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Up in the Air

Life—and everything else, for that matter—looks a little different when you're climbing a tree.



By [Matthew Halverson](#)

Photo: Chad Coleman

HANG ON A SECOND: How have I never noticed how dimpled the hood of my car is? I knew it was beat up—I was, after all, the one who white-knuckled the steering wheel through that partly-cloudy-with-a-chance-of-brimstone hailstorm in Kansas five years ago—but I've never had a view like this. From my current vantage point, dangling 30 feet above the ground in a craggy, moss-covered black walnut tree in Bitter Lake, the damage is so unmistakably severe that I'm suddenly embarrassed to lay claim to the car I once spent my Friday nights waxing. But somehow I don't think this is what my guide—the fearless, limb-walking Zen master of branch-based philosophizing Viola Brumbaugh—had in mind when she said that scaling a tree can change the way you see things.

I should clarify, though, that we're not climbing this tree the way you scrambled up the maple in your backyard as a kid. We're wearing helmets, we're using ropes and harnesses, and we're rarely touching the tree with our hands or feet. Aided by nothing more than a couple knots that are more secure than they look, we're hoisting ourselves up a line alongside the trunk the way you'd lower yourself down into a cave. Minimizing contact with the trunk and branches has a lot to do with protecting the tree's bark—it is, after all, alive—but the hands-off ascension has another purpose. As far as Brumbaugh and recreational climbers like her are concerned, the tree isn't an obstacle to be

conquered; it's a leafy sanctuary from which to commune with nature. Reaching the top isn't the goal; it's a means to experience the serenity of the forest in rarefied air. "Some promoters would like you to think this is an extreme sport, but when you're in a tree, the only thing extreme is the beauty," she says. "It's a practice of connecting, like vertical hiking." Now, lest Brumbaugh lull you into believing that tree climbing is completely devoid of adrenaline -junkies, there are those "yahoos"—her word—who climb narrow fir trees on windy days to surf the violently swaying branches.

Rope-based tree climbing isn't new. Borrowing some of the systems developed by arborists—and, ironically, loggers whose job it is to cut trees down—Oregon's New Tribe has been leading vertical hikes since 1984. And like your average leisurely hike, climbing a tree is light on physical exertion; if you can stand up and sit down, you're golden. I learned the doubled-rope technique, which, despite what its name might suggest, uses just one rope, draped over a high, steady limb. (Getting that line into the tree is the tricky part; when weighting one end and trying to toss it over a branch fails, Brumbaugh uses a supercool mini crossbow to do the job.) One half of the line, also known as the "down rope," hangs to the ground; this is what you'll climb. The other end is secured first to your saddle harness (imagine a weight-lifting belt attached to stiff, nylon chaps that cover the back of your thighs instead of the front) and then back to the down rope to create a loop, using a friction knot that can slide up but will also hold your weight.



Photo: Chad Coleman

Steep thoughts Quiet reflection and deep introspection are key to enjoying the climb.

That knot, called a Blake's Hitch, is the key. Thanks to its one-way movement, you can alternate between sitting back into your harness—this is where the reverse chaps come into play—and sliding the knot up as you stand to advance on the rope and tighten the loop. (Instead of the evenly spaced knots that you used to steady yourself on the rope in gym class, here you're using

two foot loops attached to the main line.) Do that again and again, and you're climbing—even if you do look like a human inchworm.

It looks considerably less larval when Brumbaugh does it; she's got this aerialist-meets-simian thing going on. But then she's been swinging in the treetops almost her entire life. She grew up on the Oregon coast, spending more time in the branches than she did on the ground, and after 10 soul-sucking years behind a desk at a law firm, she begged a recreational tree-climbing friend to take her up into the big-leaf maple in her front yard. "I got up there and felt a very perceptible shift in my life," she says. "It was like this gigantic breath of 'yes.' And it wasn't just me saying it; the tree was saying it, too. It was like hugging my mother for the first time in 10 years."

As much as I'd like to say I had my own Mother Gaia bonding moment there in Bitter Lake, I didn't. Truth be told, I spent more time desperately trying to conquer my fear of falling than appreciating the forest for the trees. But for a few minutes, at least, I leaned back, hung out, and saw the world—and my car—from a new point of view.

