

A RUN TO THE TOP OF A MOUNTAIN

Sarah Dickerman

Writer's comment: In my pursuit of a Bachelor of Science degree, being offered a completely creative and independent writing assignment was a rare occasion. Dr. Nigel Allan presented such an opportunity in a term paper for his course, Mountain Landscapes and Life (Landscape Architecture 168). Dr. Allan's teaching style, which supplies a breadth of interesting and insightful information, inspired me to develop my own understanding of mountain landscapes. After reading my essay proposal, Dr. Allan told me, "Roger Bannister said he could only understand a landscape if he was running." So I was encouraged to write.

— *Sarah Dickerman*

Instructor's comment: No landscape has inspired more commentary than that of mountains. In Ancient Greece mountains were regarded with fear and loathing, as the Himalaya are by today's Indians. In contrast, our own Sierra Nevada induces modern sentiments of adoration and the sublime. Sarah Dickerman's essay for Mountain Landscapes and Life (Landscape Architecture 168), expresses the "connectedness" of people with mountains. Her essay helps us understand our reverence for mountains.

By requiring a term paper outline at midterm I hope to steer students toward expressing an emotional and intellectual attachment to a mountain, however unremarkable or majestic. In addition, I hope that the course field trip into the Sierra stimulates that yearning. The paper should exemplify an individual's relationship to the biophysical environment. Ms. Dickerman, a very talented runner and essayist, captures the essence of George Steiner's remark that mountains are the elixir of life.

— *Nigel J. R. Allan, Department of Environmental Design*

A RUN TO THE TOP OF A MOUNTAIN CAN BE UNDERSTOOD in terms of numerous practical figures: 1407

feet in elevation; 2.5 miles (4 km) of trail; 2.4 foot strides that shorten as the trail steepens; 110 pounds of body weight striking the ground in two-month-old (400 miles of summer training) GT-2020 Asics running shoes; 18 minutes and 17 seconds clocked on an 8-lap memory, digital Triathlon Timex; a 420-calorie breakfast (a bowl of cereal, half a bagel, and a banana) eaten three hours earlier; muscle cells using the glycogen stores from this food and incorporating the free fatty acids in the blood for energy; muscles in need of oxygen utilizing chemical processes that free oxygen from within the muscle itself; wastes building up in the muscles faster than the blood can remove them. These physiological, mathematical, and anecdotal elements are, however, some of the furthest from my realm of consciousness as I approach my ascent. Jogging on the Point Reyes Peninsula's Bear Valley Trail, I come to the head of the Sky Trail, a trail that climbs up Mt. Wittenberg, a mild but memorable little mountain in the National Seashore.

Beginning this run up a mountain feels somewhat like starting a race. Throughout the eight years I have run competitively, I have never felt completely comfortable with the fact that I choose to stand, leaning forward on a line while nervously holding my breath, waiting for some gun to announce the start of a completely uncomfortable journey. There are plenty of reasons not to begin a race, and there are many more reasons not to run up this particular mountain. Deliberations, however, are more agonizing than the run itself. Although this morning's run lacks all of the hype of a big race, I can't help feeling now the same as I would then: just let the movement begin. In his novel, *Once a Runner*, John L. Parker's character, Cassidy, envisions the start of a race with the urgency most runners share: "The all-consuming roar, the overwhelming psych would begin then and would build up until he stood ready on this line, at once controlled and near lunacy, fearless and terrified, wishing for the relief of the start, the misery of the end. Anything! Just let the waiting be done with!"¹

Although numerous haunting "why's" are tempting dissuasions before any unnecessary physical exertion, I cannot bear to ponder them all at the base of this mountain. Stretching in the Pacific Ocean's brisk and moist morning fog, I peer up the visible length of trail. Starting my stopwatch ceremoniously, I begin my run.

The trail ascends under hazel, tanbark oak, and Douglas fir. My breathing is steady, my strides are easy. It would have been easy to deny myself this occasion, to continue at this mountain's base, resting. And as my body begins to feel the first hints of strain, it is easy to become captivated by thoughts of cresting this mountain, of reaching my destination and resting. We humans tend to be easily persuaded by inertia.

