

## Stepping Up

By Robin Kemper

My climb to the University's main campus quadrangle, on which the academic hall is situated, elicits dread, a craven and hollow wedge between my scapulae. My hesitation is unrelated to my academic concerns but premised upon my body's limitations made manifest.

My left calf-length black boot clomps onto the first of the beige stone steps that form the staircase that reaches the quad. My heel presses lightly into the shoe's supportive lining and rebounds barely perceptibly upward. "Heel strike," I imagine my physical therapist's command, in his efforts to learn proper walking techniques.

Due to my overreliance on my right hand resting on the handrail that slants diagonally upward a few feet above my legs, I have chosen to climb by the side of the staircase furthest from my approach to it, and the one closest to my right side. I grasp the smooth, cold metal handrail that appears alongside the bottommost stairs. Gleaming slightly, spottily, from the black paint that covers it, the handrail feels solid in weight and smooth in texture. My right-hand fingers grip the handrail, then release slightly, as I pitch forward like a mule plodding up a hill, lifting my right knee upward to clear the second stair.

I tilt my head slightly back and glance upwards. I survey the stairs that I will climb, stacked upon each other in a reversed cascade of solid beige rectangles that form a recessing parallelogram. I purse my lips, sensing the dry nodules on the surface of my tongue that stick weightily to the interior of my mouth.

Now on step four, I lift my right leg, and about two inches from the step, I clop my leg down to form a wide stance with which I can momentarily rest. My footing now solid, I slowly release my right hand from the handrail. My fingers, splotched in ruddy and white patchwork hues, are stiff around the joints, combining a dull absence of feeling with intermittent pins-and-needles sensations. To warm my cold, bare hands, I rub my entire right hand on my brown corduroy pants. Soothingly and comfortingly, the brown ridges stimulate my fingers' nerve endings. I breathe through my nose, and the cold air penetrates my nostrils until the outermost flaps of my nose skin ache.

Onward and upward, I step, pacing to regain my steady yet stilted momentum prior to my brief rest. My right-hand slides along the handrail; the frigid friction of my hand impresses upon me a certain urgency to complete my journey. As does my awareness that I have reached the end of the handrail – a few steps before the staircase ends.

Here, where I had hoped to continue to rely upon the handrail, the beige stone forms a decorative structure that I have termed the "protrusion." I press my right hand against the cold rigidity of the beige stone of the protrusion, leaning into my pressing hand. My left foot, significantly more slowly now, rises and steps gingerly onto the next step. Leaning into the protrusion for support, I sink into my knees and lift my ungainly left foot onto the rail-less

stair. Below, with the security of the handrail beside me, I had attempted on the lower stairs to evoke some semblance of conventional walking. Yet, on the top section of the staircase, I can no longer pretend. Instead of leading with my other foot – my left foot – to surmount the next step using typical human stairclimbing technique, I raise my foot to the concluding space of these rail-less steps by beginning right again.

I could avoid these steps, I learned over a year after beginning my studies at the University. With special authorization from the University, I could have secured access to the elevator that runs beneath this quad and therein avoid these stairs altogether. Yet by the time I received this information, I had already accommodated my imbalanced gait to the demands that the quad staircase presented.

At the top of the staircase, I lightly pat the disability-confounding protrusion. I adjust my backpack slung over both shoulders and stand for a few moments to ensure that I am steady. *Ready*, I think, assessing me, considering the stability of my legs, my mental focus. Only when I reach my destination do I know I can engage in the race to the top. Now on even ground, I wipe the tiny beads of moistness from my forehead with my right-handed fingers shaking slightly, almost imperceptibly.

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