

## AN ODE TO MOUNTAINS

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Since the beginning of recorded history, mountains have been holy places. Mountains for prehistoric peoples, especially volcanic mountains, were sources of great destructive power and were to be feared and appeased - much as the early gods were. Mount Fujiyama in Japan is an ancient sacred site to which pilgrimages are still made. Egyptian legend tells that out of the waters of Chaos rose the primeval hill from which sprang all life. The Egyptians believed their creator-god lived on a mountain, where all creation occurred. It isn't surprising, then, that the pharaohs were buried in mountain-like structures, the pyramids.

Mount Olympus, to ancient Greeks, was the home of the gods. When Moses led the Hebrew people out of Egypt, he took them to Mount Sinai, where he received the Ten Commandments. It was at Mt. Sinai that the Hebrew people renewed their covenant with God. The oldest known worship site of the Israelites is an altar on top of a mountain. The importance of sacred mountains is apparent though out Hebrew Scripture.

A strong image of peace, in I Isaiah, says:

The wolf and lamb shall feed together,  
And the lion shall eat straw like the bullock;  
They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain,

Saith the Lord.

Christian Scripture tells us that when Jesus wanted to pray the night before he was crucified, he went to the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem. In Norse mythology there is a mountain, Valhalla, which is the Norse heaven. And, before the tops of the world's mountains were explored, it was thought that heaven was located on a mountain top.

Mountains don't have significance just in ancient times, either. Martin Luther King, in talking about a day when his dream would be fulfilled, said, "I've been to the mountain top and seen the other side. Now, I may not get there with you, but I want you to know that that day will come." His prophetic voice was stilled the next day by an assassin. The mountain top imagery was also there when psychologist Abraham Maslow called the most central periods of our lives "peak" experiences". Contemporary writer Aldo Leopold wrote, "Only the mountain has lived long enough to listen objectively to the howl of a wolf." Leopold makes it clear we should continue to think of mountains as holy, for in the knowledge of the mountain lies the survival of the human race.

In Sand County Almanac, Leopold says that once he thought it was good to kill wolves because wolves kill deer. Then he tells of the time he killed a wolf, reaching the old wolf just in time to see the fierce green fire

dying in her eyes. This was a “peak experience” for Leopold, as he began to look at the world with the knowledge of the mountain.

This new insight helped him realize that deer defoliate mountains by eating bushes, seedlings, leaves, trees and bark. It is the wolf’s role to keep the deer herds from overpopulating and killing the foliage on the mountains, and elsewhere. But humans kill off the wolves, leaving dustbowls and rivers which wash the land into the sea.

Most humans see only danger in the wolf. But too much concern for safety seems to yield only danger in the long run. Perhaps this is behind Henry David Thoreau’s dictum: In wilderness is the salvation of the world. Perhaps this is the meaning hidden in the howl of the wolf, long known among mountains, but seldom perceived among (humans).

As you can see, the mountain has been one of the most powerful spiritual places in nature throughout history. Mountains, more than any where else, suggest the eternal and timeless to us. In the words of Nathaniel Hawthorne, “Mountains are earth’s undecaying monuments.”

I find I am spiritually uplifted by mountains. Today’s opening words tell why I return to the mountains time after time. Like Maria Von Trapp, I go to the hills for the sound of music. The alps affected me exactly the way they did her. I sang and danced and wept in the middle of that glorious

panorama. It was a deeply spiritual moment. I keep my house in the Berkshires mountains to relax and be renewed. I understand on a very visceral level why mountains are, and have been, holy places.

In New England, we are extremely fortunate to have mountains in such close proximity. In fact, the mountain presumed to be the most-climbed mountain in the world, Mount Monadnock, is less than an hour's drive from my home in Pepperell. I first climbed it 23 years ago. This free-standing mountain is 3,165 feet tall, and has given the name monadnock to describe other free-standing mountains around the world.

Monadnock has also been a holy mountain for Unitarian Universalists. It was the Transcendentalists, primarily, who made Monadnock holy for UUs. They did this by climbing it frequently, and then writing about it. This was an accessible holy spot, a friendly mountain. No foreboding or dangerous sacred mountain for us!

Ralph Waldo Emerson made nature a basic theme of our faith. In his essay, "Nature", Emerson expressed the fundamental idea that through all of nature, including humans, there flows a divine spark or spirit which constantly reveals new truth to those who seek it.

Emerson climbed Monadnock, as did Henry David Thoreau, who wrote about Monadnock in detail. William Ellery Channing the Younger,

nephew of William Ellery Channing, often climbed Monadnock with Thoreau. After Thoreau died, Channing climbed Monadnock every summer. He wrote, "I have said nothing, I think, about the strange feeling I have here alone; it is not solitude, but a kind of singular wonder at being in the place by myself, after all the people have gone down the hill, a degree of stillness, and beauty unlike all else I know. It affects the mind strangely. I cannot give it a name as yet, but it has a soft awe about it, a recognition of the greatness of the works of providence. It is novel and continues so. Our own species has lost its wonder for us, while nature is fresh and new."

All too often I, and others, pass our days walking in the valley of the shadow of death. Most of last year, I provided support to my daughter as she battled yet another cancer - in the blood lab, in the chemo rooms, in the radiation area, in the bathroom as she threw up, I was surrounded by the specter of death. Because I had to be with her so often, I was not able to hike any of the Appalachian Trail last year, and I miss it terribly. I fully understand the words of the Psalmist who wrote that we should look to the hills, from whence comes our help. We need, as Channing said, the wonder of nature to keep us fresh and new. We need to be lifted up, to be part of the timelessness of the mountain top.

Here in MA, we have every reason to be grateful to have mountains

all around us. A modern expression for getting away, for escaping and being free, is to head for the hills. If we can't climb, as I love to do, we can look. So look to the hills and the wonders of nature, and nature will help your soul become fresh and new.