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Climb High, Climb Deep

CHRISTOPHER SPINNEY

A “Climbing Bum”

For some people, the desire to cling gingerly and perilously to the surface of a gigantic rock wall is overpowering. It is all consuming. A stereotypical “climbing bum” finely demonstrates to what extremes a climber’s life is capable of reaching. Living on handouts or, at best, discount and damaged groceries, the climbing bum refuses to recognize the importance of a typical career. Security, insurance, family, and practically all “other interests” fall by the wayside of the superhighway that is climbing. For some, climbing is a channel that, once fully opened, cannot willingly be shut down, or even slowed down. Climbers are swept away by the gentle current of a simple life. Worldly goods and values become less and less important, ever lighter on the climber’s soul. His other needs begin to take care of themselves in one way or another. The climber plunges deeper under the surface of life, joining with the simple and elegant forces of here-and-now.

The climber learns to communicate with his respected adversary and friend, the climb. She silently teaches the climber. They become closer and the climber shares more of his time and self with the climb. His respect for her and the rock grow and flourish. He continues his passionate love affair with the climb and she becomes the focal point of his life. She is the reason and eventually the way for all other things. The climber strives to make his time away from the climb as meaningful as when he is with her. For a long time, however, he only finds failure. He spends several long years in apprenticeship to his vast, silent master before he begins to realize that she is not there, not that, but always this and here. She follows him everywhere, yet does not move. Is she everywhere, or just “here”? Hard to tell, for she is always *here*, surrounding him at every moment.

At first, though, the climber is simply a climber. He strips away extraneous “other” activities to spend more time with the climb. He sacrifices what he used to think of as fun for the deeper value he finds within climbing. Eventually, the climber comes to realize that the climb always was teaching him, but seldom has he listened. She

was always here, yet he rarely noticed. He will come to understand that even when he is not climbing she is with and within him.

Seduction

What is it that first draws him to her and why does he return again and again? It is not just an ordinary romance, but one that constantly renews itself. All this metaphorical discourse of long-term love affairs draws us away from the source though. Where does the initial desire to climb a rock come from? This question cannot be answered simply since there are obviously very personal and varied reasons for wanting to climb. However, we can consider some of the more dominant forces at play in someone experiencing the desire to climb a rock or mountain.

Mountain climbing has not always been sought after as it is today. Up until a couple hundred years ago it was usually avoided as much as possible by almost everyone, even people living in and near great mountains. This desire to climb has emerged in the relatively recent historical past. More useful to us now, though, is not where or when mountain climbing began, but rather its attraction for contemporary persons. The reasons for climbing have undoubtedly changed over the years, though the desire to climb remains.

The initial desire to climb for some persons comes from a desire for "extreme adventure." Rock climbing is certainly portrayed that way in popular culture—that is, as part of the contemporary fad to participate in extraordinary and seemingly high-risk sports. In today's world, the urge to rock climb might be a desire to do "extreme" and "dangerous" sports in search of some adrenaline rush or high. Others want to say that they have "been there, done that," giving the "I'm-too-cool" middle finger to any other "extreme" activity, like skydiving or whitewater rafting.

Having done an extreme sport, one seemingly becomes a member of some elite club. One has tempted death, even dared it, and then triumphed. One is still here, and seemingly all the stronger because of it. Nothing can scare this person, now that they've *rock climbed*. This is what the hype would like us all to believe. Who creates this hype? We all do in a sense. But it doesn't matter. What matters is that this hype creates a personal desire to be *that guy*, the one who has been there and done that. And so we are compelled to rock climb, it would seem, by a desire to look death in the face and then return to tell the tale. This is the sublime: looking into the fathomless void, realizing that nothing holds you back from throwing yourself over the edge, and then stepping back with conscious effort. It is overcoming nothingness. This defines the desire to rock climb, its draw, its lure. Come look into the void, it says. See what happens.

Pointlessness: Becoming the Void

As the climber matures, though, climbing begins to churn up chunks of something else within this sublimity. His control over himself and the rock becomes more precise and his climbing more closely resembles dancing. His movements are grace-

ful, precise, and fluid. Though he still pushes himself and recognizes that he is staring into the void, something else is now present besides pure sublimity. Shadows and shades of beauty emerge as his familiarity with the void grows. Each time he looks into it, he understands it a little more deeply. His fear of the void lessens as it melts into an obsession with standing at its rim and staring into the nothingness of his limits.

Now, thoughts are no longer present when he climbs. He becomes his climbing. His body dissipates into nothing so that it can intimately explore the wonderful and beautiful void. The void is now him and he is it. As he forgets his body, he loses the fear of having to control and take care of that body. This is the point at which climbing becomes climbing and nothing else. The point is to climb, just to climb. It is pointlessness that the climber seeks now.

Pointlessness is the way of the climb. It is hauntingly fluid and seductive. The climber comes to the point of utter pointlessness. After turning back (after doing nothing other than climbing in this pointless realm), he longs to return to this pointless point. But where is this point? It is actually no point at all, but in attempting to describe it, we might consider it a (no-)place beyond time and space. Maybe more like a state of condition. The zone. Maps and instructions for wandering. Water pouring in zero-gravity space. Formlessness in action. Pointless climbing eludes description because it has stepped out of the time constraints that would normally allow us to pin it down and cage it, limit it, and define it. It escapes our traps of description as ink disperses in water and spreads throughout. In our attempts to describe it, it begins to describe us. With heavy effortlessness, it patiently exhausts our every effort attempting to define it. And this is it.

Dreaming with Open Eyes

I step up, tying in to the end of the rope. I ready myself for my imminent plunge into the icy waters of intensity. It is my dreaming self, preparing to let go and let its shadow-brother awake in the world of the sun. It is the opposite of, and yet very much the same as those last few moments before I go to sleep at night. I lie there and wait to let go. I wait for some other force of consciousness to take control and guide me through heretofore-unknown time and territory. In preparing to climb, I ready my waking self for sleep. But when I climb, I am my dreaming self awoken, exploring and wandering through the open hills of my experience with here-and-now. Standing on solid, stable ground for the last few moments is my alarm clock invading the space of my dreams. The curtain separating these worlds of dark and light tatters and thins and rips and for a few brief moments these universes seep into one another. The rock I will climb looks so different from my perspective on the ground than it will when I see it, am connected to it, suspended from it, and feel it from within. I push this world over the edge and as it dies another death, a deeper world is born, just as the stars follow the sun's descent.

Now I climb into that spaceless space where I am climbing,
my eyes open,
eyes open,
open,
and I am gone.