WILDERNESS ESSAY

Fear of Missing Out – A Tribute to Zach Orman

Earlier this year, the students at the University of Arizona College of Medicine suffered a major loss. Zach Orman, a third year student, became the victim of a fatal paragliding accident outside of Sonoita, Arizona, when a sudden gust of wind slammed him to the ground.

Zach was at the top of his medical class. He was awarded both academic and humanities honors, which he received with the utmost grace and humility. As mentioned several times at his memorial gathering, Zach was the type of person with whom we all want to practice medicine.

Wilderness medicine also suffered a loss in the passing of Zach. Zach was the past president of the University of Arizona Wilderness Medicine Club, an avid rock climber, mountain biker, skier, and river runner. He previously worked on ski patrol in California and served on the search and rescue crew at Yosemite National Park. His first summer of medical school was spent caring for patients at the Grand Canyon Village clinic. He had a deep passion for the outdoors and for the medical care specific to outdoor sports. There is no doubt that further leadership in wilderness medicine would have been in Zach's future.

I had a difficult time processing Zach's death. He and I were friends, mountain bike partners, and co-leaders of the Wilderness Medicine Club. Having similar interests and career goals, we regularly discussed navigating medical school and preparing for future practice. Our last conversation regarded how time-consuming third year was and how we needed to take a mountain bike break soon. And just like that, a few days later, he was gone. I (and so many others) had lost someone very special.

There was more to my processing than purely personal loss, however. Zach was not the first person I knew to die on a wilderness adventure. An avalanche in Montana took one friend skiing in the backcountry and another drowned in Colorado attempting to drop a waterfall in his kayak. All three were well experienced at their respective sport and aware of the risks, but still, something went wrong. They paid the ultimate price in pursuit of the wilderness experience.

In light of these events, I began wondering how far is "too far"? The wilderness offers so much joy and excitement, but can also be very unforgiving. It might be wise to step back a bit, paddle the flat water, ski

inbounds. Maybe bouldering in a rock gym would be a more responsible choice than taking on a multi-pitch sport climb. People don't die bouldering in rock gyms. Obviously if these young men had known their fate, they would have stayed home, or at least taken a different route. But this one time, they each happened to take it too far.

At his memorial service, Zach's father shared his son's life motto. Zach had severe FOMO: *Fear of Missing Out*. It drove him to medicine, to outdoor sports, to traveling, and to paragliding. It was not an obligatory fear, but an enthusiasm that brought richness to his life. It also, however, led him to the edge at times. This motto helped me realize why wilderness medicine was so important to him. FOMO can be dangerous and wilderness medicine provides a source of protection. It is a safety net for those of us who do end up taking it too far. I believe that Zach's solution was not so much to step back, as to build a buffer against the risk.

I have lost friends to adventure sports, but I have also had friends rescued by wilderness medicine trained personnel. I can think of friends brought down the mountain by ski patrol and others rescued by SAR. In the same avalanche that claimed the life of one friend in Montana, another severely injured friend was rescued. Fellow skiers cared for him until he could be flown out

Zach patrolled at Bear Valley, Northstar, and Sugarbowl.

Zach was an avid climber and enjoyed teaching climbing skills.

the next day. He lost his leg, but strong wilderness medicine skills likely saved his life. Zach had similar stories of avalanche and steep angle rescues. Wilderness medicine can be a powerful tool in protecting those who push the limits.

I wish so badly that Zach's accident could have ended differently. I looked forward to working with him and soaking in his enthusiasm for outdoor adventure. Though his tenure was brief, I believe he left a legacy for the rest of us who are medically trained and have a habit of taking it too far. The lesson of his legacy: strong wilderness medicine, through strong systems and strong training, can protect against injury and death. We must remember, however, that safety is not guaranteed. Knowledge and

competency in wilderness medicine must also include judgment of when to turn around and when to ask for help. Even though the exact point of "too far" is impossible to know, Zach's death should remind us that it does, in fact, exist. We should fear wilderness injury enough to adequately assess the risk and establish a strong safety net. Once this is taken care of, a healthy *fear of missing out* should help us to step fully into the richness of wilderness adventure.

Photographs compliments of Becca Dennis.

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