six men

encountering God

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Introduction

Ever-increasing circles

I have never understood how this world works. In fact, it was only recently that I realized I assume that it does work. For a brief while, I flirted with the idea that it doesn't, but that seemed far too desperately pointless.

I think everybody knows how some South American species of butterfly hovering somewhere in the Andes might flutter a little too energetically and risk the creation of a tidal wave off the coast of China. They call it chaos theory. But no matter how much of a mess this world seems and how random our lives feel, I have to believe that an unseen hand is involved. You see, even for those who subscribe to chaos theory, the butterfly is a potential planet killer only if it works in perfect harmony with an infinite number of other seemingly unconnected events—perhaps if a tree falls in an Austrian valley, a man drops his ice cream in Blackpool and, with perfect timing in a New York zoo, a monkey sneezes…

The chaos theorist and the atheist are both forced to believe that they are living in a terrifyingly random world, where the next time they turn the page of a book too quickly they could unwittingly cause David Beckham to change his hairstyle six months later. The Christian has to believe, however, that it is all a conspiracy.

This is the conundrum. The Bible teaches us that as individuals we all have free will to choose what we do next. However, it also tells us that God is in control of what happens in the world, even to the extent of creating and destroying empires: 'For the Scripture says to Pharaoh: "I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth." Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden' (Romans

9:17–18). I think we can assume that Pharaoh was ignorant of his appointment as God's accomplice. He would have believed he was making his own decisions, acting independently of his own volition. So if we are acting freely, independently, how can Mr Big be behind it all?

It was during the hot, humid monsoon in Nepal that my wife and I made a decision in response to a situation. We thought it was free will.

We had travelled to a Nepali village about three or four hours' walk uphill from the nearest road. Despite its relative isolation, Arthar is a sizeable community of over 5000 people, sprawling either side of a ridge some 5500 feet above sea level. We were part of a group of eight *bideshi* (foreigners) and two Nepali language teachers, staying for two weeks with some of the families in the village. The purpose was to help us in our language learning, understanding of the culture and appreciation of the living conditions of the majority of Nepalis. At that point, we had only been in Nepal for three months and we quickly became aware that, even with our numerous orientation lectures and experience of the relatively affluent city of Pokhara, there was much to learn. For a start, despite being led around the steep, rain-slicked, red mud paths of the village by surefooted villagers wearing plastic and foam flip-flops, we showed a Bambi-like inability to stay on our feet. The villagers were both gentle and understanding, resisting the temptation to laugh as I slid into yet another rice paddy.

We had been there five days when we first met Laxmi and her daughter Kalpana. We had not intended to return to the house in which we were staying, but a change of plan caused us to wander into the courtyard about midway through this particular Saturday afternoon. Initially the scene looked quite innocent. From her clothes, the absence of jewellery, even the texture of her skin, it

was obvious that the woman washing the pots in the water supply of the house was poor. Her small daughter was sleeping beside her under a pile of rags in the warm afternoon sun. 'How nice,' we naïvely assumed. 'The woman of the house is clearly letting her neighbour use the tap to wash her pots and pans.'

It subsequently became apparent that the woman was actually washing our host's pots as a way to earn some food: two cobs of corn. It was taking her some time, mainly because she had cataracts in both eyes, rendering her almost completely blind. The 'pile of rags' her daughter was sleeping under were, in fact, the daughter's clothes. Morna, my wife, peeled away the urine-soaked material to discover a severely malnourished child, too weak to sit or stand. She had a high temperature, indicating a fever. Her swollen cheeks, feet and hands were symptoms of circulation problems, probably caused as her organs struggled in the absence of badly needed vitamins. Although the child was four years old, Morna was able to dress her in our nine-month-old son's shorts and T-shirt, so that her other 'clothes' could be washed. We were later able to estimate her weight at five kilos.

We quickly discovered from the other villagers that the woman was extremely poor, with no other family and nowhere to live. We went to the only shop in the village and bought five days' supply of rice and vegetables to enable the pair to feed themselves. Morna walked with them to where they were staying, carrying the child and the food. She returned in tears, and told me that their 'home' was a covered space between two buildings where rice sacks were stored, open to the elements. The tears were because it was apparent to Morna that, without urgent treatment, the girl was going to die.

We had to decide what to do. I am embarrassed to say that we actually considered, albeit briefly, that there might be nothing we could reasonably do. In the end, what made us act was the belief that, in our shoes, Jesus would never have turned his back on this woman. So we flapped our butterfly wings, feeling quite flimsy but hoping we could create some sort of wave. In the next couple of

days, we consulted the village leader, bought some locally available medicines, evaluated the locally available health post and then cut short our stay in the village to take the woman and child to the nearest city, Pokhara. The sight of them being carried to the road by porters was enough to convince us we were on the right track.

There followed a hospital stay of eight days for Kalpana and her mother while the child received first intravenous treatment and then dietary supplements. It became apparent that at the root of her rapid decline was nothing more exceptional than a case of worms—a nuisance to most healthy kids but all too frequently life-threatening in Nepal. During this time it was possible, with the help of many of our new friends within our missionary organization, to arrange the operations required to restore Laxmi's eyesight and to begin the work of providing a basic home, some basic employment training and a school for Kalpana. Three weeks after we had gone to Pokhara, we were able to return the two of them to their village with a future—admittedly still a tough and difficult future but, with Laxmi's restored eyes, literally a brighter future.

We had done something—taken a decision and acted on it. We did it prayerfully, true, but *we* did it. I have come to think of this action like throwing a pebble into a pond, because the consequences of our intervention have been considerable. The ripples have spread. Some unexpected events have occurred and developments have taken place in unexpected directions. However, all of these other events have happened only because others have also decided to take some action. They too have thrown pebbles and, as the rings have expanded, their ripples have intersected with ours, creating new patterns.

