

THE GREAT SUBWAY ADVENTURE

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It is a law of this universe that a person becomes confused when something stable becomes unstable and somehow the number eight is responsible (a little-known fact). At least that is what became apparent from our trip to Zion National Park in southern Utah.

Our trip revolved around a Saturday hike into a narrow slot canyon called “The Subway.” It sounded exciting and adventurous, which was something that was sadly lacking in my gotta-work-hard-to-get-ahead life.

Our seven-member party was comprised of Shira, my friend from LA; myself; my sister Katie, husband Mark, son Josh (heretofore referred to as the “Fox family”) and two others camped at the trailhead (whom we never would meet them it turns out). We were all eager to experience the challenge of a narrow slot canyon that would mean wading or swimming through cold water, rope rappels, scrambling over rocks and whatever other obstacles we would encounter on the trek.

We all arrived Friday evening, set to launch our excursion the following morning.

We had the permits, the maps, the plan, the coordination. Shira and I even found a few used full body wetsuits for—get this— \$15! Well, okay, one had a big hole in the butt seam and mine had no zipper, and they smelled like a bog, but heck, fifteen bucks!

The weather was somewhat threatening. The forecast was for rain, but nothing significant until afternoon. Hopefully enough time to do the Subway ahead of the flash flood danger. And if worse came to worst, Shira and I had a backup plan to do the Subway on Monday.

The following morning the stable became unstable—setting a pattern for the remainder of the three-day trip.

Looking out the window of our motel room in the predawn darkness, we were greeted by the lovely shimmering of lights reflecting off a rain soaked parking lot and a drenched street.

The two campers from our party (not enjoying themselves in the rain) bugged out, leaving Shira, myself and the Foxes.

No Subway today folks. Go to plan B.

Plan B was a hike, which was the original plan for day two anyway. The only difference was that we did not plan the hike to be in a steady rain; but heck, it just makes it more interesting and who wants to do a typical hike in the hot normal weather of southern Utah—everybody has done that! Variety is the spice of life and spices are good in tea which is wet. And if you can understand that maxim, you will understand me—which nobody does.

So, we bought some cheap ponchos with the exception of Josh—who at fifteen years old is immune to cold and rain and just about anything else—and off we went.

It was a beautiful hike. The trail cut through a series of sheer canyon walls four miles up the Weeping Rock trail to Observation Point at the head of the canyon. From this lofty, rain drenched buttress we gazed down the incredible thousand foot cliffs of Zion National Park, the coloring enhanced by the rain, the misty clouds shrouding and revealing the cliff faces.

Two thousand feet below—almost directly below—a snaking river and road directed a series of little white bugs that had been busses when we were down there a few hours earlier. Now we were above it all, in the clouds—literally. To the right, Angels Landing protruded out into the head of the valley. Shira (an experienced climber) and I (a seat of pants climber) plotted a route up the face of the 1500 foot sheer rock formation that can also be accessed from behind by a thrilling trail. I have never done such a climb, but according to my somewhat erroneous philosophy, you must blindly trust anyone who says you can do something even though you've never done it before.

Soaked and satisfied, we finished the hike and had some hot tea at the Zion Lodge where Shira defeated me at a game of chess in about a dozen moves—reinforcing my intention to blindly trust her on the climb. (It logically follows anyone who can beat me at chess obviously knows I can climb Angels Landing, right?)

Meanwhile, we adjusted and rearranged plans to get things stable again.

The Fox family would hike the trail up to Angels Landing tomorrow, while we would climb up the rock face and maybe we'd meet at the top.

A soak in the hot tub that evening, a good dinner, a good plan and we were ready for the next day—or so we thought.

The following day we learned the significance of eight—which is the number of legs on a tarantula—more on that later.

I discovered from a local climbing guide that we were not equipped for Angels Landing and we should climb in a popular climbing area outside of St. George called

Crawdad Canyon. The Foxes were already off on their hike and would be leaving later that day. We jumped in my sports car and sped off, eager to find an area to climb.

The drive was beautiful with the morning sun highlighting red sandstone cliffs descending into deep sculpted canyons contrasting with black volcanic basalt ridges and white limestone domes. St. George is a beautiful setting for an abundant population of modern adobe style communities where the retired come to spend their time playing golf and doing whatever retired people do down here (how would I know).

