

# I Lift Up My Eyes to the Mountains

by Tomas Frydrych

The sun is slowly approaching the horizon, the glowing sky reflecting in the loch below. The mountains are just a black outline behind me; the air suddenly noticeably cooler. A narrow path winds ahead and below, and in the last rays of the sun I can see Bob in the distance; he is running. I have no intention chasing after him, relishing the fading sunshine so rare in these quarters.

Covered in mud and green slime that rubbed on me in a narrow, unpleasant chimney on the penultimate pitch on the last climb of the day, I am contemplating the day's achievement and what drives me back to the mountains.



It starts so innocuously. A trip down the quarry with an obliging friend, first clumsy moves on the rock, with the safety of the rope above my head, and fear of heights in it. Some never return, some cannot but to return. Perhaps we were chosen before the creation of the world.

Then comes the first mountain route, the sense of being suspended in mid air halfway up the mountain. The stakes are much higher, even a twisted ankle would have serious consequences; that is the risk we take to be free. But the rope is still coming from above and with it a sense of relative safety.

And so I am following the friend above me. Climbing breeds different kind of friendship than anything else I do. When I tie onto one end of the rope, I am, quite literary, putting my life

into the hands of the other, and by the same token, taking the life of the other into mine. The people I trust enough to do this can be counted on the fingers of one hand; Bob, whose silhouette is now barely visible in the shadows below, comes at the top of that list.

I had occasionally climbed with people I did not have full confidence in, and it always limited what I would set out to do, but also, how I would do it: a familiar climb, one I would just cruise over with a trusted friend at the other end of the rope, becomes a deliberate and tense effort; instead of enjoying the movement, my mind concentrates on not falling off.

There are other situations when I put my life into the hands of others; most notably the daily drive to work, by far the most dangerous thing I do. But I do so grudgingly, out of necessity, with suspicion, with much resentment.

My relationship with God fluctuates between the two extremes; there are times I enjoy the freedom of movement that comes out of the utter confidence in the Other, but there are times I wonder how much attention the Other is paying and whether I am in safe hands.



Being at the bottom end of the climbing rope comes with its own challenges; I have to follow where the leader leads, I have to climb what *s/he* decided was within *our* abilities. Sometimes this is not so easy, particularly when the guy ahead is over ambitious or has a much longer reach than I do -- not unlike my life of faith; there have been times when I had to follow where I really did not want to go, when I wondered if the guy up there spared any thought for how tall I am, and how far I

can reach. But at the end of the day, I have no choice but to follow; I cannot just untie and walk off.



And then the day comes when I first tie onto the sharp end of the rope, climbing ahead of my friend. That is a whole different game. Falling down now means exactly that – flying down, hoping the last piece of gear I placed earlier on was good enough to bring me to a stop.

But the sharp end of rope also means greater freedom in choosing the route, greater satisfaction in overcoming problems, and not last, much greater responsibility for, and to, the guy below – he will have no choice but to follow where I lead, he will share in the consequence of my own decisions, for we are tied together by the nylon umbilical cord.



Often when I return from a day out climbing, my wife asks, ‘So what did you guys talk about all day?’ Actually, the face-to-face encounters on the mountain are few and brief. My friend and I are mostly apart, only that thin nylon line reminding me I am not alone, that he is somewhere out there. Often we are not just out of sight, but also out of shout. And while I can hear the shouts of the guys on the next climb, indeed, on the other side of the mountain, I often cannot hear my friend.

Sometimes other climbers relay our messages up and down, just as we do for them, but there are times I desperately need to hear my friend’s voice, shouting at the very top of my lungs, only for the sound to break on the deaf rock, to drown in the gushing wind.

Just like in my life of faith, there are times I wonder if my friend is still there, or whether he just vanished, I wonder what is taking him so long to reach me, while I am disappearing under the falling snow, encrusted in ice, my fingers and toes turning blue.

In times like these, we depend on knowing each other well, knowing what the other will do and not do, that he will not do something stupid that would endanger me, that he is moving as fast as he can to reach me; we work as a team, even when we each seem to be on our own.



As time goes, we get better at the game, individually and as a team. The challenges of yesterdays become things we do without a second thought. And so we seek new ones. Greater commitment is required, often the last piece of protection that ties me to this earth is too low for comfort, or way too marginal for complete safety. There is no time to hang around. I have to learn to steady the shaking knees, to get a grip of my fear, and keep moving up.

One day the inevitable happens; perhaps I have underestimated the move ahead, perhaps I was just a bit too careless. There is no time to reflect as I peel off the rock, hurtling down. I am shaken, surprised how far I fell, how close to the ground I came. I learn more respect for the game, my expectations become more realistic, but I get back on the rock heading up, not allowing that experience to control my life; I know instinctively that there is nothing to be gained by standing below staring at the rock face.



I have had my share of 'interesting' moments in the mountains: caught out on climbs by darkness, forced by hail storm to abseil from half way up the Ben, benighted on a narrow ledge of an alpine peak with rope badly damaged by rock fall. Some of these were preventable, some were outwith my control.

Interestingly enough, the really good climbs, the climbs I continue to remember fondly, are those, that really scared the crap out of me, the climbs that stretched me past my comfort zone, the climbs where I was asking myself *'What are you doing here? Why do you put yourself through this?'* and where I replied to myself, *'You have only yourself to blame for this! You should have stayed home watching the telly, like normal people do!'*

But time filters out the fear and cold, and after a while, only the sense of achievement and the sunshine remain in the consciousness.



My walking with Jesus has been like this too. I often do not enjoy the pitches while on them. They tend to be exposed, and sometimes the protection has been scarcely adequate; I suspect I had backed off climbs better protected than sometimes my life has been. It is only when the belay stance is reached that some satisfaction, or at least relief, arrives.

But even then the belays more often than not have been cramped and uncomfortable, even marginal, and did not allow me to recuperate fully. I have taken a few falls along the way, I know the feeling of coming to a halt two feet of the ground. There have been a few times I thought of bailing out, setting up an abseil, getting off the Mountain and never ever coming back.

There have been times when I would have bailed out if I could, if I was able to find anything solid enough to carry my weight. I didn't; perhaps I was chosen before the creation of the world.

But there were other times when I was glad that I didn't give up, that I stuck it out; there is nothing like the feeling of getting to the top after a hard day's climbing.



And so, I keep heading up the Mountain, and one day, when the last pitch is completed and we shake hands on the top, I will look back and know why I did it, know that it was worth it. At the moment, I have my doubts. My legs ache, my fingers are losing grip. Often I am angry: angry with myself for letting myself into this, angry with the Leader for not choosing an easier climb for me.

Yet, I have no choice but to keep climbing. No belay stance, no matter how big or bombproof can give me what I am looking for, and even less so can the solid ground below. All that remains is to trust that He knows where He is taking me, that He knows what I am capable of, that the protection will hold, that He will not let go of me if I peel off while trying to follow the route we set off on together.



And so I dream of the sunlit mountaintop, high above the cloud that surrounds me, and keep climbing.