

The Mountain as Metaphor

I had always wanted to climb a mountain. Not so much for the sake of climbing a mountain or even to reach the summit. I had always wanted to learn what it was all about. I wanted to know what it felt like to sleep on the snow at a mountainous elevation. I wanted to go through the process so I could turn an unknown into a known. Now that I have climbed Mt. Rainier I have a much better understanding of mountaineering and what it truly involves. For example, not having a 60 pound pack.

Mountaineering is one of those activities that you can have a general concept and knowledge base, but the practical—oh the practical—is a mystery until you go. Hopefully you can get some great information from people or books. Sometimes not. The three of us met in Seattle, Washington to organize our gear and sleep. Eric McBride, a teacher with whom I teach, his buddy, Kyle, and my family met at the Sea Tac Airport—Eric and Kyle had just flown in from Indiana. After running about the baggage claim area with cell phones trying to locate each other, we threw everything in the van and headed up to Colin and Maija's home for the night. This was on a Wednesday afternoon, August 7, 2002.

We bummed around the area for awhile because some of our gear was in a car at Albert's. Last minute purchases at REI and some grocery shopping for snacks and basics. Food. Now this is a great example of experience. Food is one of the areas that seemed so important prior to the trip, but after doing it, I realize how little difference it made one way or the other. Me, I am a eat-Top-Ramen-out-of-the-bag-uncooked person so any discussion on food seemed too long. However, since I did not know what to expect up there I needed someone in our group to take control and be leader. In the end, after spending nearly two hours working the food issue over, we ended up getting prepackaged, dehydrated food. We spent too much time focusing on food. Maybe we needed to because it was a way for us to get into the groove of the adventure, or maybe it was because it was an item over which we had (seemingly) control. There was talk about wonderful meals of gourmet proportions, which would be great, but not for us.

The food was one area that I could not take lead, but in packing supplies, I could have done better. This is the lesson—experience gives you wisdom. I asked my partners a few times should I bring this or that, what do I need, let's pack this together...however, after awhile, I felt like I was bugging them too much because I did not get too many specifics. It really was my lesson to learn. If I am not getting the answers that I need, I need to push for them. The person questioning has to be willing to bug until their questions are answered without any concern over anything else because you have a question and it is important. The answers would have given me stability not to mention a pack about 20 pounds lighter. The last two hours of the climb up to base camp was slow given the weight of the pack. I knew I could do it, but it totally wore me out on Thursday.

On Thursday morning, August 8, 2002 we woke up at 6:00 am with the intent of leaving Seattle one half hour later. My sleep that previous night was not too restful, but the hospitality and company of everyone was great—Colin, Maija, Albert, Tana, Kael, Eric, and Kyle.

We did pull away from the house at one minute past our goal, amazing. Heading south toward Rainier, we pulled into Tacoma for a quick bite to eat at The Flying Boot Café on 6th avenue, East side. This was a great experience of itself. The place was dimly lit and had several people inside, not many, but enough to constitute several, all regulars.

One family came in and had a banter going with the waitress and discussion of so-and-so who is now this old and what they are doing. This is a regular morning for some people. Some of the others looked like they came all the time, but tended to stay away from the front where people naturally go when they walk in. These people brought reading material along with their appetites. Kyle was aching for some hashbrowns.

We hit the old highway to Mt. Rainer, highway 7 to highway 706, which is a big road through much of Tacoma, Spanaway, and Parkland before you get to what feels like the foothills of the mountain—Elbe, Washington. We made it to the Ranger station at Longmire by 10:00 am which is our check in time to claim our reservations. Claiming the reservations is on what everything seemed to be hinged. If we did not make it in time, we would have lost the right to climb. Planning. Proper planning prevents poor production. Even though it was not a long drive, we planned extra time in case something happened. Smart, because our two hour trip turned into about four.

