



Upfront

“Come and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,” Micah says in the Old Testament.

Exodus reports God’s instructions to Moses, before delivering the tablets containing the Ten Commandments: “Climb higher up the mountain and wait there for me.”

Throughout the Andes, in Incan culture, mountains are sacred symbols – the origins of mystical spirits and forces (“apus,” in Quechuan, the indigenous tongue).

George Mallory was an English clergyman – coincidental vocation? – and a member of the first three British Mount Everest expedition teams. When asked by a *New York Times* reporter, “Why do men climb mountains?” Mallory quickly (and famously) quipped, “Because they are there.”

Ansel Adams, of black-and-white alpine photography fame, said, “...a large granite mountain cannot be denied. It speaks in silence to the core of your being.”

A mountain is a metaphor. Rugged, unforgiving, aspirational, humbling. In conquering a mountain, man may be surrendering to Nietzsche’s suggestion that we have an innate need to “overcome the self.” He theorizes that the self is composed of two parts: the weak and the strong. Reaching a mountaintop is a celebration of the strong’s triumph over its insidious twin.

Freud studied the impulse to champion the strong over the weak. In climbing, he found explanation, consistent with many of his leanings: At the root, it’s pleasure. An irreplicable thrill. An emotional charge. An otherworldly satisfaction. A high, which seems aptly named.

Fifteen thousand feet up is a lot. Especially if you normally live at

sea level. I’ve been to 19,000 once, in Chile, when my wife was alive. The final 500 vertical felt like marching in place in quicksand in the central square of hell. In 2016, I crossed the Salkantay Pass in Peru, rewarded at its 15,062-foot summit by a torrent of sleet. A few weeks ago, I returned to the Peruvian Andes with my younger daughter (her sister suffered an ill-timed broken ankle a few weeks before departure). A massive landslide had redrawn a Salkantay landscape that referenced but didn’t reconcile with my memories. In February of 2020, a rock face the size of a modern skyscraper had suddenly sheared itself from its host peak, and raged more than a mile down a crease of thin-aired valley, flattening trees, animals, and people in its way.

In its most rudimentary construct, we think of heaven as “up there.” Ten days of high-altitude trekking and a final slog up the thousands of steep “stairs” that scale Machu Picchu Mountain leading to a small clearing that overlooks the famous city’s ruins of the same name far below, and I’m a believer: Heaven is up there, and climbing takes me closer to it.

The photos on this page document a brutal ascent from Soraypampa to an Andean Cross at roughly 16,000, and a down-and-back-up to Lake Humantay. The climb to the cross is two hours of relentless, breath-stealing gravity-defiance, but the payoff is indescribable – perhaps the pictures provide a hint.

Barry Finlay, author of *Kilimanjaro Beyond*, writes: “Every mountain top is within reach, if you just keep climbing.”

Someone, without attribution, said, “The best view comes after the hardest climb.”

Barry and his anonymous spiritual compatriot are both right as rain...or blindingly radiant sunlight, as the miles-high case may be.

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