Before we ever visited the village, another family had left a Bible with the shopkeeper from whom we bought the food for the woman and her child. He asked us where in the Bible it suggested that we should pray for people for healing, and we were able to show him. A Nepali Christian, one of our language teachers, had been seeking a way to witness to his boss, who had become disillusioned with

some of the injustices of the caste system and his Hindu traditions. When we cut short our stay in the village to work with the woman, it caused the boss to go to the teacher and discuss the motives behind our action. A Christian Nepali social worker was aware of a woman in his church who was very short of money. We were able to employ her to feed and care for Laxmi and Kalpana in hospital, providing a source of income with dignity for a couple of weeks. While she was in the hospital, she witnessed to her patients. One Nepali church was discussing how the *bideshi* visitors who first brought the gospel didn't seem to care for Nepalis 'the way they used to', yet, among the reminiscences of the older church members, this more recent example of compassion for Laxmi and Kalpana was shared by one individual, and the church meeting was greatly encouraged and challenged.

Not all of the consequences were positive. Our action caused some controversy within our own organization, with some people questioning the wisdom of helping this woman in the way that we did. They suggested that our actions were naïve, that it was likely that all we had done was to postpone the inevitable. Some, with much more experience in Nepal than I, suggested that we were lucky and that we risked creating more problems than we had solved. Among other things, we appeared to have created a storm in a teacup.

So where was God in all this? As I sat outside one of the many tea shops, considering what was going on, I had ample opportunity to watch raindrops causing rings of ripples in puddles. The ripples in the muddy street puddles intersected and interacted and, as they did so, they created new patterns. In these interference patterns, some ripples joined with others to create bigger waves while others cancelled each other out. While one big splash on its own could sometimes affect the whole puddle, in combination with others it created new and unpredictable patterns.

It made me think that perhaps every action we take is like that of a waterboatman or other insect struggling on the surface of a pond.

Our writhing arms and bodies make little ripples, beyond our understanding. Our vibrations reach across the water, always spreading, and, as they spread, interacting and interfering with each other. Perhaps God sometimes reaches down to touch the surface and make grand ripples of his own, both affecting us directly and causing waves that swamp or multiply our own efforts—and somehow, God always manages to make the result look beautiful. From our vantage point, stuck to the tension on the surface, it looks choppy as we sink in a trough and waves obscure the horizon, while at other times we are lifted on a crest to get a better perspective. Yet from God's point of view, it never looks chaotic. It looks exactly the way he meant it to look.

That's a comforting theory, but how do we check it out? I reasoned that if God was working with and through Pharaoh at the time of Moses—if he was involved in everything—then he would have been involved in my life before I even acknowledged his existence. I began to think through my developing years, my own story, searching for his fingerprints. It didn't take me long to discover what I believe to be his signature on many of my preconversion experiences. I started to write them down and, in recording them, to search for patterns and clues to God's methods and techniques. In so doing, I hoped to learn more about him. In the same way that scientists try to understand the characteristics of subatomic particles too small to see, by studying the traces they leave as they race through baths of chlorine buried beneath mountains, so I was searching for God in the patterns his interference had left in my life.

This book has been an attempt to expand that process. I have had the great privilege of sitting and listening to a number of men telling their true stories, allowing me to spot patterns with them and draw conclusions from their experiences. I am immensely grateful to them just for that. I hope and believe that we have all learnt things from the hours spent chatting. The fact that these men have then agreed to allow me to write their stories down as best I can, and to share them, is beyond the call of duty. They have shown

great honesty, openness and bravery of a type not normally associated with the male of the species.

I have chosen to write their stories in the first person, to emphasize the very personal nature of our interactions with God. I've had to try to put myself in the other man's shoes, to look through his eyes and interpret through his mind. The result can, of course, only be an approximation. While I have worked with the subjects closely in reproducing events that took place as long as 50 years ago, we view the events through the distorting lenses of memory, interpretation and assumption. Nonetheless, I believe that these stories of men who would describe themselves as 'ordinary' are quite remarkable and worthy of examination. I hope and pray that you can identify with these characters and, in doing so, can draw your own patterns and conclusions about the nature of our God. You may feel you know him well or you may doubt he exists at all, but these stories have convinced me more than ever before that he knows you. In fact, he is getting involved, interfering with you, even now.

Ask yourself this: why did you open this book?

Peak experience

The great lesson… that the sacred is in the ordinary, that it is to be found in one's daily life, in one's neighbours, friends, and family, in one's back yard, and that travel [pilgrimages] may be a flight from confronting the sacred—this lesson can be easily lost. To be looking elsewhere for miracles is to me a sure sign of ignorance that everything is miraculous.

Abraham Maslow, 'Religions, Values and Peak Experiences' (Penguin, 1976)

Basically, I could not hold on much longer. All of the options were exhausted and so was I. My arms had that slightly heavy, dying feeling that comes as the muscles, having topped themselves up with lactic acid, are running out of sugar to burn. In contrast with the likely violence of my end, they were giving up slowly—gradually, but surely. Not that my tiredness made much difference. This would have been an impossible position if it had come at the beginning of the climb, with my body still warm and elastic, blood surging through my limbs just for the sheer excitement of being alive. As it was, the Norwegian winter sun had already gone and, with it, any last vestiges of warmth and hope. In the grey-blue light I could feel the cold coming at me like an approaching freight train, not rushing like an express but slow and inevitable. It would not smash into me; it would slowly squeeze the life out of me bit by bit. I could see it coming, could do nothing about it, did not care. I fully expected to die of the fall long before the cold got me. It was just, somehow, an appropriate atmosphere for an unspectacular failure.

