



Lamenting Emerson: What Shall It Profit a Person to Climb a Mountain but Lose Their Soul?

DOUG EMORY

MY FIRST IMAGE OF “WILDERNESS” WAS BORN in a musty college classroom outside Chicago during a unit on the American Romantics. Like the classroom, my professor was a tad musty, but his assigned readings broke something loose in me. For the first time, I glimpsed a world beyond the one I’d grown up in, beyond those acres of asphalt and suburban lawns surrounded by what I’d derisively termed the Great Corn Sea.

On my rack of a dorm room bed, I propped pillows behind me and read for hours. Thoreau struck me as hit or miss: his rebelliousness resonated, but his discourses on nature felt too provincial. Thoreau’s nature reminded me of my Boy Scout experience, tramping through swampy county parks and incinerating pork chops in tin cook sets. I didn’t have time to waste communing with every milkweed pod, banana spider, and fallen oak leaf along the way. I wanted a place utterly foreign, a land grand and expansive.

Emerson provided me with that land, and my vision of wilderness as the gateway to mystery began with him. Because I humbly considered

myself an intellectual in training, his writing’s layered texture fascinated me, the manner in which he classified the features and uses of nature like any dry biologist while simultaneously pushing into more ambiguous realms: nature’s connections to our emotions, its ties to morality and ethics, and its service as a portal to a transcendent reality. Emerson’s wilderness, Emerson’s nature let me glimpse a world beyond my all-too-evident “mean egotism,” a world where I could enter the presence of the divine.

After Emerson, I next read every word John Muir had written. Muir was Gawain to Emerson’s Arthur, a person who translated theory into the field of action. No well-signed suburban parks or evenings strolling Walden Pond for him. He searched instead for the Green Chapel, entering the Sierra’s intimidating world of granite and ice alone. On the cliffs of Mount Ritter, he conquered fear and was borne aloft on wings. Every feature he discovered about this untrammelled wilderness proved ethically and functionally superior to its human equivalent. The landscape Muir trod was

the one I wanted—one where I would become sensitive and bold, strong and spiritual. I believed in nature as Muir and Emerson described it long before ever laying eyes on it.

In this way, those sessions in a university classroom created one of my life's pillars. I moved West. I became a hiker and backpacker and eventually—unexpectedly for a flatlander—a species of mountaineer called a [peak bagger](#).

Until recently, I would have told you that, though climbing was my passion, any means by which people venture into the wilderness is an equivalent good. Each connects us equally well to Emerson's nature. In my case, hiking and backpacking, just like mountaineering, kept me outdoors. All were human propelled. I followed trail etiquette, left no trace, and stayed aware of environmental conditions and causes.

But, at times, I experienced hints that mountaineering was different somehow, that it led to a trail divergent from the one the Transcendentalists had started me on. Just a few times, I'd take that last stride onto a summit but feel oddly deflated by the view. At others, I'd hustle along a trail so frantically that I couldn't call a feature to mind afterwards. These sensations started me thinking back, sounding the first soft notes of a lament for my lost days with Emerson. Hadn't I, before ever climbing a mountain, swung on my pack to experience Nature with a capital "N," to wade into "the currents of the Universal Being" and allow them to circulate through me? And that memory generated a question I'd never asked myself before: had my participation in an extreme outdoor sport, one flushed with adrenalin and laser-focused on a goal, damaged my intended relationship with wilderness?

My first non-text-based contact with a truly wild place occurred after my first year of graduate school when I road-tripped from Illinois to the Colorado Rockies. The summer after, I drove even farther, all the way to the Sierra Mountains, to Muir's [Range of Light](#). I booked a campsite in King's Canyon, arriving at dusk and hiking out before pitching my tent. The trail was empty. Insects shimmered, whirling from shadows into grainy golden light. Just as I placed a hand on a bridge railing, an intimation stopped me. From

upstream, water cascaded toward me, inky black and rimmed with silver where it rippled over rocks or spun in whirlpools. Then I looked ahead at the trail. Nailed to a tree beyond the creek, a weathered sign marked the boundary of the Sequoia-Kings Canyon wilderness. Farther on, the trail faded to a gray ribbon, bounded by conifers that disappeared into the evening sky.

