

### Mountains of the Bible: Three Rules of Mountaineering

*"It's always farther than it looks. It's always taller than it looks. It's always harder than it looks."*—  
The Three Rules of Mountaineering

*"The knowledge of God is a mountain steep indeed and difficult to climb."*—Gregory of Nyssa

*"When you get to the top of a mountain, keep climbing."*—Zen Buddhist saying

Climbing mountains makes me nervous. While I know getting an early start is always best, on days when I plan to climb I'll do just about anything to procrastinate. Re-read the maps over and over again. Check the weather. Check the weather again. I'm normally relatively focused and calm. But mountains make me jittery.

The types of mountains I usually climb don't pose a particularly concerning physical threat. I'm not talking about climbing K2 or the Matterhorn. I'll gleefully lace up my rubber-soled wading boots for a day on the river, knowing full well that I could end up falling on river rocks, being swept downstream through boulders and rapids, putting rod and limb in peril. But when I lace up my hiking boots, my heart flits and flutters. I know the feeling well because I'm feeling it right now, writing early in the morning on a beautiful July day in which I plan to hike up Mount Abraham in Vermont's Green Mountains.

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Mountains are edge experiences. They bring us to the vertical edge of this world, and perhaps also to the vertical edge of the self. When you reach the top of a mountain, you feel as if you've come to the end of something, the end of what the earth can offer in your path of ascent, and that if you wanted to go higher you would have to fly.

Mountains have long been thought to be where the gods dwell—the thunder and lightning and wind spirits, the fire gods of the volcanoes. When I think about climbing a mountain, especially one that takes me above timberline, I pause over this uneasy thought – for thousands of years of our human history, climbing to the tops of mountains was nearly unheard of and unthought of. The idea of going above timberline was thought to border somewhere between lunacy and

blasphemy. And so when I find myself taking in the panoramic view from a mountaintop, coursing underneath there's this sneaking suspicion that I might be trespassing. That I am not where I—not where humans—belong. There's the brutal indifference of rock and the relentless assault of sun and rain and wind and snow. There's the sense of being a brief visitor at most, and the sense that it could only be other, and higher spirits that could inhabit such a fierce landscape full-time.

In addition to the existential difficulty that mountains pose to the human spirit, there are also the basic physical difficulties to consider. Going up a mountain challenges the human body, and puts it in positions and strains that are not everyday motions. It requires stamina and energy and determination. It requires you to push through discomfort and exhaustion until you reach your second, third, fourth breaths. Not only do you have to lift your body upwards, pushing against gravity and the hardness of the mountain, you have to do so while cautiously but confidently placing each foot on possibly wobbly and erratic rock, slippery tree roots, cold mountain streams. Sometimes it's just you and a rock wall that you doubt you can scramble up without a rope and a belay and some chalk. Sometimes the wind tries to knock you off your feet. Sometimes the morbid thought lingers in the back of your mind—there are many ways to die on a mountain: death by dehydration or altitude sickness; death by rockfall or ice-fall from above; death by freezing; death by falling. Every year hundreds of people meet their end in the mountains.

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If, as American philosopher William James thought, the spiritual life is necessarily a strenuous life—one defined by what he called “the strenuous mood” that strives to test oneself and achieve that which is difficult and rare, rather than “the easy-going mood” which seeks to avoid pain and conflict—then mountain climbing could be seen as a spiritual practice *par excellence*. The ideal peak experience, then, becomes one which is only reached through passing through a great ordeal. We most fully realize ourselves on the top of a mountain when the journey there has tested us. When seen as a spiritual practice, ascent up the mountain becomes a type awakening—ascension becomes asceticism.

Strenuous, challenging, arduous, inhospitable, indifferent, difficult. Mountains are extreme—literally, metaphorically, physically. The mountaineering community summarizes this demanding aspect of mountains with their “Three Rules of Mountaineering”—“It's always farther than it looks. It's always taller than it looks. It's always harder than it looks.”

### **Rule #1 – “It's always farther than it looks.”**

God pushed Abraham further than any human should reasonably expect to be pushed. From the start of his story, God's relationship with Abraham was one of equal parts challenge and trust.

God's call came to Abraham (then Abram) when he was 75 years old, and childless with his wife Sarai (later Sarah).

*Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you.*

*-Genesis 12: 1*

Unlike Odysseus, who gave the Western imagination the image of life as a journey that eventually leads the self back to where it began—Odysseus sailing the seas of the world only to end up back in his native Ithaca—the story of Abraham presents a different picture and pattern for the journey of life—one in which one sets off from somewhere and ends up somewhere else, a journey that doesn't lead back to the known, but leads and pushes ever onward into the unknown. And so in addition to being the "father of faith" for the three great Abrahamic religions, Abraham is also in a sense the father of all explorers—the forerunner of Roald Amundsen and Fridtjof Nansen, George Mallory and Edmund Hilary, Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin.