It was not a good day to die. I would not be going out in a blaze of glory. It might be worth two column inches on page 22 of the *Daily Telegraph*, but it would be written off as an inevitable consequence of stupid decisions and ill-equipped climbers taking one risk too many. I would receive a glowing obituary at college and

(ironically enough) my fellow climbers would turn out at the funeral my parents would organize in the Lincolnshire chapel I never frequented.

They say that on big climbs at high altitude there are mornings when everyone feels they are at the beginning of a day that will end in tragedy, but the really successful climbers are the ones who know when the feeling is a true reflection of the circumstances. The really good climbers know when to turn back.

I could have turned back. Arne did. Even as the least experienced of the three of us, he had realized that our progress was too slow and we were not going to make the summit of the Ottafössen waterfall before dark. So, showing strength of character, resisting the 'up, up, up' urge of the climber's inner voice, he had abseiled off the vertical ribbon of ice. Steve and I had said a rapid farewell, then Arne had headed back to the station waiting-room at the isolated railway junction where we had persuaded the staff to let us sleep the night before, in cheerful warmth. While he descended, we had pushed on up the brittle ice. It was not how winter climbing should be. Our ascent had thus far been characterized by an unsatisfactory scrambling to find decent placements for our axes—smashing and fracturing the frozen surface of the waterfall. When we did find purchase, there was no real confidence but rather a nervy half-trust in the hold, and hesitant progress, limbs and senses taut for the moment when the tip of the angled ice-axe blade would rip out.

About 40 or 50 feet from the top of the vertical mile of rock and ice, Steve and I had found relative safety in a small ice cave. When it became time to move on again, he had taken up a stance secured to a couple of fragile icicles, more in hope that he would never have to rely on them than in the expectation that they would be any use in the case of a big fall. Emerging from the cave, I tiptoed a traverse of 30 or 40 feet, the front points of my crampons finding enough purchase to allow me to make the horizontal journey across a glassy smooth wall. I had headed for the one apparent weakness in the route, a vertical crack full of loose fragments of ice, and wedged

myself into it. In that relative security, I had placed our two remaining ice screws as high as I could manage and had clipped the line into them. These would be my first line of defence if I did fall, and I had absolutely no confidence in them, given the quality of the ice we had thus far encountered.

In climbing, there are distinct moments of commitment, and this was one. I could have turned back at this point, but instead I shouted to Steve that I was going to have a go, and started to scramble my way up the crack. This was no elegant series of coordinated and planned moves, but an undignified thrashing of feet and ice-axes—more often than not, achieving a cascade of ice rather than any upward progress. It was all pretty ungainly. Eventually, breathing heavily and with the cold stinging my nostrils, I came to the point at which the crack diminished to nothing and, with it, the option to continue straight up.

I half twisted and half shoved myself round and managed to get myself in a precarious position from which I could see out to the right, and found no reassurance. Away and up, there swept a barely rippled wall of blue-white frosted glass, beautiful in its lack of imperfections to anyone less directly involved. To me it spelt the end. My left foot was trembling slightly as my calves spent themselves with the effort of holding steady in the crack, and my left hand was repeatedly hacking and scrabbling to find a placement for the teeth of the axe in the same groove. My body was curved around the right-hand edge of the crack, with my right hand and foot slapping and flapping helplessly at the flat ice surface.

I could not see how I could get out on to the wall to try to climb it and, even if I could, I was certain I did not have the energy, ability or equipment to make any meaningful progress. It was also clear that I would not have the strength to maintain my 'half-in, half-out' position for more than a few minutes. I tried to fight the burgeoning fear that was reaching up from my stomach and squeezing at my lungs, allowing me ever shorter and shallower breaths. The blood, desperately trying to respond to the many demands for oxygen from

my muscles, thumped in my neck, ears and temples. I tried to focus on the options. There were none. I could not climb on; I could not stay here; I would never be able to retrace my route down the crack. I was going to fall.

Steve, 50 or 60 feet below me and attached to me by the nylon rope, was not as acutely aware of his own personal danger. When I fell, I would drop past him and, having accelerated for over 100 feet, I would take up any remaining slack in the rope and simply drag him out of the cave and down the frozen watercourse with me. We would both fall at least 2000 feet. If, by some small miracle, either of us survived the impact, he would die where he lay, injured at the bottom, with no one looking for us, miles from the next human being, alone and tied to a frozen corpse. I worked through the logic of the situation and then gave up on logic. My sum total of resources had proved insufficient. Nothing I had learnt, no equipment I had brought with me, no technique or training or temperament, would be enough. I gave in to fear and prayed.

I guess I could have prayed to the ice, to the sky, to the disappearing sunlight or even to the moon that must have been rising somewhere. People have done that before, and at least I had tangible evidence of their existence. Perhaps it was my mother's faith, which, though unspoken, was definitely there throughout my childhood, or maybe it was the few weeks I attended that chapel Sunday school as a kid. Whatever the reason, I prayed a not terribly unique or original prayer to God. I attempted to strike the bargain that almost everyone has used as a refuge of panicked last resort, whether for a genuine life-and-death situation or just to see their team escape relegation at the end of the season: 'Get me out of this, God. Just get me out of this and I'll do anything you want. Anything.'

How many people have struck that deal, never once considering their own obligations if God does indeed grant the wish? I had more than enough to occupy my mind without considering a future series of commitments and, with no obvious alternatives, it was a bargain offered like a bankrupt's wedding ring in return for a lottery ticket.

My future—the only thing of value left, and that was rapidly depreciating—offered in return for my future existence. It was an easy deal to make: zero additional risk and, no matter how poor the odds, a potential jackpot return.

'Trust me.'

