on an overnight in months. I lived in Vermont this past winter and skied a ridiculous number of days, but barely touched any backcountry. Ever since moving to New York City in 2013, I've struggled to find the extra motivation needed to get outdoors. It's made me question my identity as an outdoorswoman, and has sometimes left me feeling like I don't deserve to say I love the mountains and the cliffs, when I've given so little time to them as of late. So I was more than a little surprised when I was asked to sit on a panel for Discover Outdoors' Women in the Outdoors Week (<https://www.discoveroutdoors.com/calendar>) back in May. Between Georgina Miranda (<http://www.georginamiranda.com>), Founder of this very website, and Jess Davis, Founder of Folk Rebellion, (<https://www.folkrebellion.com/>) I already felt a little bit like an imposter. When I found out that Emilie Drinkwater would also be on the panel, I went into full freak-out mode. I was nervous to speak about being a modern outdoorswoman and taking an alternative career trajectory regardless of whom I was sitting next to. Having it be one of my childhood heroes only heightened the imposter syndrome.





When I was young, I was uncomfortable in my skin. My hair made my head hot, so I shaved it off. I worried so much about sweating that I sweat through all my shirts. My solution was to cut the sleeves off of almost everything I owned, sweatshirts included. I was, in other words, a pretty standard preteen girl.

Compared to me, Emilie was superhuman. Belaying her up a pitch, I'd crane my neck up, stretching to see every move she made. Where I felt sloppy, she was deliberate. Where my legs quaked, she moved with confidence. She lived in a yurt off the grid and guided for a living and had everything figured out, which is why I was so surprised when, sitting up on that panel, she admitted to being insecure, to worrying about what people thought when they saw a woman guide, and to selling herself short instead of acknowledging her accomplishments.

Just minutes before, we'd been laughing over plastic cups of inexpensive wine. But now, surrounded by enthusiastic women and flickering tea lights, the woman I'd believed to be infallible was revealed to be perhaps the most vulnerable thing of all: human.

I haven't built an anchor in a while. I climb outdoors so infrequently that I prefer to entrust it to a friend, but I always check their work, counting out the points of protection and checking for fail-safes. Sometimes I neaten up a knot, or even spot a small mistake. The entire time, Emilie's voice is in my head. Which sounds cheesy, I know, but like a favorite 9th grade English teacher, her guidance is imprinted on my mind. "Use your legs," "keep your hips in," "don't do one flashy move where three practical ones will

do,” “breath, always breath,” “check your knots,” and “keep them neat.” But now all of this advice sounds a little different. Instead of being otherworldly, spoken down from somewhere higher up on the cliff, the voice is level with me. The words of a hero(ine) have become human, and, for that, they mean more than ever before.





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