I wasn't John Muir. I couldn't force a step onto the bridge, barred both by the scene's beauty and two versions of fear: of entering that dark forest alone, for sure, but intermixed with that the fear of impending transformation. I'd traveled a long distance from my dorm room. I'd chased this experience for years. The boundary of wilderness lay a few easy strides ahead, but I wanted time to consider what stepping across that boundary meant.

That night, I wolfed down a freeze-dried meal then stretched out in my sleeping bag, writing under my headlamp's light in the journal I so religiously maintained: "The thought of crossing beyond that sign seemed like such a tremendous adventure. Crossing the line drawn by the creek would have been like falling into a fairytale world, like I had shed my skin and left everything I had been behind." Early the next morning, I hiked over the bridge, spent my first hours ever in designated wilderness, and progressed along what seemed a logical path.

I'd been applying for teaching jobs west of the Mississippi, and one finally came through, in the high desert of northern Arizona. There I day-hiked the Ponderosa pine forests of the Coconino Plateau and the aspen forests of the San Francisco Peaks. I expanded the length of my excursions, hiking the Grand Canyon to the Colorado River and later backpacking the Sierras. Muir might have expressed disappointment, but at that time the mountains brought me no particular good tidings—alpine scenery touched my soul, but no more than overlooks from canyon rims or hikes across juniper-covered mesas. I was a kid from the midwestern suburbs, for goodness sake. Everything around me sang with beauty, everything was new, everything in the surrounding landscape guided me in learning "from Nature the lesson of worship."



My attention only began shifting to mountaineering with my brief relocation to Colorado and my participation in fourteener bagging. Depending on how one defines the word *mountain*, Colorado is home to between fifty-four and fifty-eight peaks over 14,000 feet. Climbing them all is a common goal, and this quest can become remarkably obsessive. For example, individuals and mountaineering groups maintain checklists not only of who has climbed how many, but also of which peaks are

most difficult, of speed-climbing records set on them individually or as a group, even of who has climbed the most in twenty-four hours.

My engagement with this hiking and climbing community began innocently enough. I had just one summer in the state. Turning my transcendental gaze toward those peaks seemed natural, simple as providing lots of trails for my wanderings. I invested a dollop of my limited cash in Gerry Roach's wonderfully descriptive



Colorado's Fourteeners, and with that I had directions to more than enough sublime scenery to pack a summer.

But within a month of fourteenner climbing, I was addicted. My transformation into a peak bagger was instantaneous. Peak-bagging, “an activity in which hikers, climbers, and mountaineers attempt to reach a collection of summits,” was done without consideration for whether a route is aesthetic or novel, and that was an ideal match for my mediocre ability level. My wilderness journal, filled with my deepest romantic musings, was supplanted by a spare, scientific list of the mountains I scaled—peak number, peak name, elevation, and credit to the companions who accompanied me. In eight weeks, I could proudly boast of eight Front Range fourteeners already on my list.

I never reflected on how this new activity changed my perspective. I was, after all, still out in the wilderness. But mountain lakes weren't

destinations any longer—just lovely spots I'd bob my head at while traveling somewhere I'd decided was more significant. Whereas before I had felt the occasional pinprick of vanity about the distance I could cover in a day, now my contemplative soul delighted in competition. Lots of people were trying to bag peaks, but I was young, fit, and acclimatized. I climbed [Longs Peak](#) with a marathon runner, and when she exclaimed, “God, I love passing people!” we joyfully gained speed, leaving a train of struggling mortals in our wake. Scrambles up summit rocks pumped my veins with adrenalin. Those elements of peak-bagging—a substitution of goals for contemplation, a recognition of my growing stamina, and the cheap thrills brought on by my (limited) daring—well, taken together I found that brew irresistible.

When my Colorado summer ended, I moved to my new job in the Pacific Northwest, which offered both more challenging mountains

and more lists—the [Cascade Volcanoes](#), the [Bulger List](#), the [Backcourt](#) and [Homecourt 100](#). Fred Beckey's three-volume *Cascade Alpine Guide* contained more peaks than I could bag in my lifetime. When friends invited me on a hike to a lake, I searched maps for nearby mountains I might scramble along the way. When my first son was born, everyone told me I'd have to give up my goal-obsessed climbing for “strolls around the duck pond,” but I ignored their advice. Instead, when my boy's stubby little legs tired, I tossed him on my shoulders and continued uphill.

