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Up: A non-climber's account of his climbing self

by

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Chairperson

Dean, Graduate School

Date
There is a lack in climbing literature (a large and widely read genre) of any sense that the reasons for, and meaning of, mountain climbing, rock climbing or any other form of ascent should be defended. Climbing is considered to be normal and admirable. This is something that bothers me.

Recreational climbing as it is carried out in the western world, while usually held to be a commendable act of connection with wildness and the natural world, is actually a product and reflection of our basic disconnection from nature. At its worst ("bagging" K2 or Denali or Everest in synthetic pants with bottled oxygen and a disposable camera) climbing is basically just another example of predominantly white male conquest, domination, subjugation and exploitation. And at its "best," climbing in our culture is a superficial, fruitless attempt at reconnecting with something that is surely not located uphill. Climbing the way we do it is not innate. Nor is it "normal" in any sense of the word that takes into account a period of human history that does not include the last 200 years.

The true meaning of our climbing tendencies have been unknown or ignored for long enough, a problem this thesis attempts to address. In it I tell some climbing stories of my own. I examine the genetic basis for our desire to gain elevation, showing that recreational climbing is more a product of cultural forces than of biological. I illustrate the shift in perception that occurred in England and the United States in 17th, 18th and 19th centuries that moved mountains from the ugly, bad column in our brains over into the beautiful, good one. And how this shift did not change the inherent disconnection between our culture and the natural world. Finally, I provide some examples of the types of relationships other cultures have had with mountains, hills, plateaus and the whole rest of the planet, contrasting these with our own.
The First Thing to Read

There is a coffee shop in the Minneapolis-St. Paul airport whose owners have decided to attempt to appeal to the same type of consumer who purchases Eddie Bauer-edition Toyota four-runners with bike racks and leather seats. I think this coffee shop is part of a national chain, but the only one I have ever seen is there in that mid-western airport. It is called Caribou coffee, and the reason that I am telling you about it is that it supplied me with a napkin that was particularly relevant to this thesis.

The people I was traveling with were coffee drinkers and it was morning and we were on a layover, so stopping at Caribou Coffee to purchase a bear tooth java or wapiti mocha was not an unordinary thing for us to do. I do not normally drink coffee (mostly because I never fail to be surprised when it turns out not to taste sweet and chocolatey) so I think I might have considered buying a tundra muffin or Yukon cookie (both of which would have made me feel like wearing fleece and tevas) but in the end I didn’t come away with anything other than a napkin that I found on the counter next to the plastic stirrers and coffee cup lids. It had a message:

*Why Caribou Coffee?...*

*Why climb Mt. Everest?*

*Because it’s there!*

On the one hand I suppose the message on this napkin could be interpreted as a straightforward explanation of why anyone dragging his luggage through the Minneapolis-St. Paul Airport on a Sunday morning would ever choose to purchase coffee from a coffee shop that has stylized deer and wolves and bears adorning its walls. Why would this business tripper in striped tie and Nordstroms shoes buy coffee from a
place pretending to have to do with the Great Outdoors? Well, because he is addicted
to caffeine and is in an airport and he pretty much has no other choice unless he wants
to go all the way over to concourse B, where he can buy coffee from the hip urban coffee
place called "Pavement" or "Hip Urban Coffee" or something.

Why Caribou Coffee? Because it's there.

I don't think this is what the ad agency folks had in mind when they made up the
slogans for the napkins and named the coffee and cookies as if you were going to be
purchasing them from a Patagonia catalog. But then, the only other interpretation I can
think of does not make much sense either. I mean, I am pretty sure that you are not
supposed to read the napkin and think, "If I drink this coffee, it'll be a real
accomplishment!" That's not the kind of thing you want to be communicating to your
customers if you are Caribou Coffee.

Bottom line: the napkin makes no sense at all. You're not even supposed to read
the thing. It is just there for you to use to wipe your mouth and if you happen to notice
the words "Mt. Everest," "Because it's there!," and "Caribou Coffee" then you might find
yourself identifying with George Leigh Mallory in the Minneapolis-St. Paul Airport, and if
a cup of coffee can make you feel like an explorer you might buy another and maybe
even a Jack London cookie to go with it, and that is all there is to it. I am OK with this. I
am used to marketers treating me like I am an idiot. And, I can get past the faulty logic
and nonsensical nature of a coffee napkin. What really bothers me, though, are the
words "Because it's there" – not simply because they are present on the napkin, but
because they are present in our culture in a way that makes it reasonable, if not
admirable, to use them as a real and actual explanation for doing something like
climbing a mountain.
I am the kind of person who feels the need to defend, explain and (often) apologize for every decision I make. I have not eaten meat in five years because I keep doing the math and adding up more reasons not to eat than to eat it. I am like this with everything and it drives my wife nuts. We were at the hardware store shopping for paint for our bedroom and she thought it would be a good idea to buy a little plastic brush designed to paint the thin molding that holds the window pane in. She asked me what I thought of this little gadget and I told her that I thought it looked like trash and we argued for about an hour. Me: Are you kidding? Look at that thing! Do you really want to spend your $1.19 on ensuring that pieces of crap like that continue to be brought in to existence? Cast your dollar vote: no more plastic trash! (I can be sort of a punk sometimes). Her: It might work, and we have about 800 of those little molding things to paint. Do you want to be there until next year with a razor blade scraping? (She's usually pretty reasonable).

We ended up buying it.¹ But not before expending 680 calories a piece and a total of 2.25 person hours in the process. This is just to give you an idea of the time and energy I spend (my own and that of the poor people around me) worrying about how my $1.19 is going to change the world. It's why the muscles in my neck are tense a lot of the time. It's why I get slightly heated about the way we think and talk about (among other things) mountain climbing. And it is why I wrote this thesis.

In all of the writing that has been produced on the subject of climbing there has been a glaring lack of space dedicated to the question of why we feel the need to go up, and what this urge means. When George Leigh Mallory quipped, "Because it's there," in

¹ But it didn't work!
response to a question by an American reporter who wondered why Mallory would do
such a thing as climb the highest mountain in the world, Mallory distilled and
summarized the basic attitude we all in the western world have toward climbing. His
was not an answer that was meant to be taken seriously. But that is only because it
was a question that could not be taken seriously. Of course we climb. And of course it
is a worthy activity.

Other climbers and writers have made more serious attempts to describe what it
is that causes them to ascend. Often they use more words than Mallory did, but they
have never really said much that could not be squeezed back down into another version
of, “because it’s there” or “because it’s who I am,” or “it’s a mystery.” But none of these
help us out all that much because they do not provide any sort of valid reason for
treating climbing as something normal. But then, this is exactly what is missing from all
climbing literature that I have ever found: a sense that climbing mountains might, in fact,
not be normal, that it is something that needs to be defended in the first place. The
closest any of these writers ever really come to defending the appropriateness of
climbing, in my experience, has been for the writer/ climber to ask some version of “Why
climb?” and answer with some version of “I don’t know” or “Because it’s good.”

For example, in The Mountain of My Fear. David Roberts writes:

If the old question, the one Mallory tried to answer is a valid one, I have
given up trying to meet it rationally. Perhaps, if one were immortal, he
would feel prompted to ask an ordinary person ‘Why do you live?’ How
well could that embarrassed mortal answer? Beyond the neatness of any
rationale for life lies its untranslatable glory, the elemental courage of
wanting to live. Climbing is serious, because it is like life for us who do it,
not like a sport; perhaps we betray it by trying to explain our reasons.²

What are we supposed to do with this? Immortals and non-climbers asking questions of embarrassed mortals and ordinary people. Untranslatable glory, elemental courage, and in the end, no answer at all. Roberts has given up on rationality all right. This type of answer to the "why climb?" question, while more earnest and thoughtful than Mallory's brings us no closer to a real explanation of why we climb. Roberts' is simply a less funny way of saying exactly what Mallory said: the question "why do we climb?" is not a valid one.

But it is a valid, relevant, answerable question, one that when answered provides insights into the ways that we think about ourselves and our place in the world. Mountaineering, because it lies on the extreme end of a continuum of climbing behavior that encompasses chair-lifts, day hikes, scenic drives, bouldering, and rock climbing among others, is a useful place to start in examining our relationship with the vertical plane. Mountaineering is dangerous. It is not an activity that a person undertakes without the knowledge that he or (less often) she is doing something on purpose that has the potential to be fatal. Thus, it makes for good stories. People die or lose extremities and we get Nature Disaster books, movies and magazine articles. And thanks to this high level of visibility, the climbing celebrities are called upon by the public to justify the very actions that made them famous in the first place. So the question, "why do you climb?" is one that is asked over and over again. But even the thoughtful, eloquent climbers (and David Roberts is both) are almost universally unable to explain what the heck they are doing.

Why are we so incapable of explaining why it is that we continually walk and climb and drive and ride to the highest places available to us? Beyond this, what does it mean that we do it? And if the climbers who follow this mystery urge onto the slippery,
cold walls of the highest mountains on earth where there is not even oxygen to fill a birthday balloon are unable to return and explain to the loved ones of those that died up there why they went in the first place and what they found that was worthwhile, then it seems to me that there is a pretty significant gap in our understanding of ourselves.

Can I presume to tell David Roberts why he climbed Mount Huntington (the mountain of his fear)? Would he even listen? I am sure of neither of these. What I do know, however, is that unlike Roberts, who is unwilling or unable to try to explain his reasons for climbing for fear that he might betray that for which he climbs, I have no such qualms. Why we climb and what it means are questions that can be answered. But to do so we must move beyond the half-hearted attempts of writers like Jon Krakauer who in his Author's Note to his collection of climbing essays, *Eiger Dreams* says, "Nowhere does this book come right out and address the central question - Why would a normal person want to do this stuff? - head on; I circle the issue continually, poke at it from behind with a long stick now and then, but at no point do I jump right in the cage and wrestle with the beast directly."

It is time to drop the stick and stop circling.

Recreational climbing as it is carried out in the western world, while usually held to be a commendable act of connection with wildness and the natural world, is actually a product and reflection of our basic disconnection from nature. At its worst ("bagging" K2 or Denali or Everest in synthetic pants with bottled oxygen and a disposable camera) climbing is basically just another example of predominantly white male conquest, domination, subjugation and exploitation. And at its "best," climbing in our culture is a

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superficial, fruitless attempt at reconnecting with something that is surely not located uphill. Climbing the way we do it is not innate. Nor is it "normal" in any sense of the word that takes into account a period of human history that does not include the last 200 years.

The true meaning of our climbing tendencies have been unknown or ignored for long enough, a problem this thesis will attempt to address. In it I will tell some climbing stories (such as they are) of my own. I will examine the genetic basis for our desire to gain elevation, showing that recreational climbing is more a product of cultural forces than of biological. I will illustrate the shift in perception that occurred in England and the United States in 17th, 18th and 19th centuries that moved mountains from the ugly, bad column in our brains over into the beautiful, good one. And how this shift did not change the fact that there was (and is) an inherent disconnection between our culture and the natural world. Finally, I will provide some examples of the types of relationships other cultures have had with mountains, hills, plateaus and the whole rest of the planet, contrasting these with our own.

This thesis will not sell any gear. Nor will it motivate anyone to head for the hills. It doesn't have any snazzy photos of death defying activities or purple prose written from the tops of the world. Mostly it just has some ideas that I stole and some others that I made up. And, like any thesis worth its salt, it has some random facts sprinkled here and there about things like the gastrointestinal system, the pope, and a person I know who has no sense of taste or smell – all of which (welcome to the inside of my brain) actually do have to do with the questions “Why do we climb?,” and “What does it mean?”
The Highest Point on Earth: genes and culture but mostly culture

I am trying to remember the first thing I ever climbed. My earliest memories of anything at all are a series of vague impressions of the little white house my parents bought in Seattle, Washington. I remember my mom's bowling ball in the hall closet (I have never seen her roll that, or any other bowling ball, in my life) and my dad's old letterman's jacket hanging above it. I remember the kitchen table and the steps leading down to the basement. The earliest dream I remember is one in which the basement in that house was transformed into a 7 eleven-type store where I could take my pick of chips and cookies. That was the first time I was sad to wake up. I accidentally cut myself with a pocketknife on the way back from the park, but that was later, after my first brother arrived. I have no memory of my mom being pregnant, but I do have an image of being dropped off at the Morris' house when my dad was taking her to the hospital so I could get a new brother. There was a sandbox in the backyard, and I had a pair of socks that I left out there to play with. I would put them on and pretend that my feet were pigs. But I don't remember my first climb. It must have been a tree or a jungle gym, maybe a fence.

I am certain that I was climbing by the time we moved to Tacoma, but I think that I must have climbed in the way that I did everything else I was capable of as a seven-year-old. I sat on the heater vent and ate cinnamon toast before leaving for school while it was still dark out; I wrestled in the living room with my brother, spiderman, and an octopus that my dad turned into; I ran in circles around my school yelling, "Eat nails! Eat nails!" (Why? I know not). I rode my bike and hid under the porch and wore a watch that I couldn’t get used to and knocked my front teeth out on the kitchen table and took baths and ruined a 99 cent ball on the rose bush. But those are all just things that you do when you are small. You watch your dad work on the car. You notice the dust
floating in the garage sunshine. You walk to school with your mom and you show off the stitches on your thumb. That is how it works. There is not really any such thing as doing something, because everything you do is something. There is no distinguishing between hopping the fence into your neighbor's yard and drinking half a cup of coke with both hands only on the weekend.

I was born in southern California. My parents went to Seattle just after I started walking so my dad could get a master's degree in art. He never finished, which is pretty artistic if you ask me. We stayed in Washington where my mom worked as a labor and delivery nurse and my dad stayed up late to tie oil tankers off when they arrived at the shipyards in Tacoma. I squirmed around in the sandbox with socks on. My brother spent his time dumping my mom's perfume out the upstairs window. Family was in California, and we would fly down every summer so that my mom wouldn't go insane. My grandma lived in Arcadia, which is where the Santa Anita racetrack is, and she would always know the tricks for avoiding the racetrack traffic. My grandma had sycamore trees in her front yard. There was one in particular that was accessible to me by the time I hit second or third grade. How to describe it? It was kind of like a wishbone jammed slantways into the ground. It had a short trunk with two horizontal branches that stuck out over the St. Augustine grass of the yard (I knew the name of the grass because it was different from Tacoma grass - you could make it whistle between your thumbs). That tree could not have been the first I ever climbed, but it was the first tree I spent a significant amount of time in. It was many things in my mind, including a pirate ship and a large machine with an unknown purpose. Mostly, though, it was a sycamore tree with bark that flaked off in large satisfying scabs and branches that bounced and leaves.
By third grade I must have grown to the point where I was able to wander a little bit more and was physically capable of going up more things because I have a whole collection of climbing memories starting at this point in my life. We were in Edmonds, Washington now, in the house my second brother was born into. He arrived in a snowstorm and was my show and tell item that day in class, although I didn’t get to show him since he was busy arriving. I just told.

