



Gliding Friendship: A story for those who've tried to teach a friend

by Anna Bjorklund

The morning air was crisp and the camp coffee strong. "I think I'd like to be a mountaineer," my friend Naomi told me on the final morning of a backpacking trip in the Bridgers. "Could you teach me a few things?"

This was two years ago, in the early summer. Naomi had quickly become taken with the Bridgers. Old stories of mountain men and modern tales of Ridge Runners captured her imagination and got her dreaming some big dreams.

"I can only take you so far," I told her. I looked at a snowfield near our camp and continued, "We could start with getting you comfortable on skis next winter." All summer, she looked forward to the return of the snow. I second-guessed my offer to help her; worried I'd gotten her hopes up.

Naomi should not even be alive. One day, when she was ten, she told her mother she had a bad headache. When she grew intensely nauseous, Mom knew something was amiss. An initial trip to the rural hospital, resulted in an airlift to St. Patrick Hospital of Missoula where Naomi underwent surgery to repair a ruptured blood vessel that had caused bleeding into her brain. At the end of the day, Naomi was in grave condition, but somehow still alive.

Unbelievably, in three months she was walking again. But that near-fatal day left her with a tremor in the right side of her body. Her arm shakes anytime she carries a load with it or attempts fine-motor movement. Her leg was weakened, and she walks with a somewhat windswept stride.

Now, as a young adult, she has an incredible awareness of her limits and an equally strong desire to test and stretch those limits. Many times, I have offered to help her and heard her reply with confidence, "No, I can do that." She is also comfortable saying, "I don't think I can do this; I need help." Naomi knows herself. In the end, that is what assures me that I've made the right choice. Somehow, I will teach her how to ski.

Our first skiing lessons start with the delightful basics of clipping in and out, walking in circles without poles—all the fun little drills that accustom a beginner to the size and weight of cross-country skis. She seems comfortable with the skis, so I take her out for some flat trail work. She follows in my track and is more steady than many adult beginners I've worked with, even picking up the pace and getting a good glide in now and then. The weeks pass by. She practices. We set a date for our first real ski outing, an up-and-back on the Sourdough Creek trail.

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“How’s it going?” I ask. She sighs in response. I need to think of something. I remember watching the not-so-well-known sport of skijoring back in Minnesota. It involves using a climbing harness to tether a cross-country skier to a dog. What if I could be the dog? I happen to have some nylon webbing and a spool of 5-mil cord in my pack. “Naomi, I’ve got an idea,” I venture. “But it might look a little funny.” I share the details. She laughs and says, “Let’s try it.”

We fashion a tethering system between the waist strap on her daypack and mine. Two miles later, we’re all smiles. On the whole she’s staying upright and getting to pick up the pace. Yet, I’m not feeling her weight all that much. How it works, we’re not sure.

I speculate about some physiospiritual connection, about her sensing my movement and rhythm through the tether, internalizing it somehow. Naomi is far more pragmatic. "I think it just makes me more confident," she says, "knowing that someone is there to help me on the steeper sections."

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