NEWTON'S FIRST LAW OF MOTION

EVERY BODY CONTINUES IN ITS STATE OF REST OR OF UNIFORM SPEED IN A STRAIGHT LINE UNLESS IT IS COMPELLED TO CHANGE THAT STATE BY A NET FORCE ACTING UPON IT.²

Either we get stuck in the same place, unwilling to change, or we get stuck pursuing some external goal, unwilling to change. It is difficult to avoid a state of rest: to get out of bed, get dressed, go to work, pay attention, participate, commit, realize one's talents, work hard. It is difficult to change direction while traveling at uniform motion in a straight line: to grow up, grow apart, move away, come back, fall in love, fall out of love, realize one's weaknesses, improve. It is difficult to wake up at 6:30 a.m., dress in shorts and a tee shirt, go out in the fog, and decide to run up a mountain. Our intellects, imaginations, desires, and ambitions are, ultimately, the only net forces acting when we decide to resist inertia. These intangible forces act from within, not upon us. We odd humans do all sorts of things that, at least philosophically, defy Newton's first law. When we decide to do these things well, we transcend difficulty and become, for

the moment, more than “every body.” It is at this moment that our movements can no longer be broken down into only practical figures.

Beside an old gnarled oak, the trail steepens. I wonder at the strength of this beautiful tree that holds on to this mountain slope with such fervor. Despite years of gravitational forces, eroding water, herbivorous insects, and bothersome hikers, this noble tree stands. My digital watch reads 05:07. Barely a quarter of the way to the top of the mountain, and already I feel discomfort in my leg muscles. I shift my body weight forward and push off of the trail surface. I pick up the pace. My thoughts now bend away from anxious beginnings. I avoid thoughts of painful, yet glorious, endings. I look around.

To live only for some future goal is shallow. It's the sides of the mountain which sustain life, not the top. Here's where things grow. But of course, without the top you can't have any sides. It's the top that defines the sides. So on we go...we have a long way...no hurry ...just one step after the next....

- Robert Pirsig, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*³

There is beauty here that my movement intensifies. Arching trees form a leafy tunnel around me through which sound and sunlight are filtered. I hear only the murmur of air rustling vegetation, the padding of my steps along the trail, and the sounds of my steady breathing. Under this shadowy canopy, cool air and flecks of yellow light glide by me. I pass early blooming huckleberry bushes. I go by a bay tree with a broken bough. I run over a mass of sword ferns. These sounds and sights collide and then dissolve in another wash of perceptions as I continue on, moving.

When I was a sophomore in high school, the man who coached our girl's cross country team (though he would have preferred a more respectable coaching position) practiced his golf swing and puffed intermittently on his Marlboros as I ran hill repeats. On my way up a stretch of paved bank twisting from the shore of the American River to a glorious stop sign a half mile away, I could hear this bored man call out: “You hate the hill, Sarah! Beat the hill!” I have met with many similar philosophies about running since, all of which combine to call out: “Hate the hill, the course, the competitors! Fight the hill, the course, the competitors! Beat the hill, the course, the competitors!”

With this perspective, I could have long ago lost that which makes running most meaningful for me. I could have become preoccupied with distant goals instead of taking time to notice and understand my surroundings. Instead of finding friendships in teammates, I could have only found competitors. Instead of learning from my struggles, I could have achieved only shallow goals - or I could have been consumed by my failures. But this perspective is held by someone who witnesses the sport objectively as opposed to introspectively. Robert Pirsig writes about the different perspectives of mountain climbers: “To the untrained eye, ego-climbing and selfless climbing may appear identical... But what a difference!...The ego-climber is like an instrument that's out of adjustment.... Every step's an effort, both physically and spiritually, because he imagines his goal to be external and distant.”⁴

