



Opening Words (adapted from Erik Walker Wikstrom)

We come together this morning because within us there is something that knows we need more than we can find in our aloneness. We know—instinctively, in the depths of our beings—that we need others for this journey of life even though we also guard our independence and individuality quite closely.

In our togetherness we are so much more than we can ever be on our own. So on this Sunday, let us celebrate all that makes us unique, yet also all that makes us one, and let us dream of the mountains we can climb... together.

Prayer (by Russell R. Bletzer)

Abiding and abounding spirit in whom is our life and all our ways:
We search our hearts this day in the earnest quest for deeper self-knowledge, for greater self-understanding. We would remove the obstacles to love which hinder us from reaching the fullest fellowship and communion with our neighbors. We would cleanse our hearts of bitterness, of fear, of hatred, and of all the poisonous tensions that separate us from our brothers and sisters. For love is the bridge over which we connect with others. Love is the bond that unites us to humanity, always, in perfect freedom. Love is the fulfillment of our individual destiny, as well as our social duty. Love is the release of our selfhood, and the generous losing of selfhood in the service of others. To love as we need to, to love as we ought to, we would begin with ourselves, in acceptance and forgiveness. To free ourselves of the chains with which we are bound, we would rise in the dignity of self-appreciation and self-realization to the mountain tops of living from which we can see all of humanity as sisters and brothers like ourselves, in mutual need of one another. May we face our weaknesses without contempt, may we face our failures and imperfections without guilt, that in the strength of self-approval and confidence, we may rise to heights we but dimly see, through the help we can give one another.

Story for All Ages

Oh! The Places You'll Go! (by Dr. Seuss)

Read by Jenn Taylor

Congratulations!
Today is your day.
You're off to Great Places!
You're off and away!

You have brains in your head.
You have feet in your shoes.
You can steer yourself any direction you choose.
You're on your own. And you know what you know. And YOU are the guy who'll decide where to go.

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You'll look up and down streets. Look'em over with care. About some you will say, "I don't choose to go there." With your head full of brains and your shoes full of feet, you're too smart to go down a not-so-good street.

And you may not find any you'll want to go down. In that case, of course, you'll head straight out of town. It's opener there in the wide open air.

Out there things can happen and frequently do to people as brainy and footsy as you.

And when things start to happen, don't worry. Don't stew. Just go right along. You'll start happening too.

Oh! The Places You'll Go!

You'll be on your way up!
 You'll be seeing great sights!
 You'll join the high fliers who soar to high heights.

You won't lag behind, because you'll have the speed. You'll pass the whole gang and you'll soon take the lead. Wherever you fly, you'll be best of the best. Wherever you go, you will top all the rest.

Except when you don't.
 Because, sometimes, you won't.

I'm sorry to say so but, sadly, it's true that Bang-ups and Hang-ups can happen to you.

I'm afraid that sometimes you'll play lonely games too. Games you can't win 'cause you'll play against you.

All Alone!
 Whether you like it or not, Alone will be something you'll be quite a lot.

And when you're alone, there's a very good chance you'll meet things that scare you right out of your pants. There are some, down the road between hither and yon, that can scare you so much you won't want to go on.

But on you will go though the weather be foul. On you will go though your enemies prowl. On you will go though the Hakken-Kraks howl. Onward up many a frightening creek, though your arms may get sore and your sneakers may leak. On and on you will hike. And I know you'll hike far and face up to your problems whatever they are.

You'll get mixed up, of course, as you already know. You'll get mixed up with many strange birds as you go. So be sure when you step. Step with care and great tact and remember that Life's a Great Balancing Act. Just never forget to be dexterous and deft. And never mix up your right foot with your left.

And will you succeed?
 Yes! You will, indeed!
 (98 and $\frac{3}{4}$ percent guaranteed.)

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Kid, you'll move mountains!
 So...be your name Buxbaum or Bixby or Bray or Mordecai Ale Van Allen O'Shea, you're
 off to Great Places!
 Today is your day!
 Your mountain is waiting.
 So...get on your way!

Reading

Life's Mountaintops (by Jeanne Needham)

Read by Carrie Lang

You've climbed mountains. I've climbed mountains. Mountain-climbing takes great effort, serious focus, and superhuman fortitude, but we all do it and we somehow reach the top.