We filled out the necessary paperwork, checked the right boxes—yes, we have helmets, pickets, a team of three, one has summated before—all the while eager to get on the hike up to base camp. The team ahead of us had a discussion with the ranger about whether or not a helmet was required. The ranger said no, but it was highly recommended. They did not have them. The next group said no to not having pickets—which are large metal stakes with holes in them for carabineers to use for crevasse rescue while crossing a glacier or backup gear to prevent a catastrophic fall. They informed the ranger that they had an alternate method. The ranger sizing his clients up decided to just let them have it because it would have been a fruitless battle over pickets. We left the Paradise Ranger Station on Mt. Rainier at 12:00 noon to hike the 4.5 mile trudge up to Camp Muir—base camp, an elevation gain of 4600 feet.

Concrete and steps start the hike; it is where the majority of the people visiting Paradise travel, a small 3 mile round trip hike through the area. Continuing on, the path turns to gravel and eventually puts you along side Pebble Creek and the Muir Snowfield. Our total time from car to camp was 6 hours going up. The snowfield was beautiful and a great way to start off. Crisp blue skies, a balancing breeze, and a destination that was not in sight and a long way off. About 4 hours of the hike was on the snowfield.

It is wonderful to have these experiences where you have to focus and are not allowed the luxury of some other thought. The hike up was step, step, step. For me, it was even more of a battle of will over physical strength. My pack was really starting to get heavy and slowing me down, but it was step, step, step. I knew that once I hit base camp I could toss my pack on the ground and be done with it for two days. It was a personal pace that I took.

Hot, thirsty, tired and everything else you think of when hiking were the negative thoughts that filled my head as I finished up those last two hours. It amazes me, a person who knows that they can do anything and will push through arrogantly simply because, how quickly negative thoughts grew in my head. These are self created and are therefore stronger than anything someone could say. It was a mental battle to realize that when you face a tough challenge it is too easy to accept these negative thoughts because they almost give you the okay to give up. I know why so many people are lazy and quit too often, they let these thoughts get to them. Maybe they have always let these thoughts get to them and they do not know any better. Whatever the reason, I was not going to let these complaints about the pack give me a reason to stop. I had to find my own pace and

rhythm. I was not being compared to anyone. The process was the goal, not the stopping point. I wanted this adventure less for the summit or base camp and more for what I learned. Negative thoughts kill dreams quickly.

Another item the hike to base camp reaffirmed in my head is that no matter how spent you think you are, you always have more. If you think you cannot go any further or there is nothing more that you can do, you are wrong. I felt as if I could not take another step up the snowfield, the pack being my albatross. However, with a sweep of the negative thoughts and a focus on the goal, I plodded on. I wonder how much of our lives are spent giving up or going on.

The 6th hour marked my arrival at base camp and looking down the snowfield at a spot from where I looked up before thinking that the camp was too far away, unobtainable, I felt good in the fact that I had made it. Which does not really surprise me because I always seem to pull it off. The first accomplishment. Some water and a snack. Some relaxing and then it was time to set up the tent before nightfall.

This base camp is called Camp Muir after writer and naturalist John Muir who was among a climbing party who made the sixth recorded ascent of Mount Rainier in 1888, nearly one-hundred and fourteen year prior.

At base camp the temperature was shorts, t-shirt, and sandals in the sun and long pants in the shade. It was warmer than I expected. I would leave the many useless items I brought for one light pair of Tevas so I would not have to hang about base camp in my climbing boots (which were great Jackson, but not the lounging type). The tent was the first thing to set up for it would be dark soon. The height of the peak and the angle created a fast sunset. One moment the sun is there. The next—gone. It was great to watch the shadows stretch across the snowfield as the sun went down as if reaching off to some unknown object, racing to get there first. When the sun was completely behind the peak, the snow temperatures came. It got cool quick. There was ambient light everywhere which allowed us to continue setting up. I do not remember what we had for dinner, but I remember we all suggested going to bed early and sleeping in.

Mt. Adams, Mt. Hood, and Mt. St. Helens stood proud from our campsite. The sloping side of Helens where the lateral eruption took place was stark. The flow of ash and melted glacier water from slightly more than a decade ago was visible. It was a darker color than the rest of the mountain.

