

**Confessions of a Mountain Climber**  
**By Agnes Denes**

I am a mountain climber. My struggle is visible from up close and from afar. People watch me, some with awe, others bemused or even derisive. They watch my climb from far away or from below for few ever attempt to climb a distance with me. Some give it a whirl, fail and leave town. Or go into related professions. Almost anyone I know was once a mountain climber of sorts. They would like to climb the mountain, or rather be at the peak, but are not willing to make the effort, do the climb, and stick with it, day after day, year after year. They usually start puffing and complaining, tire and get frightened fairly soon, as if some kind of punishment awaited them beyond a certain cliff, and not pleasures beyond belief. The fear of knowing and the exertion keeps them spectators. They watch from below where it's safe. But one often hears them tell the tales of mountains climbed, or else, how easily they could do it, if only they really wanted to, or if someone had not stood in their way, or something, like having to make a living had not interfered.

People around mountain climbers always make comparisons to their own lives. Oh, I could have done it if I tried, if I only could find the time, if I didn't need to make a living, if I had started sooner. No one likes to admit to fear, laziness, lack of ability, or having settled on or wanting even, the easier road. And so they come to watch, stare askance, not wanting to get involved. Not in the climb, anyway. Only in the result of the climb. The process to be done by someone else. Thus my ascent is watched with interest, with awe, with amusement. They seldom throw me a rope when I need one, instead they wait to see what happens if I fall. They would take exquisite pleasure in watching me get up and climb back up again, and shower me even with sympathy if I got hurt. But they keep watching, because there is a pleasure in this for them. Other climbers are often worse. They have their own climb to worry about and it is the pinnacle they are after, camaraderie comes second, especially if it's a choice.

It is understood that the mountain is unclimbable. Well, restricted to a few in history. The roads are uncharted and treacherous and the rewards are almost always out of reach. There are small rewards, a peak here, a peak there, almost to tease you and to spur you on. So it is the process itself, the attitude and the nature of the ascent, the view from here and the ethics of the undertaking that surmounts all other endeavors and cannot be exchanged for anything else, that makes you do it and go on.

Even living the life of a monk or priest and being offered to see god at the end of it could become a letdown and most probably would be, considering how we have exaggerated His being. But this is total ecstasy for this mountain does not have a single peak on top, it has no limits, it goes on forever into the spaces of layered meanings and illusions and realities, where each step is its own reward. The road goes deep into the shadows of integrities and truths (not the kind that we have become accustomed to in our decadent sophistication, but innocent, naive and heartbreakingly fresh truths) and all that mortals value, fear and seek forever.

The higher one gets, the steeper the mountain and fewer resting places. Eventually there is no way down, only up. People seldom make a decision to *walk down*; usually there is an unavoidable slide or horrible fall. These are seldom noticed at the beginning, sometimes during, but mostly afterwards.

The climber seldom sees the peak. It is a concept imagined and usually more glamorous than the truth or reality of it. The peak is always there, taunting, inviting, forever higher and further away. When the peak is reached, it is usually known long after it has happened, on the way down. There are many ways down, as many as up.

The peak is glimpsed for a second, like applause that wash over the performer, too tired and exalted to grasp the meaning, just that it feels good, and by then it is gone. The peak is always yet to come or already passed and gone. It is a fickle little bastard, set by our own standards and created by our own mind.

Only when the climber gets very old and the process slows to a halt, usually because of physical illness and pains, or lack of energy, or accumulated disappointments that the mountain peak gets glimpsed. It's usually at the very end, oddly enough, when it is not even too far away, and then it seldom seems very high or magnificent. It is not a complete letdown, it just isn't as magnificent as one imagined, and one wonders what all the hoopla was about. And those who get to the peak, or a peak—as I said, there are many peaks—say: Is this all there is to it? With all this effort, I thought it would be bigger, more magnificent more of a high. I had this exhilaration many times before with smaller peaks, ledges, footholds, why did I climb further? Is this all I've been waiting for? This is not much. It must be the addiction of the climb then, the journey itself, the process of the road up.

But by then it doesn't matter. Safety matters so one clings to whatever peak or resting place there is for the moment, because there is nowhere to go. As I said before, one cannot climb down, one can only slide, jump or fall. And one gets so tired from the climb up that one stays, clings, and wonders perhaps what the whole thing was about. So we are talking about disappointment then? It's too easy a solution.