Down at the end of our street was a bluff of sand that looked out over a shopping center and a parking lot. The bluff was pretty steep and was eroding into large dunes at its base. My friends and I would scramble around, jumping from what seemed like serious heights, sinking up to our knees upon landing.

There was also a medium-sized evergreen in our front yard, what kind I am not sure… Douglas fir maybe? Whatever it was, it made it into all of my third-grade landscape drawings of our house. At some point, I climbed up into that tree and undertook a project that would not even occur to me as being possible today. I don’t know where I got the idea, but I built a nest up there twenty or thirty feet off the ground in the branches of my family’s unidentified evergreen. I must have broken branches from the tree itself. I don’t think that I collected any from the ground or other trees because my memory of the nest building is that it all took place in the tree. I found a couple of relatively thick branches three or four feet apart and laid smaller ones across those, and smaller ones on top of those and on and on until I had a platform of good smelling, green, pokey branches. This was probably not really that unique a project for a nine year-old. I have certainly built and excavated and found my fair share of forts and clubhouses since then, not all of them off the ground in trees (one was a bunker that I dug under the back porch with a swap meet army shovel), but many. There is something almost foreign about this particular memory of mine, as if that small person in the tree in my mind has nothing to do with the larger person I am today. I suppose I feel
this way about many of my childhood memories. Perhaps most of us do. And maybe I am being melodramatic, but I can't help but feel sad that the nine-year-old me, the one who looks at a tree and sees a comfortable, logical place to inhabit, a place to read books, to sit in the rain, is gone.

* * *

Gray Thompson remembers the first thing he ever climbed. Thompson is well-known in the American climbing community, having made many first ascents and climbed extensively in the Himalayas, the Canadian Rockies and the Sierras. In 1967, he was a member of a team of Harvard and Dartmouth students that made the first ascent of the direct south face of Denali, “which is an 11,000 foot face and is still probably the biggest and certainly the most dangerous and maybe the most difficult route on Denali... that goes right to the summit at least.” He is a professor of geology at the University of Montana, Missoula, and is author and co-author of numerous books on geology and earth science. He has a massive slide collection: photos of him and his climbing partners sprawled out on the sides of granite slabs speckled with yellow and green lichen at Cochise's Stronghold in Arizona, posing beneath Denali in 1967, swallowed by the looming darkness of north faces in the Canadian Rockies. Thompson continues to climb to this day, although in recent years his focus has shifted toward “safer” climbs (which still means “impossible” and “terrifying” to people like me) in places like the Sierra where the sun shines and there is little danger of avalanche or rock fall.

The first thing that Thompson climbed was a tree. He remembers. He grew up in a small New England town that was lacking in jungle gyms but had a plentiful supply of trees, and he and his brother and sister “used to scramble up and down trees.”

Thompson has a theory about why people climb.

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Most kids climb. You see it at parks where they climb on jungle gyms. In one sense I think it’s sort of an atavistic urge to climb up things. And, I think a lot of kids lose it as they get older. There are some people who just retain that urge that most children have into what we fondly regard as adulthood. They are the people who are the real climbers. So the answer to ‘why do you climb?’ for a lot of people is ‘because I am a climber. Because I haven’t lost that atavistic, or primal sense of ‘this is what I should be doing.’

Thompson is not the only person who has made this observation about kids and climbing. In the opening pages of *Give Me the Hills*, Miriam Underhill writes about her own childhood experiences with climbing. Underhill started her climbing career in the 1920s in Europe. She was one of the first prominent woman climbers, and she started the practice of “manless climbing” – that’s right, no boys allowed. Her book begins like this:

‘One thing is sure – she doesn’t want dolls for her birthday. I got one downtown and she turned away in disgust. Aunt Ellen came last night. She says she is going to buy her a greased pole or a tree to climb or something of that order.’ This, the first written record of my inclination towards climbing, occurs in a letter from my mother to her mother, back in the last century (by a few months).

Thompson and Underhill are obviously two people who carried their childhood affinity for climbing into their adult lives. They are not alone as climbers who can trace their climbing back to childhood. Neither are they alone as people who can remember climbing as children. Surely the majority of us have fences and poles and trees and walls that we put under us as kids. Thompson believes that for one reason or another some of us just happen to hold on to that childhood climbing desire. He believes that climbing is simply a part of human nature. Thompson even uses the word “atavistic”

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5 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
(roughly, the reappearance of characteristics of some remote ancestor) to describe this behavior.

So, is that it then? We climb because we are primates? No one can deny that we possess the flexible arms, legs, fingers, toes, and double-barreled eyeballs (that provide the ability to judge distance, which comes in handy in moving from branch to branch when the ground is far below) that are the inheritance of a tree-climbing ancestry. But we have to be careful with how far we take this argument about the genetic causes of our climbing behavior.

The field of evolutionary psychology, (or sociobiology or behavioral ecology or Darwinian anthropology as it has been variously called) though, has some interesting things to say about the genetic foundation of human behavior and can be used to shed a small amount of light on the question of why people go up. In his book, The Moral Animal, Robert Wright presents what amounts to a crash course on the relevance of evolutionary psychology to everyday life. The questions addressed by this relatively new field of inquiry “range from the mundane to the spiritual and touch on just about everything that matters.” Wright explains that practitioners of evolutionary psychology are fighting “the idea that biology doesn’t matter — that the uniquely malleable human mind, together with the unique force of culture has severed our behavior from its evolutionary roots; that there is no inherent human nature driving human events.”

What evolutionary psychologists attempt to do, then, is to find the patterns in human nature and behavior that occur in cultures across the world.

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9 Ibid., page 5
Beneath the global crazy quilt of rituals and customs, they [evolutionary psychologists] see recurring patterns in the structure of family, friendship, politics, courtship, morality. They believe the evolutionary design of human beings explains these patterns: why people in all cultures worry about social status... why people in all cultures not only gossip, but gossip about the same kinds of things... why people everywhere feel guilt...[and] have a deep sense of justice.¹⁰

I love that there are scientists out there conducting scholarly work on the genetic basis for gossip. And even more than that, I love the fact that there are millions of humans in the world gossiping about the same stuff I enjoy listening to and talking about. It makes me feel like I am a part of a species, not just an individual product of some television, internet, consumer culture that was invented five minutes ago. I have things in common with people who never attended middle school, who have never gotten a free refill or a high school diploma. I have more than a remote control and straight teeth. I have a genetic heritage.

Evolutionary psychology is based upon a small theory that Charles Darwin called natural selection. That we remember the creator of this theory as Charles Darwin is actually a part of an interesting story involving another naturalist/explorer named Alfred Russel Wallace. Wallace wrote to Darwin with his own theory of natural selection (although he didn't call it that) before Darwin had published On the Origin of Species, causing poor Charlie nearly to lay an egg - I wonder what the evolutionary psychologists would say about that. You can read about this episode in Wright's book¹¹ and in David Quammen's The Song of the Dodo.¹² Ultimately, two papers, one by Darwin, the other by Wallace, on the subject of natural selection were presented at the Linnean Society

¹⁰ Ibid., pages 6-7
¹¹ Ibid., pages 301-10
meeting of July 1, 1858. But Darwin pretty much got, and continues to get, the credit for inventing the theory that turned out to be so confounding to Kansas school boards.

I refer to natural selection as a "small theory" partly because I want you to think that I am an incorrigible maverick (That's right, I scoff at gravity, relativity and all of the laws of thermodynamics too). But also because it is really not all that complicated. Even the pope understands it. He says it's OK to believe in it, in case that was something you were worried about. The theory of natural selection says approximately this: genetic traits that allow an individual to survive and reproduce successfully will be passed on to the next generation. Those that don't won't. That's it. End of theory.

Natural selection is driven by the random mutation and recombination of genes in individual members of a species. These mutations result in traits that are either 1) beneficial 2) detrimental or 3) irrelevant to that individual's chances to survive and reproduce. Of course, a trait's status as beneficial, detrimental, or irrelevant is defined by its relationship to the outside environment. Ultimately, it is the environment that does the selecting. You might end up with a bigger beak, a set of lungs that you can use outside of the water, or a shorter gestation period (all of which in the right conditions might help you to pass your genes on). OR you might end up humpbacked, pigeon-toed, or stupid (none of which are likely to help you in your quest to recreate small versions of you). OR you might end up with an appendix, or green eyes, or something else equally as confusing and ambiguous that has no discernible effect on your ability to reproduce. This process is continuous, ongoing and is responsible for variation among individuals of the same species. Indeed, it is responsible for the very existence of separate species. Over the course of millions and millions of years, natural selection has produced (and is continuing to modify) rock wrens, limpets, whirligig beetles,
mudpuppies, hellbenders, hermit crabs, wisteria, kelp, star-nosed moles, narwhals, rock
pigeons, polar bears, yellow-rumped warblers, ice plant, catfish, dogfish, goosefish,
batfish, frogfish, cavefish, flyingfish, pearlfish, needlefish and mule deer, and that's only
a fraction of a fraction of a fraction of the species that still happen to be around. Natural
selection has also, I am happy to report, resulted in my sitting here writing this, and now
your sitting here reading it. We are all, everyone of us on this planet, the result of an
unthinkable number of minute positive and negative and neutral genetic adjustments - a
little bipedalism here, some darker skin pigmentation there, a bit more hair, a bit less
stomach, a bit more brain... all of it passed through our genes from one generation to
the next.

To consider humans to be participants in the process of natural selection, and
there is no doubt that we should (we do, after all, pass on our genes as well as the next
species), is to open lines of questioning that allow us to examine the genetic roots and
causes of all human characteristics - not only physical ones, but our behavioral
characteristics as well. Obviously, this includes climbing behavior. Gary Cziko in his
informative, intimidating book, The Things We Do, makes the case that “a biologically
inspired view of behavior that uses the insights of Bernard and Darwin is far superior to
the one-way cause effect approach currently embraced by mainstream behavioral
scientists.” 14 Cziko believes that the path to a better understanding of human behavior
winds through the work of Charles Darwin and one of his (Darwin’s) contemporaries, a
biologist named Claude Bernard. In the mid-1800s Bernard conducted work on the
internal processes of living organisms, illustrating an important conceptual idea about
the manner in which living organisms interact with the outside world; animals and plants
are able to regulate their internal environments, maintaining relatively constant
temperatures independent of external forces (a process we now refer to as homeostasis,
and learn about in high school biology). And perhaps even more significant is the fact
(first identified by Bernard) that organisms are also able to control, or utilize, certain
aspects of their external environments: beavers build dams; ospreys rise on updrafts;
cutthroat trout propel themselves through water; humans subdivide, develop and
landscape. "What we see in these and all instances of purposeful behavior are not
reactions to environmental forces, but rather actions that compensate for environmental
forces to achieve the organism's goal, using behavior that appears outside the scope of
Newton's laws of motion" [author's emphasis]. Which is not to say that behavioral
responses exempt animals from the Newtonian laws of motion. They do, however, allow
an owl, for example, to move from a barn roof to the ground in way that a bowling ball
simply is not capable of. At its most basic, behavior is the utilization of physical laws for
the benefit of the behaving.

Cziko's argument, then, is that all animate behavior, being the result of
interactions with the external environment (Bernard) and also being the result of
generations of genetic trial and error (Darwin), is ultimately biological in nature. Thus,
we can ask the question, "Why do we behave in a certain way?" and (according to
Cziko) answer it, at least theoretically, by saying, "Because 1) we are animate organisms
and 2) because that behavior is beneficial (or at least not terminally detrimental) to us in
physical and genetically adaptive ways. That is, we make bread because we can AND
because it is full of carbohydrates that, when craved and consumed by our early
ancestors, made them more likely to survive and reproduce. Or (and perhaps more

14 Gary Cziko, The Things We Do: Using the Lessons of Bernard and Darwin to Understand the
15 Ibid., pages 5-6
relevantly) we climb hills because there is nothing genetically “bad” in doing so. There might even be something genetically “good.”

But, is all human behavior, as Cziko and Wright suggest, only the result of biological, evolutionary factors? What role does culture play in all of this? According to Cziko, there is currently a significant amount of debate on this topic. “Ethologists, sociobiologists and evolutionary psychologists tend to believe that such explanations [evolutionary ones] exist for all behavior, and they point to the impressive success this approach has in making sense of animal behavior.”\(^{16}\) However, other scientists do not agree, especially those who focus on the importance of cultural and physical environments as the determining factors of human behavior. These scholars point to the vast range of human behavior represented in many different cultures all around the world and ask the question: can all of the behaviors everywhere truly be ascribed to genetics? One could also raise questions about those behaviors, such as the ones practiced by Catholic priests and nuns, vegetarians, (and climbers) that appear to fly directly in the face of our sexually reproducing, meat-eating genetic heritage.

Wright bridges this gap between the genetic and the cultural in The Moral Animal, by pointing out that environmental and cultural (non-genetic) influences are, in fact, key factors in determining human behavioral impulses. “Evolutionary psychologists, contrary to common expectation, subscribe to a cardinal doctrine of twentieth-century psychology and psychiatry: the potency of early social environment in shaping the adult mind.”\(^{17}\) Wright does not suggest that all behavior is only the result of genes. Nor does he say that some behaviors exist completely independent of our genetic baggage, that they are merely learned behaviors that come from culture and culture alone. What he

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\(^{16}\) ibid., page 248
\(^{17}\) Robert Wright, The Moral Animal page 8
does say is that humans' capacity to be influenced by social and other environmental factors itself is a function of genetics, that vegetarianism and purposeful celibacy themselves come from an innate human genetic flexibility that causes us to respond in different ways to environmental factors during our development. Wright uses a metaphor, "the knobs of human nature," to illustrate this point. The knobs represent the common characteristics shared by humans the world over: guilt, greed, ambition, and so on. Each knob is capable of being set at a different level based on external forces affecting a human's development. However, that these knobs exist in the first place, and that they have the capacity to be set at different levels, are the result of genetics... are the results of natural selection.