I can't say with conviction that God actually spoke to me. Not in words. It was more a vague but powerful sense that God was there and that he wanted me to trust him. If the presence of God can be likened to any elemental force, then I guess I had an experience not unlike that of the prophet Elijah when he too emerged from a fault in the rock. There was a whispering from some amorphous cloud around me and inside me, rather than the caricatured thundering voice from on high. Ephemeral as this sense now sounds, at the time it was substantial enough for me to lean on, almost literally.

I pulled back my heavy right arm and swung it half blind at the ice above and to the right of my head. 'Let this be a good one,' I whispered inwardly, trying to engage the Unknown in conversation. The blow was genuinely made in pure baseless hope, and so I registered the dull 'thok' with some surprise as the tip of the axe found a good solid placement. It is pretty rare to find such a hold first time and especially when swung blind. I dragged my left arm out from the crack and swung again. 'Thok.' Two good placements. I can't tell you what my reaction was to the second miracle, because at this point I stopped thinking. I just climbed.

I want to emphasize the word 'just' in that last little phrase. How often in your life have you ever done 'just' one thing? How many times have you ever been so absorbed and concentrated that nothing else—not one single distracting thought—entered your consciousness? I didn't consider the new sense of trust, I didn't notice the ache in my forearms, I was oblivious to the cold, and I was even oblivious to the fact that I was oblivious. I just climbed. One after another, perfect ice-axe placements flowed together with flawless positioning of the front points on my crampons. In my

altered state of perception, I saw tiny fluctuations in the colour of the ice and understood their meaning as they showed me the lines of weakness. I moved automatically, in harmony with my body, the equipment and even the ice itself. And then I was at the top.

It was probably, in total, a vertical distance of 30 feet, and it can only have taken ten minutes. I sat quite still, shocked by what had just happened, waiting for the sensation to pass. In my heightened state, the full-ish moon provided plenty of light, illuminating my breath as it curled upwards in the cold. The sweet dry smell of the pine trees that crowded up towards the edge of the precipice was aromatherapy. Moments passed as my rate of breathing and my surging pulse subsided and I again became a normal human, left with only a wide-eyed memory of my supernatural escape. I remembered Steve and, quickly tying the rope to the secure and solid trunks of the pines as a belay, I half assisted, half dragged him up from the cave below.

As he crawled over the lip, he spoke his own disbelief. 'How the —— did you get up that?' I can't remember the exact words, but I am pretty sure he would have used some expletive I'm glad I cannot repeat. I knew the answer. I'd just had a Peak Experience.

I'd been reading a lot about this elusive holy grail—the Peak Experience. My recent life had been very deliberately structured around climbing. The availability of subsistence grants, the long holidays, the proximity of like-minded friends, not to mention the presence of climbing guru Pete Livesey as a lecturer, had made it easy to select the academic backwater of Ilkley College as the best place to spend four years scraping through a B.Ed. in Outdoor Education. For my dissertation, I had chosen to write about a phenomenon that peppered the pages of various climbing magazines: Abraham Maslow's 'Peak Experience'. Primarily looking at states described by religious mystics, he articulated moments where the individual

becomes 'most truly himself, more perfectly actualizes his potentials, closer to the core of his Being, more fully human'. Although he initially interviewed a variety of gurus, prophets and those active in the creative arts, it was Maslow's assertion that the housewife and the athlete are equally capable of participating in these spiritual moments of self-actualization (to use the jargon) that allowed the rest of us to climb on board. He famously wrote that in the attempt to reach the heights, 'a first rate soup is better than a second rate painting', and many mountaineers would add 'summiting a great climb' to the list.

I especially recall reading John Long's description of weaving in and out of the rock as he ascended a big wall without the security of a safety rope, in characteristically romantic language. In tennis they were beginning to call it 'Inner Tennis.' Later came Inner Skiing and then Inner everything else. Californian climbers were using their own wacky phrase for it: 'think pink'. As far as I was concerned, it sounded like the effects of smoking a little too much weed, combined with an adrenalin surge, producing a particular relaxed focus that could be described in terms of biochemistry and basic psychology—that and the desire to talk like a hippy.

My development through childhood and adolescence had given me a fairly solid Protestant work ethic, from which spirituality had been thoroughly excised and in which brief moments of achievement were earnt through long hours of effort and personal investment. I preferred fairly rounded and very grounded companions to those who had cruised through life riding the up-escalator of privilege. Stairs were there to be climbed, and the top floor should be gained with a knowledge that one had earnt the right to be there. There is no magic. You get out what you put in.

My mother, a regular at her local Lincolnshire chapel, provided an example of 'religious' life. Chapel-going was about religious and regular attendance, which placed faith in a compartment found only in the pews. I had never seen her open a Bible or pray outside the stone walls. She had never spoken to me openly about Christianity

and, although I was taken to Sunday school during my early years, I was given the choice of attending as soon as I was able to make it. By the age of twelve I had exercised the option to abstain.

Looking back, it seems that my father had a more definite influence on my world view. His dreams were for dreaming, his life was for working, and these two spheres were strictly compartmentalized. His values were based on investment and self-sacrifice for the family, ancestry rooted in the Lincolnshire soil. The family were (indeed, some still are) small-scale 'cottager' farmers, although my father's father was a docks policeman on the east coast. Starting as a butcher's errand runner, moving through postal delivery and National Service, Dad achieved the heady heights of white collar employment with the Department of Health and Social Security. His was a life lived in very civil service both to country and kin, enduring a despised job, dispensing public benefits to achieve a fiscal and status benefit for his loved ones. While I subconsciously soaked up many of his values, I positively grabbed at his aspirations.