The selfless climber resembles the introspective runner. Both understand the mountain as a journey that ultimately reaches a goal. They pay attention to the experience. The selfless climber and the introspective runner know what in motion is practical, but they also see that there is more to movement than that which can be reduced to bare mechanics. As Raymond Bridge puts it in *Climbing*, “The mountains cannot be conquered by man, for he is only a visitor, and a rather weak and ill-adapted one...”⁵

NEWTON'S THIRD LAW OF MOTION

WHENEVER AN OBJECT EXERTS A FORCE ON A SECOND OBJECT, THE SECOND EXERTS AN EQUAL AND OPPOSITE FORCE ON THE FIRST.⁶

Our introspective runner understands the exchange between a mountain and those who choose to ascend it. If I were to run up a mountain hoping to conquer it - to hate it, fight it and beat it, I would

“oppose” my surroundings. If, while running up this mountain, I treat it as an obstacle, I will therefore fail. If, on the other hand, I understand the “equal and opposite force” this mountain exerts at each step I take, I will be able to work in connection and exchange with my surroundings, and also with my experience. Perspective is everything.

A run up a mountain is an experience that allows one to grow in physical and mental strength. In *Galloway's Book on Running*, Jeff Galloway writes about uphill training: “As your competitors struggle against the force of gravity, you can conserve energy and actually let it work for you. It may be hard to imagine when you’re in the midst of a steep incline, but a hill can be a great opportunity.”⁷ Just as I step on the mountain’s surface to gain elevation, I allow the mountain to impress upon me new lessons and new growth:

Climb the mountains and get their good tidings. Nature’s peace will flow into you as sunshine flows into trees. The winds will blow their own freshness into you, and the storms their energy, while cares will drop off like autumn leaves.

- John Muir

I am now a little more than half way up the mountain. I come to the only somewhat level ground on this run: a clearing about the size of a football field, encircled by dense forests and steep slopes. I have been envisioning this level ground just beyond the next switchback (or the next) for the past few minutes. My legs are aching and I lengthen my stride while I can. I visualize the blood in my body slowing its rapid pulses. I wonder just how much I can let my body relax on this level stretch without it tipping over from fatigue. In this clearing I can see that the air is still clean, cold, and white with fog. A small grazing herd of deer shifts a little when I run by. Ears prick up, heads turn. But only for a moment. I take a few steps more and once again the open trail steepens, the green canopy thickens, and I am swallowed by the firs.

Helen Bingham, who visited Point Reyes in 1906, described this area in her book, *In Tamal Land*: “One can drive through its cool depths on a finely graded road amid thousands of majestic trees, while here and there an open space reveals the sunlight and the blue sky overhead in contrast with the dim, uncertain light pervading its woodland stretches.”⁸ Running alone on the mountainside, I feel a part of all that surrounds me. The ground meets me, the trees know me, the other animals watch me - but aren’t disturbed. Bingham witnessed natural beauty here long before this mountain trail was ever sheared. Her words transcend time, and I share her understanding of what motion brings to the experience of the contours, colors, and contrasts in this landscape. I am also reminded, on this occasion, of Christopher Morley’s reference to Emily Dickinson in “Sauntering” ...

And as one walks and speculates among this visible panorama, beating one’s brains to catch some passing snapshots of it, watching, listening, imagining, the whole hullabaloo becomes extraordinarily precious.... One longs to clutch the whole meaning in some sudden embrace - to utter some testament of affection that will speak plain truth. “Friday I tasted life,” said Emily Dickinson “...it was a vast morsel.”⁹

Of course, I am unable to capture the truth as well as Emily Dickinson: the truth I find when I decide to do something that is difficult; the truth I find when I achieve a whole experience, not just my goal; the truth I find when I stop fighting obstacles and find ways I can learn and grow; the truth I find when I become a component of my own perspective and of my surroundings. The fact is that these moments are at once difficult to grasp and yet complete, hard to define and yet fulfilling. These moments stem from vaporous net forces, undefinable nothings that somehow motivate, invisible perceptions of connection, intangible flashes of understanding, and fleeting grasps at peace - everything that makes this run more than just the sum of its practical parts:

The experience (mountain climbing) is one of humility. Yet paradoxically it is also renewing, leaving one more at peace with oneself and other men and women than one was before. There is something about mountains that brings perspective and allows the soul and consciousness to grow.