God called Abraham to "go" and to go farther and farther into the unknown. When they were 100 years old God surprised Abraham and Sarah with their first child together, Isaac. A few years later, when Isaac was still a child, God pushed Abraham further than God ever had.

*After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." He said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you."-Genesis 22: 1-2*

It's one of the most harrowing and blood-curdling depictions of God in the Bible. A God that would ask someone to sacrifice their child, their greatest joy and love? This is the type of God that might tempt even God to atheism.

But somehow, through unspoken moments in the text that defy all reasonable expectation for what is humanly possible, Abraham readies himself for the task. He rises early in the morning. He saddles his donkey. He splits the wood. His every move is deliberate and precise, an image of calm on the surface of what could only have been a tempestuous sea that was capsizing his inner self and drowning his trust in God.

Abraham and Isaac set out and journey towards the land that God will show them. They go three days into the unknown. Three days into the mountain region of Moriah, waiting for God to show him the specific mountain that God has in mind.

*"On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place far away."*

*-Genesis 22: 4*

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At 26 miles away, on a route that would see an elevation gain of over 5,000 feet and a decline of 1,300 feet, if I set out on foot for Mount Abraham from my house it might well take me three days like Abraham's journey to Moriah. "Mount Abe," as locals call it, is one of the five peaks of Vermont's "Presidential Range," in the Green Mountains. Situated above the town of Lincoln (confusingly, not named after President Abraham Lincoln like the mountain is, but after Revolutionary War hero Benjamin Lincoln), Mount Abe looms broad and large on the landscape, and seems to present an impenetrable first wall to the Green Mountains when approaching from the west. It's a long-sloping, solid mountain with a worn nub of a peak. Before being named after President Lincoln, it was known in the early 19<sup>th</sup>-century as Potato Hill. What the native Abenaki name for the mountain is has proved difficult to track down.

As the highest peak in Addison County at 4,006 ft., Mount Abe is a local hiking favorite, as it's noteworthy for its low timberline, alpine tundra vegetation, and 360-degree panorama from the peak. On a clear day you can see Mt. Marcy in the Adirondacks to the west, Killington Peak to the south, the White Mountains of New Hampshire to the east, and the long outer spine of the Green Mountains to the north. The beginning of the trail quickly brings you into a dark and mossy enchanted fairy fern forest, with the peak presenting a different feel altogether as the cold indifference of rock takes over.

Mount Abe is classified as a "moderately challenging" hike. In my experience the weather systems that the mountain creates have proved to be the most challenging feature of the hike, as on multiple occasions the mountain has turned me back with wind, fog, rain, hail, snow, ice. There's a shelter less than a mile below the summit which can be a good place to wait out a storm, contemplating whether or not to continue up.

I've noticed that neither myself nor the mountain seem particularly disappointed here when I turn around and head back down. This is a mountain which seems to like to keep some mystery to it.

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Vermont field biologist and naturalist Craig Zondag knows this mountain well. And this mountain knows Craig well. To hike this mountain with him is to hike a mountain of stone and birdsong and lichen and moss, but also to hike a mountain of mind and body and soul and spirit.

Although I had hiked this mountain many times, it wasn't until I hiked with Craig that I noticed the precise moment when quartzite rock shows up on the trail. It wasn't until I hiked with him that I learned that the first major boulder deposit is a vast, angular fortress of rock that is called the Hall of the Mountain King. It wasn't until I hiked with him that I noticed that, after about the first quarter mile, about the exact moment when the body starts to get a bit hot and sweaty on

a summer day coincides with when the mountain turns cool and dark and smells of fragrant balsam, birch, and pine. “Notice how the mountain incense attaches to the open pores of the skin—I call this mountain cleansing,” Craig said. A winter wren sings its canary-like song deep in the woods, and a Swainson’s thrush sings its electric melody closer by, adding to the baptismal feel of the moment.

We ascend over a beautiful stretch of the trail, where the rocks lie flat, large, and horizontal like steps. Craig calls this section Jacob’s Ladder. It will lead us up to where we’re hoping to arrive on today’s hike—not the summit with its 360-degree panorama and alpine tundra ecotone, but the moment about halfway up when the path narrows and needles through two massive boulders, one on each side of the trail.