Mountain climbers are never satisfied. Contentment is momentary as with actors. The applause is the high, but often too sparse and too short. No sooner does the mountain climber manage to get a foothold, a stance, but reaches for another and another. For some there is one peak to achieve, some never achieve it, for others there are many peaks and many mountains like the flying Dutchman, who forever sailed the seas without ever finding a final port.

Even the average life is like this mountain with the exception that there one is sometimes allowed to just simply try another side of the mountain, but only too often we just take one step at a time on the same side. Even in climbing one is allowed or rather one is able to swing from one point to another, sideways, dig in the spurs and swing to a better ledge, even if in limited capacity. We can never truly shed our skin and even if we could we find that only similar skin lies underneath.

A clever climber is shrewd and tenacious and exploits every foothold, every bit of information and inch to his advantage. The mountain is the enemy to be conquered for unknown reason and urges beyond survival instinct, risking survival in fact. The more treacherous the mountain of choice the more the risk, the more the rewards, the louder the murmur from beneath, the greater the adulation, the more the climber needs it, like drugs, the process never ends only increases.

I wonder if half or let's say two thirds up, when the climber realizes it is time to rest or give up, what the various reactions may be. Halfway up is bad. It's murder. From there, there is a chance to return, but down is as much work and is more painful in defeat than continuing upward into never-never land and inevitability, upward in the face of a cloud-shrouded peak, that unknown entity with its dangers, perils, disappointments and constantly increasing danger of the fall. And of course the ecstasy, the thrill, the facing the unknown at every turn. Yet the depths are always increasing—the higher one gets, as the saying goes, the greater the fall. That is the reason why so many never try or climb smaller, more comfortable mountains. As a matter of fact most of them do.

So at this point, midway, comes the first realization that one is trapped, facing humiliation and defeat in one direction and even greater perils in the other. Some climbers never hesitate much, others procrastinate forever at every turn. We all know the right answers, the right speed, the steps to take, when to rest when to move, the right thinking and making the right decisions. But we don't listen to our own instincts. Don't think too much, don't hesitate, don't rest too much, dare when needed, caution when it's called for, balance is the utmost, knowing your terrain, knowing your enemy, the mountain. Well, it's not always the mountain. But we don't follow our inner knowledge on that, the climbing instinct is too strong and overwhelming.

I am sorry to say, but this mountain climbing is in a sense an unnatural thing to do, an unnatural act for this animal, for he does it for pleasure and ego and being driven, not for survival, he does it for psychological reasons only too often, a kind of rehabilitation of the self, a yearning to conquer the unknown or whatever, to end insecurities and inner demons, to prove something to one self and others, a bravado act. It is a vertical motion with no food or other rewards at the end which might justify it for the species. It is not a horizontal, planar roaming to find shelter or food or procreate, it is actually giving shelter up voluntarily. It is not eliminating danger, but seeking it, it is facing death by invoking it in order to stare into its face. So it is an unnatural act but a hell of a lot better than the life of the spectators who view you like strange, often precious monkeys and speak of knowing you.

Some might say that this could be accomplished by horizontal roaming, but just think, when you roam like that the air doesn't get thinner, it's easier to rest, find shelter, the road seldom so treacherous. It's up the mountain I tell you! It takes more effort. Ask any athlete who doesn't just want to survive but wants to be the best, the number one. Stupid, of course, but there it is and this competitiveness is as much human nature as survival, for us, this is survival.

And for me, personally, it is not the applause, although a momentary acknowledgment is nice, or being number one, but the eternal damned questions, to find answers and purposes and meanings and reasons, that forever lurk behind a peak in the shadows to be deciphered, problems solved, more and better questions found, the thirst for this knowing. And unfortunately it has become a cliché, "the meaning of life", people make fun of it because they don't have the answers and whatever people cannot achieve they mock. But those of us who remain thirsty children, curious animals, this is not a joke, this is goddamn survival, as necessary as air or water or food. It's a drug.

From a short distance up you can turn back, try again or give up. But close to the top, once you have experienced the exaltation, and glimpsed morsels of some answers of the unknown, there is nowhere else to go but on, or fall to the bottom.

Take it from me, I am a mountain climber and there is no way out but up. Not for the peak, I have long since understood about that, but for the mountain. You create the mountain and then you climb it. Not for the final peak, the challenge is the process and the journey, and the unattainable answers the lure.

The air is cleaner up there, the scents stronger, the dangers more exciting, the road more unsure and treacherous, the few answers more fulfilling.

I built some mountains and have climbed them, but there are more mountains and more climbs ahead. I am addicted.