When I'm at the top of a mountain, I like to sit and look back at the path I've traveled. I can see where the climb began. I can see the twists and turns in that trek, and all the little side trips I took along the way. I can remember great and small discoveries, and I can remember the dead ends. I can see where the climb was steeper and the rocks were looser. I can see all the places where I skinned my knees, and where my hands were gouged in the climbing. I can see the small plateaus where I was able to rest and catch my breath, sleep for a bit, and renew my resolve. I sit at the top of the mountain and immensely enjoy a sense of satisfaction!

I'm grateful for all the handholds that were provided even if they did cause a little blood to flow. I don't much remember the negative feelings that occurred — the anguish when I couldn't see which way to go, or the incomprehensible fatigue that would sometimes grab my soul and say *stop, this is crazy, who needs this mountain anyway, go back, going down is so much easier!* All I know right now, at the top of this mountain is: I did it, with help from unexpected places, with guidance from surprising events along the way.

Then I turn and look forward, I see and know things I've never seen or known before, and I see and know them so clearly! I close my eyes, take the deepest breath I've ever taken, and I experience the immense and unspeakable joy of arriving.

Okay, so I've never climbed a *real* mountain, but I think our journey through life brings us to our own spiritual mountains. We can do it, gratefully stand proud when it's done, and make ourselves ready for the next great discoveries. But what do you think pushes us to even *begin* the mountain-climb, and what do you feel when you've completed the climb?

Sermon

I was hiking through massive ponderosa pines on my way up to the top of the tallest mountain in Arizona. The wind in the trees made them sway overhead but it was quiet and serene on the snowy white path where I walked. This was a very special trip for me. You see, I spent the last year and a half hiking up every mountain I came across while living in Arizona. To me, those mountains were beautiful, daunting, challenging and spiritual. Something about them drew me to them. And I found

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that when I climbed them alone, some spiritual insight or new wisdom would often come to me. I learned so much about myself, about life, about the ways of nature and the universe. My soul came alive while I was on them. The mountains were a kind of spiritual boot camp for me and I relished the chance to challenge myself on them and learn their wisdom. But I had to say goodbye to Arizona. Our family was moving to Michigan to start a new life there. My wife was already in our new home with our baby son and they were waiting for me to join them. I had one last month to finish up my work and tie up loose ends but of course, I used as much of that time as possible to climb all the mountains I could find and to thank them for all that they had taught me. So, I saved the tallest peak for my very last climb. You can imagine the significance I placed on it. It's name is Mt Humphries and it's the tallest of the San Francisco Peaks –which together make up the remains of an ancient, massive volcano just north of Flagstaff. Maybe you've seen it towering into the sky above every other mountain around it. I was eager to discover what Mt Humphries would have to teach me about life. Since I had learned so much about myself and the world on the smaller mountains, what wisdom would this great father of the sky and land offer me? I pictured myself standing on the peak with the clouds parting and have a beam of sun light shining down onto me and I dared to hope that I might come face to face with my God, my Creator, the Great Spirit. I imagined having some great epiphany while feeling completely connected to the world around me. Those were the hopes and dreams that filled my heart and mind as I made my way steadily up the trail.

I saw a few people as I went up, they were very supportive and wished me luck. Usually when I climb, I am by myself so it was unusual to have even occasional human contact, but since this was a very long and tedious hike, I appreciated their kind words. After hours of hiking through the dense forest, I reached an altitude where the trees started to thin and I could see more of the scenery around me. It was a wonderful view with the forested hills and valleys below and the cloud enshrouded rocky peaks above but I noticed that there was less protection from the wind here. And it was cold! Just the day before I had been hiking through the canyons of Sedona wearing light clothes with the sun shining warmly upon me. So today's snow and wind had taken me by surprise. Still, I hoped I was prepared for the climb with my freshly purchased and matching fleece jacket and gloves. I didn't know if I'd be warm enough but I sure looked good! I should be alright..., right? There was a point on the mountain in front of me where the two main peaks met and that marked the place where the trees stopped and the difficult climbing would begin. From here on out, I would be climbing on icy rock instead of soft trail and I'd be without any protection from the elements. The trail above me went along the edge of a sharp ridge. On left was the steep slope of the mountain side that I had hiked up. On the right was a sharp cliff overlooking frost covered jagged rock. The wind was very harsh and I was pelted by stinging snow and ice. I would look up above me and I could see the trail curving up into the distance but I couldn't see very far. I was walking in clouds now and they made everything look grey and bleak. The trail became treacherous with icy rocky footing and I swear the wind was deliberately trying to push me over the edge of the cliff. I was losing feeling in my hands and my ears and face stung from the cold and snow but still, that peak, somewhere in the distance didn't seem to get any closer. The wind was so cold and strong that wherever my bare skin was exposed, I ached from it. Trying to figure out some way to at least protect my ears, I remembered that I had a tank top in the bottom of my backpack. I took it out and tied it around my head. It must've looked bizarre with my green tank top over my ears and it totally clashed with my jacket and gloves but it provided some warmth and I was able to continue on. My fleece gloves weren't strong enough to stop the wind so I had to keep my hands in my pockets to keep them warm and that made balancing on that rocky path even more treacherous. Not knowing how much farther I had to go. Not sure about how much worse the weather would get. I should've turned around. But because of the bitterly cold wind at my back, it actually seemed easier and safer to keep going up than to turn around and face that blizzard head on. I wasn't even sure if I could make it back down safely once I got to the top! You heard about the saying about digging yourself a hole that you can't get out of? That was me in reverse! And still, I kept climbing. At one point, I came very close