The anecdotes that brought Dad's passions to the surface were those that described his youthful cycle touring expeditions. His favourite books were as practical and pragmatic as his lifestyle, but they described the best way to build a fire, tie a knot, whittle a tent peg or construct a bivouac. I absorbed the contents from early on, and lived out the dreams under tents made from towels and clothes horses. Youth and its associated freedom from responsibility allowed me to indulge my dreams in a way that Dad could not. We were both bored by our nine-to-fives, but for me the tedious school day was an interlude between evenings and weekends focused on the outdoor life. Like most children, I was forthright about the things I wanted, pushing and pestering my parents. The start of a Cub Scouts pack in a neighbouring village gave me an opportunity to feed this hunger and, at the age of nine, I joined. Even amid the exuberance of the pack, I was by far the most enthusiastic. As a consequence, I achieved the promotions and badges that the Scout Association confers on its rank and file, but they were merely a

byproduct of my interest in all things outdoor and adventurous.

Football supporters live their lives in seasons and Saturdays, while Scouts measure the passing of time in summer camps and evening meetings. Coincident with my elevation from the Cubs to the Scouts was the move to a secondary school. It is therefore ironic that while the opportunities afforded by the Scout troop were eagerly anticipated, it was an event in the first year of secondary school that brought a clearer focus to my passions and ultimately pulled me away from Scouting. Our class was taken on a week-long trip to Barmouth on the Welsh coast, at which we were given taster sessions in orienteering, canoeing and, crucially, rock climbing. It was my first experience of climbing and its associated sensuous paraphernalia—slings, karabiners, harnesses and ropes. I was hooked.

The following Easter, I joined a group from the Scouts on a hiking trip in the Peak District, during which we pitched our camp for a night under a crag called Birchens Edge. Even now I can clearly recall the morning. I woke early. For many, the response to the cold, damp tent walls was to shrink back into the warmth of the sleeping bag. I distinctly remember hearing, beyond the canvas, the voices of people at the foot of the crag. They beckoned me and a few of the others out of our cocoons and across the dewy grass to watch 'proper' climbers in action. A gulf opened up that I ached to cross. We were boys playing at the outdoors, learning as we went. The men coiling ropes, chatting casually about routes, smoking their cigarettes and pushing themselves past fingertip holds, dotting the rock with chalk marks, were living my dreams. For the first time I understood what graduation meant, and I wanted to study. School was to be endured, climbing was worthy of my personal commitment, and, with an objective forming somewhere in my gut, it became clear just how much of my dad's capacity to invest I had inherited.

The next weekend, I persuaded a friend to join me and we hitched our way from home back to Birchens Edge. Once there, we clambered our amateur way around the base of the rock, copying

our new heroes, in our minds emulating them, before making the two-hour return trip.

My Scout troop was both active and adventurous, and I was a fully paid-up member. The dues were not financial but physical, allowing those who contributed effort and ideas free rein. One weekend, we held a sponsored canoe race in which my team prevailed and therefore earned a key say in the use of the money raised. While others struggled to come up with a coherent plan, I was in no such quandary. We should buy some climbing equipment. Our leader, Dick, agreed, adopting the plan with characteristic verve. These were days when adventure was unfettered by cautious consideration of legalities. Litigious parents were only found in the caricatures of the upper classes in comics and novels, so the fact that Dick had as much experience of climbing as he had of writing liability disclaimers was not a brake on our enthusiasm. As far as I was concerned, he had all the key qualifications—energy, a willingness to support us in our own passions, and a Sherpa.

The Sherpa was an orange builders' van, and four or five hardcore enthusiasts from our troop spent every other weekend bouncing in the back on top of sleeping bags, rags and old foam mats laid down to ease the hard cold of the steel floor. Dick took the wheel as we headed for Wales or the Peak District or the Yorkshire Dales in search of rock faces and caves. Once there, we would drag out the kit we had assembled and work out for ourselves the right way to rig a belay, place the protecting nuts or master a layback. I took the lead role in the desk research, ordering books from the library in Lincoln, matching the line diagrams on the pages to our experiences, discovering new techniques to practise at the rock face on the following Saturday.

I continued to make repeated trips to Birchens Edge on the days when the Sherpa was not called into action, most frequently hitchhiking with a friend. One of these occasions marked a development in my understanding of how far my own endeavours could take me. We had been watching a pair attempt a route. The first and more

capable man led, taking the rope up and using a variety of aluminium devices to provide some protection should he fall. This is the more exposed role in climbing, where the safety of the climber depends almost entirely on the climber himself. His partner, holding the rope, can only save the climber from a fall if his friend above can safely place runners for the rope to travel through in the cracks. Much is said about the special relationship between the two members of a climbing team. The bond of the rope, where two are literally bound to each other, is as much about shared risk and mutual dependence as it is about the physical link. On relatively short climbs, however, where the top can be gained within one rope length, it is very much the leader who experiences the greater hazard and takes the responsibility.

As we watched, the first climber made it to the top. In the normal manner, having regained his breath, he set about finding a safe point from which to belay. He did this by finding a solid anchor point, such as a large boulder, round which he secured the rope, literally attaching himself to that foundation. He then passed the rope round and across his back before dropping it down to the second climber below. By shuffling the rope through his hands, he could take up any slack in the rope as the partner ascended, but hold it firm should the other fall.

On this occasion, and unfortunately for the second climber, he had an audience as he struggled to follow up the route, repeatedly slipping, trusting to the rope several times. Eventually, tired and dispirited, he admitted defeat and allowed himself to be lowered to the ground. To his credit, having failed himself, he turned to me and asked if I would like a go. It may be that his motive was actually to make it clear that this game is not as easy as it looks, and shared defeat is often easier to bear. Whatever, I was just grateful to have the chance. Unexpectedly I was clipped into a rope attached to a genuine climber—not exactly the big time, but certainly closer to bridging the gap than the clambering around a few feet from the ground that I had anticipated. I don’t suppose it was in any way

elegant, but to my great delight I worked my way to the top. I began to realize that the gulf could be bridged, that my ambitions could be realized. Hitherto, my sporting experience had not been one of success, and my failure to excel at school ball games had marked me out as one of the 'not sporty' types. These experiences are formative, and it may be that I was able to resist the defining nature of that particular epithet through small achievements like this success in climbing.

