

Michael knew exactly where he wanted to go.

He walked outside and down to a grassy trail he'd found nearby. He needed to say hello to the river that cut through the fields below, maybe a 15-minute walk away. The morning August air was filled with life from the woods, dominated by white pines and mixed with flowering jasmine vining up the sides of the seasoned brush.

The burdens of his busy life lightened with each step as he took slow, deliberate breaths of the mountain air. His sense of peace grew as he arrived at the river's edge, pleasantly surprised by how calm the river was. It was 9:30 AM—the waters must have calmed during the night by the clear moon-lit sky.

Michael didn't pause long before bending down to pick up the best flat, polished stone he could find. He loved skipping stones and nature had prepped the river for him to take a shot at his record of 16 skips. He planted his feet on the pebbled shore, cocked his arm back and let it go!

1.... 2.... 3.... 4... 5... 6... 7... 8.. 9..10..11..12-13-14-15-16-17-18!

A new record, and on his first try! His retreat was now officially underway. Michael watched as the ripples from each skip scattered in a straight line from each touch of the stone. He validated his new record, recounting the ripples as they extended outward, and thrust his fists high into the air in celebration. He let out a loud shout, then paused, wishing his wife Allie, son Jason, and daughter Jaimee had been there to witness his feat.

Michael continued watching each ripple disrupt the calm water as the small, circular wakes expanded further out. *How far does each ripple go?* he thought to himself.

A self-employed owner of a small logging company, Michael needed to relieve his stress from the three months of negotiations leading up to his largest sale to date.

It's a dog-eat-dog world, he thought, his mind drifting back to his work. The \$2,000 dollars he slipped into the hands of the union president helped take out his primary competition, a more seasoned company that refused to play the palm-greasing game. Michael knew he'd easily recover the two grand within the first year and justified the back-door dealings as necessary for his company to compete with the big boys in his field.

His thoughts turned again to his family. Providing for them was his top priority, and he vowed to let nothing stand in the way of giving them a father's love—something he'd never received as a child. Michael grew up without really knowing his father, who had left his family just a few weeks shy of his third birthday. He desperately wanted to be a good dad to his two children and was committed to breaking the chain of emptiness and pain that resulted from his father's cowardly choice to abandon his family. Unlike his father, he was ready to do anything to provide for his family, and he didn't understand why he let guilt pester him about the way he won his big business deal.

Honesty is a virtue, he thought to himself, *but if you're not caught and it doesn't hurt anyone, then it's okay.*

He continued, now speaking in soft reflection. "The end justifies the means. Someday, I'm going to hand this business down to one of my kids, and there's no way I'm going to leave them with a struggling business."

"After all," he continued, "I didn't make the rules of the game, but I *have* been around long enough to know how to play to win."

The ripples from his stone now reached the shore, startling a bullfrog just enough to cause it to

jump underwater and burrow in the mud. He watched as the stir from the frog released a stick from the grasp of algae that had settled near the shore. The stick slowly drifted out into the river, collecting a collage of nature's debris including algae, small twigs, and some leaves.

Michael pondered: *Where was nature's new cluster headed and how much would it grow as the river's current picked up along the way?*

He remembered a poster that once hung on his college dorm wall. The poster emphasized the word "RESPONSIBILITY," and it read: "No single drop of water thinks it is responsible for the flood." With a sense of remorse, Michael wondered, *Will the ripples from this back-door deal with the union president impact my legacy, or worse yet, the well-being of Jason and Jaimee somewhere down the road? Am I threatening my ability to provide for my family because I'm not taking responsibility for doing business in an honest way?*

"The ripple effect has already started," he said quietly. He couldn't stop it now and he could have no idea whom it would touch or if it would impact the very people he was trying to provide for. "Best case," he said in a reflective tone, "no one will be impacted by my decision to win the contract dishonestly." With that, Michael realized he had learned an important lesson and vowed never to compromise his integrity or his children's future well-being again.

Fortunately, he thought, as he considered the alternatives, honesty causes a ripple effect too. Although I can't control all potential outcomes, at least the ripples of honesty are honorable. The "effect" resembles the character of its "cause." Honorable ripples are caused by honesty, while dishonorable ripples are caused by dishonesty.

Michael decided that any ripples he would set in motion from now on were going to be honorable. He remembered a reflection he'd heard from Mother Teresa: "I alone cannot change the world, but I can cast a stone across the waters to create many ripples."

Michael was unsure how he could stop the harmful ripples he'd already set into motion, but he was determined never to resort to dishonest dealings again. He promised himself that, no matter what, the ripples he would create in life would come from honorable actions. What happened from there, while out of his hands, could only be good.