My peak list now spanned several pages. My adventures acquired a mathematical component. One new summit per outing was great, but even more prized were “multiples”—two, three, even four new peaks in a day. I focused inordinately on speed, calculating my minutes per mile and elevation gained per hour. I rarely stopped for breaks and ate while moving. I didn't linger on summits, just tagged them and turned downhill. No matter how fast I traveled, I frequently staggered home like a 4:00 am drunk, tiptoeing in with shoes in hand, hours after I'd told my partner to expect my arrival.

The climb that best demonstrates how I'd changed from my early days wandering lonely as a cloud to those as a veteran peak bagger is my journey up Mount Olympus. Of the hundreds of mountains I've now climbed, Olympus is perhaps the most unique. The ascent route begins in the temperate rain forest along the Hoh River and ends twenty-three miles later atop a glacier called the Snow Dome, a point that receives more precipitation than any other in the contiguous United States. Over the course of this adventure, a person metaphorically traverses life zones from the Equator to the North Pole. During those miles of hiking and climbing, a person encounters ancient trees, follows a surging river, and leaps over iridescent, bottomless crevasses. If approached respectfully and sanely, Olympus can both reveal nature's holy riot of diversity and open a portal to the divine.

But my list of peaks climbed lacked cells highlighting the potential for spiritual enlightenment. My climbing team, composed of other intensely focused individuals, scheduled a two-day weekend for our expedition and off

we charged, following our headlamp's glow into the rain forest. Thirty-six hours later, with the summit another notch on our belts, we poured ourselves back into the car.

On the one hand, those two days on Olympus, covering nearly fifty miles and eight thousand vertical feet, reflect the zenith of my unexceptional athletic career. However, there's an alternate prism through which to view this tale. A true Transcendentalist would have paused in wonder at a thousand points along the trail. An awe-stricken Emerson would have transformed into a transparent eyeball right in the parking lot.

Here, in contrast, are my memories of Olympus: At the beginning, my headlamp illuminated the trunks of some exceptionally large trees. At mile nine, we passed a ranger station and stared longingly at a shelter where hikers laughed around a fire. At mile ten we crossed the Hoh River. We reached high camp at mile eighteen and napped under a rain fly. Up four hours later, again in darkness, we ascended into a whiteout's sunless fog. On the summit, machine-gun bursts of hail rattled our Gortex jackets. I had my hood cinched up tight, and a dazed companion blundered into my circumscribed vision, lips numb and teeth chattering. “Why?” he posed the metaphysical question. “Why have we done this to ourselves?”

Heading down, I too turned from the physical to the contemplative. My mouth was too gummed up to talk, so I embraced a vow of silence. Could a person, I wondered, hike so far that he simply collapsed and died? I tossed back ibuprofen like popcorn because my feet resembled an item you'd find at your local butcher's. Near mile forty-one, I experienced, at last, a transcendent moment. My soul left my body, floating among the branches of cedar and hemlock, gazing benevolently down, and whispering, “Look at that poor fool walk. Just look at him walk.”

Olympus stands as the most masochistic example of what I would suffer to bag a peak, but in its general outlines, it's one of many similar experiences. My peak list now covers over a dozen pages. Decades have passed since I last spent an afternoon beside an alpine lake, watching dragon flies dimple the water.

Probably because of my age, I'm wondering

now what that trek from the bottom of King's Canyon to the summit of Mount Olympus has cost me. I'm slower on the trail these days. I can't trick myself into believing I'm immortal any longer. I'm far more likely to die in bed than from toppling tragically into a crevasse, and with that I'm realizing life is a parabola, that everything I've experienced I'll experience again in reverse. And one piece of that parabolic descent is the return of the spiritual hunger my readings about Emerson's mysterious Nature originally called forth in me.

I had constructed my identity as a mountaineer. I had spent thirty years with my compass out, believing I followed the trails Emerson and Muir recommended, but somehow I'd gotten dramatically off course. That recognition raised some tough questions: in my relationship with nature, as Emerson metaphorically described it, had I become a logger rather than poet? Through my quest to conquer mountain upon mountain, had I, as the philosopher Iain McGilchrist wrote, "abandoned Nature . . . intent on seeking power"? Had I reduced the holy sanctuary of the wilderness to an amusement park ride, a series of thrills, an adult Disneyland?