I have a deep sense of gratitude that, having found a passion, I could pursue it, and, as I watch the development of my own children, one of my recurring prayers is that they too will discover something in which they can find an enduring enthusiasm. The alternative, a life of indifference, is a lesser life.

Ironically, another factor that may have encouraged me in my quest to become a climber was that I lived in one of Britain's flattest counties. Despite the lack of millstone grit crags or even moderate hills, Lincolnshire's county town did boast a climbing club. I started to attend, cycling 14 miles into Lincoln to drink orange juice at the bar and soak up the atmosphere. The clubs based in the climbing hotbeds around the Peak and Lake Districts, and in North Wales, were populated by the 'names' of British climbing who regularly appeared in the magazines I read avidly. Climbing, like almost every other occupation, has its hierarchy. I would not regard myself as an especially talented young apprentice and I doubt I would have felt able to approach the stars who ascended the highest peaks and assumed corresponding status. To my good fortune, the top of the Lincolnshire tree was occupied by club members John Oaks and Geoff Causey. Neither had set the climbing world alight with any first ascents, but they had climbed routes that I had heard of. It was enough for now to be able to perch on a bar stool, sip my juice and listen to tales of daring, eavesdrop planning sessions, and breathe in the smoky exhalations of those who had been and done.

The lifestyle, the attitudes, the laconic conversation and the studied indifference infused my own development. I was invited first

on day trips, then weekends, then minor expeditions. I grew and trained and developed, and, perhaps most importantly, *earned* my place. With the growth of technique and strength and ability came a deeper enhancement of my values. I well remember, some time later, looking slightly cynically at some colleagues as we travelled to climb one peak. They talked too much, wore their enthusiasm a little too openly and appeared to have come from privileged backgrounds where the accumulation of funds and equipment for their trips had not involved the sacrifice that respect required. My admiration was mainly reserved for those who had demonstrated dedication and denial, to live lives pursuing the summits.

The idea then that the climber can experience a super-spiritual moment was as foreign to me as the Nepali Sherpas who supported the Himalayan expeditions I aspired to join. The world in which I was involved valued very down-to-earth behaviour, and generally viewed the writings of the climbing mystics with a wry and mocking humour. To express an interest in these views was to invite a quick and sarcastic quip. Even exuberance in a climbing success had to be tempered with understatement, so it was both reasonable and safe for me to develop a scientific view about the 'Peak Experience'. I'd had good days, when I had climbed well or when I'd felt really on form. These moments could be attributed to hours of training in the gym or on the climbing wall, to special weather conditions, or to adrenalin surges followed by climactic moves, all played out against a background of beautiful scenery.

In the world of outdoor education (the subject of my B.Ed.), interest in providing people with the opportunity to experience such highs had been born out of Maslow's belief that problems such as alcoholism, violence and drug abuse stem from a spiritual emptiness that may be assuaged by even one 'Peak Experience'. Following his agenda, a number of 'outward bound' style courses emerged, in which adventure was offered to those who had never previously left an urban landscape. In the debate, I tended to disregard this approach as 'tinned adventure'—manufactured and

artificial. In my research for my dissertation, I sought out articles providing chemical and physiological explanations. So it was my experience on that final pitch at the top of the frozen waterfall that forced me to allow for other possibilities. As I read articles on drug abuse, surfing and, of course, climbing, I began to discover that it was the more New Age writers, open to the inexplicable, who best described my own encounter.

That astonishing experience challenged my convictions about investment and return. The fact that I had had a Peak Experience was undeniable, but that I had earnt it was at best debatable. One could argue that I deserved to fall. I had ignored the warnings to turn back. I'd gone ill-equipped: I note, with a slight reddening of the cheeks, that I had not even been wearing a head torch as my twilight drama played out. I had committed the cardinal sin of climbing away from all of my options to leave myself stranded, with no route of advance or retreat. While Steve would not have deserved to be dragged off the mountain, I could not have blamed a fall on anyone other than myself. The idea that God may have answered my prayer was not justified by anything I had done in the immediately preceding moments or, indeed, at any point in my life.

The deal I struck with him was not based on any special faith, and up to that point I had offered him my indifferent tolerance, at best. He was, after all, confined to church services. So I am afraid that my return from Norway was not accompanied by any serious attempt to discover exactly what God might demand from me. He had kept his side of the deal, but I was not dwelling unduly on mine. The event may have allowed me to consider a role for the spiritual dimension within the physical, but I was preoccupied with an entirely different encounter. I had fallen in love with a fellow student, Amanda.

Of course, some of the attraction was physical. She was small, dark and athletic. I'd felt confident enough that she liked me to ask her out—but although she was quite shy, she'd had sufficient assurance to turn me down, and had kept me at a distance subsequently. In my

attempt to handle this rejection and also to express my disbelief at her decision, I had written her a note. I returned to college with serious misgivings about the wisdom of my correspondence. When we did meet, she was good enough to address the key issue quickly, avoiding any prolonged tension: 'I'm sorry. I like you, but I am a Christian and you are not. It is too important a difference to ignore, so there can be no real relationship.'

This was a surprise. It was not the fact that she described herself as a Christian: I had known that she was a regular churchgoer. It was the idea that a faith could actually affect the way you lived that really gave me pause. It seemed pretty clear to me that she wanted a relationship, so she seemed to be concluding that her passion for Christ was of a higher priority than her interest in me. There he was again, if vicariously in this case. Twice in quick succession he had reached out from the confines of his own house to manipulate affairs in mine—once to save, once to deny. Or had he? Could I not rationalize it as some kind of yin-yang principle—a New Age, 'whole earth' concept of balance? He, She or It gives and takes away. The Force had been with me at least a couple of times, no doubt. It took me some time to discover an associated personality.