Stars punctured the night sky and we could see the bands of the spiral galaxy. The empty spots between stars that you normally see in the city were filled with stars. It was as if a huge saltshaker was uncapped and flew across the dark sky spilling salt all along the way and creating discernable patterns. The Big Dipper was out and proud, poised greatly behind the peak. As the night went on, the Big Dipper slowly dipped behind the mountain route we would later take the next night to grab a cupful of glacier snow. I jotted some notes down in my journal before going to bed.

I found myself lying in the tent looking up at the ceiling and thinking, *how long have I been looking at the ceiling, how long have I been awake, did I ever go to sleep, what time is it, how long have I been in the tent?*

On Friday, August 9, 2002. we did not get up late. In fact we got up quite early—7:00 am I believe. Friday was a day of gearing up and practicing rescue safety procedures. We discussed all around what we would do in this situation of that. Unified our ways when it came to self-arresting with the ice-ax as well as our communication

codes. The best was the simplicity and ease of a rescue technique called the “Z-Pulley Rescue.” I learned a lot in setting this up even beyond the pulley system; there were many smaller strategies locked in the system that were great to know. We also spent the day drinking lots of water and eating everything that was high in calories and fat—energy and warmth. I found it hard to just sit around and watch because I felt like I could (should) be doing something. I was also excited for the climb later that night. Even though, I did sit on the back side of the public shelter with Eric and Kyle watching other teams setting up and teams coming back from climbing Thursday night.

It is a real community up there. Everyone is so bonded by the common goal and desires that friendship is quick and discussion easy. People would just start up conversation or share information about the climb. I did not hesitate to leave my belongings out in the open, knowing that no one would take or tamper with them. (I had left Polarfleece pants and a jacket out on the bench by the public shelter and no one took them, no one even touched them.) That is a great feeling—to know that everyone else is following the same rules and guidelines as you, a real community. There were National Park Rangers that would stay at the A-frame and walk around talking to everyone, making sure that they had a good plan. The rangers were great and a wonderful support system on the mountain. I think I might enjoy that job.

Sleep did not come easily just like the weak nap earlier. We set all of our gear up outside the tent and dressed most of the way for the climb, crawled into the sleeping bags, and listened to the night air. I did not sleep. I did not feel like I needed it, but welcomed the chance to just relax and not focus on anything. We had prepared to leave that night at 11:00 pm. Our nap lasted under two hours as we came from out of our caves between 10:00 and 10:30 pm. We geared up, checked every last item, double checked each other’s gear and safety, and hooked into our rope. My watch said 11:00 pm. I set it to ring four hours later, approximately halfway through our climb. It would take us eight hours up and five hours down.

A simple climb over the little ridge and we made our way across the Cowlitz Glacier. In this process, the one item that became abundantly clear is that if you can see the spot, you can climb to it. The distance from the start to the Cathedral Gap, located at the end of the Cowlitz Glacier, seemed like hours away. It turned out, however, to only be an hour. This really pumps you up, knowing that you can cover great distances even at a steady pace. The climb was on.

We climbed at night because the snow would be hard and therefore provide better footing. It is also a good idea to do this because you will be at the summit when the sun comes up and aside from being spectacular, it is safer to climb down when the snow is not yet fully warmed up. It is common to climb at night and descend in the early morning.

At the Cowlitz Glacier we climbed underneath the area where rocks and chunks of ice were falling all morning long and we came to the first change. To get to the Cathedral Gap you need to climb up a good sized bump of rock that we climbed on for probably one hour. From the Gap it is a short curve to the left and we continued on to Ingraham Flats (11,100 feet)—which some people can use as base camp. Only a small number of people can reserve that space in what is really a flat snowfield at the top of a field of crumbled snow and crevasses that eventually flows down into the Ingraham Glacier. We crossed that field and made our way to Disappointment Cleaver.

Disappointment Cleaver is rocky on the first part. We coiled up our sections of the rope and pulled in close to avoid dragging the rope through everything. At this point it was more like hiking on a rocks, boulders, from a rock fall. On the second half of the Disappoint Cleaver our route was no longer clear. Remember, we are climbing at night so we can see as far as the headlamps projected light. We now had to slow down and orient ourselves. After taking two wrong turns, one of which lead to a steep and precarious section that we knew could not be it simply because of its precariousness, we found our route. From then on the route was easy to locate because we could see the path in the snow of previous climbers that we could not see on rock. In front of us now lay the long climb to the summit with it many switchbacks.