I answered these questions initially by developing excuses to cover my failure in self-awareness. The easiest explanation was in the intoxicating qualities of the mountaineering experience. Running an alpine ridge provides an adrenalin rush and mind-blowing views wherever you turn. Kicking up glacial ice onto a volcanic summit is the definition of "triumph." And while spiritual self-discovery is a solitary activity, mountaineering most often is social. You spend hours and days with friends, and your bonds become unbreakable. You're not only a member of a glorified Facebook group, you're with individuals who have entrusted their lives to one another.

My second excuse was that, though my moments of spiritual transcendence faded, they never entirely disappeared. On the obscure, exquisitely named [Seven-Fingered Jack](#), for example, two friends and I picked our way through steep, crumbling scree, concentrating on our footing because any misstep sent rocks bombing toward the teams below. Reaching the top after that prolonged tension was a relief. In

every way, the climb resembled a dozen others, and we sank as one onto our packs, wordlessly gazing down the barren upper valley of the Entiat River. A smoke plume rose from a distant fire. Still no one spoke. Time stretched. Only minutes seemed to have passed, but on checking my watch, I found we'd spent an hour in complete silence.

Lastly, I considered the most comforting explanation of all: I was a victim, tricked into abandoning my pilgrimage by a deluded community, one fed by a media focused on who was first, who was fastest, what was hardest. Wasn't there an entire enormous community of extreme sports enthusiasts, all of them abusing their connection to the wilderness as I had? Surely not every person in a squirrel suit, taking a backwards half gainer off Glacier Point while recording himself with a GoPro camera did so on a spiritual quest. Thousands of people were using the wilderness as a tool, as an emotional charge to feed their egos.

Once the insidious prospect that mountaineering might distance rather than bond people to the wilderness wormed into my consciousness, I found clues supporting this rationalization everywhere. At a celebration for completers of a prestigious climbing list, two participants presented their accomplishment using scattergrams rather than sonnets. I reexamined an article I loved, Lito Tejada-Flores's "[Games Climbers Play](#)," the thesis of which is that climbers have developed rules guiding the various levels of climbing, from bouldering through eight-thousand-meter peak expeditions because doing so provides meaning to an otherwise meaningless endeavor. Tejada-Flores's concept still seemed inarguable, but equally inarguable was how removed his viewpoint was from that of the Transcendental community's own extreme sports enthusiast, John Muir. Muir, as James Brannon notes in *The John Muir Newsletter*, engaged in "direct physical immersion in nature, especially her alpine areas" to produce "an experience of spirituality." His experiences weren't meaningless. What he sought couldn't be plotted on a scattergram.

During the mercifully brief period in which I blamed the mountaineering community for my sense of dislocation, I created a list much different



than the one on which I recorded my climbs: I charted a myriad of ways in which mountaineering and related facets of the extreme sports industry brought on real-world consequences. Everest, the holy center of the universe, now possessed a trash dump and suffered pedestrian traffic jams below its summit. Back country skiers in the Tetons, in their hunt for ever-more exotic lines, had chased the bighorn herd into remote and dangerous sections of the mountains. Rock climbers disputed with tribal nations about their right to scale sacred formations like [Shiprock](#), [Devils Tower](#), and [Bears Ears](#). I agreed implicitly with ecopsychologist Jeanine Canty when she argued that narcissism, requiring a constant feeding of the “heroic ego,” has separated us from an authentic relationship with nature, thus exploiting and destroying the planet.

It seemed, then, a case could be made that mountaineering and other such sports reflected a spiritual malady, but my blanket critique of thousands of my fellow humans soon felt dishonest. The argument let me off the hook far too easily. Pigeonholing the motives of every mountaineer, backcountry skier, and thru-hiker into one of two categories was far too simple. As my sociologist friend Dr. Laura Toussaint pointed out, to gain an objective understanding of how a community viewed its connection with wilderness, I’d need to develop a survey based around the questions with which I troubled myself, with responses all compiled on a Likert scale. How would mountaineers of my acquaintance respond to my scientific study? I harbored no illusions. The documents would either be returned with troll-ish comments scribbled in the margins or left untouched on brewpub tables, splattered with beer.

