

2010 05 The Journey, Mt Adams WA



This year started out with way too many aches and pains from one abuse or another. I was wondering between several visits to the bone doctors just how



many climbs were left in me??? If it wasn't the jarring trot from one of my paint breed horses, it was the interminable sitting of my occupation as an engineer eating life out of my small frame. Regardless, experience had told me that my back felt wonderful after heavy backpacking and my spirits are always lifted for many months after.

I was in a lunch meeting with an integrated circuits vendor exchanging pleasantries and mentioned that I intended to climb Mt Adams later in the year. My friend spoke of a mutual acquaintance that was guiding a team only a month or so hence. I jumped at the possibility to climb the peak with an experienced guide and asked for an introduction. Jeff Sondermeyer and I had shared a brief engineering meeting some weeks earlier but I barely remembered him. He agreed to add me to the team of 4 and I would be his bunk mate and the two of us would car pool to the mountain base – Trout Lake Ranger Station. It turns out Jeff is a lay preacher much like myself – steeped in our devotion to serving God. Along the way as we passed near centralia a large field of huge statues and I asked my new friend what he might know about them. His reply began one of the most interesting conversations and spiritual journeys for the two of us and a deep friendship. "In his thick Tennessee accent he said, "Ah I think it might be some kind of Mahmon thing..." He glanced at me from his driving as I quickly retorted, I can assure you its not a Mormon thing" "Why? Is you a Mahmon?" "Dyed in the wool" "Well I got one question....." and that one question led to so many more.



I suggested his deep question about what my religion thought about Jesus and Lucifer being brothers would require more background and begged off till a latter juncture. How we discussed is in many regards as important as what we discussed. Each question had new words and as fellow engineers we new the imperative of defining ones variable before using it in an equation. We

sometimes spoke for an hour or more to understand a new key word.

Our other two companions, also of the Baptist persuasion, looked on at us two magpies somewhat astonished at our unending dialog. We ranged from engineering to harrowing adventures and back to religion. This went on for two days straight. This was for all practical purposes a winter ascent of Adams and we were a good 5 miles farther down the mountain than the normal trail head so the 1st day it took an entire afternoon just to attain the upper reaches of the forest – about 500' up from the trailhead I estimate. The next day we pushed hard to reach high camp about 9000 feet and well above the tree line. There we made a windy camp – the visual reach was astounding and the air cool and crisp but the spirit of God seemed to warm our conversation as we shared conversion experiences and doctrinal understandings. Both of us had had visionary intercessions from the Almighty that had been transformative and we shared stories of God's goodness in our lives. As cold as it was I felt like we were wrapped in a warm blanket; hour after hour this went on.



This was after all a group of rather unlikely bedfellows; literally. In my tent, myself – an engineer/Mormon Lay minister and my companion also an engineer but Baptist lay minister. The conversations rotated freely between harrowing climbing tales, techno babble and deep religious doctrines. It remained just that – seriously no arguments, just the most enlightening and pleasant discussion as the spirit of the Lord seemed to make the communication effortless.

Both of us were very acquainted with the Bible and so the conversation flowed freely with interest and clarifying exchanges but curiously no argument; referring to the common testy exchanges that can happen when opposing views collide. I recall at one point expressing some understanding I think about the immortal soul not having its origin in mortal birth and roughly quoting a scripture. Jeff rarely was not acquainted with any scripture that was brought up and he challenged.. “ah, that’s not in the Bible!” But, I happened to have a new fangled smart phone with me with a scripture app and recovered the verse to our mutual enlightenment. We continued advancing in our conversation to some other doctrinal topic when mid-sentence he apologized for the interruption and said, “Steve, I have a confession to make!”

“Oh?” “I didn’t want you on this trip...” “Really” “I thought you might be a Mahmon....and I just didn’t know how this would go with us bunking up and all for so long...(I have no idea how a 5 min engineering meeting led him to that conclusion – Not sure I was even on FB then) but,” he continued, “I’ve felt the spirit of God attend our every conversation and the only way that’s possible is if you were saved! And that’s a thought that I’d never think....” He smiled wryly and continued, “I’m going to have to call you ‘my brother in Christ’ !” And so it was that “wherever two or three are gathered in My name there will I be amongst you. That evening I gained a brother.



The morning of the Summit attempt was cold and early. We gather for prayer and up we went. The rest of the climb was both tiring, educational and epic for me, a newer mountaineer who was still managing acrophobia (true!).

The approach was practically straight up the slope, but we zigzagged to get some relief. As the 2nd hour waxed long, perhaps about 1500 feet up from high camp, I began to have weird foot trouble with tingling toes – almost electric and an increasingly sharp heel pain – neither good news. It got rather

intense fast and when I attained a slight bench (really just a slight slack in the slope) I couldn't get those boots off fast enough it seemed. The toe warmers must have somehow been the culprits, but the boots were coconspirators as the lining in the heel cup had wholly given way to bare leather.

Jeff suggested the oddest remedy of using duct tape on my heel. It seemed so unlikely, but he had so much more mountaineering experience than myself, though seasoned as I was... I deferred and after a few explanations I was able to properly tape the wound leaving a smooth section over the sore spot. After a few moments of hair pulling – read ouch, ouch ouch... I began to forget about my foot and powered up the hill trying to catch up with the other two.