To our misfortune, we relied on a road map in a climbing book as a stable guide.

As we were to gradually discover throughout the day, climbers don't necessarily like you to know how to get to their exclusive climbing areas and—whether consciously or unconsciously—tend to give you erroneous and/or deceptive directions. At least that's what I think.

The next event was our first MUF. (It's an acronym).

Definition of MUF: You're driving along and come to realize you have **M**issed the turnoff so you make a **U** turn and backtrack to **F**ind the turn you missed. Sample sentences: "Be careful that you don't MUF the exit when you hit Cedar City." (verb). "Damn! That was a ten mile MUF!" (noun)

So, we MUF'ed the Bluff Street turnoff by about three miles—which was no big deal and would in fact be the least of our MUF's—and got back on track. We drove on past Snow Canyon—which was another climbing area that was not recommended because its sandstone might be wet from yesterday's rain. This seemingly innocuous datum would prove to be the egg that hatched the wild goose that we would be chasing for the next three hours.

We continued on eight miles to the town of Veyo and turned off on a short road to Crawdad Canyon (recommended to me earlier by the climbing guide). But when we turned into the parking lot we saw locked gates strenuously proclaiming that the area is closed (?). Why? The guy recommended it that morning. Why wouldn't he know? Is this the right place? This town is "Veyo," that's what the map says. This must be it. Which fact is incorrect? The town, the climbing guide or the map?

Okay, it's early we're still under the false idea that maps are accurate and there are other climbing area's on this map. Let's try another one...

We plot another area. On the map it says just down the road we're supposed to turn off onto Highway 9.

Eight miles later comes our second MUF.

"Did you see a turnoff?"

"No."

We go back eight miles.

"Is that it?"

"It must be. Shouldn't it?"

A small sign says Gunlock Road. Does the map say Gunlock Road?

"No, it says Highway 9."

What is with these peoples' aversion to standard street signs! Where are those big brown or green signs you see all along the freeway that tell you where you are? Even a standard highway sign would be nice!

We drive on. I become infatuated driving along a narrow winding road devoid of traffic. My turbocharged Pontiac Solstice was created for this! We wind our way through small desert valleys cut by washes with an occasional remote, dilapidated farm house. It's a total driving experience and I'm glad we're somewhat lost—at least for now.

We pass by a sign that says we are entering an Indian reservation. My sense of trepidation increases.

“Is that on the map?”

“No.”

“Is this the right road?”

I look at Shira and see we are equally baffled.

Finally—after eight miles becomes maybe sixteen we come to a “T” in the road. Okay, the map seems to imply the climbing area is eight miles east on this road.

“Is this Highway 91?”

“Should be.”

“Any highway signs?”

“No.”

“Well, the map implies eight miles, let's go eight miles and see.”

Twelve miles later another MUF and it is becoming apparent that every time we have eight miles to go, something will go wrong. We find ourselves in an uncertain somewhere that looks like the middle of nowhere. It's all Joshua Trees and barren sand and the only sign of life is an occasional jaywalking tarantula. Shira keeps spotting them on the road, I don't. I'm feeling concerned about her.

A sign ahead! What does it say? Arizona border??? Huh? I don't know where we are, but it shouldn't be Arizona!

MUF number 4.

We do have to take some responsibility for this—I mean Shira and I uniformly get lost in parking garages, so in an area this vast I suppose it's inevitable. Basically, if you put us in an area with no iPhone coverage we'll probably get lost.

Backtracking a few miles, we come to a small, incredibly insignificant road off to the side with tiny sign. That must be it, the climbing area! But the map indicates we have four miles of dirt road ahead. I'm not driving that in a sports car; no way.

An SUV suddenly turns off onto the road.

Maybe they're climbers! Where'd they come from?

"Flag 'em down, Shira, they can give us a ride!" No, that's not a good idea. I'm not leaving the car parked alongside a remote highway full of tarantulas, imagined or not. And I've seen some real shady looking cars driving down this road. They may have knives and I have a rag top convertible.

"Let's find another place on the map; how far?"

"Eight miles." (Of course.)

Eight miles later we come to a rough, un-named dirt road disappearing over a hill into the desert. I don't like the looks of that either.

Our viewpoint shifts and wavers—having nothing to anchor to. This could be an entirely different area than what we think we are following on a map route in another area. (Does that sentence make sense? Of course not. Neither did the map.)

