

## **We Would Not Be Broken**

Jess Lewis

I paused for a moment and looked north, back up the trail and saw 3,000 miles of the west stretch out behind me wrapped like a present in six beautiful months of memories. My legs willed me onward into the final miles to Mexico but something was calling to me to stop, to wait, to pause, to think. But what exactly? I looked ahead and watched as my family glided towards the border on legs tanned by the wild sun, and then it struck me, we are not who we once were. The trail had changed us, the mountains had spoken to our very souls and we had been born again into the wilderness.

I found the West, as my family walked from Canada to Mexico along the Continental Divide Trail. Or maybe more importantly the west had found me. I was only 14 years old and even then I knew that something inside me was changing, forever. I discovered a person within that I had only caught glimpses of before and had never fully met. But on the trail that wound through rocky crags and pinnacles that jutted skyward along the spine of our country, I began to know her more fully and to embrace all the strength and grace she endowed me with. I was no longer just an overweight teenager I was a young woman of the mountains.

Despite their beauty and power, the mountains are not always gentle teachers. It was September and winter had come early and with it a fury I had never known. The snow beat down with an unrelenting ferocity and the wind whipped our backs as we climbed, climbed ever skyward, up to the Great Divide. It almost broke us. Tensions ran high and electricity crackled from one person to the next, a rubbing that never quite let up and which wore on us almost as much as the storm. Even our dog looked put out. I wish I could say it was one of those hallelujah moments when the sun poked through the clouds sending down an angel ray and we laughed at our own pride and pointless anger, but it didn't happen that way. Instead we climbed, and we sweated, and we froze and we walked with our anger until it wore us out and then we slogged through the storm some more until finally it beat us into stillness. And in that stillness, in that *vast, calm measureless mountain day* (as John Muir once wrote), we found ourselves. The wind carried away the selfish ego and deposited it somewhere far beyond the mountains and filled that void with a knowing and a love that reaches beyond the friction of discomfort. We would not be broken.

I came to learn through one footfall after the other, and each passing day, that the west—the unveiling of oneself through time and space, the adventure in the unknown—shapes identity, and that it was shaping me with every passing mile marker. But as I watched my family walk away from me down the trail towards Mexico I realized that identity, no matter how beautiful is incomplete without anyone to share it with. Community completes the cycle of identity and fulfills the need to give of oneself. My community was walking away from me and I scurried to catch up. I fell easily into the rhythm of their boot tread and walked, head held high through the sand and sun of the desert southwest knowing that this is where I belong.