

The Spaces Between

Contributed by James Foulks

Whether it's about the snow, the mountains, or the friendships, every day in the backcountry has its own story. In James Foulks's essay, he relates skiing the trees to challenges in life. His essay won the Backcountry Essay Contest and was published in last November's issue. Submit yours for a chance to be published, today.

Tweet

When we ski the trees, the trick is to focus on the spaces between; not the trees themselves. The lines we choose are defined by our fears and our confidences, and when these are out of balance, when our fears outnumber our confidences, we lose the ability to find the spaces between the trees. We lose our rhythm. This goes for life, too.

I'm generally a private person, withholding the difficult things, the trees in my life, from my friends and family. I prefer that folks see the open spaces of my life instead. There are, however, some very large trees that require my attention.

My wife has anorexia. She's struggled with this all her life, but recently--to keep the allegory rolling--she smacked into the trees. She's struggling to find the spaces between. And as her partner, I've struggled and failed to keep her moving through the forest. At times, I've guided her into trees too dense for her to navigate. What appears to me as an open glade of old growth aspen, to her is a tangled mess of icy dead-fall. But I must keep my partner from becoming lost completely. I'm responsible for her safety, and she for mine. I can point out the spaces, but I can't expect her to ski them as I would.

At the same time, I'm struggling to find the way through my own tangle of trees. I recently lost my job of 13 years, and for the past few months have lost my rhythm. Rhythm, when skiing the trees, is as important as finding the spaces between. The two are interlinked; one cannot exist without the other. At speed, it's easy to decide which way to go, which space to pass by and which to pass through. With each turn is another decision, in a rhythm that repeats itself over and over again; turn after turn, flowing from space to space. I struggle mightily to find good lines these days. Skiing much too slow to find any rhythm, I'm forced to stop short--to hunt for a new space in the woods that only seem to grow more dense.

Skiing the trees, there are no guarantees, no timelines, no certainties; only expectations. It's not certain, I only expect my partner and I will find our rhythm again, and we'll flow from space to space as easily as we once did. Momentum is everything. We'll gain momentum, and though it doesn't always lead to the spaces between, stopping leaves us no choice but to stare at trees.

With The Spaces Between, James Foulks won the November Essay Contest, and was published in the November, 2010 issue of Backcountry Magazine.

Share your story in Backcountry's Essay Contest for a chance to be published. All submissions are welcome and eligible for publication. Keep it to 600 words and send it to [drew \[at\] holpublications \[dot\] com](mailto:drew@holpublications.com), subject titled, "Essay."

Tweet