This theory shared by Wright and Cziko, that people behave the way they do based on a genetic sensitivity to environmental influences, which shape their personalities during development, is something that you might be wary of. It is after all the type of broad, foolproof theory that given its very nature is uncontradictable, saying as it does that all behavior is genetic except those behaviors that are social, and those are genetic too. Nonetheless it is an important observation if only because it recognizes the fact that underneath all of our culture there are a whole bunch of biological beings that pass on their genes just like all the rest of the plants and animals on this planet.

To think that human behavior, any behavior, could be built upon a non-biological foundation is to ignore the fact that we are members of the 400,000 year old species of Homo sapiens. We are humans, not zebras, or wallabies, or snails, or rock doves, or fruit flies, or anything else that we aren't. We act like humans (we eat bread and gossip) because that's what we are. Which is, of course, not to say that culture does not influence human behavior, or that there are not many different types of culture with many

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18 Ibid., page 9
different influences. Culture is very much an important factor in defining and determining human behavior. It is just that there is no way to separate culture from genes to the point where genes become irrelevant.

But, just how important our genes are in causing us to ascend is not a question that can be answered without first defining what type of “climbing” is being addressed. Western white male climbing conducted by people from places like the U.S., England and New Zealand (who often go to other countries and continents to do it) is obviously not the same as climbing as it is practiced by Sherpas and the Hopi. It is this very difference that inevitably leads to the conclusion that the type of climbing written about in Outside magazine, by people like Jon Krakauer, cannot even be considered a pervasive behavior. When examined closely, it becomes clear that western recreational climbing is, in reality, a sort of anomalous behavior that is being expressed primarily because of cultural factors that (though ultimately genetic) really do have more to do with a social environment that encourages behavior and thought that puts people on top of things almost incidentally.

To arrive at this conclusion we can use the method Wright employs in The Moral Animal to test theories about the evolutionary roots of specific human behaviors or traits. On the surface this is somewhat of a confusing exercise, as Wright has already made it clear that he believes all human behavior to be genetically determined. It seems like you could pretty much get away with saying “It’s genetic!” about any old behavior that popped into your head and you’d be fine. Jealousy? It’s genetic! Ambition? It’s genetic! The nurturing of friendships? It’s genetic! But, the point of evaluating these behavioral

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theories is not to determine whether or not the specific behavior is in fact genetic; it is to examine the truthfulness of the particular theory under scrutiny. The point is to figure out if the theory is telling a truth about human nature - in other words, to figure out if the theory actually does identify and explain a pervasive human behavior.

"About each theory," Wright writes, "we ask a series of questions, and the answers nourish belief or doubt or ambivalence." He tests the theory of parental investment by asking two basic questions: 1) Does human behavior comply with the theory in the most basic ways? ("Are women more choosy about sexual partners than men?" and 2) Can we show that the logic of the theory is obeyed generally? (Would such behavior be genetically beneficial to women and men?). By answering these questions, Wright is able to make a strong case for the genetic basis for differing attitudes towards sex in men and women. He illustrates the fact that men are usually less choosy about sexual partners than women are, and he shows the direct reproductive benefits to both men and women of behaving the way they do: men are more likely to successfully reproduce if they have sex with more than one partner; women are more likely to reproduce successfully if they choose the right partner. He confirms, based on observations of human behavior and the principles of natural selection, that the theory of parental investment is a truth about humans.

What, then, could our theory on the genetic basis for climbing be? We might start with something like: human climbing behavior is a genetic adaptation that exists because it has consistently led to a greater degree of reproductive success in climbing individuals (people who climbed saw more, hunted better or avoided predators more easily and therefore had more babies). Now we ask the question, does human behavior

\[20\] Robert Wright, *The Moral Animal* page 43
\[21\] *Ibid.*, page 43
comply with the theory in the most basic ways? In other words, do humans climb? Well, sure we do. All of us climb to some degree. It is unavoidable given that we live in a three dimensional world; wherever you go you are either ascending, descending or not. But it is at this point that we run into the problem of what type of climbing we are talking about. If we call climbing the practice of purposefully aiming up and going until there is no more up available (as we do in the western world), the theory on the genetic causes of climbing begins to unravel. Do humans climb in this way? Do we treat climbing as an end in and of itself? Yes. We have how-to guides in bookstores and libraries that teach us complicated techniques for getting up steep walls. There is a multi-million dollar per year industry devoted to producing and distributing climbing gear: helmets, carabiners, crampons, bolts, ropes, harnesses, ice axes, special chalk bags, special shoes, special shirts and pants and shorts... all of it designed to help us go up. Even people who don’t spend lots of cash on climbing equipment make a habit of going up things on purpose. You can see them on the hills outside of town, their T-shirts shining from a distance.

But this has not always been the case. Rock climbing as it is practiced in countless climbing gyms across the land is only fifteen or twenty years old. And mountain climbing as a sport is only about two hundred years old, beginning as far as most historians of climbing are concerned with the ascent of Mont Blanc in 1786 by a Swiss farmer named Jacques Balmat. And, two hundred forty five years earlier, when in 1541 another Swiss, (this one a naturalist) Conrad Gessner, wrote to a friend “I am resolved that as long as God grants me life, I will each year climb some mountains,” his decision was considered to be about plumb wacky. People simply did not climb

mountains. They were high and useless and scary, and there was more than enough work to be done in the valleys. So, in answer to Wright's first question, it would appear that we have to admit that, yes, humans do in fact climb, but that this has not always been the case everywhere in every culture, and there have been times in our past when some humans (because of their culture) avoided mountains like the plague.

Now for Wright's second question; what is genetically beneficial about climbing? Here again the definition we choose for climbing becomes especially important. There are clear reproductive benefits to vertical travel. Safety from predators as well as an increased ability to locate and capture prey or fruit, are undeniable benefits that may have encouraged humans to climb. Obviously, there was something genetically beneficial to human ancestors' climbing up into trees (or maybe even onto rocks); otherwise, I wouldn't have these handy ball and socket joints attaching my arms to my torso, or binocular vision or a sensitive inner ear or flexible, gripping fingers.

However, if we examine the current practice of treating climbing itself as a worthy activity, rather than as a means to some other genetically beneficial end, it becomes apparent that there might even be something maladaptive, or genetically detrimental, to this sort of climbing. Climbing Mount Everest or K2 or Denali, for example, is not an activity well-suited to the survival and reproduction of the climbers. I mean, if you are climbing up to elevations where high altitude pulmonary edema, high altitude cerebral edema, avalanches, freezing temperatures, and large falling rocks are waiting to do you in, you are participating in natural selection all right. Your genes stand a pretty good chance of not going anywhere.

Obviously, the risks of sport climbing in a gym or even on cliffs are not so great as those of mountaineering. But the risks are still there. People fall. People get hurt. People who wouldn't fall and wouldn't get hurt if they hadn't gone up in the first place.
And even the benefits of walking up stairs to look out from the top of the Empire State Building or the Statue of Liberty are unclear to me, beyond the cardiovascular, that is.

Thus, the answer to the questions "do humans climb simply for the sake of climbing?" and "is there something genetically adaptive in their doing so?" lead us away from a clear genetic explanation for western climbing.

There is, however, the possibility that the way we climb might be the result of maladaptive genes at work. This is something that Wright addresses in a bit of a roundabout way in his book. He writes, "The dustbin of genetic history overflows with failed experiments."^24 In this sentence he is referring to the many species that hit evolutionary dead-ends and dropped out of existence. They turned out to be the wrong color, or their necks were too short, or they didn't have enough hair when things started to get cold. Usually we think of such species as having been unlucky enough to end up with maladaptive physical traits that brought about their demise. Or perhaps, they simply did not evolve new adaptive traits quickly enough to not be out-competed by other species. What Wright does not point out, though, is that these traits may not have been only physical. They could just as easily have been behavioral traits as well. Species are just as likely to evolve traits (both physical and behavioral) that are detrimental to their ability to perpetuate themselves. It would be a mistake to assume that simply because a species happens to be in existence today every one of its traits is a positive one. The species might just be in the process of going extinct.

Therefore, claiming that all human behavior is genetically based is perfectly compatible with the idea that all human behaviors are not necessarily genetically

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adaptive. Perhaps climbing in the form of rock climbing, mountaineering and view hiking, then, really is atavistic as Gray Thompson suggests. Maybe it is a behavior that was once evolutionarily beneficial to us, but is now expressed as a recreational activity, as a form of play in which we act out (in varying degrees of intensity) the no longer necessary urges that drove our ancestors into the trees.

However, to make a case for this type of recreational climbing as the result of genetics (even as the result of "faulty," maladaptive genetics) we have to somehow account for the fact that people did not express these genes until the late 1700s. It might, therefore, be more fruitful to turn toward the cultural determinants of human behavior for an explanation of western climbing.

By accepting the basic arguments of evolutionary biology that say all behavior is genetic, we are not saying that there is no such thing as culture. We are merely stating that culture is a result of the genetic makeup of the organisms that comprise a culture. The effect of societal, or cultural, influences on developing individuals, as I have already pointed out, is inherent to the principles of evolutionary psychology. Culture, then, (in a somewhat confusing twist), both despite and because of the fact that it is based on genetics, is an important factor in influencing human behavior.

Using this information, it is possible to shift the existence of recreational climbing away from purely biological causes and effects, and (in part at least) on to the shoulders of the cultural motivations and rewards we have created surrounding this activity. This is exactly what I intend to do. Thanks to our culture, the very fact that climbing may be physically dangerous at times (in combination with other physical attributes acquired by the tan, in-shape climbers) leads to a greater degree of reproductive success in those climbers that do survive. I.e., people climb because they are rewarded for doing so by our culture, and these rewards afford genetic benefits.
Human climbing behavior as it has been carried out over the past two hundred years or so in the western world is the result of cultural influences that place value on certain aspects of climbing that are not directly related to our tree-climbing genetic background. While genes are undeniably the foundation for all human behavior, and are also the reason that we are physically capable of ascending hills and trees and tricky rocks, the bottom line is that we don't climb because it is a leftover, atavistic, genetic behavior. We climb because we are a part of a culture that rewards conquest, domination, and disconnection. We are not genetic climbers. We are cultural climbers.

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When I climbed into my trees as a nine-year old I did not even realize that I was climbing, or rather, that climbing was anything different from doing anything else. I simply occupied my three-dimensional world in the only way that I knew how. I went over and across and through and in and out and, of course, up and down. I think that Gray Thompson is right about kids; they are climbers. But, they are incidental climbers. And climbing, as it is carried out by the first asencers, peak baggers and even the view hikers of the world, is not the same as the incidental climbing carried out by nine-year-olds in their front yards. Climbing as something separate from everything else is a recent invention, one that is revealing, I think, when we consider it in relation to the way we in the western world think about and occupy the natural world. Obviously, climbing is a part of human nature. That it is in us is evident not only in our physiology but also in the very fact that we do climb as kids, and that there are examples of individuals and entire cultures climbing in healthy ways. But for us to claim that, in the United States, we climb hills and mountains and walls because it is a part of who we are, because it is
human nature, would be an oversimplification and a mistake. Of course, everything we do is a part of who we are. And genes do provide the foundation for all human behavior. But the fact of the matter is, we do not desire to plant flags at the highest point on earth because it is in our genes. We want to plant flags at the highest point on earth because we are members of a culture that wants to plant flags at the highest point on earth.
Explosions and Lists; parenthetical anecdote # 1 (from which conclusions may or may not be drawn)

There are certain things that just don't seem to stick in my brain. Things like dates and times and street names. Yesterday, for instance, someone asked me something like, “April second, isn't that Monday?” I couldn't even have said that the day we were currently experiencing was Thursday, the 29th of March, much less provide the date of the Monday after the upcoming weekend. Even now I am sitting here with my day planner open so that I can get the dates right as I tell this story. The part of my brain that is supposed to cache dates and weekdays just seems to be absent. And never ask me how to get somewhere because I will tell you a long story that includes landmarks that very few other people (as I have learned) pay attention to. It will take you at least as long to read my directions as it will to actually get where you want to go. “Turn right onto the little street that looks like a driveway with two urn things that have flowers in them, but somebody came in the middle of the night and smashed one of them so there are no longer two" kind of stuff. Mostly I navigate my way through the world by feel and through my days by hunger and other peoples’ watches.

This is fine when I am not doing that many things or if it doesn't matter if I am on time. But when my days fill up with classes and books and meetings and work and papers and meals and e-mail and telephone calls, I start forgetting things. Last semester, for example, I was taking 12 credits worth of classes, working 30 hours a week, pretending to be making progress on this here thesis, and basically failing at all of it. I realize that being busy is not all that unique or noteworthy, and I'm definitely aware that there are people in the world who are much busier than I am even when I feel at my busiest. My friend Herbie Duber, for example, is in Medical School in New York. He sleeps 45 minutes a day and spends the rest of his time starting student health clinics in
foreign countries and learning about things like the renal and gastrointestinal system. I have never been, and never will be, as busy as people like Herbie who care about things and are willing not to sleep (I guess this is probably because one of the things I care about is sleep).

But when I get busy (by my own standards) to the point that important things start disappearing from my life only to reappear as Oh Lord, Something I Should Have Done Two Weeks Ago, I start making lists. It took me a while to figure out this strategy, but once I did, I learned something: a list can be a very powerful tool.

When you sit down to make a list you are doing more than simply writing a series of tasks and commitments on a piece of paper. You are taking your vast, complex world of almost infinite possibilities and reducing it to a series of finite tasks that can be crossed out or checked off. I wonder if part of the power in a list lies in the fact that you are giving each item a name (maybe even a number, if you are feeling especially obsessive-compulsive) and in doing so you are able to take possession of it, to define it in understandable, perfectly doable terms. “Write thank you letters” magically turns “Shoot! I forgot to write those letters again. When am I going to do it?” into a task that no longer hangs over you. It’s just on the list.

