

# El Capitan: 'Cajole It, Court It'

Recalling the High of Diving Off the Great Monolith

## The High of Diving Off El Capitan

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The risks he takes now are more sophisticated, and so is Orłowski, to whom skydiving is more satisfying, more skillful, and certainly less chancy than the runway antics that got him arrested on at least one occasion.

"I tried snow skiing and surfing and a dozen other things, and this was the one thing that kept my attention," is the way Orłowski — now co-owner of a parachute center in Lake Elsinore and four-time national jump champion — puts it.

Dr. Dean Shapiro puts it another way.

The acting director of the psychotherapy clinic's outpatient program at UC Irvine Medical Center has spent time studying these things — "what causes people to master a certain way of life" — even so thrill-oriented a way as Orłowski's.

Some experts say it is insecurity; others, like Maslow, say it is "self-actualization," the making and defining of oneself as a distinct being. Even the root of existence, the Latin word "existo," means "to stand forth."

Orłowski and the other 11 people who took the plunge off of El Capitan last month may have much in common with Shapiro's six-year-old daughter, who only recently took the plunge off a high-dive board. El Capitan and the high dive may look worlds different, but to the little girl and the grownups who leaped, their own personal skills and scales made them equal challenges.

"Whether you're jumping off a mountain or into a relationship, there's the issue of whether to take the step or not to take it — every day," he said. "In one way, the challenge of everyday living may be parallel to jumping off a cliff."

But one man's fear is another man's exhilaration, and they all come from the same basic arousal that creates love, hate and terror.

"It's the same physiological response — it depends on how you interpret it," said Shapiro. "Why do some interpret it as fear, and others as the height of a challenge?"

The answer to that is found in an individual's upbringing and conditioning. It could be the Western achievement ethic, it could be the examples one sees as a child, or it could be a sense of "exploratory behavior that may be built into our makeup — a need to create, to take risks — choosing to be alive," said Shapiro, even at the expense of risking that aliveness.

Up on El Capitan, Orłowski was thinking the jump would be easy, compared to the ascent.