Worse than the reality of my suspect data, pleading victimization made me feel older than ever, like a crotchety geezer hollering at kids more physically adept than I had become. This unpleasant sensation forced me into a novel approach: instead of judging, I’d try out empathy. Human actions came in response to an array of circumstances. Testing oneself, adventuring up high, was just simply fun. Professional climbers, seeking a share of fame and a corporate

sponsorship, had to flaunt their heroic egos by definition. Hosting meditative sessions beside an alpine lake would never bring North Face knocking on their doors.

Even depraved media executives had an excuse: that of the bottom line. Lives of Fred Beckey-esque dirt-baggery, sleeping in vans and wolfing food samples from a Red Apple Market, would merely rumple their suits and lead to the unemployment line. Heroic narratives, ascents of great peaks under impossible conditions—those sold. The human mind, since time immemorial, has craved such tales.

So I’d reached an impasse. I’d identified a disturbing personal evolution, but my community didn’t offer any obvious ways to reverse that trend. No one had developed a twelve-step program for addicted peak baggers. There wasn’t even a mustache-twirling villain handy to blame for my mistakes.

When I at last capitulated to that realization, I returned to core principles, marching all the way back to lessons from my dorm room reading. Emerson wrote, “The moral influence of nature upon every individual is that amount of truth which it illustrates to him.” Well, what had my time in nature taught me? What was my truth, and how could that truth heal the rift between the diverging paths I had taken?

To begin, I asked a key question: could I go cold turkey, abandon peak-bagging, and rediscover the wisdom of my best hours reflected in flowers, rivers, and trees? Could I serenely pierce the veil of material objects and understand that “every natural fact [is] a symbol of some spiritual fact?”

Not in a million years. I adored mountaineering’s thrills and its physical challenge. My friends would mock me. I’d pine for my discarded peak list. Given a choice between rereading Muir or watching *The Alpinist* for the eighth time, and without my musty professor checking up on me, I knew exactly what my choice would be.

This renewed clarity about my manifold limitations led me, ironically, to adopt techniques I relied on while mountaineering. On most climbs, you face a minimum ascent of 3,000 vertical feet. If you simply charge ahead, head tilted back and

eyes locked on the summit, the mountaintop never appears to come any closer. This is impossibly demoralizing, so instead, you drop your eyes and watch your boots kick into the slope. You focus internally and time your breath to the placement of your hands, ice ax, and feet. You pick your team and rely on them to support you when even those small steps appear too exhausting.

Because I didn’t have a grand, sweeping gesture in me, I chose this analogous method, breaking an overwhelming task into manageable bits. I listened to webinars across the extreme sports industry and focused on reports that showed outdoor enthusiasts working to align their activities with the natural world while also respecting its spirituality: skiers negotiating with the Forest Service to lessen their impact on wintering species and kayakers and rock climbers collaborating with tribal nations to access and set routes respectful of traditional sites and practices.

This research gave me a glimmer of hope. At the most personal level, it showed my worries weren’t unfounded—sports like mine could indeed generate conflicts in values. Simply being

outdoors wasn’t the same as stepping into nature as understood by Emerson or Muir.

But while these positive solutions were necessary, they weren’t sufficient. All were based within the realm of logic, but my quest’s purpose was to heal a sense of spiritual disconnection. To facilitate my recovery, I needed help beyond what extreme sports peers, advocacy groups, and scientists could provide me. I needed to go full-on Joseph Campbell and enter the cave that held the treasure I sought. I needed a wise mentor. So, to the unending hilarity of my climbing friends, I reached out to a shaman.

Chivito Cowan, once a climber and self-confessed “adrenalin addict,” had discovered a magic I lacked, leaving peak-bagging and rehabilitating himself through years studying with monks and shamans across the globe. Now he is the author of *Raven Speech* and lead counselor of Tree of Totems, a group that offers wilderness-based activities and holds a foundational belief that “every person [has a] birthright to have a relationship with Spirit and Nature.”

Chivito began our meeting with a story. One



day, a friend mentioned an officemate who, she believed, was “a great hiker. He hikes twenty-five miles a day!” To which Chivito’s replied, “He sounds like a horrible hiker. He could do all that on a treadmill.”