Also, once created, a list is more than a collection of individual items. It is... itself. And, as itself, it provides a reason to complete each of the tasks beyond the necessary and obvious ones inherent in the tasks themselves. That is, you complete the list in large part simply because you wrote it and you want to cross off each of the items regardless of what they are. I have found that there is a very real sense of satisfaction

25 He wrote me a letter that had the following information about the gastrointestinal system: “Did you know that the urge to defecate comes when the rectum is 25% full? Did you know that there is actually a name (the Valsalva Maneuver) for the thing you do when you hold your breath and push really hard to go poop?” My question: Do we really need to name everything?
that comes from crossing items off lists. I'll even write things down that I have already
done just so I can make my little check mark in the little box that I draw beside each
task.

On Thursday, February 8th I wrote myself the following list:

- Bowling with kindergarten
- Call Don Snow
- Talk with reference librarian
- Interlibrary loan
- Read 4 chapters, Eiger Dreams
- Read 1 history essay
- Summarize history essay
- Find Jack Turner
- Pick up Sean and Alex
- Conduct e-mail business
- Get envelopes

Here’s the thing, I did all of it and I felt like I had a productive day. Without the
list I probably would have just gone bowling in the morning with Kristen’s kindergarten
class. I might have read a little of Eiger Dreams and watched some TV, snacked a
little, maybe have gone for a walk, and then I would have picked Sean and Alex up from
the airport. But would I have gotten envelopes? Or gone in to talk to the reference
librarian? Probably not. What’s more, even if I had done all of those tasks, without the
list I am not sure I would have gotten any real satisfaction out of the fact that I read and
summarized a history essay for class or stopped by Interlibrary Loan to pick up the
books I had requested. I probably would not even have come to the conclusion that I

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26 It is fun to go places with kindergarteners because every place you go, people want to show
you things. You could easily get a tour of the kitchen at Burger King (if you so desired) if you
walked in with twenty of these small humans who are so new in the world that they have just
learned what it means when the recess bell rings. When I went bowling with Kristen’s class we
got a grand tour of the guts of a bowling alley. A man took us back and showed us the machines
that pick up the pins and re-rack them, and that spit the balls back down to the end of the lane.
He told us that there were 50,000 moving parts in those machines. We all nodded (me and some
had done anything worthy of note on February 8th if I didn’t have a leftover piece of paper as evidence that I had been places and produced things. In the end what did I actually accomplish? Yes, I did all of the actual tasks that I had written down. I did find Jack Turner’s e-mail address. I did summarize a history essay. And I did spend 45 minutes talking with Barry, the curly headed librarian who sits up in the science reference section on the fifth floor of the Maureen and Mike Mansfield Library at the University of Montana. But, more to the point, I finished my list. If there was any true accomplishment carried out on my not-too-exciting winter day it was that. I had taken all of the pointless little mundane bits of my life that had filled my day and turned them into productivity. I had Done Something.

I had made a list.

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Maar volcanoes are not volcanoes as you usually think about them. They are not large mountains with snow and trees that blast dust and ash over the entire northwest. Nor are they islands in the Pacific Ocean that continue to grow, covering highways with red magma and attracting tourists from New Jersey and Japan. Maar volcanoes are holes in the ground. Compared to the holes and divots and wedges excavated by rivers and glaciers they are not even that big, usually about a kilometer in diameter. But, when you stand at the edge of one of these holes and look across to the other side and imagine the size of explosion it would take to move that volume of dirt and rock, you start to think that maybe a kilometer really isn’t that small.

kindergarteners and one of the dads who had a shaved head and a red goatee and a wrestling t shirt) like we knew what that meant and moved down so the people behind us could see too. 27 jackaltango@hotmail.com
Maars form when underground magma makes contact with groundwater, creating a massive steam explosion. The hole created by this explosion often fills with water (thus, the name "maar" as in Español for sea). You can find these volcanoes in the Sonoran Desert of Mexico, in the Sudan, Ethiopia, Bolivia, south Australia, Death Valley, and probably lots of other places that I don’t know about.

The maar that I want to tell you about is Ubehebe Crater. Thanks to the efforts of the U.S. National Park Service you can drive on a paved road to its rim, park in the parking lot and read a brown and white interpretive sign that tells you all about the crater. This maar is located at the north end of the park in Death Valley and is the largest and the youngest in a field of maar volcanoes. It erupted around 2,000 years ago, about the time when Mary and Joseph were on their way to Bethlehem to get counted in the census. This crater is approximately half a mile wide and 770 feet deep, and there is a trail that winds its way down into it from the parking lot. You can walk down to the puddles and mud that occupy the floor of the crater and take pictures or throw dirt clods or watch ants.

This is a trail that I have walked down a couple of times in my life. I am not sure why I feel the need to go down to the bottom of this large hole, but I do. I think a large part of it has to do with getting out of the wind. The wind at the top of Ubehebe is strong and cold (at least in the winter, which is the only time you'll ever find me in Death Valley) and if you want to do more than read the sign and get back in the car and if you want to get out of the wind, you pretty much have to go down the trail. But that’s disingenuous. I think that I'd walk down into this hole even if there was no wind, so never mind the wind. It’s a hole. I go down into it.
One winter, I walked down into this crater with three other people. One was a friend of mine (Damien) and the other two (Cameron and Heon) were acquaintances whom I only knew because my friend had invited them to come on a car camping trip to Death Valley. We screwed around at the bottom of the hole for awhile, enjoying our time in "nature" (It sure is great not to be in the city, what a relaxing atmosphere; such clean air, and the scenery is just astonishing... here, take my picture with that cloud in the background... yack yack yack) before we got the bright idea to climb out of the crater on the side opposite of where the trail comes down.

Small canyons had eroded into the side of the crater and from the bottom it looked like we could pick one and take it to the top. We climbed up a short way into a couple of them, chose a canyon that looked hopeful and started making our way up. In ten or fifteen minutes, the well-defined canyon went away, and along with it went the easy climbing. Damien and Heon sensibly decided that it was time to go back. They climbed back down and walked out of the crater using the trail. Cameron and I kept going.

In the annals of climbing, this particular climb of ours most definitely does not stand out as anything special. It was not all that technically difficult; a real climber probably wouldn't even consider it anything more than a scamper. To Cameron and me, though, this climb mattered. It was steep and we felt exposed and frightened at points. We climbed up the side of Ubehebe Crater, digging our fingers into the mud and gravel and trying not to slide, and if one of us had fallen it would have been bad news. But,

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28 Cameron is the only person I have ever met who has no sense of smell or taste. He was born this way, and has his picture on the walls of many restaurants that challenge their patrons to eat large portions of spicy food and then reward them with more free spicy food and polaroid portraits on the wall when/if they succeed. I spent an embarrassing amount of time plying him with questions about how he can decide what types of food he finds to be "good" (temperature and consistency) and what its "like" not to smell anything (its kind of like being able to smell things, only the opposite). He was very patient with me.
neither of us did, and we made it to the "top," where we were so excited by our accomplishment that we (who had just met two days ago when we were shopping for cheese and pasta to eat in Death Valley) gave each other a great big hug and clapped each other on the back and talked about our climb all the way back to the parking lot, and for the next four days.

Out of all the climbs I have conducted in my non-climbing life, this one has to be, by far, the most meaningless. For one thing, it was a hole. Granted it was a fairly large hole, one that was created by an explosion big enough to measure in the kinds of units they use to measure nuclear weapons, but I don't get to claim any credit for the explosion. All I get credit for is crawling out of the hole the explosion left behind, and I am pretty close to being convinced that this is not something I can brag much about. When you climb up out of a hole, you don't even get a view payoff. There is no metaphorical, or even physical, (metaphysical?) peak. You just climb up and out and you stand there looking around. There you are at the top of your climb and all you see (at most) is horizon, which is not bad, but you probably should be asking yourself what it is exactly that you have accomplished. I mean, really all you've done is spent an hour or two creating an elaborate, nerve wracking, dangerous, time consuming, dirty path back to the parking lot. Shouldn't you be confused, maybe even a little bit frustrated? But instead you are hugging this person that you have only known for 58 hours because together you have accomplished something. But again I ask, what have you accomplished?

29 Heon is the only person I have ever met who is named Heon, but I did not spend much time asking her about the origins of her name because she was a student at Cal Arts, and I found her to be intimidating.
Many recreational climbers I have talked to express a love of the actual physical movements that make up a climb. Some have even said to me that the top of the mountain or the wall (apparently most people don't make a practice of climbing out of holes) does not hold, for them, any significance beyond the fact that it is the part of the climb where they have to stop going up and start going down. These people claim that they climb not because they are attempting to arrive at a higher place, but simply because they enjoy putting a toe here and a hand up there and another toe over there and the other hand over here... and on and on until they run out of up and they are required to go down. Presumably, things like scenery and warmth and smell and the texture of the rock play somewhat important parts in the climbing experiences of these existential climbers, because otherwise you would probably see more of them on those Nordic-track-like climbing machines that you find in gyms. These machines are kind of like hind-leg versions of exercise bicycles, where you stand in one place moving your arms and legs in an effort to burn enough calories to feel like you can stop moving and start eating again. There is one of these machines in a little gym up the street. It is called an “Everyoung 73500 Climber.”

I do not completely believe these climbers when they say that the top of their climb holds no appeal for them. I have heard too many climbers exclaim things like “I just love being on the tops of mountains!” And besides, to separate the elevation change from climbing would be to make the climb disappear. You may as well get down on your hands and knees and crawl 200 yards down a bike trail, turn around and crawl 200 yards back if all you are looking for is the feeling of moving your legs and arms in a certain way. I am, though, willing to accept that these physical movements, the careful placing of hands and feet and fingers and toes, the attention to weight distribution, the

30 I can't help but pronounce this “every-unj” in my head.
satisfaction of using shoulder, back, leg and wrist muscles, are an important part of
climbing to some (perhaps most) climbers. In fact, as a list maker, I can see exactly why
the physical aspects of climbing can be such an agreeable activity.

To climb is to make a list. When you climb a wall or a cliff, or a mountain, or
even a flight of stairs, you do so a piece at a time. Handhold… check. As you go along,
you complete a task that leads you to an ultimate goal, a task that you will never be
required to complete again (unless you decide to come back and do the climb again).
Handhold… check. Each of these finite tasks that make up the climb represent a small
occurrence of possession, of the rock, of yourself (For, isn't that all that list making is? A
way to possess yourself and your tasks in a way that makes you feel in control,
productive?). Foothold… check. So, you make your way up, gaining more and more
control of yourself and the rock as you go, investing energy in an activity that would be
considered completely pointless were it not for the energy you are investing in it, and
crossing items off your list one at a time until you reach the top. Now you have
completed a series of meaningless tasks that suddenly have meaning 1) because you
carried them out and 2) because they are a part of a larger whole (in my case it was a
larger “hole”) that you have decided to identify as an activity worth completing.
Foothold… check. End of list.

You have completed your list and the satisfaction you feel does not come from
the worthiness of the items on your list, but from the simple fact that you made a list and
completed it. And, even if it is nothing more than a slightly large hole that you have
exited by crawling and clawing your way out of in a silly and pointless (literally “point” –
“less”) climb, you will still feel happy, even exultant and you will hug a stranger and
impress your friends. But I’m telling you it is just a hole, and you did nothing more than
superimpose a contrived structure of meaning onto an activity that is exactly as
significant as doing nothing at all, unless of course you call it an item on a list. Then, you can check it off and pretend it matters.
Climbing Away from Home

The house I grew up in was not one house but nine, all located at various points up and down the West Coast in places like Arcadia, California; Seattle, Tacoma, and Edmonds, Washington; Benicia, California; Edmonds, Washington (again); and Monrovia, California. My family lived in all of these places, and when we ended up staying in Monrovia for six years straight, my Mom started calling it a world record, though we didn't even stay in one house in Monrovia. When I was a sophomore in high school, we moved up the street and around the corner to a house on Primrose that had a mother-in-law unit for my grandma (my dad's mother-in-law). Actually, the six-year record in Monrovia was not one that I got to participate in fully, because after I graduated from high school, I moved to Claremont, California, where I went to college. Then a year later, my parents and younger brothers moved to Phoenix, Arizona, which made me feel like I never really moved away from home (in the way people move away from home when they get 'their own place" or "move out" at 23 and have to start vacuuming their own floors). It was more like my home never stopped moving and somewhere in the middle of college I failed to keep up. My parents and youngest brother are still in Phoenix, while my middle brother is in Flagstaff, where he goes to school. I am in Missoula, Montana, at least for the next couple of months until Kristen and I head back down to California, which seems to be the place that everyone in my family returns to before bouncing off to other states and places.

I am telling you all of this because I am trying to establish my authority on the mobility of a particular American family (mine) from 1977 to 2001. The shape of my childhood was created in the leaving from and arriving at old schools and new schools, old houses and new houses, and in the leaving of old friends and finding new strangers. Packing my room into boxes with crumpled newspaper, labeling the boxes with a
permanent marker, riding in the passenger seat of rented U-Haul trucks, walking through empty houses (about to be filled or about to be left), listening to the echoes of my footsteps in the kitchens and garages... these were events in my life that became so familiar to me that to this day I feel a strange sense of homecoming when I stand in a living-room empty of furniture and full of boxes.

In the United States, we are a displaced people. My twelve different schools for twelve different grades (it did work out so that I spent high school all in one place, which was probably good for me, although looking back I am not entirely sure) are really not all that unique. At the time of the 1990 census, only 62 percent of the people in this country lived in the state in which they were born. That's about one million people out of nearly two hundred and fifty million who changed states at least once in their lives. And it doesn't even take into account the people who moved from Cleveland to Cincinnati or from Eugene to Portland or from Reno to Vegas or from Rochester to Syracuse or from Augusta to Bangor or from Chattahoochee to Tallahassee or from Kalamazoo to Saginaw or from Wenatchee to Yakima or even from Lompoc just up the coast to Santa Maria or Morro Bay or maybe even San Simeon. In this country we make a habit of changing houses. Even those of us who do not pack all of our belongings into rented trucks and shuttle them across city, county, and state lines to unload them in new houses with different views and different numbers on the curb are still busily making the places in which we live disappear. Wal-mart, Best Buy, Barnes & Noble, Bed Bath & Beyond, Staples\textsuperscript{31} all in a row, with parking lots too large for a camel to traverse, are now the shared space of our communities.

