

Mountaintop searching: Wondering about God

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If I could only describe the high country, how the car strains and the mind races and the lungs ache, how the body slows and the breathing quickens.

—journal entry, Creede, Colorado, summer 2003

Some people seem very sure of themselves when they talk about this mountain or that mountain, as if mountains were easily defined and well-differentiated one from another.

They mention the name of a mountain and incline their heads vaguely toward something in the distance. I look, but I can't see what they see. All I see is a jagged line of peaks against the skyline. They all seem to share the same base, which looks to me like the backbone of the earth.

And if I happen to be driving toward a mountain, things don't get any easier for me. The closer I get to mountains, the less the clear they seem. Every passing mile brings an explosion of depth and detail to my eyes. The mountains change from silhouetted ideas to multidimensional reality. Foothills roll down great slabs of earth. Valleys run every which way. There are innumerable peaks and depressions, and the mountains flow gently into each other. I cannot tell where one ends and another begins.

Once some friends claimed they could take me to a mountain, and I agreed to let them try. There was a small road off the main highway with a sign and a gate. A store-bought map boldly named a mountain and assured us that this road would take us to it.

When we passed through the gate, what little knowledge I had began to unravel. Any hope of understanding the mountain was lost in a furious rush of detail. Eventually I gave up trying to know anything and simply stared at the particulars

which were presented to me just outside the window of the car. Trees, sloping meadows, rock formations, chipmunks, the occasional elk. It seemed to me that there was no mountain at all, just high country, and I laughed to myself when I thought of how we had tried to give it a name.

The truth is, I know almost nothing of mountains, and I have visited them every summer for almost twenty years. The only thing I can tell you is what mountains mean to me.

Mountains are places where the earth juts upward in complex patterns that are beyond human comprehension. You can go on the mountain or up the mountain or in the mountains; I'm not sure which preposition works best. When you drive in mountain places, sometimes the road bends and you can see far below to the highway that brought you to this strange land. In these moments of sudden vision, you can pretend that you understand how high you are.

If you look closely, you will see that mountains are made of smaller mountains. And these in turn are made of hills. These hills are made of countless bumps and undulations of earth. You cannot know or understand all the ways in which the earth goes upwards. Such knowledge is too wonderful for us.

Finally, you reach a place where even trees do not grow. It gets quiet, and sometimes the road ends and you are not allowed to go further unless you are prepared to hike and climb. You may get out of your vehicle at this point and walk around. You might say to yourself or to your companions, "We are near the top of the mountain." You may not be sure exactly what mountain you are on or how you got there, but you are high in the air, and you have the feeling that you have visited something very old and dignified.

When I am in the mountain lands, I see the world in different ways. I suddenly have no desire to own anything—ownership seems petty and small and even silly, though I know that I will want to own things again when I get back to the lowlands.

I also understand with stunning clarity that I am a small, naked person, who for some reason has wrapped himself in clothing and taken a journey to a high place. I see myself clearly, and I understand what a tiny presence I am on this mountain and in this world. I like knowing that I am small. It feels good to know it.

And I often feel a strong desire to speak out loud to the Great Intelligence I sense is behind the universe. So I pray, and my prayers sound something like this:

Thank you for my life, for the gift and the responsibility of it, both for the good and the bad of it, for the joy and even the pain of it. Thank you for not being fair. Fair is entirely too predictable and human a thing for the likes of you. Thank you for trusting us to fill in the details. Thank you for the freedom, especially since you understand more than anyone the great evil that often comes from it.

I'm sorry for wasting so much time and life. I'm sorry for what I should have seen but did not see. I'm sorry for giving so much of myself to any Tom, Dick or Harry who offered me a paycheck and a little security.

I love that you have placed us in a world of great beauty and watched to see what we would do with it. I love that story that says you molded us with your own hands. Are we precious and silly in your sight?

You are very compelling to me. I wish I knew the truth about you. Do you exist in the ways that the religious people describe, or are you so far beyond us that theology is as silly as bending your head toward the spine of the earth and daring to give it a name?

I hope you like me.

I tell you this, if you give me any light at all, any direction or guidance, I will follow you to the ends of the earth. I will keep my eyes open. What I can see I will see. What I cannot see I will love anyway.

I will wonder about you, always, when I journey to these high places. I will wonder about the names we have given you, and the maps and roads we say lead to you, and the times we boldly claim that we stand in your presence. I will wonder about these things and be a little afraid.

I know that you are very big. And it feels good to know it.