- Raymond Bridge, *Climbing*

I am nearing the top of the mountain. It seems as if the trees hold the fog as tightly as they do their own shadows; I cross out of moist air and away from wooded shelter in the same stride. On an open hillside not far from the summit, I gasp for air rhythmically and lope, with remnants of my former strength, up the rest of the trail. The last narrow reach is only 75 meters long. It feels like it is nearly vertical. I scramble up. I'm at the mountain's crest. Bending over and grasping my knees, I feel my desperate need for oxygen subside. I wearily regain a clearer awareness of my surroundings. My blurry vision, strained by sweat and exhaustion, focuses again, and I see that this summit consists of little more than a small heap of bending grasses and basking rocks. A white doe grazes nearby. She has been watching me, and now she tilts her head inquisitively. I imagine her bewilderment at watching me fumble up this mountain side, panting wildly. "What on earth could this one be up to?" I imagine her thought to be. This all seems terribly entertaining, and I can no longer retain my laughter. The quiet mountain top shakes with my disturbance. The doe bounds away.

My eyes...are forever attracted to the mountain. Nobody can travel the valley without centering off its bold presence. It is the central symbol in our lives to which the eye is always drawn. Some of us may take it for granted, yet in our subconscious it breathes heavily, an exclusively solid shape in the otherwise ever-changing, sometimes ugly, often beautiful, and too often unfortunate landscape through which we travel.

- John Nichols, *If Mountains Die*¹⁰

Notes

- ¹ John L. Parker, *Once a Runner* (Tallahassee: Cedarwinds, 1974): “Running to him was real...the way he did it the realest thing he knew. It was all joy and woe, hard as diamond; it made him weary beyond comprehension. But it also made him free.”
- ² Douglas C. Giancoli, *Physics* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1995), 76.
- ³ Robert Pirsig, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (New York: Bantam, 1974), 183.
- ⁴ Pirsig, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, 189-190.
- ⁵ Raymond Bridge, *Climbing: A Guide to Mountaineering* (New York: Scribner’s, 1977), 19.
- ⁶ Giancoli, *Physics*, 80. This law is sometimes paraphrased as “to every action there is an equal and opposite reaction.”
- ⁷ Jeff Galloway, *Galloway’s Book on Running* (Bolinis, CA: Shelter, 1984), 155. An American record setter in the ten-mile in 1973, Galloway writes of his approach to running. He agrees with Lydiard that hills are the only beneficial type of resistance training for runners.
- ⁸ Helen Bingham, *In Tamal Land* (New York: New York Publishing, 1906). Bingham described the beauty of Bear Valley, but she also portrayed a dim view of the area’s hunt club, since removed.
- ⁹ Christopher Morley, “Sauntering,” *The Pleasures of Walking*. Ed. Edwin Valentine Mitchell (New York: Vanguard, 1934), 121.
- ¹⁰ John Treadwell Nichols and William Davis, *If Mountains Die: A New Mexico Memoir* (New York: Knopf, 1979), 1.

Works Cited

- Bingham, Helen. *In Tamal Land*. NY: New York Publishing, 1906.
- Bridge, Raymond. *Climbing, A Guide to Mountaineering*. NY: Scribner’s, 1977.
- Galloway, Jeff. *Galloway’s Book on Running*. Bolinas, CA: Shelter, 1984.
- Giancoli, Douglas C. *Physics*. 4th ed. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1995.
- Morley, Christopher. “Sauntering.” *The Pleasures of Walking*. Ed. Edwin Valentine Mitchell. NY: Vanguard Press, 1934. 118-22.
- Nichols, John Treadwell and William Davis. *If Mountains Die: A New Mexico Memoir*. NY: Knopf, 1979.
- Parker, John L. *Once a Runner*. Tallahassee: Cedarwinds, 1974.
- Pirsig, Robert M. *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. NY: Bantam, 1974.