\textsuperscript{31} Just for fun, next time you go into one of these stores, pretend that you have never in you life been to on one. Walk in through the (automatic!) sliding doors, and nearly fall over when you see the boxes and packages in orange and yellow and blue stacked from floor to ceiling, on three acres of shining tile. Wonder how it is that this is something we consider to be normal. I mean,
Things can only be identified as things in relation to other things. If everything is the same thing, you have nothing. Maybe this is why we move so easily - because it doesn't matter in the least where we are, just so long as we have access to our cheaply made and cheaply bought goods,\textsuperscript{32} can park our cars when we get there and can drive by a drive-through window for some frightening beef, grease and carbonation when we have filled the "ample cargo space" in our SUVs.

The United States of America is a country filled with people who have little sense of what it means to be at home. Most of us are, after all, imports whose genes did not show up on this continent any more than two or three hundred years ago. The idea that a culture could have been around any longer than that is one that we seem to have a difficult time processing. It is, for many of us, literally foreign. In the U.S., most of us simply do not understand what it means to be indigenous, to belong in place, because we are not and because we do not.

In \textit{The Unsettling of America}, Wendell Berry argues that the "discoverers" of North America began a pattern of exploitation (of both land and people) and competition that was not so much established \textit{at} the beginning of American history as \textit{by} the beginning of American history. "What they [early settlers] saw was a great concentration of 'natural resources' – to be used according to purposes exterior to them. That some of these resources were human beings mattered not at all."\textsuperscript{33} He goes on to say:

\textsuperscript{32} "goods," though might not be the right word for these products made by impoverished workers at irrevocable environmental costs, and distributed to people who do not even need them anyway.
And so at the same time that they ‘discovered’ America, these men invented the modern condition of being away from home. On the new shores the old orders of domesticity, respect, deference, humility fell away from them; they arrived contemptuous of whatever existed before their own coming, disdainful beyond contempt of native creatures or values or orders, ravenous for their own success. They began the era of absolute human sovereignty – which is to say the era of absolute human presumption. They invented us: the flag of Ferdinand and Isabella in the hand of Columbus on the shores of the Indies becomes Old Glory in the hand of Neil Armstrong on the moon. An infinitely greedy sovereign is afoot in the universe, staking his claims.\(^4\)

The early explorers of North America, then, were some of the world’s first inhabitants to take part in the now pervasive ritual of separateness - the commute. Granted, theirs was slightly longer than the average forty-five minute or hour drive on the freeways of Seattle, Las Vegas, Atlanta, Los Angeles or Minneapolis. But, basically, the people who rode the Nina, the Pinta and the Santa Maria across the Atlantic Ocean were simply going to work for a while, with the intention of making some money before they returned home at the end of the day. Home was Europe, and the office was the “New World” with its mind-boggling bounty of trees and furs and (maybe? hopefully?) gold. But more important than any of these others was the commodity that this new continent had in amounts to numb the brain and make the eyeballs spin and the knees quiver: space. This continent had space! Especially if you ignored or destroyed all of the pesky brown people that already lived here. Ever since the first European arrivals showed up with their horses and guns and germs, they have been falling all over themselves, stumbling, crawling, lurching and racing, pouring northward and southward and especially westward across the continent, filling and emptying and refilling the space the space the space. Like lead into a mold, we filled the contours of this continent. We built cities and then we started emptying those out into the countryside, pouring miles and miles of concrete in


\(^{34}\) Ibid., page 54
looping curves lined with three versions of the same house that come in three versions of the same beige. We drive from these homogenized subdivisions back into the cities or into other subdivisions where we work in blank buildings with plastic furniture, just to make some money before we return home at the end of the day. But when we park in our two-car garages and walk through the laundry room into the kitchen, have we returned home? No, because in two years, it will be a different house with different neighbors you don’t know and a different commute to a different new world of glass and plastic, with a brand new forty-five minute crossing of a whole other ocean of concrete and cars. And even if it is the same home with the same neighbors and the same commute, it still won’t be home simply because we ourselves don’t believe that we belong here, at least not in the sense that we belong to the place. We absolutely believe it belongs to us. We are still living our lives after the pattern created by Columbus and company. We don’t live in this land of plenty. We consume here. After five hundred years, we are still away from home and on our way someplace else. One of the directions we are headed is up. The flag is on the shore. The flag is on the mountain. The flag is on the moon.

What I am talking about here is not climbing as a natural human act that is the healthy expression of an innate desire that is part of what makes us human. I am talking about climbing as a symptom. I am talking about climbing as the logical extension of a mentality that brought about the subjugation of an entire continent of native people and “natural resources.” As I have already pointed out in this piece, recreational climbing is a relatively new invention. It was simply not done before two hundred or so years ago. Recreational climbing, then, is not something that is normal in the way, say, digestion or breast-feeding are. It is normal more in the way factory farms and buzzer alarm clocks are, which is to say pervasive and accepted but not especially good or admirable.
Prior to the 18th century, western Europeans (especially the British) believed that the planet they lived on was but a shadow of its former self, that "The original earth was not the earth we see." Advances in science and a series of influential essays by people like Thomas Burnett and Robert Burton, though, inspired a new interest in geology and in aesthetics and went a long way towards creating a "natural" explanation for earth systems and processes. This opened new possibilities for humans in thinking about the natural landscape and allowed the concept of the "sublime" to become a respectable, even desirable, philosophical and spiritual experience.

We can trace the change in western attitudes towards mountains that led to their being the subject of our admiration and domination. In Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory, Marjorie Hope Nicolson follows the development of what she refers to as the "aesthetics of the infinite" in England from the 17th to the 18th centuries. Over the course of these hundred years, the attitudes of the English towards mountains changed dramatically. Nicolson points out that in the 17th century English poets either paid "lip service" with meaningless cliches to the "heaven kissing" or "star touching" mountains, or (more likely) condemned them as "warts, wens, blisters, imposthumes' that mar the face of Nature." By the 18th century, though, English poets were going out of their ways to include descriptions of beautiful, awe-inspiring mountains in their work. What brought about this change from the "mountain gloom" of the 17th century to the "mountain glory" of the 18th? Nothing less, according to Nicolson, than one of the most profound revolutions in thought that has ever occurred. "Theology, philosophy, geology,

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35 Ibid., page 77
astronomy - basic and radical changes in all these occurred before the 'Mountain Gloom' gave way to the 'Mountain Glory'. 

During this time, important advances in the sciences led to drastic shifts in theological and philosophical thinking. For example, it became apparent that, "Our earth has emerged not because of a miraculous Word or because of an ancient Deluge but by natural forces of physical law within macrocosm and geocosm." This was not a small revelation, for it changed elite Europeans' perception of earth and of their place on it.

The sublime was a concept used to describe an experience that fell somewhere between fear and awe. The creation of this concept was itself an important innovation, according to Nicolson, and represented a unique, new way of looking at the world, one that had heretofore been ignored - or rather, had simply not been available to the minds of the English because it had not yet been invented. With a new appreciation for natural processes and armed with their new geological and astronomical knowledge, Englishmen (not women) were able to appreciate mountains for some of the very physical features (size and raggedness) that had previously been reason to fear them. English poets and philosophers were able to go out into the wilderness, onto the tops of mountains and encounter the sublime, a feeling that mixed wonder and appreciation with fear and dread. To perceive the sublime was to be inspired, and it was this experience that largely fueled the Romantic Movement.

My understanding of all of this is slightly haphazard. I am by no means an expert on English literature or on English philosophy of the 17th and 18th centuries. I even find

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37 Ibid., page 3
38 Ibid., page 182
the words “English literature” and “English philosophy of the 17th and 18th centuries” to be slightly intimidating. But I am pretty certain that I have a fairly clear (not too hazy) understanding of how people who lived in England five hundred years ago stopped being scared of and hating mountains, and started being scared of and liking mountains. They learned enough to figure out that lumpy topography did not exist because God was mad at them, and then they started thinking that lumpy topography might even be kind of inspiring.

What is most interesting to me about this thought progression is not so much that people figured out that they could enjoy mountains and not go to hell; it is more the inherent division that must occur between people and land before such a realization could ever take place. What I mean to say is, that such a realization could happen points to serious disconnection between westerners and the natural world, a disconnection that is very much a part our cultural heritage (That I can even write the words “between humans and the natural world” as if humans exist somewhere beyond or outside of the physical reality that the rest of the animals and plants on this planet occupy is exactly the division I am describing). It occurs to me, too, that the emergence of “the sublime” in Western consciousness did not necessarily represent a serious “reconnection” with the natural world either. Educated intellectuals communing on the tops of hills or in groves of trees were in search of connection with the divine, not with the natural. The limits of their search had simply been expanded to include areas that used to be off limits. The basic underlying belief system, the inherent disconnection, had not changed.

What, though, is this basic underlying belief system? And how does it relate to mountains, climbing, wilderness and the natural world in general? Americans’ ideas about wilderness and mountains come in part from the Old Testament of the Bible. As
Roderick Nash puts it in *Wilderness and the American Mind*, "...wilderness as fact and symbol permeated the Judeo-Christian tradition. Anyone with a Bible had available an extended lesson in the meaning of wild land."40 He also notes that the term “wilderness” occurs 245 times in the Old Testament and that there are many other occurrences of the words “desert” and “waste,” all of these referring to essentially the same types of land: the deserts of the Near East, which receive less than four inches of rain per year. “The Old Testament,” Nash writes, “reveals that the ancient Hebrews regarded the wilderness as a cursed land and that they associated its forbidding character with a lack of water.”

He goes on to say:

> Again and again 'the great and terrible wilderness' was described as a 'thirsty ground where there was no water.' When the Lord of the Old Testament desired to threaten or punish a sinful people, he found the wilderness condition to be his most powerful weapon: 'I will lay waste the mountains and the hills, and dry up their herbage; I will turn the rivers into islands and dry up their pools...'.41

In *Nature and Madness*, Paul Shepard also takes note of the importance of desert wilderness in the Judeo-Christian tradition. “If ideas have habitats in which they originate and prosper, then the desert edge might be called the home of western thought.”42 If the Old Testament can be considered to represent the ideas of the founders of Judaism and Christianity (I don’t know what else it could be considered to represent... the Word of God, I suppose. But the Old Testament was, after all, written by humans and even if they were just channeling the ideas of God, I still feel comfortable saying that they believed the ideas) then wilderness to the Hebrews was not a happy place, especially when compared to the Garden they had been kicked out of.

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40 *Ibid.*, page 8
41 Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* page 14
Despite all of this, wilderness also plays an important role in the Old Testament as a "sanctuary from a sinful and persecuting society," as Nash points out. After their Exodus from Egypt, the Jews wandered in the wilderness for forty years. "The Old Testament account emphasizes the hardships encountered in this 'howling waste of wilderness,' and yet it is during this time that Moses received the Ten Commandments on the top of Mount Sinai. "Thereafter the Lord demonstrated his protective power by the miraculous provision of water and food." Thus, the wilderness became a sort of "testing ground" in which people may draw closer to God, where "a chosen people were purged, humbled and made ready for the land of promise." It is important to note, though, that the Israelites occupied the wilderness because of its harsh, unforgiving qualities (they were on the run, and they were being "purged") and that they did so in order to arrive eventually at the "promised land." In the Judeo-Christian tradition, then, wilderness is either something to be completely avoided or it is something to be endured until it can be completely avoided. As Nash puts it, "There was no fondness in the Hebraic tradition for wilderness itself."

Paul Shepard takes this a step further.

On the most ambitious scale in the history of the world, the ancestors of the Old Testament made virtue of their homelessness. They struck a gold vein of moral analysis by assimilating certain themes of transience from genuine nomads [who actually are at home in the wilderness] while rejecting their fatalism. In a Semitic storm God they found a traveling deity who was everyplace and therefore not bound by location. Owning nothing, they created a theology of contingent divinity and heroic escape.

43 Roderick Nash Wilderness and the American Mind page 16
44 Ibid., page 16, Nash quotes from Deuteronomy 32:10
45 Ibid., page 16
46 Ibid., page 16
47 Ibid., page 16
48 Paul Shepard, Nature and Madness, page 51
He goes on to argue that the Hebrews invented a new "antimythological myth" called history and that this myth "served as all myths do: as a story of the past that explains origins, establishes exemplary models of behavior and provides the conventions of a particular group." But this "history" that the Hebrews created for themselves was "psychologically dysfunctional in order to sustain the ideal of estrangement," and it led to a situation where "Occidental men would come to see themselves as neither wholly spiritual nor wholly natural, as fragmented rather than plural in nature."

All of which means (if I am translating correctly) that Shepard believes that western (Occidental) people are fragmented from nature and that this has a lot to do with the "ancestors of the Old Testament" who themselves were fragmented and who invented origin myths that "sustained the idea of estrangement"... Or, if I can get away with using some of my own vocabulary, we (those of us who live in the Occident) are not at home because we come from a religious and philosophical tradition of people who have never been at home. We are a people whose most fundamental religious beliefs are founded upon the virtue of transience.

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Nevertheless (and this gets back to the gloom and glory of Marjorie Hope Nicolson) our attitudes towards wilderness and mountains have (superficially at least) changed dramatically. When the continent of North America was first discovered by white people and reports began to make their ways back to Europe, notions that this

49 Ibid., page 54
continent might actually be an “earthly paradise” or a new Garden of Eden were kindled and stoked, especially by the promoters of discovery and colonization. However, hopes for a second Garden of Eden quickly disappeared as settlers arrived and found themselves in a distinctly un-gardenlike place. In *Wilderness and the American Mind*, Roderick Nash points out that, for Europeans, wild country was usually comprised of a single peak or heath or an island of uninhabited land surrounded by settlement. “But the seemingly boundless wilderness of the New World was something else. In the face of this vast blankness, courage failed and imagination multiplied fears.” Nash continues, describing the ways in which this new landscape was depicted by white pioneers. In their journals and sermons and books, they consistently used words like “howling” and “dismal” and “terrible.” They referred to the wilderness as an “enemy” that must be “conquered” and “subdued.” These sentiments continued into the 1800s, overlapping with Romanticism, a movement in literature that helped to change all of this by idealizing unspoiled scenery and pastoral lifestyles.