This anecdote brought two uncomfortable images to mind: first, me proudly boasting about my Mount Olympus experience (forty-seven miles in thirty-six hours, baby!). And this was followed by a picture of my beloved peak list set alongside the glowing readout on a Precor elliptical machine. Both contained exactly the same information: time spent, distance covered, and elevation gained.

I didn’t share these thoughts with Chivito for fear he’d end our Zoom session and return to the forest. I let him direct the conversation from the gymnasium to my concern: my desire to continue climbing while again experiencing the sanctity of wilderness, that capacity I had lost.

How have people traditionally viewed mountain peaks? Chivito began. Mountains are places of power. They are sites for temples and sacred offerings. Once a person sets a peak as a goal, however, the view of that holy space subtly alters. The sacred power the mountain contains becomes secondary to a human’s search for achievement. The mountain is transformed into a tool by which climbers forge their identities. For this reason, many climbers storm through nature like bad tourists, cameras swinging around their necks, snapping pictures atop a peak to document their conquest.

To this point, my spiritual mentor might have been reading my mail, thumbing through notices about several decades’ worth of questionable choices. Then he broadened the context of our conversation. All of us, he said, possess a desire for alignment with nature. That’s an instinctive part of being human. We’re the only species that has “fallen out of our story,” the only species that has forgotten its past relationship with wilderness and that struggles now to remember. All other animals have an “unbroken lineage” of engagement with their natural surroundings. No black bear, for example, ever pores over a copy of *Walden* to become simpatico with its forest cousins. We poor, self-torturing humans, though,

feel distinct and divorced. The trails call us out to recapture sensations that once characterized our lives within the natural world.

In this calm, nurturing way, Chivito highlighted the complexities involved in my experience with wilderness. Going out was instinctive and soul-nourishing. Scrambling a peak could, with the right mindset, be just another component in a process of rediscovery. The dysfunction arises when our individual egos take precedence over the stunningly vast and beautiful world we’ve entered, when the goal of achievement pushes aside and sublimates the attempt at reconnection.

My shaman intuitively recognized how fragile my recovery was. In line with my prior self-assessment, he recommended I make only small, manageable changes. For one, I should learn the stories of the landscapes I visit, becoming familiar with traditional place names and history. When I cross between ecosystems, from lowland forests and upward to the alpine, I should recognize that every system holds a unique combination of plants and animals. At each change in the environment, I should stop and greet this new area’s inhabitants. I should study because studying shows respect, demonstrates a desire for relationship, and just may reveal the stories and power a site holds hidden. Finally, whether the summit I gain is Mount Rainier or an unnamed rocky lump along a ridge, I need to ask what each climb has taught me and consider how those lessons might benefit the community in which I live.

Chivito will never be mistaken for Ralph Waldo Emerson, but his focus on having “right relationship” with wilderness would fit without a word changed into conversations at [Brook Farm](#). He would nod along in agreement as Emerson intoned, “Within these plantations of God, a decorum and sanctity reign, a perennial festival is dressed, and the guest sees not how he should tire of them in a thousand years.”

As for me, I’ll never return to the person I was. Never again will a trail sign drop me to my knees with awe. I know at times I’ll relapse, crashing through Krumholtz, flailing up talus, foaming like a dog made rabid by a bout of summit fever.



Recovery, in my case, will happen one peak at a time. I’ll take Chivito’s recommended baby steps. In the river valleys, I’ll greet alders and sword ferns and repeat the process when they give way to heather and alpine fir. As I kick my dusty boot into scree, I’ll lift my eyes to the summit pyramid dazzling in sunlight and allow my mind to form a temple from its uncertain outlines. I’ll wipe my sweaty face on my forearm, try to keep the sunscreen out of my eyes, and do my best to enter the gods’ abode with decorum.

Nature’s peace will flow into me “as the sunshine into the trees,” and I will pause long enough for at least one energy bar at the top. The smell of those musty pages from American literature will return in memory, and then I’ll suck in a breath of pristine mountain air.

Perhaps by these small measures will a holy wind rise, to blow those discordant pieces of my relationship with the wilderness into one unified form, once again sleek and transparent as glass. ❁