These boulders flanking the trail are the Gateway to the Mountain. Although I had admired this moment in the trail before, and had stopped by these rocks for a drink of water, and a moment to pause and reflect, it wasn’t until I hiked with Craig that I realized that these rocks truly are a gateway. You arrive here, and the trail funnels you through. To go around these huge rocks would be unthinkable. They mark a boundary, a threshold. There is the trail before these rocks. And then there is the trail after these rocks. They are a paradigmatic “thin place” as Celtic spirituality imagines it. A place where the veil between this world and the next, heaven and earth, is worn particularly thin. These rocks also have a powerful effect on human behavior. They direct your steps, just as the trail up the mountain directs your steps, teaching you how to walk on the mountain in a way that feels instructive for how to walk on the earth anywhere. “Mount Abe,” as Craig said, “teaches me how to walk. It teaches me how to put one foot after another. It teaches me how to find balance. It teaches me how to tread lightly, and how to move sustainably. Hiking this mountain always teaches me how to walk on the earth.”

For today, we stop between these two boulders. Our destination, our quest, is not for the peak, but for the Gateway to the Mountain. These rocks concentrate the intention and the wisdom of the mountain. Why are you hiking here? they ask. What is your quest? And the rocks also require that you ask a question of them. At this moment in the trail, as Craig has intuited, the sensitive hiker must ask of this Gateway—can I proceed? Can I continue on up to the summit? Is the top of this sacred mountain accessible and welcoming of me?

Craig has hiked this mountain countless times. And countless times, he has paused at the Gateway and asked permission to proceed. And countless times the mountain has said—yes, yes you may continue up. But one time the mountain said no. Once the mountain said that the peak is not for you today. Once the mountain said—this far you may go, and no farther.

For today, the gateway is our destination. We need not ask anything of these rocks but to enjoy their presence, and for them to enjoy our appreciative visit. They seem glad to have us sit among them for a while, knowing that we came up to the mountain, not for the summit, but to linger near them. Craig sits on the top of one boulder to rest with cherries and water. I sit atop the other. We watch hikers come and go, chatting about everything except the energy and presence of the mountain. We wonder if they pause to think about the Gateway, and if they might be

asking, deep within, if they can get the mountain's permission to proceed. Sitting on top of those rocks, it doesn't appear as if many people pause. It's the Fourth of July, Independence Day in America, and people seem eager as ever to get to the top. Sometimes the most difficult thing about hiking a mountain is not how far it is to get to the top, but how far you realize you have to go, and we have to go, as a species, to dwell on this earth in a more beautiful, honoring, reverential way.

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*“When they came to the place that God had shown him, Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood in order. He bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son.”*

–Genesis 22: 9-1

Rabbis refer to this horrific story as the *Akedah*, the binding of Isaac. The text is terse. We can only imagine what must have been going through Abraham's mind as he was up there on Mount Moriah, about to sacrifice his son. God pushed Abraham further than any human should be expected to be pushed.

Writing under the pseudonym Johannes de silentio (John of the Silence), Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard set on a performative pantomime of Abraham's journey to Mount Moriah, trying to imagine the depths of anxiety that the father of faith endured, the “fear and trembling” that must have accompanied him every step on this journey of sorrow to the mountain. Kierkegaard imagines many different scenarios, and tells fictive accounts of what the journey might have been like. In one account, Isaac breaks the journey off, doubting that Abraham's motives actually come from God. In another, Abraham ends up doubting God. Again and again, the philosopher tries to climb Mount Moriah, trying to get inside Abraham's head. Try as he might, the philosopher is incapable of retelling the Abraham story as it is actually told in Genesis 22. He's unable to reckon with the facts of the story as they're presented on the pages of scripture. Every attempt to get inside Abraham's head leads to the story turning out differently than it actually did. The reality of Abraham is a reality that rational, philosophical inquiry simply cannot embrace.

Kierkegaard finds himself at the end of the rope of reason and unable to make the same leap of faith that Abraham makes. “No one was so great as Abraham,” he writes, “and who is capable of understanding him?” “Personally,” he writes “I have devoted a considerable amount of time to the study of Hegelian philosophy, and I believe I understand it fairly well...On the other hand, whenever I try to think about Abraham, I am as it were annihilated...[Abraham] utterly astounds me and my brain twists and turns in its skull.”

“Abraham I cannot understand,” the philosopher concludes. “In a certain sense there is nothing I can learn from him but astonishment.”

Abraham, that great “knight of faith” as Kierkegaard terms him, made it further in faith than anyone before or since has made it. Such faith is “the highest passion of man,” Kierkegaard writes. Some might get close on this journey of faith, but compared the Abraham, “no one gets further.”