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to the edge of the cliff and as I looked over it, what my imagination saw was that if Hell ever froze over, this is what it would look like: Sharp rocks, ice, no color, bleakness, no hope, no joy, just despair. I had the feeling that with one misstep of my foot and one gust of wind, I'd be over the side and lost forever. This was no longer a great adventure, but a tedious, meaningless task that I couldn't stop. I kept climbing, kept looking for some sign that I was near the top, but every high point ended up being a false peak.

Eventually, after what felt like years of stumbling and freezing on that rocky trail, I finally reached level ground and saw a sign stuck in the rocks: Mt Humphries, elevation 11,500ft, don't go off the trail. There were no grand vistas, no beauty. The clouds that I was in obscured everything around me – except for the gray and black of what was nearby. I felt no sense of joy or accomplishment for achieving my goal. I was cold, miserable, and despondent. I wondered what trouble I had gotten myself into and how I would get myself out of it. Then saw a low rock foundation for what might've been an outpost once. It wasn't much, but I thought that if I hunkered down on the far side of it, it might protect me from the blizzard for a while. As I approached the far corner of the foundation, I saw the most unexpected thing! In this place of solitary bleakness and hopelessness, there were two people huddled together against the rock wall! Two fellow climbers who were also trying to get out of that wind. I think they were as surprised to see me as I was to see them, and when I asked them if I could join them, they were happy to make room for me. Imagine me and two strangers getting cozy behind a 3 foot wall of rock in that far remote place... We squished together as close as we could and I could feel myself thaw and warm from our collective body heat. I asked them if they were OK and they said they were thirsty because their water had frozen. My water was still okay so I shared mine with them. We talked about our situation and how worried we were about facing the blizzard on the way back down. All three of us felt stuck on the mountain top. But after some time to rest and warm up, we felt a little more hopeful. We started talking seriously about how to make our descent. We decided to go down together and watch out for each other. Having companions to trek with made the wind and cold much more bearable. Like three kids playing follow the leader, we bounded from rock to rock going down the snowy trail and even though the wind was still biting cold, the companionship made it almost fun. The snow and ice pelted us but it seemed more manageable now. Then what seemed like a short time later, we were back near the tree line again. The rest of the descent from there would be easier and less scary and I was ready to keep going down the mountain. But my new companions said we should go behind a rock outcropping and meet up with their friends. They had hiking partners who wisely decided to wait in a place protected from the wind instead of braving the trip to the peak. So, I met them and we talked about the mountain and our trip to the top and the horrid weather. And those friends... They had coffee! And it was hot!! And when they shared it with me, I swear it was the best thing that I ever tasted in my whole life! The six of us hung out there in our now cozy bit of mountain, sharing stories, and enjoying the moment. The world was still cold and gray but I was out of the wind, I was safe, I had coffee and I had companionship. I didn't think I could've asked for anything more, when all of a sudden, the gray clouds in front of us parted like curtains and revealed the most amazing scene: beautiful green and yellow forests far below us lit by golden sunshine with mountain ranges far off into the distance. It was like watching Wizard of Oz turning the world from black and white into color. It was magical and awesome and I felt like I was in the midst of a very profound spiritual moment. It was then that I remembered my dreams for climbing the mountain. It seemed funny and ironic to me now and I just had to tell my new friends, "You know, I went up to the top of the mountain to meet my God, and instead, I found you people" ... Of course they thought it was hilarious and they thought I was strange, but they laughed and I laughed with them. But inside I knew there was some profound lesson there... After our coffee break, we realized that we still had a long way to go to get to the bottom of the mountain and if we didn't hurry, it would get dark on us. So together, we hiked down the trail while telling stories and jokes, laughing most of the way. It did get dark, but I was never worried about losing my way with my companions at my side.

