

Short Story

Why I Climb Mountains Anyway

by Henry Mintzberg

“Why do you climb mountains anyway?” Not again. This time it was in the English Lake District, about to head up to this miserable peak in the rain. Didn't we have enough troubles? She and her husband were going to take a little walk under the umbrella. If I answer her question, maybe no one will ever ask it again. OK, why do I climb mountains anyway? Let me recount the answers.

1. *Because they're there.* So's the pub.

2. *If you have to ask the question, you wouldn't understand the answer.* True. But what's the answer?

3. *To get away from people who ask such questions.* No doubt. It works every time. But not much more of an answer. Dick, one of my climbing partners, said I should have answered, "So I can look down on you." Dick should understand that having to be on top is the mountain climber's burden.

4. *To have time to reflect on such questions of no consequence.* Little did she realize.

5. *Because daddy made me.* Too often too true. But my daddy didn't. Maybe that's why I do.

6. *To eat the cheese.* Now you're talking. Especially in France. You don't know what Tomme de Savoie tastes like until you've eaten it above 2,000 meters. Here, however, I got a funny look when I asked for Stilton in my picnic. But even just short of 1000 meters, I

never ate Stilton like that.

7. *To see what's on the other side.* Jonathan volunteered this answer on our second day, as we were approaching a col. For me, however, it's just plain to see. Nowhere do I see the way I do from a mountain that I have climbed. I don't know if it's the joy, the adrenaline, or just the blood finally flowing freely in my veins. Maybe it's the altitude beyond the attitude. The air is thinner up here—less of it gets in the way. But I believe it's because what we see is really ours. Jacques Balmat, the first person to stand on top of Mont Blanc, claimed that: "Everything that surrounded me seemed to be my own property. I was the King of Mont Blanc—the statue of this tremendous pedestal." He was right: we do own those views that we have earned, which are not the same as those we buy in a cable car.

8. *To lose yourself.* Maybe. But only temporarily. I figure it takes me anywhere from an hour to a day to get the city out of my blood.

9. *To find yourself.* No way. No one has ever found himself on top of a mountain. (Herselves are usually too smart to look.) If this is what you need, go lose yourself in the latest group experience. Anyway there are far better places to find things. Like under a sofa cushion. (Personally, I like to find myself in a good restaurant.) I read a story years ago about a hotshot magazine editor who quit his job in the States to go find himself atop the highest mountain in South America. (Why must it always be the highest? Wouldn't the second highest do?) After suffering all the usual catastrophes, he got there. He could look down on everyone in South America. So, did he find himself? Who knows? What I do know is that there was a place on that path where he could have found himself, one precise little place, just a hundred or a thousand paces short of the peak. All he had to do was stop there, turn around, and go back down. But he never noticed. He had to be on top, just like back in the life he was trying to escape. Anyway, on that first day, I did find myself on top of that mountain...cold, wet, and miserable. So much so that I forgot to look for myself a hundred or a thousand paces back.

10. *To be cold, wet, and miserable.* You may know this as "to make a man out of me." Frankly, I can confirm my gender any time I like. But there are times, I must admit, when it feels good to stop climbing. (Of course, it can feel equally good to stop beating my head against a glass in the pub.) To tell you the truth, when I haven't done this for a while, I find the going up tiring. And the going down worse. How are we supposed to balance ourselves on our two little feet? (Getting off our front paws was one of the dumbest things we ever did.) But leaving all the goings up and goings down aside, the rest is wonderful—the cheeses, the questions, the answers, the searching, the seeing, the scenery—especially when you sit on top knowing there's no more up and conveniently forgetting that there's still a down. In fact, you're not always cold, wet, and miserable at all. There are times, like on our second day (not the highest peak in England, I hasten to add—that was on the first day), when you are warm, dry, and mesmerized. And when you're in shape, the goings up, even the goings down, can be delightful. Add up all the moments of exhilaration and you can end up with a lifetime of exuberance.

So tell me: Why *don't* you climb mountains? Anyway?

"You are a fool if you don't climb Mount Fuji, but you are a bigger fool if you climb it twice."
(*Japanese expression*)

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