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After you pass through the small mountain town of Lincoln, the road narrows as it follows the boulder-laden New Haven River upstream towards its headwaters on the east side of Mount Abe. The mountain itself forms an imposing wall that looks impenetrable. Although only a few miles away at this point, the apparent inaccessibility of the broad imposing peak makes it seem much further away than it actually is. Eventually the road turns to gravel and narrows, twisting and turning up into the evergreens, the road itself become more and more trail-like with switchbacks and steep ascents, until you reach the Lincoln Gap, a steep and wild mountain pass, Vermont’s highest, at 2,424 feet. To your right, the Long Trail climbs up to Sunset Ledge. To the left, the trailhead to Mount Abe. The Gap is a high v-shaped pass, already up in the mountains, with peaks rising on either side. Like the two boulders halfway up the mountain, it has the feel more of a Gateway than a Gap.

From what I’ve been able to read, for most of their time living in Vermont, for thousands of years the Abenaki generally avoided going up to the high peaks. Preferring the Champlain Valley’s fertile land, gentler climate, and accessible hunting, the mountains were not the place for humans to live, but were instead the realm of the sacred, where their cultural hero/ creator God Gluskabe is said to dwell. Gluskabe, known as “the Owner,” or more literally, “the man who created himself,” is said to have lived at a time before the evolution of legs and bipedalism. And so Gluskabe dragged his body around, rolling over the landscape, creating Vermont’s mountains and rivers and valleys.

As late as 1940 Abenaki long houses could still be found on the shores of Lake Champlain, but the forcible displacement and retreat of the Abenaki had long begun. Some sought refuge first in the mountains, including the Lincoln Gap, drawn to the rugged and seemingly safe, impenetrable landscape. Today’s Abenaki live in many places throughout the state. There is a local legend though that the spirits of an Abenaki party have remained behind in the Lincoln Gap/ Mount Abe area, dwelling behind the rocks and the trees. They’re known as “the protectors of the Gap.” Occasionally they make their presence known. There are accounts of hikers smelling wood and incense burning but being unable to locate the campfire. Other hikers have reported seeing eyes staring at them through the woods and fleeting shadows moving with them on the trail. One theory about the protectors of the Gap is that they are trying to protect the wildness of the rugged mountain area.

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*But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." He said, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." And Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called that place "The Lord will provide"; as it is said to this day, "On the mountain of the Lord it shall be provided."*

-Genesis 22: 11-14

God pushed Abraham further than any human should expect to be pushed. God pushed him to leave his homeland, and venture forever into the unknown, to be a restless explorer for the course of his life. And then God pushed Abraham even further. How Abraham did it—how he rose early in the morning, how he saddled his donkey, how he split the wood, how we journeyed for three days to a mountain God would finally show him, a mountain that after three was days still “far off.” How he hiked up that mountain with his son Isaac who wondered aloud where the lamb for the sacrificial offering would come from. How he made it up to that last moment.

Mountaineers say the first rule of mountain climbing is that “it’s always farther than you think.” Abraham knew that better than anyone. Abraham knew that in a way that I still cannot understand. From Abraham, I can only learn astonishment and wonder.

Out on our local Abraham Mountain, there is always something about the mountain which eludes me. Sometimes making it only halfway up is far enough. Sometimes just standing at the trailhead far enough. Sometimes the protectors of the Gap, or the Gateway say that you can go this far, but no further. And sometimes you can find yourself on the top, at the end of yourself but close to Gluskabe, close to Abraham and all other explorers who have journeyed to the edges, close to the heavens, close to the endless extremity of God.

## **Rule #2 – “It’s always taller than you think.”**

Although Jesus generally experienced mountains as peaceful places of prayer and inspiration (e.g., his Sermon on the Mount), Jesus also faced his own type of testing and temptation in the mountains. Matthew’s Gospel tells about how early on in his ministry, right after being baptized by John in the Jordan, the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness for forty days and forty nights.

Famished and exhausted, the tempter Satan visits Jesus. Surrounded by rocks in a barren landscape, Satan tempts Jesus to turn the rocks into bread. Jesus resists. The rocks are just rocks, after all, and even if they were bread, Jesus knows that *“one does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from God.”*

Next Satan takes Jesus up to the holy Temple of Jerusalem. Also known as the Temple Mount—a holy site to Jews, Christians, and Muslims—some traditions hold that his was the same mountain that Abraham was asked to sacrifice Isaac on, Mount Moriah. From that mountain-temple, Satan tempts Jesus to test God—to throw himself off the mountain and trust that God will save him, just as God saved Isaac at the last second. Jesus reaches deep into the scriptures of his youth, and remembers a verse from Deuteronomy, *“Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”*

Finally,

*the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” Jesus said to him, “Away with you, Satan! for it is written,*

*Worship the Lord your God,  
and serve only him.*

*Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him. –Matthew 4: 8-11*

The King James version says that this Mountain of Temptation was not only “very high,” but “exceedingly high.” While traditionally associated with Mount Quarantania, a small hill overlooking Jericho in the West Bank, at only 1,201 ft., it seems likely that the location of this “exceedingly high” mountain was elsewhere, and is unknown and perhaps lost to history.