It is perhaps poetic that the eventual introduction was arranged by someone I could trace all the way back to that wall in Norway. Helen was another student on my college course. In the summer of 1984 she had a boyfriend, Brian. He was my climbing partner when I first went to the Troll Wall to see water cascading down its face, offering the dream of a winter ascent of a frozen waterfall. However, it was a full year after my icy epic and the warmer rejection by Amanda that I found myself in deep conversation with Helen. I had known for some time that Helen was also a committed Christian. She was someone I would never have described as 'religious', and she certainly shied away from the establishment and tradition, preferring a less conventional expression of her faith. Like any 'normal' student and climber, she was rebellious and passionate about many things. She did not fit into any caricature that I had

developed based around the squarer Christian Union faithful: she preferred to be a more rounded peg.

I enjoyed the conversation, the walk home together from the pub, and the doorstep embrace that preceded our 'good night'. We became an item, Brian having long since departed the scene. Some two or three weeks later, we decided to travel down to Cornwall with a group of friends to spend some of the generous Easter holiday climbing. I would not be able to stay for the full break, as I had agreed to work as a cook for one week at the Buckden House Outdoor Centre in Wharfedale, West Yorkshire. The attraction of the job was that, having tidied up after breakfast, I would have most of the day free to work out on the climbing wall before getting dinner ready. The cash was already earmarked for an anticipated summer in the Alps. As an added bonus, my early departure from the team in Cornwall would allow me a day or so with Helen at her family's house in Devon on the way back up north.

It was in Cornwall that I had another of those pub conversations with Helen. In this case, it was pretty much one-way traffic, with her doing the talking. It was not that I was spellbound by her appearance, although she was undeniably attractive, with long, sun-bleached blonde hair framing a fresh face. It was not that she was especially forceful, and she certainly wasn't trying to dominate the tête-à-tête. I just found that I had nothing of significance to contribute. She, on the other hand, shared a series of life experiences that revealed a depth and substance I had never considered possible. She had grown up with her missionary parents in Thailand, and was able to recount childhood stories in which she encountered poverty and sickness, stories that were richer for the zest of an Asian culture and a family life lived with abundance and intensity. She had actually grown up in a mud hut and, on her return to the UK, had had to learn to hold a pen properly. While she sometimes appeared naïve, especially when displaying her ignorance of pop culture, hers was a life that operated on many levels, tapping into an underground spiritual reservoir and irrigating the surface to provide verdant fruit in varied colours and

hues. As she continued talking in the pub, I began to feel rootless and monochrome. What you saw was all there was. My life seemed like a veneer, a façade, a superficial scrub anchored only in parched sand.

We walked back to the campsite almost mute. I had nothing to say. It was as if I was now enduring the very opposite of a Peak Experience—a Trough Experience. On that frozen waterfall I had received a glimpse of what was possible, a state that transcended normal humanness as I knew it, a moment when my body seemed inadequate to contain all that was possible. In a sense, I overflowed. Trudging along the clifftop path towards the tents, I now felt less than human. In comparison to Helen's apparent fullness, I felt like a hollow shell. I became aware that it was possible to look within a person, and when I looked within myself I found nothing.

A couple of days later, we broke the journey back north with the promised stay at Helen's parents' house. Over breakfast, Helen's father cornered me. He was, quite naturally, interested to find out exactly who his daughter was spending her time with, and where it was likely to be leading.

'What do you make of Jesus?'

It could have been a qualifying question, a selection interview test—one which, correctly answered, would have granted me access to his blessing, whatever that was. But now, as I look back, I detect his concern for me as much as for his daughter.

'I don't know. But I am genuinely interested to find out.'

I really, genuinely was. It occurs to me now that it would have been a great answer even if it had not been true, but I was still reeling from the discovery of my personal inner vacuum. Helen's dad gave me a paperback copy of the New Testament and suggested that this would be a good place to start. He also talked me through the sort of prayer I might use if I felt that I wanted to become more intimately involved with Jesus. He finished by assuring me that he would be praying for me. I'm not sure if I passed the 'suitable son-in-law' test, but the combination of Helen's substance and her

father's frank certainty left me determined to discover more—genuinely determined, more determined than I had been as a result of that miraculous rescue and the deal I had struck in desperation.

You would have to understand just how addicted to climbing I was to realize how absurd it was for me to spurn the climbing wall to spend my free time reading the Bible. I loved climbing. It was not a hobby or an occupation or even a vocation. It had pretty much defined me. My time was divided between climbing, talking about climbing, and working out how I could do more climbing. I trained physically for it; I planned my life around it; I even once seriously considered credit card fraud to fund it. What I did not do was pass up an opportunity to spend time on a climbing wall to read about some bloke who had wandered around in the Middle East a couple of thousand years previously. Sure, he did ascend the odd mountain, but not on routes that would feature in anything more challenging than a pamphlet describing rambles in and around Jerusalem.

But, having arrived for the planned holiday job in Yorkshire, I did read avidly, for a good portion of each day. I made it all the way through Luke and even dipped occasionally into the more enigmatic Revelation. As I did so, Jesus rose up out of the pages as a real personality. He was not merely an interesting historical character but a flesh-and-blood, sitting-next-to-me, charismatic personality. He was alive, and I found that the more I read, the more I wanted to know. I read about the disciples who lived with this man and I realized that I was almost jealous. I wanted to be a disciple. I wanted to know him, really know him, genuinely know him. The moment at the top of the waterfall, Amanda's rejection, even the conversations with Helen can be seen as crucial moments only with the advantage of hindsight. In contrast, as I read that paperback New Testament I became aware that I was approaching a junction at which I would have to make a choice. I decided to go for a walk, a walk with a purpose. I would confront the issue. I decided to decide.

