

# **Catherine Freer: An Inspiration and Friend**

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### **Founder of Catherine Freer Wilderness Therapy Programs**

I met Catherine sitting on a fence at Baker City Ranch Rodeo. We were trying to decide whether to take up the rancher's offer to ride one of his huge Hereford bulls. She was 22, just getting started as a climbing guide; I was a newly promoted head river guide for the same outfit, which was running a two-week camp for patients from the Oregon State Mental Hospital. We had a good time discussing the place of women in the outdoor adventure world while putting off deciding about a ride on those bulls. Our talk led to a 15-year friendship.

Between climbing guide jobs, she ran baggage barge on the river trips I led for several years; and, when I started my own whitewater outfit in 1976, she became my business partner. In those early years, she worked and lived in Seattle. She was also intensely involved in psychotherapy in those days. When her therapist died from a mistake of inattention with kerosene stove, she grieved that she had not been there to keep him alive with her ability to totally attend to issues of physical environment, as he had saved her by giving her the keys to her inner world. She continued on her own the work she had begun with him through all the years I knew her.

Not long after that, freed of the tether that had held her loosely to the Seattle area, Catherine decided to give up the plans and dreams of ordinary life to take the leap into full-time climbing. She loved life, and children, and being a counselor, and deciding to climb full-time was painful for her because she fully realized that she was putting all of those at risk. But climbing and living outdoors had become a passion for her, and to choose the ordinary things of life would have been to give up her soul. Following its demands became her true life. She became incredibly tough and increasingly well known, but she never was

the kind of climber who is all external macho; she was always true to her own soul, and equally sensitive to the inner processes of others.

As she became one of the elite climbers in the world - one of the best alpinists in the United States, and the best female alpinist and big-wall rock climber - she was increasingly in demand for Himalayan expeditions as a woman who could fully carry her own weight. The Himalayas are climbed in the summer, and Catherine could no longer work with me on the rivers.

It was at that point that she and I began to plan a wilderness treatment program for adolescents that would combine her outdoor skills with my therapy skills. Catherine would have been the ideal wilderness treatment guide: a rock of strength, a model of the tough survivor of a hard life, warm and tender and accessible, incredibly physically competent and also emotionally aware and mature. She would have saved some kids by sheer force of personality, becoming a central beacon in their lives. She'd be nearly 50 today, doing less climbing, making other children a part of her life; and she'd be one of those people who have reached another level of being human, who emit a special kind of light that illuminates dark corners and brightens the world for those who encounter them.

But she isn't. Catherine Freer died, with her climbing partner, trying to climb the kind of almost-impossible ridge that world-class climbers try. A snow cornice they were apparently camped on collapsed and they fell 5,000 feet, leaving their tent dangling from the edge of the knife ridge.

I last saw Catherine when she stopped by Oregon on her way from China and a near miss at being the first woman to reach the

top of K-2. I'm not a climber, and our family, and the work I was doing, were a kind of brief refuge for Catherine. She brought Chinese fairy tale books for my daughters, and told them stories about riding camels to K-2. We talked about river guiding the next summer (she signed on for several trips, tentatively), and where and how to run the wilderness program, and about having kids, and Hummingbird Ridge, and maybe dying. Then she was gone.

She remains a beacon in my life, and through this program, in many others.