

Climbing and the Spiritual Journey  
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Video (3:12 min)

In this video Mark was bouldering a V11 route. I am not actually sure what the V stands for in the rating, but I think it is the number of very's in front of hard. Mark is a friend and attendee of New Hope who helped me think about climbing and what it can show us about our spiritual journey. He is also the one who took me rock climbing for the first time last summer. A couple of others from New Hope and the Calgary Climbing Centre have been part of reflecting on climbing's connection to the spiritual life and I have read a bit about a few professional climbers in the book "Vertical World". One thing is clear – there are many reasons that people climb, there are many kinds of climbing and one message can only touch on a couple of these.

The truth is that everyone's experience is unique but there do seem to be common elements. So this morning I will talk about some that came to the forefront for me as I listened to some climbers and reflected on my own experience.

For those of you who don't know anything about climbing, and I was there less than a year and a half ago, I want to briefly define some terms that will come up through the message.

First, bouldering refers to climbing routes of about 12-15 feet without ropes. Belay refers to holding the rope at the opposite end of the climber. Lead climbing is the form of climbing in which the climber places anchors and attaches the belay rope as they climb (traditional) or clips the belay rope into preplaced equipment (sport). The crux is the most difficult move or series of moves in a route and to send, an abbreviation of ascend, means to climb a route from start to finish without falling.

#### **Fear:**

One thing that I experience in climbing is fear and the need to deal with fear. I was a bit surprised that this is pretty common; perhaps it is even what draws some people to climbing. It is not what draws me, but I have had to be intentional about dealing with fear as does everyone who climbs.

We need to confront and overcome our fear as we stand at the bottom of the wall or rock face and part of us says, "There is no way I can climb that without falling." In fact, I may fear falling or I may just fear failing. When asked if he was ever scared, professional climber Dave Graham responded, "I'm horrified of rock climbing. All the time....When it comes to doing things like rappelling and [lead] climbing, I'm always scared....It does, however, lead me to accept that I'm scared and recognize that I need to chill because I am. And it's not a big deal, because everybody does and should get scared." Dave Graham

I so appreciate this quote because I think it is as true in life as it is in climbing, "Everybody does and should get scared." How we deal with fear is the important thing, not whether we feel it or not. We will feel it, it is inevitable, but we do not have to let ourselves be controlled by it.

Sometimes fear is a good thing because it protects us from doing really stupid and reckless things. Sometimes it is a good thing because it reminds us to pay attention and use some caution. Sometimes it is a totally neutral thing – it is just there. Sometimes it has the potential to hold us back from doing or becoming all we are meant to do and be; this is the kind of fear that we have to face honestly and overcome.

#### **2 Timothy 1:7 (NLT) says,**

"For God has not given us a spirit of fear and timidity, but of power, love, and self-discipline."

For most of my life I believed that it was not ok to be afraid, and this has caused me to push fear down and completely deny it or to be ashamed of it. Because of this view of fear I misunderstood this verse for a long time, I thought it meant I should not be afraid. Through the last few years I have come to understand that God helps us overcome our fear only when we acknowledge it and let Him into it.

John writes in 1 John 4:18 "perfect love drives out fear"

Again, I think we sometimes take this to mean that if only we loved enough we would not be afraid, but that is not the reality of our experience. It is that our love for someone or something gives us courage to do what we want to do, what we know is right even when we are afraid. When we love what we are doing this love helps us press through the obstacle that fear is. At the same time, knowing we are loved, that we are held in the love of God can give us courage, power to move forward even when we feel afraid.

Pedro Arupe, a Jesuit priest wrote the following about love's power in our life.

"Nothing is more practical than finding God,

That is, falling in love in a quite absolute final way.

What you are in love with, what seizes your imagination, will affect everything.

It will decide what will get you out of bed in the morning.

What you will do with your mornings.

How you will spend your weekends,

What you will read,

Who you will know,

What breaks your heart,

What amazes you with joy and gratitude.

Fall in love,

Stay in love, and

It will decide everything."

Pedro Arupe, SJ

There are two kinds of movement in climbing that speak to me about how we live our lives. They are Static and Dynamic movement.

Sometimes we move steadily and slowly, taking our time and moving with precision and grace. This is static movement. It is what we do most of the time. We may still need to do a move that stretches us or that feels dangerous, but the movement we make is controlled.