On the way to the summit we ran into another team who had a climber whose headlamp went out. Kyle gave him his mini-mag lite and we kept on going. This section was particularly steep and involved the use of the front prongs of the crampons. This section was a terrible place to stop and deal with a headlamp. It was in a section that was exposed to the wind so we did our nice deed and moved quickly on.

Kyle did a great job of keeping the pace strong and consistent while at the same time not wearing us out. We would stop at obvious goals—ridges, rounds, corners, vantage points. I liked the pace that Kyle created. Some of you will not catch the allusion here from Dune, but our pace, like the slow knife, pierce the shield. Above 12,000 feet and that is when the climbing took on new feeling. It was no longer a climb of what you would expect. I found myself very conscious of my breathing, step-breath-step-breath, and the routine habit of allowing your body to breath for you now was something of which I wanted control. Our pace slowed a bit and we each called out breaks. I used the “rest step” in part of this section not for the rest it gave my legs but for the breath it gave me. This is when the process truly becomes unique in that it demonstrates the human will. There is no reason to climb a mountain just like the “because it is there” quote suggests. However, in the process of taking on a challenge the process teaches you that you can do anything. Many would not have even wanted to climb the mountain. Several would have quit before the summit, but the process of going on is the reason for the whole climb—to physically know that there is no limit other than that which you place on yourself.

Only when you push your skills do you grow and only when you grow do you live.

Although we were hours away from Portland and Seattle as the car drives, their lights were visible during the night. A whitish-yellow aura of light emanated from those two areas as well as smaller cities of which we did not know. From our vantage point it almost looked like a black prairie filed with clusters of off-white flowers. Mt. St. Helens was backlit by Portland creating a gorgeous silhouette of the once tall mountain.

5:00 am, Saturday, August 10, 2002 marked the turning point for darkness—the swirls of grays and blacks disappeared and made way for the rising sun. We switched off our headlamps and looked down the mountain to where we were hours ago and even to where the Cathedral Gap is basically located. Base camp could not be seen because it was down and behind the mountain. The sky was a warm robin’s egg blue. We were above the clouds and saw the peaks of the larger mountains poking through the whipped cumulus that encircled Rainier. Mt. Adams, Mt. Hood, and only because of its proximity, we could see the tip of Mt. St. Helens. There were about two hours left to the climb.

The last bit of the climb is the exposed face of the summit approach. Unlike the better part of the whole trip which is a series of switchbacks in gullies or narrow walkways, the last part was a steep climb. Looking down gave me a sense of height and was a precarious feel. A narrow walkway of snow going up was the only bit that distinguished what we were walking on from the face.

The summit was both glorious and not. The summit was reached at 7:00 am and we were soon joined by other groups. It was a great feeling to have the process' end realized. We made it. I had climbed my first glaciatic peak above 11,000 feet. At the same time, I wished that the process could have gone on since it was what was more important and now that we had reached the top, it was over. I was actually not that excited to be done. About this time dehydration was taking affect on me.

I felt nauseas and wanted to curl up into a ball and rest. Water. I knew I needed it, but I had no desire to drink—drinking only made me feel worse. It would be a temporary feeling of sickness that I had to endure. I had not wanted to drink too much water on the way up since the water was cold; the bite-valve of the Camelback was frozen. I figured if I took small amounts I would soon be at the summit and could drink there. Wrong. So I drank large amounts of water slowly and had some Gu, a carbohydrate substance that has the consistency of its namesake, and tried to warm up my midsection by placing handwarmer packets on my stomach. Eric also had some hot cocoa that tasted terrible to me under the circumstances but probably did wonders to warm me up. Once I got enough water, warmth, and body fuel I started to feel better. Good enough for the obligatory I-reached-the-summit-shot. I was happy to start heading down since I would be back into the process, the groove. I did not get much out of the summit this time so I would like to go back another time for enjoying the summit and its sights. I will also put my Camelback inside my clothes so that it is warm as well as preheat the water before climbing. (You can only learn through experience.) This is what is so great about experience—you can gather all of the little actions that make the difference and make you a stronger person, but you have to actually go through the process; no one can tell you to do this or that for everything; some of it you have to do yourself. This is learning.