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There’s a certain culture in the mountain climbing world in which success is measured in altitude. “Peak baggers,” they’re sometimes called. This drive to climb the tallest and most difficult mountains is a relatively recent desire for humanity, and seems to be a particularly masculine obsession to conquer and dominate nature. Until the 18<sup>th</sup>-century, tall peaks, by and large, were mostly ignored at best and were disdained at worst. Up until the high Alps started to be climbed in the mid-to-late 1700s, the dominant attitude about mountains in much of the world was either one of reverence or repulsion. Reverence seems to be the deepest human attitude

towards mountains, with people worshiping peaks like Mount Fuji, Mount Olympus, Mount Kilimanjaro as holy places for thousands of years—as the dwelling place of the gods, as those places where heaven met earth. And yet, in Europe there was a curious attitude of repulsion towards the mountains that developed.

In Thomas Burnet's *The Sacred Theory of the Earth* of 1681, one of the foundational works of geology, mountains were thought to represent the fallenness of the world and the sinfulness of humanity. Burnet's influential "Egg Theory" of the earth posited that when God originally created it, the surface of the earth was smooth and pristine like an egg. Inside the egg was the white (water) and the yolk (fire). When Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden of Eden, it was as if the egg-shell of creation was cracked in a million little places. The egg-white moved to the surface and flooded the earth. The yolk-fire erupted in volcanoes. The watery world gathered bits of eggshell into irregular piles. When the floods finally subsided, the piles of egg shell emerged as mountains on the disfigured landscape. Mountains then were thought to be direct symbols and signs of original sin and humanity's fall from grace.

And so it was common in 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe to revere flat landscapes that speak of agricultural fecundity and connections to smooth, flat Eden. Meadows, orchards, and grazing fields made up the ideal landscape. Mountains, by contrast, were seen as aesthetically and theologically repugnant. In common parlance of the time, mountains were referred to as 'deserts', 'boils', 'warts', 'wens', 'excrescences'. When travelers would make the journey through the alps, it was common practice to put a blindfold on when passing through the most jagged peaks.

It wasn't until the Industrial Revolution's capitalist dis-enchantment of reality gave birth to the Romantic movement in the arts and philosophy that the perception of mountains began to change. As longing for the wild and the uncommodified gripped Industrial Europe, a revolution of landscape perception unfolded over the course of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. The qualities for which mountains were once disdained—jaggedness, danger, indifference—came to be seen as their most alluring aspects.

The modern mountaineering efforts to climb the earth's tallest moments arose out of this Romantic revolution of perception concerning mountains. Mont Blanc in the Swiss Alps, first ascended in 1786, set the stage for almost two centuries of obsessive mountaineering, the highest prize of which was undoubtedly Mount Everest, the tallest peak on earth, the "Third Pole."

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When Roald Amundsen reached the South Pole in 1911, the two polar blanks on the map had been filled in. When it came to the earth's most extreme places, only Everest, the "Third Pole" remained.

Of course, the Third Pole wasn't unknown to the Tibetans and Nepalis, who had worshipped the mountain for generations (known as *Chomolunga* in Tibet, "Mother Goddess of the World," and *Sagarmatha* in Nepal, "Forehead of the Ocean," or "Goddess of the Sky"). Curiously they felt no need to climb the mountain themselves, and didn't even have a word for the "peak" of a mountain. The high parts of mountains, for them, are the realm of the gods.

When Tenzing Norgay and Sir Edmund Hilary first made it to the summit in 1953, their responses to the moment were illuminating. Tenzing Norgay said a quite prayer honoring Chomolunga, Mother Goddess of the World, lending weight to the Dalai Lama's claim that "the most spiritual people on this planet live in the highest place." Hilary, by contrast, turned to expedition partner George Lowe. "By George," he said, "we've knocked the bastard off."

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Thirty years earlier George Mallory, the crown prince of the Romantic mountaineering movement, made three epic expeditions to Everest. In 1921 Mallory was 35 years old. He had a steady job as a schoolmaster, a wife Ruth that he loved dearly, and three young children he cherished. And yet he longed for more—adventure, poetry, danger. Over the course of three grueling trips to the great Himalayan peak, Mallory fell in love with Everest, a love affair that would prove fatal.

The first 1921 expedition was largely a reconnaissance mission—to map every detail of the mountain, and to seek the best route to the top. The tweed-clad group brought to the mountains tins of quail and cases of champagne. Under the spell of the romance and danger of it all, on first glimpse Mallory fell madly in love with Everest. "I cannot tell you how much it possesses me," he wrote home to Ruth in 1921. Even so, the arduous trip there, and the challenging time on the mountain—the relentless, unbearable cold, snow, sun, and wind—left Mallory feeling defeated on the trip back home. In a letter from the ship ride back, Mallory wrote to his sister that "I wouldn't go again next year, as the saying is, for all the gold in Arabia."