Sometimes we need to jump or swing toward a hold we can't actually reach, trusting that the rope (or mat, or friend) will catch us if we miss what we are aiming for. This is Dynamic movement and there are times when we have to gather our courage, take our life in our hands, and just leap.

There are times in life and in faith when we experience the same types of movement. We can move through most of life with intention and care, but then there are moments when we are invited to take a leap; to trust not only ourselves and our own strengths and capacities but to trust the 'holder of the rope' to catch us.

The line in the song "Sigh No More" by Mumford and Sons, "Love will never betray you, dismay or enslave you; it will set you free to be

more like the man you were made to be" tells us how we can trust in God when we have the choice to jump for that 'hold' that is a bit beyond our reach. "Love that never betrays us, dismays or enslaves us."

That sense of security can also be provided through the community that God gives us. Our families and friends, the community of faith that we are a part of.

Mark writes the following about how we can cope with fear. "Due to its nature, climbing naturally puts us in that position of having to face fears. And it's only by effort and preparation that we are able to control them instead of the reverse. This is often when the iron sharpens iron analogy arrives; where in the presence of friends and camaraderie we are able to accomplish greater feats than by ourselves."

Trinity Shane, a member of New Hope and climber says, "I love climbing because it is challenging, there is an element of fear. Then there is the element of success when you are able to climb the route without falling." (Trinity S.)

Sometimes the only way to overcome our fear is to walk directly into it. Then it loses its power over us. The satisfaction of overcoming the fear and pressing through it are a part of the reward of climbing. We can look back and appreciate the courage it took to move forward even when it seemed impossible.

### **Focus/Concentration**

I think one of the things that draws me to climbing, although I was not aware of it at first, is that you have to be present to what you are doing completely. You cannot be distracted and thinking about other things and expect to climb well.

Chris Sharma says, "I feel like when I go climbing... you have to be totally present. It's a very meditative thing to be so focused". (Chris Sharma)

This is about living in the present moment and being present to the moment.

Mark writes, "In part, climbing is a motion back to that time of youth where we don't think, we simply do. The situations, often potentially dangerous, if even only in our minds, demand our complete attention. You can't be split focused running through the list of errands you have planned en route back to the city and the house. It demands that we live

in the moment, or consequences can be harsh.”

There seems to be a sense of lightness and freedom in this mental space. I think I have tasted it once or twice when everything just seemed to flow and the climbing felt effortless. The more I hear others talk about this state of being the truer I think Chris Sharma’s words “It’s a very meditative thing to be so focused” are.

There is a way of living life that can be named as ‘contemplative’. This sounds very spiritual and beyond us, but it is like being in the moment on a climb. Paying attention to this rock face in front of me and to my movement on it. Paying attention to this moment and not looking too far ahead, paying attention to this task and not the list of the million tasks yet to be done this week, paying attention to this person and not thinking about the next encounter. Paying attention to the ever present presence of God.

Shaun Harrison, my climbing coach writes about this sense of presence when he describes an ‘almost’ perfect climb:

“I feel I have come fairly close to what I would consider the perfect climb on only a few occasions. One experience was a project I was working for a few years in Fontainebleau, France. The first element that made this almost the perfect send was being in the ‘magical forest’ at sunset when the air was cool, the lighting through the trees was something out of a Monet painting, and the support of climbers around me. I put my shoes on, chalked up, closed my eyes, took a deep breath; at that moment it seemed as if everything came together. My mind was clear, focused and relaxed, nothing mattered. I opened my eyes, jumped for the first hold, stabilized then grabbed the second and third and fourth and so on. As I moved up to the crux where I have fallen hundreds of times over the years, I was still in the same euphoric state as I was on the ground. Finally after pushing through the crux to the top, I pulled the lip to the finish and stood there in disbelief. Not disbelief that I finally sent my project, but how I still felt in such a relaxed state, both mentally and physically.” (Shaun Harrison)

According to Trinity, “The “perfect” climb would be out on a sunny day in the mountains with a good friend. You are confident in their abilities to keep you safe so your mind is not focused so much on falling but more so on the freedom to attempt to climb and challenge yourself to a hard cliff face. Once you have started to ascend up the route and you are in that zone, being able to climb with ease.” (Trinity S.)