Out loud, he affirmed, "*I can cast a stone across the waters to create positive ripples.*" How true this rang in his mind and his heart. Michael smiled at the strength and empowerment of the notion that even the simplest ripple of love caused by him could change countless lives. He sighed. So much of his life felt out of his control, and here was a simple truth to live by.

Michael turned to head back up to the cabin. Peacefulness from the mountain air filled his heart, mind, and body. An eagle flew down from the side of a mountain, and as it passed over, he felt a gift of forgiveness for what he had done. Michael had just arrived at his retreat, and already he felt energized and renewed. He made a promise to himself that no matter what lay ahead, love was the force he wanted emanating from his life.

He could always live with ripples caused by love.

Love would be his new polished stone.

The Cave

Lauren pushed aside the webs that built up across the passageway and went deeper into the cave she'd discovered while wandering off a trail, about a mile from her cabin. She left for the walk wearing a pair of walking shoes, jeans, a t-shirt, a light casual button-down shirt, and her old college jean jacket. The t-shirt, she thought, could be fuel for a hand-made torch to give her some light. She undressed, put the shirt and jacket back on, and tore the t-shirt into strips. She wrapped one strip of dry cloth around a decaying branch she had picked up at the cave's entrance, and her

lighter did the rest. Now she had some light to walk deeper into the cave.

The cave was dark, moist, and eerie. Not where she intended to end up, but Lauren was about as spontaneous as they come. The rocks that formed the cave's edges were rough, jagged, and unforgiving. Lauren had already taken a few scratches to her hands and one cut across her forehead. The one to her forehead upset her. She hoped there'd be no scar, but she was too engrossed to assess the damage. She didn't have a compact mirror with her to take a quick look—all she brought was her iPhone, a lighter, and the clothes she was wearing. The phone, for what it was worth, had lost reception as soon as she entered the cave.

Lauren wasn't sure why she wanted to keep going deeper into the cave. She thought the better question was, "Why not?" What started out as a walk through the woods was turning into something quite different, something adventurous, and she liked that. When she first came across the cave, she paused for a moment, then curiosity got the better of her. A divorced mother of two, Lauren was now 42 and she was eager for an interruption to feed her ambitions and bring some excitement into her life. Her heart had been broken several times and she'd learned to be quite the independent pioneer. Still, she graded her life as a disappointment up to this point, and the cave was an irresistible escape from thinking any more about it.

Other than a slight glimmer coming from somewhere far ahead, the torch was her only source of light and direction. She would need to find her way out of the cave eventually, but turning back was not her first choice. She had explored the trail behind her and wanted something different, something more. T. S. Eliot once said, "Only those who risk going too far can possibly find out how far they can go." Lauren was a schoolteacher, and philosophy was her favorite subject. She felt challenged by the questions asked in philosophy, though it wasn't as good at providing answers.

Lauren found it odd that it was never quiet in the cave. There was a haunting mixture of an echoing humming noise, dripping water, and an occasional, distant clank. The humming noise was too inconsistent to call it white noise. It changed irregularly from a cold whistling sound to a distant, hollow echo. She figured the clanking noise had to be from pebbles falling loose from the cave's ceiling from all the constant moisture.

Lauren had never been this far into a cave before, so she hadn't given much thought to what she'd find. But that was part of its appeal. At first, the humming noise was something she'd sized up as nothing, but now she began to question herself. Before, it was somewhere in the background, but now it was coming from somewhere nearby.

She paused to gather herself, shivering from the damp chill and aware of the goose bumps, anticipating what lay ahead. Then she felt a deep, exhilarating warmth inside that encouraged her to continue to move forward. *This warmth, she thought, is like a flourishing within my heart.* It comforted her, welcomed her, and, oddly enough, deeply encouraged her.

The humidity and moisture dripping from the cave walls produced a very primitive scent. She had never experienced anything quite like it before but, true to Lauren's nature, because it was new, she wanted more of it. She took deep breaths of the cave air, which felt heavy and full of life. She thought it interesting that she'd always considered that a cave would be a restrictive, stifling place. Yet, inside it was alive, expressive, and deliciously mysterious.

Her shirt, now soaked through from a combination of perspiration and moisture from the cave, wasn't doing much to keep her warm. Her jacket helped retain some body heat, and she was thankful for the tough material of her jean jacket and pants. They protected her from the cave's sharp edges—and creepy insects.

