

Words by Tod Schimelpfenig on receiving the Charles (Reb) Gregg Award
Wilderness Risk Managers Conference
Colorado Springs, CO
October 16, 2010

Thank you

My friends and colleagues, standing before so many deserving of this recognition, I am deeply humbled by this honor.

There are many people I would like to thank, a host of folks I respect and appreciate. Indeed, this profession has been my life because of the people, wilderness, and the impact of our work.

Let's remember the late Jim Ratz for his support for this gathering. I also want to thank Molly Hampton, perhaps a name from the past for many of you, for her support and drive in the early years of this conference.

Reb – for his questions and insights. Jed – for being there when I called him in 1989.

And my many NOLS colleagues, especially Drew Leemon – who provides such able leadership for Risk Management at NOLS, and Shana Tarter, who won't let us be less than excellent.

I'd like to thank all the WRMC attendees over the years. We first gathered in 1994 to open communication and share wisdom within this industry, to better serve our participants, clients, patients, students. It's heartening to see us continuing to carry this synergy forward.

Receiving this award has caused me to ponder what I believe about risk management.

I was young once, and adventure, challenge and epics were appealing. I admired the risk takers, relished in their tales and wanted to be like them. But after the deaths of two close friends, I could no longer overlook that these epics are often born of human attitudes and error, not chance.

Then I became a parent and balancing risks and benefits for my children took on a new meaning.

I don't believe in taking risks to simply take risks. There has to be a higher purpose, something to better our community, humanity or our young people. I'd rather read about Three Cups of Tea than watch another rock climbing video. I'm more impressed by Luanne Freer's work on the medical clinic at Everest base camp than I am by those who

climb Everest. If I'm justifying risk for education, the learning must have substance and be more than mere entertainment.

Unreasonable risks, recklessness, are selfish and foolish acts. I don't laugh at those silly YouTube videos. I don't have compassion when the risk takers come to misfortune. Ability has to be matched with common sense, boldness with wise consideration of consequences.

I believe the experience of wilderness is important to the character of our young people, and the character of our country. It's important to the environment. Woe to us if we stay at home, cling to an illusion of safety, and only experience the world through a video screen.

Yet, as careful and thoughtful as we can be, wilderness is wild and wild places are not safe. Every time I hear of a tragedy in our vital work, my heart breaks.

I've been amused by the similarities between being a parent and a field instructor. I've been known to remark that we really should not hire staff until they have raised children through adolescence. As a parent I want my children to grow up with an adventurous soul, with experience and good sense. I'd rather buy them experience than buy them a toy. I want to foster their sense of responsibility and autonomy by allowing them to make decisions, first with limits, then guidance, and finally with autonomy. As an outdoor leader, I have similar goals for my students.

Thirty seven years ago I trained to become a NOLS instructor because of the appeal of wilderness, the freedom it gave, the responsibility and competence it demanded. Paul Petzoldt gave me 17 NOLS students, and let me loose in the Wind Rivers for 30 days. I was 19 and Paul was perhaps not exercising his best judgment, but it was empowering, and a powerful act of trust.

Over the years we've worked hard at systems and trainings and resources to help us manage risk in our wilderness ventures. This is good.

Yet our locus of control remains narrow. We rely on the leader at the sharp end of the rope, with their hand on the tiller, in the moment, with the participant and the situation in front of them. This is also good. Leaders making decisions in the field, from experience, with competence and wise judgment - these are precious - both in wilderness and in life. This is the grail, our most powerful risk management tool. Let's keep our eyes on this prize.

Thank you.