

# Climbing toward God

*Adventurers do not talk much about religion, but this man finds a distinct spiritual experience in the mountains*

**Peter Bronski**



EVERY NOW AND THEN CLIMBING PUTS A HEALTHY FEAR OF GOD in me. Not a scared-out-of-my-mind-never-going-climbing-again kind of fear. More of a forced-to-face-my-own-mortality kind of fear. It first happened about six years ago on El Pico de Orizaba in Mexico. Descending after a summit bid, a softball-sized rock dislodged from an ice-choked gulley somewhere high above, plummeted downward, and slammed me squarely in the back. Thankfully, my half-filled day pack cushioned the blow. Point is, climbing has a way of reminding me that my time on this Earth will at some point come to an end, whether in the mountains or not.

And when that time comes, I hope that I'll meet my maker at the pearly gates of heaven and that he'll smile out at me and say, "You climbed well. Welcome to the top!" But deep down I also wrestle with a concern that he might respond, "That climbing thing sure was foolish. I'm not at all pleased." I'm keenly aware that to some outside observers (most notably, my in-laws), climbing may seem irresponsible with its risk and hazards and (I say false) reputation as a life-threatening extreme adventure sport. Personally, I'm much more worried about what the Big Man Upstairs thinks of my passion for peak-bagging.

I'm a fairly religious guy—a Christian—but you wouldn't necessarily know it if you saw me climbing. I don't kneel in prayer before starting a tough lead, or pull an idol from my day pack and place it at the base of the cliff, or burn incense atop mountain summits. Yet for me there's always been a spiritual side to climbing. It is more than just upward mobility, vertical movement, or a physical and psychological challenge in an amazing setting. Something about it transcends the act itself, though for a long time I couldn't put my finger on precisely how it fits with my personal faith.

A few months ago, everything fell into place as I sat in on a banquet in eastern Pennsylvania while researching another article. I listened in on a true story about an Inuit guide and his client, a white Westerner with aspirations of traveling on foot to the North Pole. The pair was cresting a ridgeline, about to embark across Resolute Bay in the far north of Canada's Arctic. Suddenly, the Inuit guide stopped and turned his companion to face back toward Fort Resolute, the northernmost human settlement in the Arctic and the last sign of civilization they would see for weeks.

*The author's solitary footsteps crossing the summit ice cap of Mount Adams, with Mount Rainier, also known as Tahoma—another mountain sacred to the Pacific Northwest's Native Americans—in the background.* PETER BRONSKI

“Breathe deeply, and tell me what you smell.”

“I smell warmth, comfort, civilization,” replied the man.

Then, facing his client toward the white expanse of the Arctic, the Inuit guide again asked the man to inhale deeply and say what he smells.

“I smell the wilderness,” replied the man.

“No,” countered the Inuit. “You smell the breath of God.”

And there it is—the very thing I’ve never been able to put into words, perfectly articulated in the span of seven simple words. For me, there’s a distinct spiritual side to climbing mountains, very simply, because it immerses me in the breath of God. It’s something I can’t necessarily touch, or see, or even describe. But I can feel it, and maybe that’s what matters most.

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It’s not just the Inuit guide and I who think and feel this way. Native peoples have understood the connection between God and mountains for a long time. There were the ancient Greeks beneath Mount Olympus, home of Zeus and family; Nepalese Sherpas living in the shadow of Mount Everest, the Mountain Goddess; and Australian Aborigines near the sacred Uluru, or Ayers Rock. There’s a reason why the Inca built stone altars atop 20,000-foot Andean peaks, and why monks retreat to mountain hideaways like the Benedictine monastery atop Spain’s Montserrat—there’s God in them there mountains.

You’d be right to point out that these varied cultural groups disagree over what exactly that means—for some, mountains are gods; for others, mountains are the home of gods; and for others still, mountains are sacred places that play a more general, but just as integral, religious role. Yet through all the differences it seems that one fundamental truth emerges—there’s an undeniable spiritual side to mountains and mountaineering. You don’t have to take my word for it, though. Just in the last two weeks, I’ve stumbled into



*A self-portrait high on the North Ridge route during a solo climb of Mount Adams.*

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two more references to experiencing God in the mountains, including one by a Silverton, Colorado, resident who describes himself as a “non-religious atheist.” And maybe that says something more profound about spirituality and the mountains than I ever can—if a modern-day atheist finds God in the mountains, that must surely mean something.

More authoritative voices have weighed in on the subject, too. Henry David Thoreau and John Muir recognized it, and you can see it in their writing.

My writing is another story. When I told friends that I was writing an essay about climbing and religion, their reaction was one of surprise at hearing the two words in the same sentence. I can't say I blame them. In today's secularized world, climbing and religion don't really have much to say about one

another. If you do happen to hear about them at all, it's in terms of conflict between climbers and the religious beliefs of Native Americans at places like Devil's Tower and Cave Rock.

But then again, there's another viewpoint—the Judeo-Christian tradition—which offers something of a divine blessing to go and climb and sing your praises unto the hills. Years ago I read somewhere in the Bible that “faith can move mountains.” Who would have thought that it can be part of climbing them as well? Yet consider a quick tour of the Old and New Testaments: Noah's ark came to rest atop Mount Ararat; Moses received the Ten Commandments atop Mount Sinai; Jesus gave his famous sermon atop the Mount of Olives; and the Last Supper took place atop Mount Zion. At least for Jews and Christians, the tops of mountains are good places to be. They are a proverbial stairway to heaven, so it seems best to get on climbing them. (Side note: Catholics even have their own patron saint for mountain climbers, Saint Bernard of Montjoux, not to mention Pope John Paul II, who during his young days was known as a man of the mountains, in the Tatra Range of Poland's Carpathian Mountains.)

I'm comforted to find that there does indeed seem to be a moral high ground among the peaks, and that my mountain climbing addiction is likely to meet with favor from the good Lord. But my own beliefs aside, whether you're a religious climber, or one who climbs religiously, we can all learn a lesson from the Rev. F. T. Wethered, who wrote in a 1919 letter to the *Alpine Journal*: “The mountains have done the spiritual side of me more good religiously, as well as in my body physically, than anything else in the world. No one knows who and what God is until he has seen some real mountaineering and climbing in the Alps.” Amen to that, I say. Now, if you'll excuse me, it's time to get out and go climbing. It just might do my body, and my soul, some good.

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Adventure writer PETER BRONSKI, of Boulder, Colorado, tries to go to church as religiously as he climbs. His book, *At the Mercy of the Mountains: True Stories of Tragedy and Survival in New York's Adirondacks*, will be released this fall by AMC Books. Visit him at [www.peterbronski.com](http://www.peterbronski.com).