The Romantic Movement (before the Romantic Movement comes the Valsalva Maneuver), which included writers and artists such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Thomas Cole and Henry David Thoreau, dramatically changed the way wilderness was perceived in this country. These Romantics/Transcendentalists/early conservationists helped to create a situation where wilderness appreciation began to be associated with patriotism because large cliffs and mountains and waterfalls were things Americans could brag about to the rest of the world even if they didn’t have much going for them in the way of books or paintings. But isn’t this “memorialization” of waterfalls and scenic vistas akin to putting the natural world in a museum for people to oggle from the other

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50 Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, page 26
side of glass display case? Can it represent anything other than the further separation of everything “natural” with everything “human?”

When Thoreau climbed to the top of Mount Katahdin in Maine in early September of 1846, he observed, “we have not seen pure Nature, unless we have seen her thus vast, and drear and inhuman.” 51 He had wandered into a landscape that did not include humans, and according to many scholars he panicked. It is here that he wrote his famous lines, “the solid earth! The actual world! The common sense! Contact! Contact! Who are we? Where are we?” 52 There it is; Henry David has stumbled upon the “actual world” and there is not a person to be seen.

And any discussion of wilderness and mountains in 19th century America cannot overlook the importance of John Muir. Here was a man who could not keep himself from going up things (not that it ever occurred to him that he should try). Muir climbed mountains on his way to climbing mountains. In his writings he comes across as a climber in search of views; he spends pages and pages describing what he could see from the tops of peaks. In 1888, he wrote an essay about climbing Mount Rainier in Washington. In it he underscores the feeling of being away from home when he is on the tops of mountains.

The view we enjoyed from the summit could hardly be surpassed in sublimity and grandeur. But one feels far from home so high in the sky, so much so that one is inclined to guess that, apart from the acquisition of knowledge and the exhilaration of climbing, more pleasure is to be found as the foot of mountains than at their frozen tops. 53

52 Ibid., page 35
The reactions of Muir and Thoreau to being on the tops of mountains and in the middle
of wilderness are typical of the ones people still experience to this day. Indeed, probably
more than any other individuals, these men taught us how to think about and occupy
wilderness and mountains. We are all familiar with the feelings they describe: awe,
imintimidation, the sense of being a visitor, and the feeling that this experience is worth
something.

This is why we have things that we call National Parks, the first of which,
Yellowstone, was designated in 1872. Yosemite was created in 1890. The continued
designation of National Parks, Wilderness Areas, and National Memorials were (and are)
the result of a dramatic shift in attitude toward wild places. This shift is important
because it accounts for the fact that today in America we don't use words like “howling”
and “terrible” to describe wilderness as much as we use words like “pristine” and “virgin.”
But the real point is not that now wilderness is good where it once was bad. The real
point is that this change in vocabulary is not the result of any significant shift in our belief
system. Rather, it is the logical extension of a belief system that has disenfranchised
humans from the natural world for over 2000 years.

There are, however, some people (and many climbers fall into this category) who
see climbing as a valid means of reconnecting with the natural and spiritual forces of the
universe, with wilderness and wilderness. I have a little book that I checked out from the
library that has quotes on all different aspects of climbing. It is called The Quotable
Climber and is broken up into more than twenty sections, including “Famous Climbs,”
“Hubris,” “Humility,” “Risk and Luck” and “Spirituality and Nature.” I find it to be
interesting that many of the quotes in the “Spirituality and Nature” section were not
produced by climbers and do not appear to have anything at all to do with climbing.
There is a quote from Nietzsche that says, “One should not go into churches if one
wants to breathe pure air.” Wordsworth tells us to “Come forth into the light of things. Let nature be your teacher.” And a person named James Ramsey Ullman informs us “That the supreme and most precious moment of human living however much they may appear to depend on the body and the senses, are primarily experiences of the spirit.” The very presence of these quotes in a book called The Quotable Climber is revealing of the spiritual status we have assigned to climbing mountains. This book, though, is not only philosophical mumbo jumbo that can be applied to climbing because of missing context and creativity. There are some quotes in here that were actually written or said by climbers about mountains, but these seem to have less to do with spirituality and nature than the spiritual and natural ones have to do with climbing. Sir Martin Conway says, “A man does not climb a mountain without bringing some of it away with him and leaving something of himself upon it,” and “Each fresh peak ascended teaches us something.” Margaret Young claims that “It’s as close as we can come to flying”... all of which share the general tone of most climbing literature; climbing is good because it puts climbers in touch with themselves and with the universe. This is the de facto niche that we have allowed climbing to fill in our culture. We throw around quotations from Nietzsche and Wordsworth that we think might have something to do with nature or mountains, using them to validate climbing as a meaningful and important pastime, one that puts us back in touch with a natural world that we are not a part of when we are on a horizontal plane. I find this to be confusing and slightly frustrating.

Climbers and climbing writers have identified a real and obvious characteristic of our society, the very one that Paul Shepard and Roderick Nash and Wendell Berry have described and followed back to more than 2,000 years ago - separateness. And no one can deny that we do live in a culture that perceives itself as existing separate from the natural world. Today we are just as disconnected from the wild lands of this planet as
the Old Testamenters ever were, maybe even more so. At least when the Israelites went into the wilderness, they lived there for four decades. We, on the other hand, passed a Wilderness Act in 1964 that designates special areas “where earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man.” In this country we have our National Wilderness Areas and National Parks and National Forests all of which have been set aside for uses other than human habitation. Meanwhile, we also have places like Atlanta and Los Angeles. There is an irrefutable division between humans and the environment that we live in (or rather on) in the Western world. Thus, what is important about a climber’s claim that he goes up in order to connect with the natural world is not whether he is actually able to do so. What is important about this claim is that it is made in the first place. For the claim is simply further evidence for the fact that westerners have an unhealthy relationship to the planet. The issue of whether or not climbing is a valid or appropriate means of connecting with the natural world becomes irrelevant for members of our culture because the fact is we are members of a disconnected culture. If we climb simply because we are disconnected and we like to dominate, or if we climb because we long to reconnect and participate, the fact remains that climbing is a result of our disconnection with the natural world.

I am still trying to figure out where my home is. I think it is southern California because if I am “from” anywhere, that’s the place. It’s where I lettered in varsity sports and learned to drive and rented prom tuxedos and applied to colleges and worked in the Community Center, staying up until two in the morning, waiting for the wedding reception to end so that I could mop the floor and empty the trash. It is where both my parents were born and grew up. It is where they met when they were counselors at a summer

54 The Wilderness Act of 1964
camp. It is where my grandma and her brother and her "mother and dad" (these were descriptive terms more than anything else - her mother was a mother and her dad was a dad. She made me miss them even though I never met them) are buried. I have a history of my own that happened in the foothills of the San Gabriel Mountains. I breathed the air and felt the ground shake and learned CPR and rollerbladed in February with the teenager who turned into the grownup I would marry. There are people there whom I don't want to run into in the Supermarket – which is, I guess, as good a definition of home as I can come up with.

But still, even with all of this I can't help but feel sad about the fact that when I move back to the town where I went to high school it will be my tenth or eleventh move, and for me to go there is just a choice that I can make. I am only from there because I choose to be. And the most familiar part of my move will not be the arriving; it will be the leaving.

We are members of a disconnected culture. We are away from home. Perhaps we climb mountains and hills in an effort to reconnect, to find a home, but if this is the case, it is misguided and slightly pathetic. It is the paradox of the white person who is from nowhere: we leave where we are to find where we belong. But we'll never find that place by moving from city to city or from job to job or from low elevation to high. We can never go to a place that we are from. We can only stay there.
The Story About the Woman On the Side Of the Rock and the Day I Could Not Let Go; parenthetical anecdote #2

As soon as we got out of the car we heard her screaming. What you do when you have just gotten out of your car after a three-hour drive into the desert and you hear someone screaming is this: You look with large eyes at the people you drove in with and you run through the campground hoping that whatever you find will not make a mess of the inside of your car and that somebody else is already there and in charge and you won't have to do anything except go find a stick for the splint or do whatever else you are told.

We found her and she was screaming, but she did not want or need our help. She was strapped into a climbing harness and attached by a rope to another woman standing 30 feet below “on belay.” The screaming woman was stuck like a tan and skinny starfish to the side of a granite outcrop the size of an upended high school gymnasium. She wanted to be there. I know this to be true because if she hadn't wanted to be there, she could have just let go and the belay woman would have belayed and the screaming woman would have ended up dangling safely from the end of a nylon climbing rope. But she did not let go. She dug into the granite with her fingers and toes and she screamed. She might have been cramping or she might have been stuck and frustrated, but she was not broken, and I, with my limited knowledge of first aid and the modicum sense of responsibility that goes along with that knowledge, was not expected to fix her or to transport her. She was on belay. So we walked back to our campsite to pitch our tents and cook our pasta.

It occurs to me that you have to be taking something very seriously to scream like that. Yourself, the rock... something. I've never screamed in that way. In fact, I'd say that if I had any defining quality, it would be my ability to be in almost any situation and never need to scream. I think this might be a bad thing.
I went rock climbing once. I was staying in Walla Walla, Washington, with a geology professor who teaches at Whitman College. There were about fifteen of us sleeping in his garage for a few days before we all headed south into Oregon to start a geologic mapping project. He had built a climbing wall in his garage and we played around on it, falling backwards onto our stacked sleeping bags and therma-rest pads. He had an entire room in his basement dedicated to the storage of all of his climbing gear – harnesses, ropes, carabiners, chalk bags, all dangling from hooks and organized on shelves. Climbers are a singular sort. They are obsessive and they are careful. They respect their equipment because they know what they hope it will never have to do for them someday. This climbing professor’s obsession, combined with that of some of the students who had already gone up and down a lot of walls, sent all of us out early on a Saturday morning to fall from real rocks. I found myself in the passenger seat of somebody’s car in a caravan off someplace on gravel roads in eastern Washington.

We ended up at the bottom of a wide, flat, vertical plane stretching up above us and out of the trees. The experienced climbers put on their harnesses and shoes and dipped their fingers into bags of chalk, and with the help of a person at the other end of their ropes began “leading” routes up the rock. The climbers would yell, “On Belay?” which, translated, means, “Are you holding on to the rope? And, if I fall off this rock will you keep me from dying?” The belayers would yell back, “Belay on,” which, translated, means, “yes.” The climbers slowly worked their ways up out of the trees and into the sunshine, attaching carabiners to bolts, which sometime previously had been drilled into the side of the wall. A carabiner is basically a fancy, trustworthy, load-bearing clip. The climbing rope, which is attached to both the climber and the belayer, runs through each carabiner attached to the wall. If the leader falls, she is “caught” by the last carabiner she hooked to a bolt. The weight of the belayer at the other end of the rope keeps her
from falling all the way down and breaking into many pieces on the ground. At the top of her climb, she runs the rope through an anchor. Then she rappels back down, unhooking each carabiner on the way until, pulley-like, the climbing rope runs straight from the ground where the belayer is attached to it, up through the anchor and back down to the ground where the climber is now detaching it from her harness. The lead climb is complete. Whoever climbs the route now does not have to worry about the hooking and unhooking of carabiners. He just has to aim up, and trust his belayer to keep the climbing rope nice and taut. It is somebody else’s turn. Not mine. I went and found a nice horizontal boulder and ate my lunch.

When it was my turn, I stepped into a climbing harness, probably one of the most awkward arrangements of straps and clips ever designed. It fits on your body in a way that is almost obscene. But your arms and legs are free to move whichever way you please, which is important when you decide to travel up the vertical face of a very large rock. I put on the little shoes and I got my fingers all chalky, because that’s just what you do, and I started up the rock.

Limits are funny things. Lots of people go looking for them, but nobody really wants to find them. I like to think that the limit I found that day is a limit that only has to do with a very specific set of circumstances, i.e. on that day, in that particular situation, with those exact people, undertaking this activity, I happened to find myself in a place where I chose to go no farther. I’d gone high enough. The fact that I stopped says nothing about who I am as a person or how I live my life or the toughness or goodness of my soul. It only has to do with the fact that I did not particularly want to climb any further.

I didn’t.
The problem is that I know that the choice I made was not so much a choice as it was a requirement that I inflicted on myself with the help of adrenaline, fear and gravity. It is not that I stopped. It is that I was unable to continue. I ended up in a spot where I had to let go of the rock with both of my hands and lunge upward about six inches to grab a handhold that I could not see. I was twisted funny. I was uncomfortable and I was getting tired. I knew that the handhold was there because I'd made sure to watch people climb this route before I did. I was strapped into a harness, anchored to a rope designed to hold much more than a single human could ever weigh. Belay was very much on (I checked several times), and I was physically incapable of letting go of the rock. If I had tried and failed, I would not have fallen more than an inch or two. I might have swung a bit to the side, but that would have been it. My belayer could have lowered me to the ground, or I could have tried again. But I did not try. I did not fail. And I did not scream. I started making jokes. I don't remember what I said. But I remember the people on the ground laughing and I remember that my legs and arms and fingers were shaking and there was a lightness in my chest like something was trying to rise up and out of my sternum. So I chose not to go any higher.

Humans need to go up. We paint letters on the sides of hills, letters that begin the names of high schools and colleges and cities, and on sunny weekend afternoons we walk up to them. We live in skylines and hike to scenic vistas. We “bag” mountain peaks and pay money to ride trams to destinations that are only destinations because they are higher than the place the tram started. We buy orange and green straps and ropes and use them to help us up the sides of walls. I don’t know why we do these things. I do these things. I can’t help it. Perhaps it is because climbing is unambiguous. You know when you have reached your destination because when you do, there is no
place to go but down. You have arrived. You have succeeded. You know when to stop. The ground tells you.

Only, in my case, it was not the ground that told me not to go any farther. I told myself. This worries me because I have a difficult time confining the choice I made to the rock face that I made it on. I am twenty-four years old, and, in a sense, I have always been on belay. That I could not let go of the rock must mean something. But at the same time that I am jealous of the screaming woman’s capacity to scream and hold on, there is a whole other part of me that just wants to tell her to shut up about it. Climb the rock, or don’t. But stop broadcasting your fierce determination to succeed in the face of adversity to everybody in Joshua Tree National Monument. Let me get out of my car and cook my pasta in peace. And let me watch shooting stars from my folding chair or play cribbage at the picnic table. Let me grow up in a suburb and take my A.P. English classes and impress my parents and grandparents. Let me go to a good college and join the Residence Hall Staff and worry about things like cancer and airplanes, because that’s exactly what I am going to do until the rope gets cut. Then, I guess, we’ll see what happens.
What We Know About Ourselves

I find that as I am trying to write about why “people” climb, in my mind I keep returning to things that I did and thought as a small person. This is something that I do a lot anyway. I have these moments when I look around at the people I work with or the people at the grocery store or something, and I have to ask myself, What happened to me? What am I doing here? Grownups confound me at times. I guess I am just amazed at other people’s capacity to take themselves seriously when the things they are doing are of no significance whatsoever.