Okay, that's it. It's time to find a known location. How about Snow Canyon? We know we can find that. This wild goose chase/MUF-fest was all based on one datum: Sandstone is not good to climb on after a rainstorm and Snow Canyon is sandstone.

Throw that datum out.

We drive back to essentially where we started. We get directions from the locals and after only a few more MUF's, find a rock to climb! Hurray!

We gear up and I lead up a 5.9 route and realized suddenly that the confusion of the day had not entirely left my mind, and by adding another climbing variable, my mind essentially goes "blue screen" (or "blank" to those not familiar with computers). I stare at the rope and can't for the life of me figure out how to tie a knot I have tied 100 times before as I dangle from a single anchor 75 feet above the ground, my legs shaking uncontrollably under the stress.

Some patience from Shira down below (whose mind is apparently working fine) and I finally get it together and descend back down.

And the curse is broken!

We spend a wonderful afternoon climbing.

Moral of the story: No matter how long it takes you to get there, if you do actually arrive, all the confusion and upset involved in getting there dissolves into a silly story (such as this)—*so don't give up*. Otherwise it's a bad memory and we all have enough of those.

Ultimately the day was a roaring success. We overcame eight MUFs, 2 False Datums, 12 jaywalking Tarantulas, 125 miles of unknown highway and one case of temporary amnesia.

Results: 10 fun climbs, 2 happy climbers and a fun driving experience; and yes, they really were tarantulas. I finally spotted some too. Apparently, they are migrating through the area.

Monday morning we were up early for the final adventure—the Subway!

The only problem was we had to find the trailhead between here and there and there were three factors that just might throw the whole thing into a spin: 1) we had a map which I have grown very suspicious of; 2) we'd never done this before; 3) the trailheads were eight miles apart and every time the number eight shows up, something goes wrong.

We do find the exit trailhead (where we would be coming out) and park Shira's car there. We head for the starting point eight miles ahead to park my car.

You guessed it. We go twelve miles and realize we missed the trailhead—first MUF of the day. In this particular case fate and the number eight had placed the glaring morning sun in line with the turnoff and we missed it. But then it was only four miles back—so with no 'eight' involved, we found the trailhead easily.

The trek though the subway was a success. After only one slight MUF on the two-mile walk down into the canyon, we plunge down into the Subway where we thanked the gods for our smelly, leaky wetsuits as we swam through deep, narrow passages filled, at times, over our heads with cold water. We descended waterfalls with ropes and waded through the waters, gawking at the smoothly carved walls around us and colorful sandstone cliffs rising 1000 feet straight above our heads. We swam through a dozen pools—some only as wide as our shoulders—rappelled down three waterfalls, scrambled over rocks and waded through clear pools surrounded by what I

can only describe as walls that look like a giant snake burrowed through them and shed his skin on the way.

Eventually we arrived at the final rappel, shed our stinky wetsuits and continued down the canyon another four relatively easy miles until the final strenuous climb out of the canyon.

After seven hours of trekking; exhausted but satisfied from three days of adventure, we exited the canyon to Shira's car and—just because it was inevitable—we pulled off one more MUF while driving back to my car parked at the trailhead.

All in all, another useful life skill acquired: The ability to navigate a narrow slot canyon.

And so we returned to our homes, me to Salt Lake City, Shira to Los Angeles and back to the tedious task of day to day living.

But somehow this time something has changed. Instead of my previous habit of making big plans and later *thinking* about how it couldn't or shouldn't be done; this time we made big plans and squinted and plunged in (not a thinking activity). Conclusion: The act of thinking is bunk.

It took a little adventure to disconnect me from day to day life. It has been years since I have taken such an adventure—being too concerned with “getting ahead” which, after years of hard won experience proves to be a complete oxymoron. It seems the only thing “experience” is good for is the Botox vendors you hire to take the bags from beneath your eyes and the wrinkles out of your forehead.

As a result, further plans have been proposed and soon these plans will materialize into distinct possibilities and these possibilities may override the “realities” (the product of too much thinking) and one day soon, we just might find ourselves climbing a rock or descending a slope, or diving or flying somewhere in the world where only adventure seekers go and thinkers merely think about.

We just need to avoid that number eight.

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