

# TUMBLING INTO MINDFULNESS

## A NOVICE AT AGE 50

Words Lee Rosen

**IN THE WINTER** of my 50<sup>th</sup> year, I had the clever idea that I'd learn to snowboard. My 10 year old, Eli, was in his second year of riding and taking to it with tenacity. As I monitored his progress, the usual paternal pride grew into genuine admiration. Seeing him navigate the process of falling, getting up, falling and then finally staying up, I realized I was witnessing the alleged "growth mindset" in action.

In Carol Dweck's book, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, the eminent social psychologist makes the claim that successful, fulfilled people's growth and skill come from effort and practice rather than innate talent. The growth mindset entails flinging oneself at difficult, uncomfortable endeavors because that's where we attain personal and neurological expansion. This was manifest in my kid, who would return home from the hill battered but buoyant. By the end of that first winter, Eli could make it down the greens and had embraced the snowboarder identity—the lingo, the swagger, the works. "Was out shredding today," read his Saturday evening text to friends.

We went to Cochran's Ski Area, a local Vermont hill owned by the Cochran family of Olympic skiing fame and equipped with two rope tows and a T-bar where I followed my son around on skis. I've skied since I was young, and while watching Eli was vicarious fun, the skiing itself wasn't particularly exhilarating. "I'll learn to snowboard," I thought. "How hard could it be?" Pride, evidently, comes before the fall.

Eli soon graduated to riding at Bolton Valley, another cozy Vermont mountain, this one with chairlifts. I rented some gear, full of optimism. The boots were shockingly comfortable. Why would anybody ski? But oh, that first morning snowboarding, my neck still aches when I think about it. Grudgingly detaching myself from the lift, it was never a question of whether I'd fall but rather how many innocents I'd take down with me. There wasn't much cover that winter, the trail was packed thin with a rock-hard layer of ice underneath. I was back on skis after two runs. Total defeat.

Yet I couldn't shake the desire to snowboard. I felt like snowboarders were my people, that I was just a sort of problematic member of the tribe. I'm not particularly hip or edgy. By day, I'm a Ph.D. in clinical psychology. At the University of Vermont, I teach doctoral students how to treat people with anxiety and medical students how to reflect and communicate. As occupations go, it's a bit nerdy. I've never been a cool kid. But I felt like a snowboarder.

Fast-forward to the following winter, January 2016, my month of destiny. My son and I returned to Cochran's. Eli made his way to the T-bar while I committed to the Mighty Mite rope tow, where toddlers around here gain their snow legs. Relieved from the chairlift dismount, I was nonetheless fully capable of falling on the rope tow. Three-year-olds zipped by, staring at me with curiosity.

Jeremy Jones follows his daughter Mia at Champéry, Switzerland—no matter how experienced, we can always learn something from chasing the younger generation around the mountain.  
Photo: Sean Kerrick Sullivan



In the academic world where I work, competence is the coin of the realm. By age 50, you're supposed to have your act together. Though at Cochran's I was, without exception, the most incompetent person in the entire place. Sprawled out on the snow, I peeked around to see if anyone had witnessed my latest wreck. I felt ridiculous. But what could I do? I wasn't leaving until I learned how to do this. Gradually, I gave myself over to humility. This is what it means to be a beginner, to be a learner. In my teaching and clinical practice, I often ask people to embrace being uncomfortable. My turn. I let go of my fragile ego and notions of self-worth. Liberation through humility.

Gradually, I got the feeling for sliding on my toe-edge. Feeling sheepishly triumphant, I managed to get down the hill without falling constantly. Eli cruised by at one point, "Dad, you're going backward!" he yelled. I was so focused on staying upright I couldn't respond. Backward, forward, I could barely tell. All I knew was that I was upright and moving.

Awkwardly maneuvering down the Mighty Mite, I became fully engaged in the present moment—complete absorption. I could think of nothing but where my body was in relation to the slope. If my attention drifted from present-moment awareness, I fell. If I maintained even-flowing focus, I could stay on my feet. I spend a lot of time teaching people how to be mindful, to cultivate awareness of current experience with acceptance, and there it was. Snowboarding demanded it of me. My near-constant state of fretting came to a complete halt as I surrendered to the requirements of the ride.

I left Cochran's exhausted, pummeled and jubilant—refreshed in a way I haven't felt in a long time. I couldn't wait to go back. In the meantime, I talked to my students with a renewed passion regarding a beginner's mind, for atop the Mighty Mite I discovered the joys of being a novice at age 50. ▲