Another aspect of being in the moment is letting go of the compulsion to succeed. Steph Davis, a professional climber said, “It was only when I learned how to let go of the outcome and only care about just being there and doing it that things work for me.” (Steph Davis)

This is true of our life too – we cannot fully live life if we are so concerned about the outcome that we cannot pay attention to what is immediately before us. We can get so distracted that we lose sight of what is important. We can begin to dis-integrate, to be pulled apart.

**Proverbs 4:25-26 (NIV) says,**

“Let your eyes look straight ahead;  
fix your gaze directly before you.  
Give careful thought to the paths for your feet  
and be steadfast in all your ways.”

“Being focused and relaxed with a clear mind,” “being in the zone”, “being in a meditative state”, “just being there.” These are all phrases that describe what it feels like to live intentionally and contemplatively. They also help me see more clearly what it means to live simply.

Jose Hobday writes in the book “Simple Living”, “Simplicity can be understood in one way as the refusal to dissipate. It is holding out against fragmentation. Simplicity holds the center against the impulse to go off in all directions, scattering your energy as you go.” (Hobday, p. 21)

Climbing teaches us about using our energy wisely, focusing on the present and holding the center.

**Perseverance**

Another thing I have discovered in climbing is that when I think I cannot go any farther or hang on any longer, surprisingly I can. What seems impossible can sometimes become possible through perseverance, hard work and a willingness to risk failure.

“[W]hen we climb we get to physically touch and experience the rock. It may look impossible from a photo at the base of the cliff, but when you get up close and begin to inspect it, then little weaknesses appear and hope blooms in our hearts and minds that maybe, just maybe, it might be possible.... The physical effort of climbing is also very rewarding. If you work hard and puzzle out the movement then you are gifted with

the accomplishment of attaining the top of a mountain, a rock cliff, or even a boulder. “ (Mark F.)

Right now I am in ‘group training’ with a coach and sometimes when I am there and he is pushing us to our limit, I ask myself, “Why am I here? Did I really volunteer for this?” but when we come to the end of the session the only time I feel any regret is when I have to acknowledge to myself that I could have pushed harder if I had really wanted to. When I have come to the end of the evening and know that I really could not have worked any harder or longer, than I have a deep satisfaction whether I was able to send a route or fell repeatedly.

Shaun, the coach of this group says, “Climbing is a hard sport, there are so many aspects that we as climbers have to overcome, whether its pure physical strength, power, endurance, etc., or the other side, our mind. With both sides constantly playing against us, we have to find it within ourselves to overcome so much, and this is what I truly love, not only in how others and myself approach the difficulties of inevitable failure, but the euphoric reward of success.” Shaun Harrison

There is always room to grow. When you feel comfortable at one level that is the time to start to push yourself to the next level. There is a beauty about not being afraid of failure that is present in climbing. The letting go of outcomes and focusing on the process is what we also need to do in our spiritual life. We sometimes expect ourselves to have arrived at perfection in our spiritual journey, forgetting that perfection is an unattainable goal. We are only required to live as much as possible with attention to God’s movement in us. We forget the focus of our faith is Jesus and think that our perfection is the end. This is a distortion and a deception.

Sanctification is the theological word that means we are made perfect in God. There are many views on how and when that happens in our spiritual journey but one thing I know is that it is not up to us to sanctify ourselves, that is God’s work. We are only truly and deeply transformed by opening ourselves up to God’s love and grace.

**Hebrews 12:1-2 says,**

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.

Perhaps this sounds contradictory talking about perseverance and hard work and the fact that we can’t do anything to change. It is a paradox; we need to persevere in focusing on Jesus so that he can work in our hearts. It is only as we experience the ongoing reality of brokenness and surrender to grace in our daily lives that our faith is perfected.

There are many more aspects of climbing that have illuminated my life with God in a new way. Some who climb will think I have missed the most important ones, and perhaps I have not spoken of some of the most obvious ones but these are the ones that had the most resonance for me at this time.

I want to close with another quote from Mark that talks about climbing, but I think it is also very applicable to our journey with God.

“Climbing is an innate movement we aspire to as kids. The challenges can be mild, but if we chose to challenge ourselves, then half-hearted efforts won’t suffice. We are at our limit with the difficulties it presents. Wasting energy unwisely will result in failure. It’s only by learning the minute intricacies of the movement, finding exactly where and how to grab the rock, focusing on just what’s in front of us (not the whole path), and managing the fears that we are able to shoot the moon and briefly know that satisfaction.” Mark

**Prayer**

Blessing: “I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with unfailing kindness.” Jer. 31:3