For example, last night I read an article in The New Yorker that informed me that Microsoft estimates that at least thirty million Powerpoint presentations are made every day. This is something that makes me feel sad. Especially when I think about the fact that all of these Powerpointers were born; their uncles came to the hospital straight from baseball games in uniforms and cleats to hug their dads and wave to the tiny blue baby through the widow. Their grandpas took everyone out to consume alcohol and consumed so much themselves that they left their credit cards behind (and you know how grandpas are with their credit cards). These people who now spend hundreds of millions of hours every week creating bulleted lists of words like “strategy” and “fiscal year” and “organization” were once so important that they made other humans indescribably happy simply by being there. They arrived in this world and were celebrated not because of what they might become or what they might achieve in 16 or 37 or 49 years. They were celebrated because they were breathing, because they were hungry, because they had limbs and eyeballs and lots of hair or no hair at all. Now they shop at J.C. Penny for ties and wear undershirts and make Powerpoint presentations with 29,999,999 others on any given Tuesday.
One recent Christmas my family got out our old 8mm home video projector and played a bunch of home movies on the living room wall, and I watched a two-year-old version of myself bumble around in the backyard of a small rented house in Pasadena. I wasn’t doing anything special—just walking and periodically falling back on my butt. I knew that dad was holding something funny up to his face, but I didn’t know that I would be capable of watching myself point at it and smile two decades later in a dark living room. I just knew that I mattered and that I could get back up if I fell down. Watching myself on the wall like that, I felt like I had somehow failed by doing nothing more than turn into the older me that I was. Twenty-two-year-old Kyle mattered less than two-year-old Kyle in a way that I couldn’t describe then, and I’m not sure I can describe now. Maybe it has to do with the fact that as a two-year-old, you are the center of the universe. And as a twenty-two-year-old, your universe has grown to the point that you realize you can only ever be in orbit and that while others may be spinning around you, you are not the only one they are spinning around and that this is what it is like not to be Michael Stipe or Madonna, to be able to walk into a room and have it matter not one iota to anyone in that room that you don’t already know. But then I am not really so sure that “mattering” as a two-year-old actually does have everything to do with all of the other people in the room. I think it is more the result of an ignorant egoism that simply precludes the possibility that anything anywhere could exist independently of you.

David Foster Wallace wrote about this:

One of the few things I still miss from my Midwest childhood was this weird, deluded but unshakable conviction that everything around me existed all and only For Me…. Maybe what I really miss now is the fact that a child’s radical delusively self-centeredness doesn’t cause him conflict or pain. His is the sort of regally innocent solipsism of like Bishop
Berkeley's God; all things are nothing until his sight calls them forth from the void: his stimulation is the world's very being.  

In this funny, insightful, cleverly footnoted essay that he wrote about the Illinois State Fair, Wallace goes on to apply this child self-centeredness to the reaction that kids have to events like state fairs and parades and sporting events. "...the child's manic excitement" he says, "is really exultation at his own power," i.e., a kid loves these things because they exist for him and him alone. I think Wallace is right about this; it's probably why kids break down so drastically and dramatically when that power disappears, when they can't get the pirate gun they want, or it is time to go home. Then, they get carried out by their parents, bawling and protesting the unfairness of it all.

But I wonder how much of this feeling of being at the center of the universe really does go away as we get taller and hairier. I mean, there is definitely a point (somewhere in the middle of puberty) when you look up and realize that there is a world out there and that there are other people in it who are not Mom, Dad, brothers and people at your school. Gradually things start happening that make you realize that you might not be as important to the universe as you thought. You don't get elected class secretary, you can't play the cello like the girl in the talent show or spell the word "umbrella" in the spelling bee. Of course, you are still at the center of the universe. It just kind of feels like you aren't until your mom cuts you up same apples and you go play GI Joe in the backyard with your friend Josh (who is also at the center of the universe). You do, though, eventually arrive at a place where you realize that really you don't matter all that much. Maybe it's after high school graduation and you are standing there with your

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55 David Foster Wallace, "Getting Away From Already Being Pretty Much Away From It All," A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again (Little and Brown Company, 1997, Boston): pages 89-90
rolled-up piece of paper, wearing a robe in one of your school colors along with 400 other people wearing robes in one of your school colors. Or maybe it's a year or two later, when you realize that nobody is around to give you awards for perfect attendance or outstanding achievement in P.E.. Or maybe its 30 years later, after you have mapped the pig genome and it suddenly hits you that there are only seven other people on the planet who really care what the pig genome looks like and even if there are opportunities for "astonishing medical advances," you could still disappear and the only people that would care would be the ones with whom you share genes or body fluids. But even this realization doesn't completely remove you from the center of your universe. And, if you are like me (and maybe David Foster Wallace), you spend a disproportionate amount of time during the rest of your life trying to figure out how to get back into the middle of things, how to matter in that way you did when there was never even a remote possibility that you were not the most important thing in existence.

Here is the thing, though: the fact that I spend so much time wondering what the heck I am doing in this world of grownups, combined with some general observations I've made of other people's behavior, gives me the impression that this self-centeredness is not something we (I) can ever really leave behind. Even when we realize that we don't matter much in the grand scheme of things, we still wish that we could. This is probably the thing that makes me feel saddest of all: that I don't really want to matter, but I don't know how to leave that desire behind — the desire to be two years old and know everything.

In Nature and Madness, Paul Shepard argues that modern-day humans in the western world are unable to develop a healthy relationship with the natural world

58 Ibid., page 90
because we have created a society that does not allow us to mature fully or correctly. He sees our adulation of childhood as evidence for this. It is no surprise, then, according to Shepard, that our society “celebrates childhood, admires youth and despises age, and equates childhood with innocence, wisdom and spiritual power.” He goes on to say “To wish to remain childlike, to foster the nostalgia for childhood is to grieve for our own lost maturity, not because maturity is synonymous with childhood but because then [in childhood] it was still possible to move epigenetically toward maturity.”

Shepard starts off by asking a relatively straightforward question, one that he addressed continually throughout the course of his career: “...why do men persist in destroying their habitat? I have, at different times, believed the answer was a lack of information, faulty technique, or insensibility.” In *Nature and Madness*, though, Shepard posits the idea that perhaps the real reason behind the human species’ continual and continued destruction of the natural environment might have nothing to do with any of these factors but instead might be the result of some sort of species-wide insanity. On an individual level, he points out, “most mental problems have their roots in our first years of life and their symptoms are defined in terms of immaturity.” Therefore, humankind’s tendency to destroy its habitat might arise from an inability on the part of humans to mature fully.

In his book, Shepard provides an example of what he believes to be the ideal situation for the “ontogeny” (growth and development through adolescence to maturity) of a human. This ontogeny occurs in what Shepard himself admits might be viewed as a somewhat sentimental and romantic version of the world. His ontologically ideal world is

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57 Paul Shepard, *Nature and Madness*, page 122
58 ibid., page 122
59 ibid., page 1
60 ibid., page 5
one that allows the child to grow and develop in a nurturing band made up of fifteen or so tribal members, with constant exposure to natural phenomena and non-human stimuli. This ontogeny is the result of millions of years of evolution and is beneficial to humans adapted to small group foraging life styles. It allows them to achieve true maturity, a maturity that is defined by

...an acceptance of ambiguity, of the tensions between the lust for omnipotence and the necessity to manipulate, between man as different and man as a kind of animal, and especially between a growing sense of the separateness of the self and kinship to the Other achieved through an ever-deepening fullness of personal identity, defined by a web of relationship and metaphorical common ground.  

Unfortunately, though, according to Shepard, humans have not lived in such a world in the past 10,000 years. The bulk of Nature and Madness is devoted to four different periods of human history that are unique for their significant contributions to the creation of a dysfunctional human ontological process. The first of these chapters, “The Domesticators,” addresses the first (and in Shepard’s view) most important development leading to the human species’ inability to mature fully - agriculture. Agriculture, he argues, led to a world view grounded in duality and opposition rather than inclusion and ambiguity. Agricultural civilization encouraged the drawing of lines between such heretofore unknown (or unimportant) boundaries as “in” and “out,” “wild” and “tame,” “weed” and “crop.” Whereas hunting and gathering was a way of life that focused on finding relationships, agriculture is a system based almost entirely on the ideas of inclusion and exclusion. When human children and adolescents were exposed to this, and only this, new world view, Shepard argues, they lost their capacity to develop into

61 ibid., pages 13 - 14
fully mature adults, creating the beginnings of “the only society more frightful than one run by children, as in Golding’s Lord of the Flies, …one run by childish adults.”  

Over the course of the next three chapters, “The Desert Fathers,” “Puritans,” and “The Mechanists,” Shepard addresses the effects of history (it is linear and simplistic and ignores the environment except as a setting for human actions), the desert (it allows for a dual world view), Protestantism (leads to hatred of the body and of the earth) and modern civilization (after 70 centuries of city life we still feel it to be wrong) on the ontogeny of humans. Ultimately, he argues, we have created a world for ourselves that is drastically inconsistent with the biological and psychological developmental needs of our own bodies and minds. We have created a world that does not allow us to mature, and thus we have created a world in which we do not feel comfortable, a world that we simply cannot know how not to destroy.

Of course, implicit in all of this is the idea that there was a time in human history when we had it “right,” when everything was eco-groovy and children grew up into happy, mature adults. In fact, it is more than implicit. Shepard comes right out and says “Our species once did (and in some small groups still does) live in stable harmony with the natural environment.”  

Which, in Paul Shepard’s mind, means that there are, and there have been in the past, humans who thought of themselves as “guests” rather than “masters.” Exactly who these “guests” are or were is apparently not a topic Shepard feels the need to elaborate upon. He is content simply to point out that they existed and leave it to the rest of us either to agree or disagree depending (I suppose) on whether or not we happen to be anthropologists or residents of Sedona, Arizona. But if we keep in mind that Nature and Madness is a critique of western civilization, then we can assume

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62 Ibid., page 17 
63 Ibid., page 3
that whoever they are, they're not white. And if you can get past the fact that there is really no such thing as "stable harmony with the natural environment," much less *in* the natural environment,\(^64\) this notion of Shepard's (though obviously not his alone) that non-westerners have a different relationship to the natural world than westerners, can yield some interesting results when applied to the question of why people go up.

How do non-westerners climb? What kind of relationship do they (and have they) shared with the high places?

According to Larry Price, a geographer at the University of Oregon, little is known about the views of prehistoric humans towards mountains. Much of the evidence that does exist is based on the study of prehistoric societies (many of whom lived in volcanically active regions) before major contact with Europeans. These societies viewed volcanoes as "the homes of beneficent deities or of devils, and volcanic eruptions were interpreted as signs of the gods' displeasure with the people."\(^65\)

Prehistoric societies, according to Price, also identified mountains with weather, viewing them as the homes of storms, lightning, strong winds, cold temperatures and clouds. Price hypothesizes that early visitors to mountain peaks must have experienced symptoms of high-altitude sickness, such as stomach aches, vomiting, dizziness and

\(^64\) As far as I can tell, stability and harmony (stability especially) are mostly just human inventions that have to do with the fact that we are only around for 80 or 90 years max. A mountain range, for example, might be growing at a rate of two or three inches a year (that's plate tectonics), and washing into the ocean at a similar rate (that's erosion). This whole planet is stretching, crunching, rising, falling and washing out to see all of the time. If we could sit on the moon and watch a time-lapse version of earth history over the past 4 billion years, we would definitely not be watching something we could categorize as stable or harmonious. For one thing, the moon wasn't even around 4 billion years ago. We would have to wait for a huge meteorite to smash into earth, blasting a bunch of crap (not cheese) into orbit that would amalgamate into our tide machine before we even got to sit on it to watch the comings and goings of continents and animal and plant species.

shortness of breath, all of which might have been difficult for travelers to account for. Price believes that they would have decided that “the explanation was obvious: they were transgressing on hallowed ground.”

He sums up prehistoric attitudes towards mountains thus:

Although mountains had some religious connotations for many tribes, to other primitive peoples, mountains were simply a natural part of their world. The attitude developed toward mountains must have depended in part upon the relationship to the land. Where conditions in mountains were harsh and unpredictable, people were likely to ascribe those same qualities to the spirits who dwelt there. Where the peaks were accessible, the weather mild, and food abundant, people were apt to see the mountain gods as benign.

Price describes the development of attitudes toward mountains in the Far East, as well. Similar to those in the western world, feelings about mountains in the east changed from initial feelings of antipathy to awe and admiration. However, in the east, Price maintains, this shift took place much earlier. “In Japan, China, Tibet, and India mountains have long been adored and worshipped.” The impact of mountains on early Chinese culture, in which mountains were considered sacred at least 2,000 years before the birth of Christ, was, according to Price, profound.

The mountain was considered to be the body of God, the rocks his bones, the water his blood, the vegetation his hair, and the clouds and mists his breath. This belief probably sprang from the ancient cult of the earth... [in which] Man is viewed as an integral part of nature. Inanimate objects have spirits and souls, just as do animate objects; it is from this point of view that mountains, being so dominant in the landscape, have come to be seen as sacred.

66 Ibid., page 7
67 Ibid., page 17
68 Ibid., page 17
Price goes on to point out the significance of mountains in eastern art. The literal English translation of the Chinese word for “landscape” is “mountains and water.” Mountain motifs appear on the earliest known Chinese pottery and stone carvings, and in landscape paintings from the Han Dynasty (206 B.C. – 220 A.D.) onward. The people of Japan, Cambodia, Thailand, Bali, Java, the Philippines, all practice forms of mountain worship. Mountains have a special significance in India as well. While India is predominantly a country of plains, the Himalayas stretch for about 1,500 miles along its northern border. In an essay in The Himalaya, Aspects of Change, a compilation of essays edited by J.S. Lall, H.C. Sarin and Gyan Singh write, “since the dawn of civilization Indians have been drawn to the Himalaya. Many holy men crossed high and hazardous ranges and established places of pilgrimage far from cities and villages... pilgrims journeyed in numbers, with no special aids, seeking religious fulfillment.” And according to Larry Price, “The Himalayas are the home of several Hindu gods, the most important of whom is Siva, the great god of the mountains, who resides on Mount Kailas.... Another Himalayan peak, Mount Meru is considered the center of the universe.” Sarin and Singh, do however, point out that “mountaineering as a sport” did not begin in the Himalaya until the spring of 1883 with the arrival of one W W Graham., “who was the first European to come for the sole purpose of climbing for sport.”