It took five hours to climb back to base camp in the sun. We stopped a lot for other teams or for the sights. The sun changed the world that we had climbed in the night. Coming down was actually harder to do because the footing was less sure (softening snow), the force of gravity pulling you down in line with each step, and the fatigue of each of the climbers. We took great care in our descent because the warming snow would make the snow bridges and crevasses more dangerous. Once again, distances that seemed great became small and the summit got further and further away and hidden by several bumps of the mountain that were false summits on our way up. Everyone at base camp was well into their morning activities that we had just done the day prior.

I went back to the shady side of the public housing structure and took off all of my climbing gear and laid down. I needed some rest and a lot of water and some more Gu to balance me off. After a short rest where Eric took care of the tent, we each collected our gear and packed up for the trip back to the car. I was energized by my short nap and knew that it may take me more time to get down so I told the guys bye and started down; I would meet up with them at the car.

The trip down was quite easy. With the soft snow and my ski poles I was able to slide or bootski down the snow field of Muir (the part that took four hours to climb up) in

about one hour. Another hour more and I would be back at the car. I find it interesting that the hardest part of the whole climb was the hike down after the snowfield. The hike on the formal trail. My sore muscles did not want to bend the same way in my climbing boots as the slope of the concrete trail. I found myself traversing the four foot wide trail simply to put less strain on my legs.

The trail was filled with tourists of all sorts from all over the globe. It was a Saturday and warm. I was loaded down with this huge pack, dressed in climbing gear, making my clomp, clomp, clomp noise as I took each step. Around me were families in shorts, t-shirts, and sandals. I received many looks and many of them took photos as I past. I must have been a sight. As Kyle descended later, he was actually filmed by a man with a video camera; something to show the folks back home about America. As I saw more and more people, I knew that I was getting closer to Paradise Ranger Station.

I wandered around the parking lot for Eric's Jeep and took off my pack as soon as I found it. Boots off, new clothing, and soft socks, I sat by the Jeep and drank some water since it was not since base camp that I had some. I explored the surrounding area while waiting for Eric and Kyle to arrive. Eric arrived first. Kyle, second, and in pain from some of the blisters that had formed during this climb. We filled out our completion of the climb form so that the rangers knew we were down and drove down the mountain.

The climb was a quick one but filled with experiences that will impact my life and future pursuits for years. I enjoyed the process of the climb and the effort it took mentally, physically, and emotionally to do. There was no luxury of time that allowed me to think about anything other than climbing. We were all so focused. It was almost like a meditative state where you just were and climbed and saw, but did not try to think outside of the moment too much. Any challenge from this day forward will seem small by comparison and that is what is great about taking on a challenge. A challenge does not by its definition mean impossible. Rather it means that it will challenge you to your greatest limit. We would all be better off if we had an experience where our limits were challenged. Greater perspective would be gained as well as a stronger sense of our true abilities. No longer would we be so quick to say, "I cannot do that" or "It is too hard" and give up before trying. As a culture, we do that too much. We give up because we do not want to expand the energy or time needed to take on a challenge. If we only knew how wonderful the completion of such a challenge was, we would never hesitate to take on a challenge. We would see a challenge for what it is—an opportunity to test our own skills and come out of it a more positive and optimistic person.

On Wednesday we spent the night in Seattle, Wa. On Thursday we made our way to the Paradise Ranger Station at about 5,420 feet elevation and climbed to Camp Muir at 10,080 feet elevation. Friday we practiced and rested. We started our climb at 11:00 pm on Friday until we reached the top of Rainier at 14,410 feet elevation at 7:00 am. We stayed up there for about an hour and then descended and arrived at base camp at 12:00 noon. Rest and then to the car for the drive home. It is an experience that has sparked the desire to climb again.