



## **Living the Symbolic Life** ***Metaphors from Yosemite***

*by Elizabeth J. Agnew, MS*

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One consistent way to improve your leadership is to find symbolic meaning in areas of your life where you might not be looking. Take something that's happening to you, make an abstract summary of it, and see where else the metaphor applies in your life.

Five of my good friends and I went on a backpacking trip to Yosemite National Park over the July fourth holiday. There were many good lessons buried in the three days we spent roughing it in the wilderness. Here are three powerful metaphors I took from the trip that I think you will find helpful, too.

**1. When you can no longer see the path ahead, stop, take a load off, and look around in a new way.**

On day 1 of our hike, the snow cover was still so deep in some areas that we'd be walking along and then the person in the front would realize they lost track of where the trail went. Conversations would pause and we'd all stop and look around. Sometimes we even had to set our packs down and send one or two people off to scout out the trail. We were looking for clues – large cut logs were a very good sign because it means that the park service had cut a trail through a fallen tree.

Sometimes when you're already in motion, going along not really paying attention to where you're headed, you realize you've lost your way. Release yourself of the weight you're carrying, take your time, and the path will become clear again.

**2. If you push through at the end, you might just end up farther than you thought you would.**

On day two, we hiked a large elevation change and several miles. It was late and everyone was ready to be at camp, but we still had two miles to go. The pace was fast so that we could make it to camp by dark. People were silent, managing their own fatigue and pain levels. When we got to our camp, we realize we'd estimated incorrectly where it was, and had hiked a mile more than we had planned!

The element of focus that comes at the end of a project, just when you want to quit, is so essential to a strong finish. Your "second wind" at this point in your progress can give you more momentum than you realize. Power through your finishes!

**3. There are greater forces at work beyond our control.**

On the drive home, we were headed west on a country highway, almost at the interstate. We slowed down because we saw a car slam on its breaks in the eastbound lane. Two cars behind it, a car was trying to avoid the car that stopped, and pulled out into oncoming traffic – right in front of us. We swerved to avoid it, but the driver was in reaction mode and had turned left into us. We collided hard. Luckily everyone was ok and walked away, but the experience shook us up, especially when we thought about how there was nothing we could have done to avoid it.

I was surprised at the sense of calm surrender I felt when I saw we were about to hit the other car. If, like me, you often feel the most afraid when you feel out of control, take note. This acute instance of knowing I was out of control led to a divine feeling of surrender and calm. The trick now, is for us to learn to apply that same feeling to other areas of our life and work where we are also out of control.

The symbolic life is one where we take meaning in moments that we would otherwise simply log in the memory bank. Leverage all of your experiences so that your future ones may be even richer.

*Liz works with individuals and organizations in technical fields needing tailored leadership development that speaks their language. Liz has logged hundreds of hours coaching individuals from companies such as Jet Propulsion Laboratories, Google, HP, SETI, Lockheed Martin, VNUS and Sun Microsystems. Her background includes experience in adult education, team facilitation, and public speaking. She offers complimentary coaching consultations – call or email today to schedule yours.*