As you probably know, the Himalayas are now one of the world’s preeminent climbing destinations (I sound like a brochure), with thousands of people from places like Japan, New Zealand, Germany, Russia, the U.S. and the U.K. arriving every year to pitch tents of synthetic material and lug cameras and bottles of oxygen up and down the highest peaks on earth. If you have ever read or seen anything at all about these

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69 Ibid., page 19
71 Price, Mountains and Man page 20
expeditions, I am sure you have some knowledge of Sherpas. But, if you are like me, the bulk of your knowledge probably consists of information gleaned from Donald Duck comics (adventures in cartoon-Nepal, with golden idols, raging rivers and Uncle Scrooge) where the Sherpas look vaguely like dogs and refer to the intrepid Duck family members as “sahib,” or from the adventure/disaster books written by and about people who had horrible things happen to them on their way to the top of Everest. If this is the case, you probably think of Sherpas as high-altitude bellhops, who check your bags at the bottom of the mountain and make sure that they meet up with you whenever you need them on your ascent. Which, in some ways, is just about right. According to nearly everyone who has ever climbed in the Himalayas, Sherpas are the backbone of any expedition. They carry loads, set up camp, cook, break trail and do all of the other little things that allow foreign climbers to get away with just carrying cameras and oxygen, all of which foreign climbers recognize and often go out of their way to praise.

In Life and Death on Mt. Everest, Sherry Ortner quotes the climber Bill Tilman, who in 1935 wrote:

> For nearly five months we had lived and climbed together, and the more we saw [of the Sherpas], the more we liked and respected them. That they can climb and carry loads is now taken for granted; but even more valuable assets to our small self-contained party were their cheerful grins, their willing work in camp and on the march, their complete lack of selfishness, their devotion to our service. To be their companion was a delight; to lead them an honor.

This is exactly the kind of stuff that you will continue to read today, and it pretty much sums up the attitude of most foreign climbers toward Sherpas. They are appreciated. They are respected. They are patronized. They are invisible. They carry your bags.

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cook your food, show you where to go, and you get to go home and claim that you climbed a mountain.

I have to be careful here because Sherpas have willingly decided to participate in western mountaineering. They are not in a situation where they have been unwillingly coerced into an activity that does them nothing but harm. Many of them have surely reaped the benefits of increased income and prestige. But it cannot be ignored that the first all-Sherpa mountaineering expedition on Mount Everest did not occur until 1986.73

So what were these people doing with their large mountains before Europeans showed up? Did they climb? How did the mountains figure into their philosophical and religious outlooks? Here are a people who have lived for centuries in the high mountains of Nepal and who figure prominently in the modern day hard-core climbing scene. Not to pay attention to their feelings about mountains would be irresponsible and careless.

Sherpas are an ethnic group that lives in northeast Nepal, in the mountains and valleys that surround the Everest Massif. Their ancestors are thought to have migrated from eastern Tibet in the fifteenth or sixteenth centuries.74 Their traditional economy is comprised of agriculture (wheat and potatoes), herding (yak and cow), and trade (selling rice from low altitude Nepal in Tibet, and Tibetan salt in Nepal, and breeding and selling dairy animals). They live in small villages and practice the Tibetan Buddhist religion, which has played an important role in defining Sherpa attitude toward climbing mountains. According to anthropologist Sherry Ortner, mountaineering has always been a questionable activity from the perspective of Sherpa religious beliefs. They believe

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73 ibid., page 138
that mountains are the homes of the gods and that gods must be kept happy if things are to go well for humanity. One of the things that makes the gods unhappy is polluting or profaning the mountains.

Such pollutions might include going high on the mountain or stepping on the summit; killing animals or otherwise shedding blood on the mountain; dropping human excretions on the mountain, burning garbage in the mountain or otherwise creating bad smells; and finally having women on the mountain at all, having women menstruating on the mountain, or having people engage in sexual relations on the mountain. 75

Sherpas believe that when the gods are unhappy, all sorts of bad things are liable to take place. And, according to Ortner, from the earliest times Sherpa lamas (religious leaders) warned against climbing the mountains. Ortner is quick to point out that there is considerable variation among Sherpas with regard to the credence individuals give to these religious warnings. In fact, she cites an example of the prominent Sherpa climber, Tenzing Norgay who, with Edmund Hillary in 1953, participated in the first ascent of Everest and who was relatively ambivalent toward his religion. After climbing Everest he was asked to give money to a monastery. He declined. In his biography he wrote, "I preferred to donate it to toward the building of a hostel or guest house which would be used by all poor people visiting the town, rather than to a group of monks who would just use it for themselves."76

On the whole, though, Ortner paints a picture of the Sherpa as a people very attentive to the spiritual world, for whom everyday choices have everything to do with their good standing in the eyes of the gods. Thus, as Sherpas began taking positions with western mountaineering expeditions, they were forced to find ways to minimize and make amends for the impacts they were inflicting upon the mountains. Ortner writes, "If

75 Ortner, Life and Death page 127
76 Ibid., page 113
one side of gaining and maintaining religious protection is a matter of avoiding offenses to the gods, the other side is a matter of actively petitioning their support and pleasing them with offerings. At the minimum, Shepras chant mantras almost continuously - in camp, on the climb, anywhere and everywhere. The sound is, according to Ortner, the "background music" of any Himalayan expedition. Sherpas practice other activities to appease the gods as well. They spread blessed rice, which they sprinkle to the gods in times of danger. They build rock cairns, hang prayer flags and organize pujas (religious ceremonies) in which all members of an expedition participate. Overall, Ortner's account of Sherpa attitudes toward mountains is one that reveals a series of behaviors that illustrate reverence and humility for mountains and a reluctance on the part of Sherpas to participate in behaviors that will in any way show disrespect for the mountain and, by extension, the gods. One gets the sense that, to varying degrees, each Sherpa who takes part in a western climbing expedition, while obviously happy to be making good western wages and increasing his level of social status, feels the need to consistently apologize and atone for his presence on the mountain. When all is said and done, a Sherpa climbs because he feels like he can get away with it if he chants enough mantras, builds his cairns high and leaves enough prayer flags.

You do not need to travel all the way to Nepal, though, to find a people with a long heritage of reverence for mountains. In an essay called "Remnants of the Mountain Crow in Montana and Wyoming," Lawrence L. Loendorf describes the importance of the prehistoric Medicine Wheel on Medicine Mountain in Wyoming. It was discovered by European-Americans in the 1880s, and its purpose and the identity of its builders have been the subject of a significant amount of debate. Leondorf describes the Medicine

\[77\] Ibid., page 130
Wheel as “an outline of piled stones with a circular shape, seventy feet in diameter, flattened on one side. This outline has twenty-eight spokes, also made of stones, that radiate from a central cairn of stones.... In addition to the central cairn, the Medicine Wheel has six other rock structures, five of them arranged at various points on the outer rim of the wheel”.

In this essay, Loendorf provides support for the idea (first put forth by anthropologist John Eddy) that this mysterious structure was originally used as a calendar or an indicator of summer solstice. According to Loendorf, the tribal group that likely constructed this site was the Mountain Crow, who divided from the River Crow (who had lived along the Missouri River with the Hidatsa and the group that would eventually leave to become the River Crow). Loendorf describes the oral traditions of the Crow Indians that say the Medicine Wheel is “the home of the sun.” “When the Mountain Crow moved to the west,” he writes, “they left behind a tradition for ceremonial lodges oriented to the solstice and symbolic homes for various persons in their mythology. It is not surprising that they took their ideology with them and constructed a replica of a ceremonial lodge when they got there.” It is, however, generally agreed that whatever its original purpose, this place served a secondary one as a vision questing site, “and probably some of the cairn structures in the outer circle of the wheel have been altered to suit individuals seeking their guardian spirits.”

The Medicine Wheel in Wyoming, then, represents an attempt by a displaced people to maintain connection with an important “person” (the sun) in their mythology. It is likely that the Crow performed ceremonies here, among them, those for Buffalo Calling or those of Old-Woman-Who-Never-Dies. Loendorf claims that the Buffalo Calling ceremonies were associated with improving herds and were a likely possibility.

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because the Crow had abandoned plant cultivation, depending entirely on hunting for survival.® The Old-Woman-Who-Never-Dies ceremony also seems likely "because it was associated with world renewal." According to Alfred W. Bowers,

The myth for Old-Woman-Who Never-Dies provided the basis for native beliefs and practices for the propagation of the cultivated crops and she was considered the 'goddess' of all vegetation. It was probably with this latter belief that she was associated by non-agricultural groups... such as the Crow....She was equally regarded as the 'producer' of wild fruit crops.  

Like the Sherpa, then, the Crow believed mountains to be the home of (at least some of) their gods. However, unlike the Sherpa, they seem to have been more willing to go visiting when they were in need of something - larger buffalo herds, world renewal... whatever.

Another North American culture that created for itself a fascinating (to me at least) relationship with the directions of up and down was the Hopi. In Book of the Hopi Frank Waters pieces together an account of the Hopi's "historical and religious world-view of life" through the testimony of some thirty elders of the Hopi Indian tribe in northern Arizona. Waters writes, "The Hopi regard themselves as the first inhabitants of America. Their village of Oraibi is indisputably the oldest continuously occupied settlement in the United States. It and most of the other villages cling to six-hundred-foot high escarpments of three rocky mesas rising abruptly out of the desert plain."  

footnotes:
79 Ibid., page 29
80 Ibid., page 27
The Hopi's world view is deeply religious. And theirs is a "life pattern rooted in the soil of this continent... the Hopis do not set themselves apart from this pattern." They view the universe as an "inseparably interrelated continuum." They believe that everything is alive, that everything possesses spirit.

The kiva is the underground chamber in which most Hopi ceremonies are held. The word "kiva" means "world below," and while the Hopi built their homes hundreds of feet off of the desert floor on the sides of mesa cliffs, they remain rooted to the earth through these underground structures. The kiva was "sunk deep, like a womb, into the body of Mother Earth, from which man is born with all that nourishes him." Waters elaborates on the importance of the kiva, comparing it to western churches;

The whole architecture of the kiva, like the concepts embodied in its ceremonialism, is thus directly opposite to that of the church of European lineage. The Christian Church is built above ground, its phallic steeple thrusting into the sky; the kiva is built below ground, a womb of Mother Earth. Inside the Christian church, altar and priests are raised above the level of common worshipers and adomed with the richest vestments; while in the kiva, altar and priests occupy the lowest level, where priests are always barefoot to show their humility.

Waters goes on to say that the kiva is focal point of Hopi life, that it is an abstract symbolization of the tenets of the ancient ceremonies performed in it and that it is the "underground heart of all that is truly, distinctly Hopi."

The Hopi appear to be unique among human cultures in that they went up only to go down (in). They lived in cliffs high on the sides of high mesas but remained

83 Ibid., page xi
84 Ibid., page 127
85 Ibid., page 129
86 Ibid., page 131
connected to the planet, and to their spiritual world, by digging down. Their deliberate choice to live at the tops of these inconvenient mesas is a reflection of their desire to occupy the proper place for humans: in the sky but also on the ground. Hopi ceremonies celebrate both directions of the vertical plane. They placed their kivas in the earth while also celebrating aspects of the sky and atmosphere. The Hopi’s is a religion largely based on interactions with the vertical plane. But unlike ours it is a religion that moves in both directions, neither favoring nor detesting one more than the other.

While this type of connection with and between earth, sky and spirit is expressed differently by the several mountain-oriented cultures I have discussed here, it is still a characteristic shared by all. It is this sense of connection to the planet (in the first place) that is missing from the western world-view.

When Paul Shepard postulates that we in the western world are disconnected from the natural world because we are ontologically incapable of turning into healthy adults, he is making a somewhat frightening assertion. For isn’t our unhealthy relationship with the natural world, as a result of dysfunction and immaturity, a much more frightening prospect than a relationship created through a series of rational (if irresponsible) choices made by humans to exploit the environment to further their own ends? If we are dealing with rationality, at least we can reverse the effects through education and awareness. That is, we can make further rational choices to fix the problem. But if we are dealing with insanity, isn’t it true that we are pretty much screwed? In fact, Shepard argues, this is reason to be even more hopeful. “An ecologically harmonious sense of self and world is not the outcome of rational choices. It is the inherent possession of everyone; it is latent in the organism, in the interaction of
the genome and early experience.\footnote{Paul Shepard, \textit{Nature and Madness} page 128} He goes on to say that given this, the problem may be much more difficult to understand than it is to solve. Which is to say, the solution is in our genes. Now we just have to hope that they outlast our civilization.

Maybe you don't buy Shepard's argument about the cause of our disconnection. That's understandable. You can't, though, deny the \textit{fact} of our disconnection. Nor can you deny the role climbing can play in illuminating that disconnection. Just as the climbing behaviors of the Sherpa, Crow and Hopi reveal a relationship to the natural world that is characterized by humility, respect and reverence, the climbing behavior of western civilization (Everest conquered and underfoot) sheds a stark light on our culture of conquest, domination and misunderstanding.

There is, I believe, something in all humans, some kind of genetic propensity for elevation, that makes us desire to go up hill. \textit{How} we go up hill is a function of the way our culture conditions us to think about things like God, the planet, its natural systems, and our relationships to all of these. For, ultimately we all (Americans, British, New Zealanders, Chinese, Japanese, Indians, Sherpa, Crow and Hopi) climb for the same reason. We climb because we think it matters. And if what we think matters is standing on the highest peak on the planet with the whole world below us, or bagging the highest mountains in each of the 50 states, or hiking up to some lookout point to experience the perfect view of someplace far away that we don't live in, or riding a tram up the side of some hill to eat hotdogs and buy postcards, then that would seem to tell us something about ourselves wouldn't it?