Everything was primitive and original in here. The cave might have looked similar two thousand years ago. She was drawn to its authenticity and humility. The cave jostled her thoughts like it

was trying to speak to her. She was torn between shrugging the notion off and listening closer. If there was a message, she decided, it was too primitive to grasp, too spiritual and abstract. She liked what the cave was saying, though, and concluded that *“Thank you for visiting”* was as close as she could come to deciphering the message that was swelling in her heart.

The cave narrowed gradually into oval-shaped walls, maybe six feet tall by eight feet wide. She was now walking in water that was about six inches deep, just up to her ankles. Lauren pulled another strip of cloth from her pocket and wrapped it around her torch to keep the fire going. She remembered—maybe she saw it in a movie?—that fire tilts toward the best ventilation. The flames told her to continue moving forward through the tunnel, and up ahead there was a growing glimmer of natural light. She had to be getting close to finding an exit. She didn’t want it to end, at least not yet. What waited on the other side would be the same ordinary, disappointing life that she’d left at the cave’s opening.

The light grew brighter as she continued forward and a wave of fresh air greeted her for the first time since she’d entered the cave. She noticed that her iPhone picked up a signal again as she checked the time: 11:12 AM. It had been about 40 minutes since she went in. Sunlight was gleaming in from the cave’s approaching exit. It wasn’t that big, about a three-foot slit in the rock that opened at the top of a hill.

As she arrived at the exit, the sun splashed onto her face and began to warm her instantly. The fresh air, along with the warmth and serenity of nature’s greeting, caught her off guard, and she gasped with delight. She soaked in everything she could in the moment. The trees were fully grown, allowing small openings for rays of sunlight to touch the ground. A patch of lavender and wild geraniums stretched out within arm’s length of the exit. Two squirrels were chasing each other through the leaves just down the side of the hill.

Lauren exited the cave with wet shoes, dirty jeans, a soaked shirt, and her jean jacket. Again, she undressed, taking off the damp shirt and wringing out a few drops of sweat and moisture. Then she put her jacket back on and snapped it up, tying the shirt around her waist and stuffing the remaining strips of cloth into the pocket of her jacket. She stretched out her arms towards the sky, took a deep breath, and turned to head towards the cabin.

Lauren marveled at all the beauty and life around her. The flowers were dancing in the breeze, birds were singing to neighboring birds across the way, and life sprung from every opening in the ground. She took in an intoxicating peace with each breath, energized with a renewal of life. Joy filled her heart and shot a deeply personal warmth throughout her body. *These are the moments that give me hope*, she thought, as she ran her hands slowly up and down the contours of her body, soaking in the buzzing joy.

It was time to head back, and as she grudgingly turned to find a way back to the trail, Lauren paused, still filled with the warmth and joy of the moment. *What’s so different about this compared to what was around me before I entered the cave? There were birds and wildflowers near the cave’s entrance. I’ve only been inside for 40 minutes. What is so different now? Where were these sensational moments of joy on the trail before I entered the cave?*

What *had* changed was what she was feeling inside. For 40 glorious minutes, the cave gently brought her to a peaceful *present*. Time stood still, and the noise from the outside—or rather, from the racing thoughts inside her—had stopped. Lauren had stopped dwelling on the regrets of her past and worries of what lay ahead in her life. When she exited the cave, she took in the same surroundings she had left at the entrance with a whole new perspective and awe. The world around her hadn’t changed. She had.

She laughed at the notion that she’d wandered through fields of flowers without giving them a second glance. It took a dark, eerie cave to remind her to stop to smell the roses.

Lauren's life had become a mind-numbing, suffocating broken record of the same regrets, worries, and fears. This new perspective opened her eyes to the hypocrisy and destruction of the way she had been living. Replaying the regrets of yesterday had never changed a thing, but it did rob her of the present. For a moment, she grew angry that she'd allowed a past that had taken away so much joy to be a thief again in *this* moment. The notion of giving the past another chance to take from her again, a sort of second life to cause pain today, was something she vowed would never happen again.

Peace, she thought to herself, *has been here all along*. Now, joy had found a way inside as well and released its enriching healing. She hadn't found them, but rather, *they found her*. Her eyes were opened, and she received the gifts that they were offering. They had been waiting patiently, like presents on Christmas morning under the tree. Only this wasn't Christmas, it was just another ordinary day. Peace and joy had come to her, they had *pursued* her. At the first light of opportunity, they sprinted inside and embraced her like a long-lost friend. They immediately started giving, healing, and emptying themselves into her. They filled her up in a way she could never have done on her own.

If they were pursuing me in the cave, Lauren pondered, *then they are certainly doing the same everywhere else too*. The notion put a smile on her face as she turned to look up towards the sun and head back to her cabin.