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Over the last 13 years, I thought long and hard about what I learned up there. And I have to admit that I didn't like my interpretation of it. It seemed to imply that my spiritual development couldn't be done completely alone anymore. It meant that I needed other people to help me grow and learn spiritually. And this bothered me a lot because I wanted to find my answers in my own way. I wanted to be so independent and so strong that I wouldn't need anyone else's wisdom or direction.

But then a few years ago I felt like my own spiritual path had come to a dead end. I no longer found inspiration from my own experiences or from the books I read. Something was missing and I wanted back on my path again. Then I thought about this mountain climb one more time. And I came to realize that I was limiting my own spiritual journey by isolating myself. I was cutting myself off from the inspiration and wisdom that only comes from sharing with other people. And that is the biggest reason I joined our church. I realized that sharing my past life experiences strengthens and deepens my own life lessons. I learned that sharing my experiences has the potential to strengthen and deepen others' life lessons too. I've discovered that I learn as much from the lessons and experiences you share with me as I do on my own. I've found inspiration and spiritual growth from you. And I've found my path again. I didn't give up my independence: I found freedom in being part of a nurturing community.

Well, I still love going on solo mountain climbs. It's a real joy for me. And I take a lot of pride in those accomplishments. There's something about having your own resourcefulness and determination and pitting those against a challenge. But that mountain climb still haunts me. Was there more to learn from it? So I thought about it and had to ask myself: Would I have made it down that mountain on my own if I hadn't found those people? Well, yeah, probably. It would've been difficult but I would've survived. But would the experience have been as rewarding and as meaningful? – definitely not! A solo trip down that mountain would've been scary and depressing. I would've felt like the effort was pointless. But in the company of my new companions, I was confident, I was hopeful, I was comforted, and I even had fun! Each one of us hikers had to make that journey down that mountain on our own, each one of us had to take all our own steps, but in the company of others, it went from being torturous to being enjoyable.

Just like the author of the reading, life's challenges are just like real mountain climbs; we conquer the challenges the same way. I faced a mountain sized life challenge just recently when I was worried about losing my job and there were layoffs all around me. And I have to tell you that my struggle became less scary and less overwhelming because of your support and your companionship. I know that the mountains in my life can only be climbed by me: it's me that makes the decisions, does the work, and keeps up the determination. I used to think it was a weakness to ask for help in facing my challenges but I've learned that there's no reason that I must face them by myself now. In the reading, the author talks about what is needed to climb to the top of the mountain: effort, serious focus and superhuman fortitude. If you have those things on your own, and really want to climb your mountain unassisted, that's great. But imagine how much more fortitude you have when you have your friends at your side. Imagine how much more rewarding the trip is when you can share the challenges and accomplishments with others. Doesn't that focus and effort seem easier in the presence of supporting companionship?

So I have to ask you: what mountains are you climbing in your life? Are you facing them alone? If so, do you really need to? Who in your life can accompany you on your journey? Who is willing to meet you half way and provide you encouragement and support (and coffee)? Let your pride go and don't be afraid to reach out to them for a little help and companionship. A companion doesn't need to carry you to make your mountain climb easier. There's no cheating on mountain climbs –we all must carry our own load. But sometimes it's just enough to hold another's hand to make it feel like

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the load is less heavy. And for those of you whose mountains aren't so steep right now... Do you know anyone who's got a tough climb ahead of them? What kind of support and comfort can you give them to help them on their way? All it takes is a simple reaching out...

I went to the top of the mountain to meet my God and I found it in the companionship of other people. Remember, we all have mountains to climb, but that doesn't mean we must face them alone.

Amen and Blessed Be.

Closing Words

May we leave this place
Knowing that we all have mountains to climb
Appreciating the gifts and challenges those mountains bring us
Comforted by our companions along the way.

Go Now in Peace