Of course, he went back the next year. And again in 1924.

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At some point Mallory began referring to Everest simply as "the mountain." His group would term their attempts at the peak as "assaults," as "making a strike," as "laying siege." On June 8<sup>th</sup> of 1924, on the third and final expedition, Mallory and his climbing partner Irvine set off with oxygen tanks (against Mallory's protest), and made an attempt at the summit. Another climbing partner, Noell Odell, stayed behind and watched them ascend, two black dots moving slowly along the summit ridge. He lost sight of them as they passed up into the clouds.

In May of 1999 George Mallory's body was found at an altitude of 27,000 feet. Face down, his arms were spread out in a manner that suggested that he was either hugging the mountain or clutching it as he slid and fell. His clothes were ripped and disintegrated, but the cold had preserved his body. His white petrified flesh looked like the cold stone of the mountain. The great explorer ended up as a white marble statute near the top of the wild mountain museum that obsessed and possessed him.

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When the second expedition team of 1922 reached the Himalayas, they had a chance to meet with Tibetan Lama Gyatrul Rinpoche before they set off for the mountain. The lama offered them tea, yogurt, and rice and inquired of the team what their intentions were, what they hoped would come of this trip. They said to him, "if we can climb the world's highest mountain, the English government will give money and high position." The lama warned them that those mountains were extremely cold, and were not useful for much of anything besides meditation. The lama warned them of dangerous spirits and sacred protectors of the land. The expedition team asked the lama's permission, and agreed not to kill any creatures on their way. The lama gave parting gifts to the team of meat and tea and flour.

"They camped at the bottom of the mountain," he recalled later in his spiritual autobiography, "and I heard that they camped seven times for each level they reached. With great effort they use magical skills with iron nails, iron chains and iron claws, with great agony, hands and feet frozen...Some left early to have limbs cut off, other stubbornly continued to climb..."

"I felt great compassion," the lama concludes, "for them to suffer so much for such meaningless work."

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Jesus found himself on an "exceedingly high mountain." He was presented with the chance to conquer and control the entire world. Even as benevolent of a ruler as Jesus would have been, he knew the deeper truth that *"the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof."* (Ps. 24:1). He knew the deeper wisdom of what's actually valuable—*"And what do you benefit, if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul?"*-Matthew 16: 26. Jesus knew that even the tallest mountain in the world wasn't tall enough for the insatiable human hunger for more. He knew that the peak itself was never the final goal, never the ultimate destination.

He knew the deep Zen wisdom of the Himalayan mountain monks, who have a mantra to resist the temptation to claim ultimate attainment and final accomplishment—"When you get to the top of a mountain, keep climbing."

Because in deep wisdom of the second rule of mountaineer, "it's always taller than you think."

### Rule #3 – “It’s always harder than you think.”

*And the angel of the Lord came again a second time, and touched him, and said, “Arise and eat, else the journey will be too great for you.” And he arose, and ate and drank, and went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mountain of God. -1 Kings 19: 7-8*

The prophet Elijah had a rough go of it. He lived at a time when King Ahab and Queen Jezebel were turning the people away from the worship of the God of Israel, and towards the worship of Baal. Elijah was one of the few prophets of the God of Israel left. He was forced to live in the edge spaces—the deserts and the mountains. He was a prophet without a people, a lone voice in the wilderness.

An extended drought and famine provided Elijah an opportunity to show God’s power. He sent word to the king about a prophets’ challenge. He invited the king to gather a great crowd, and gather all the prophets of Baal, all 450 of them, and meet Elijah on Mt. Carmel. There two alters were set up with wood and a bull on the wood ready for burning. The test was to see which god would respond to the prayers to light the altar on fire. The people will know that “the god who answers by fire,” as Elijah put it, “is God.”

The prophets of Baal pray to the heavens all day long. Elijah teases them, saying Baal must be asleep, or maybe out for a walk. Then his moment comes. With dramatic flair, he creates additional steps to the ritual. He surrounds the altar with 12 stones, reminding the people of the 12 tribes of Israel. He digs a trench around the altar, and he pours jar after jar of water on the altar, until the wood was soaked through and the trench ran full. Lifting his eyes to heaven, Elijah prays to God to answer him. The fire of God falls from the sky, burning up the wood and the bull and licking dry the mote of water. The people fall down on their face in awe. Elijah has won. The prophets of Baal are rounded up and killed.