I did not head for the hills, but instead for the neighbouring

village of Hubberholme, trudging a couple of miles through flurries of early afternoon snow falling from a frowning grey sky. I considered the options. I had believed that I had constructed my life on a fairly rational basis. A life spent climbing, scaling special peaks, seemed the best the planet had to offer. The conventional and rational alternatives of a life spent denying dreams, getting a normal job and becoming part of the establishment seemed particularly unattractive. On offer was a relationship with Christ and an acceptance of the divine as a source of inspiration and instruction. It offered an escape from the emptiness I had recently acknowledged—a chance of a deeper, more substantial life.

The small village church with its square stone tower was open and empty, with the midweek silence that only proper old churches can produce. Although it now has the claim of being the resting place for J.B. Priestley's ashes, in those days it was short of even that celebrity, and the oak pews, with their handcarved mice, were not enough to attract what little passing tourist trade the cold Yorkshire Dales can pull in at Easter. I took a hard seat a few rows back, allowing the atmosphere of cool reverence to add weight to my feelings. It seemed an appropriate location. He had come to my 'house' 15 months previously to leave his calling card, and it was only polite to return the compliment.

I prayed. 'I'm sorry that I have ignored you, God. I want to be a disciple. I want to leave my nets. I want to follow you.'

It was a nothing-to-lose swing of the ice-axe. If it didn't hold, I had lost nothing of significance, but if it did… To be honest, I am not sure I knew what to expect if it did hold. I wanted to get higher and this seemed to be the only chance. I swung the axe, not exactly sure what a firm placement would feel like.

'Thok.'

As I walked back, the snow heavier, it occurred to me that I had just become a Christian. I did not feel especially different. 'What happens next? What do I do now?' I wondered. I prayed again, 'You need to show me what direction to take.'

'Do what you will, do it well, and do it in my name.'

Again, not the thundering voice, even though the sky seemed to be in the mood for it. No distinctive spoken word, but a general sense of his affirmation of my decision. It was strangely comforting, allowing me to carry on with what I was doing but to shift the emphasis. Do it not for me, but for him. I certainly would not have understood at the time, but I now realize that my side of the bargain was being explained to me. I did not have to give up my ropes, leave my nets and wander off in some unspecified direction. He did not demand a denial of all that I enjoyed or knew. I was being asked to take on a new purpose. It ain't what you do, it's the *why* that you do it—and it gets results. The hole within me had been filled and I felt that I had become a man of substance. What was especially surprising was that I really did not deserve it. I had not earned the Peak Experience and, if anything, my tardiness in even considering my response to the waterfall miracle made me at best ungrateful, at worst a defaulter. Part of what fills me now is the joy and gratitude that he did not give up on me even then.

The Protestant work ethic handed down through family generations is so pervasive that, although it has its origins in Christianity, it can actually mask the truth of a reward that is given freely. We certainly don't get what we deserve. I knew this already. From my thoughtful trudge back to cook dinner at Buckden House, I only had to glance back a couple of years to my early days at Ilkley College, to the time when the news of Dick's death was phoned through to me by my shocked parents.

You may remember Dick, owner of the orange Sherpa van. He had invested in me, and not only in me. He had enthused and infused many young boys, taking their aspirations and ideas and making them a reality. Never one to dismiss a mad scheme, he had shared his 'can do' attitude and, as a consequence, scattered over the world are some Lincolnshire lads who 'can do'. It was therefore cruel and undeserved that a lorry should shed its load and crush Dick's eight-year-old son, Michael. How can it be fair that one who

moulded so many young lives was robbed of the chance to see the results of his efforts with his own son? How much crueller that he was even robbed of the enjoyment of seeing his surrogates develop, because shortly after this he too lost his life. Dick was caving with a friend of mine. Contradicting the weather forecast, a sudden downpour rapidly filled the cavern with water and, trapped underground, he drowned. Not only was he a big character, he was a big man, and it was his bulk that did not allow him to squeeze from the cave in time. My other, thinner friend escaped.

I recall being deeply shaken by the news. Young climbers feel a great certainty—a sense that while falls may happen, while there may be setbacks, they themselves are immune from disaster. My confidence was constructed upon a firm grounding in the work ethic that assures subscribers that the sweat of their own brow will at some point have its reward. Before Helen, before Amanda, before the Troll Wall in Norway, the first cracks in my scientific certainty may have been due to the injustice and shock of Dick's untimely end. I hope so. I hope that his death had a positive purpose and I hope that, somehow, he knows it.

Many times since then, I have been asked to tell the story of my commitment—my testimony. I've heard many others, including Elizabeth my wife, describe a time of consciously searching, like the merchant who trawls through the market stalls and backstreet bazaars in search of that one perfect pearl. I often choose to refer to another of the stories Jesus used to illustrate the experience of finding God. In one short verse in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus explains the kingdom of heaven in terms of a man who happens across a treasure hidden in a field. Having uncovered the trove, he hides it quickly, rushes off to sell everything he has and uses his new liquidity to buy the field, thus acquiring the right to the reward. It is in this way that I reconcile the competing philosophies and in them find peace.

Maslow was right. There is miraculous in the mundane, but there are also glimpses of the sublime in the misery and in the majestic. God can be found when we seek him, but reveals himself when we

are focused on anything but him. There is mystery and there is collaboration and, just as God reveals himself in the most unlikely of circumstances, he also requires a willingness to make a personal investment. I can testify that my personal small investment has recouped. I've been overwhelmed, almost embarrassed by the reward.