Post-victory, Elijah climbs to the peak of Mount Carmel and sees, far off in the distance, a rain cloud forming. The drought is about to end. He descends the mountain and begins a journey towards the king and queen, probably expecting to find a hero’s welcome, both for winning the prophets’ duel and bringing the much-needed rain. But before he arrives, word comes to him from Queen Jezebel. Instead of celebrating Elijah and welcoming him back, they are furious with the prophet, and vow that they will search him out and kill him. Dejected, the prophet turns around. He leaves behind his servant and goes deep into the wilderness on his own. He finds a solitary broom tree, a small shrub in the rocky landscape. He lies down under the tree, and asks

God to let him die. “It is enough; now, O God, take away my life.” The prophet falls asleep under the tree, wanting nothing more than not to wake up the next day.

Sometime near dawn an angel awakes him, and offers him some bread and water. He eats and drinks, and then falls asleep again. The angel visits again with a second helping of bread and water, telling the prophet to eat and drink again, because he has an even more difficult journey ahead of him—forty days and forty nights to the mountain of God, Mount Horeb, also known as Mount Sinai, where Moses had spent forty days and forty nights up in the dark clouds with God, the people below terrified of the thunder and lightning on the peak, as they awaited a word from the Lord.

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On July 23<sup>rd</sup> 1846 Henry David Thoreau walked into town from his cabin at Walden Pond and ended up spending the night in the Concord jail for refusing to pay his poll tax. A fervent abolitionist, Thoreau explained, “I cannot for an instant recognize as *my* government that which is the *slave’s* government also.” Thoreau was a prophet ahead of his time, and like Elijah, a prophet without a people, a lone voice in the wilderness. The next day somebody paid his tax for him (perhaps Emerson), and he was free to return to Walden. When he returned, he started making plans for a much longer sojourn away from Walden. On August 31<sup>st</sup>, he set off on a grueling two-week journey to hike Mount Katahdin deep in the Maine woods.

After a train ride from Boston to Bangor, he followed the Penobscot and headed “up river” by buggy, ferry, and eventually batteau (“the white man’s canoe”), canoe, and by foot. Initially, Thoreau luxuriates in the smell of the evergreens, the “diet-drink” of the air, and the sounds of the birds along the riverway. At the start of the trip it’s the Romantic, Transcendentalist Thoreau of *Walden* that the world knows and loves. He describes the woods as “that pleasant wildness which we were so eager to become acquainted with.” Soon though, the trip up to Katahdin becomes more difficult. In the damp and mossy woods, Thoreau feels like he’s hiking through a swamp, even though it’s the driest time of year. It rains just about every day and every night, and Thoreau’s hiking boots are never dry.

His group reaches the base of Katahdin. An avid hiker in the Massachusetts—New Hampshire area, Thoreau notes that “here it fell to my lot, as the oldest mountain-climber, to take the lead.” He chooses as his route the most direct and steep path up the mountain to the summit on the south side. The small handful of people who had reached the peak before him had all taken other, less direct routes. Thoreau looks up at the challenge ahead of him. “Ktaadn,” he writes, “presented a different aspect from any mountain I have seen, there being a greater proportion of naked rock rising abruptly from the forest.” At four o’clock in the afternoon, the rest of Thoreau’s weary party gives up for the day and sets up camp in view of the summit. Thoreau sets off for the peak alone.

At first the vegetation is so thick as to be nearly impenetrable. Thoreau has to hike straight up the path of a steep stream bed. He uses the word “arduous.” He invokes “Satan” and “Chaos” to describe the mountain landscape he’s trying to hike up. “Having slumped, scrambled, rolled,” he writes, “bounced, and walked, by turns, over this scraggy country, I arrived upon a side-hill, or rather side-mountain, where rocks, gray, silent rocks, were the flocks and herds that pastured, chewing a rocky cud at sunset. They looked at me with hard gray eyes, without a bleat or a low.”

A consummate naturalist, Thoreau eagerly studied every aspect of nature. Botany, perhaps was his favorite subject. Geology was his least favorite. “It is hard to know rocks,” he wrote in 1844 in his Journal. “They are crude and inaccessible to our nature.” Thoreau’s repulsion to the sheer minerality of the world would come to a head on Katahdin, making his essay about the hike unique in all his writings. It’s the only time Thoreau deconstructs his Romantic view of nature, and reckons with the brutal indifference of rock and mountain. The “Katahdin” essay is the closest Thoreau comes to attaining what Peter Matthiessen sought in *The Snow Leopard*—“an unsentimental embrace of all existence.”

1,200 feet below the Katahdin summit, dense clouds halt Thoreau’s summit. He never made it to the top.

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After having his life saved under the broom tree of his darkest night of despair, Elijah journeys forty days into the wilderness, and seeks refuge in a cave on the side of Mount Horeb. The story echoes Moses’s encounter with God on the same mountain, although rather than meeting God as the much-heralded leader of the people, Elijah meets God alone, on the run for his life.

Elijah hears God’s voice come to him in the mountain cave. “*What are you doing here, Elijah?*” God asks. The older King James Version captures the existential tone of the question — “*What doest thou here?*” God’s call comes to the prophet in the form of a question. God calls not to give the prophet encouragement or clarity of purpose or a directive for next steps. God calls to invite the prophet to pause, and to reflect, and to wonder—what *am* I doing here? What led me here? *What* is my purpose, my reason for being here on this earth?

Come, God says, stand at the entrance of your mountain cave and look out.

*And behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and broke in pieces the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice. —1 Kings 19: 11-2*

The mountain throws everything that it can at the prophet. Wind rips through rock. The tectonic plates that formed the mountain rumble again, suggesting that just as the mountain has been made, so too it can be unmade. The fire that lies deep down under these tectonic plates and that fueled the formation of the mountain itself rises to the surface. But God was not in the wind. God was not in the earthquake. God was not in the fire.

Elijah hears “a still small voice.” He hears “*the sound of sheer silence*,” “*a soft whisper*,” “*a gentle breeze*,” “*a thin quiet sound*,” as different translations put it. I imagine it as a moment of stillness for the prophet, a rare moment of quiet repose amid all the tumult and confusion of his existentially and physically strenuous ordeal. A “*be still and know that I am God*” (Psalm 46: 10) moment.

Elijah wraps his face with his scarf and stands quietly at the entrance of the cave. God’s voice comes to him again. And again, God calls to the prophet with the same question as before— “*What are you doing here, Elijah?*” “*What doest thou here?*” After the wind, after the earthquake, after the fire, after the moment of stillness and awareness of God, this question now finds the prophet ready to pick up the task of answering again to the existential claim and call on his life. He begins looking ahead, and making plans for the future. He begins to think about how to continue the movement of faith that he’s given his life to. He finds renewed life-meaning in his next task—to mentor Elisha as his protégé and successor. He had thought he was going to die. He had thought this was the end for him. But there on the mountain he pushed through the hard place he found himself in, and he emerged on the other side. He made it through the Gateway. The mountains said—yes, you can continue on your way.

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Thoreau’s experience on Katahdin sent an existential shudder down his spine and shook him to his core. It unveiled an aspect of Nature that he had previously not seen, or not wanted to see. On Katahdin Thoreau met the hard, indifferent reality of rock. Thoreau met “Matter, vast, terrific.” “Perhaps I most fully realized that this was primeval, untamed, and forever untameable *Nature*,” he wrote later as he looked back on his experience.

On Katahdin Thoreau first “felt the presence of a force not bound to be kind to man.” He wonders aloud whether it might in fact be a transgression of boundaries for humans to hike to the bare tops of mountains. He hears a voice from Mother Earth say as much to him. “Why came ye here before your time?” She asks. “I cannot pity nor fondle thee here... Why seek me where I have not called thee?”

In one of the most ecstatic prose passages in all of his writing, Thoreau describes the feeling of standing on the rock-slope of the mountain and becoming newly awakened to the sheer, indifferent materiality of existence—of being a physical body in nature, surrounded by countless other bodies of matter, many of them hard and cold as rock.

*I stand in awe of my body, this matter to which I am bound has become so strange to me. I fear not spirits, ghosts, of which I am one...but I fear bodies, I tremble to meet them. What is this Titan that has possession of me? Talk of mysteries! —Think of our life in nature, —daily to be shown matter, to come in contact with it, — trees, rocks, wind on our cheeks! the solid earth! the actual world! the common sense! Contact! Contact! Who are we? where are we?*

Who are we? Where are we? In other words, Thoreau heard the same still, small voice of God in the mountains that Elijah heard— *What doest thou here?*

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*“The knowledge of God is a mountain steep indeed and difficult to climb.”* -Gregory of Nyssa

The third and final rule of mountaineering is that “it’s always harder than you think.” Elijah felt the almost overwhelming challenge of the journey in the desert wilderness, under the broom tree when he wanted to die, and in the mountain cave where he nearly died due to wind, earthquake, and fire. Thoreau felt the hardness when he awakened to the profound indifference of material reality on Katahdin—when he woke up to “Matter, vast, terrific.” Mountains are hard, fierce landscapes. The spiritual insights they yield are equally hard and fierce.

Because when you dare to approach the mountain realm, when you make an attempt at the summit of the world, when you reach the edge of the summit of the self, and seek the summit of God—the deep truth is that it’s always farther than it looks, it’s always taller than it looks, and it’s always harder than it looks.