As the sun rose, it 1st cast a ghostly triangular shadow on the horizon and then all brilliant sparkle as the mountain lit up. The temperature never budged much as the wind was modest and steady keeping us continually cool during the ascent. At last I caught up with Jeff and TBD at what is called the lunch counter which is a broad saddle before the final pitch. We huddled in the blustery cold wind that now



began to gust a bit. While the others were bundled up in Mt McKinley down fluff, my more "lower 48" gear began to show its inferiority and the cold settled in. We continued to wait for our 4th companion – chief fancy photographer who we hoped was delayed taking awesome pictures to later share.

At the false summit, we waited for a slower member to catch up who was photographing the wonders. I was cold soaking with my mini-puffy not getting the job done and I informed Jeff – When he finally appeared, he was rather bushed and needed a good rest but by then I was getting very cold soaked and told Jeff that I really needed to get moving. After two days of gab,

he had enough confidence in my mountain skills that he waved my on and said go for it, we will catch up.

He thought for a moment and then said, I think your experience is sufficient to solo it – Go ahead – stay off the cornice and we'll catch up soon. I had never climbed a mountain by myself and frankly did not want to admit to being socially uneasy – and I knew I had the basic skillset. I gathered my backpack and headed off to the summit.

This was a bigger challenge for me who had without exception always had a mountain buddy at my side. To tackle the final and steepest pitch solo, it's really more mental than physical, but I felt ready and stepped off toward the headwall which was a ¼ mile across the saddle.

As I traversed the saddle, I skirted the edge finally getting too close to what resolved as a massive cliff. Cracks well away from the edge spoke of equally massive and life endangering cornices that I had to be standing on or very close too, so I vectored away from the glacier divide and chose one of 3 boot tracks up the final headwall that seemed a bit less steep. Mentally, "less steep" was really just faint rolling ripples of 50 even some 60 degree snow and ice, but as they periodically rolled off a bit, it gave some mental relief from the long only occasionally broken slope. I zigzagged up picking my way carefully. Up I went very carefully picking my way up hill. Too careful really, because the rest of the crew way below was steadily gaining on me – The acrophobia was playing with my mind. Did I mention it was steep this section?



The rest of the team (2 of the 3) chose a direct boot path and were soon gaining on me to the point that when I arrived at the top of the 800 headwall, we were once again united but now the weather was fast closing in with angry looking clouds piling and piling up on top of each other threatening to overtake us. The visibility was hazy so not all that great for photos and the cameras so cold only one grain cell phone would work so only a few hastily snapped pics were taken and off we went.

It seemed Kevin had fallen on his pack and burst his water bladder putting him perilously low on fluids. None of us had much or any really to spare, so, he reluctantly had to descend. Jeff had warned about using the camel backs. Now I saw at least one reason why.



Those precious few photos with my junk cell phone cameras with batteries dying from fatigue and cold was a suitable metaphor for how at least I felt at that moment. I tried to take in the spectacular grandeur of standing on top of 12 thousand feet of snow and ice in plain view of every major peak in Washington. It was enough, and with few words, we all turned and let gravity work for us – a pleasant change indeed.

A lone buff skier had caught up with us all at the crown of the mountain's cap and we both envied and feared for what would be his fast decent. The Skier, warily eyed the face and gingerly positioned himself at the edge. He looked very shaky and stumbled a bit as he started off skittering on the crusty escarped snow. I found a more sheltered angle where the snow looked a bit softer as I was hoping for a suitable glissade spot and positioned myself for a fast butt slide. Surprisingly, it didn't seem quite as bad looking down as it did approaching from below, but I readied the ice axe for a full arrest if things got too wild – Tally ho and off I went.



I picked up speed very rapidly but I felt in control – then just for grins I decided to practice arresting and rolled over on my axe – smack!#\$ the ice grabbed my ice axe and chatter smacked the adze into my chin drawing a bit of blood. Blast I muttered as I finally slowed. - I practiced again this time avoiding the same fate and at last satisfied with my reacquired skill, again let gravity make the decent a flying Disney "E" ticket ride.

Again in the saddle we trudged with a steady side wind. We started to spread out a bit as we rose out of the saddle and it seemed each of us made our own attempt at route finding our approach. Jeff got a bit concerned that one of our group had gotten well off route and too close to a very steep section. From my spot I could see him and getting his attention motioned in our direction. This section was just too steep to feel good about sliding and we plunge-stepped rapidly down a few hundred feet to where the slope eased off a bit and butt tracks could be seen. This is where the real whoopin it up part began...

I think I was 1st down and I slid what must have been 500 feet – maybe a 1000 – I was sliding so fast that through my snow pants and thermals, I began to feel an uncomfortable heat migrating in. I rolled over and self arrested with my axe; just for a moment and felt my pants and then I realized my ass was on fire! The plastic material of my snow pants was crinkled and clearly melted. I checked my GPS and it showed my decent at least 15 miles per hour – WOW.

We slid track after track after track until finally we began to approach what we figured had to be near our tents, but no tent could be seen. Somehow it just didn't look quite the same and various foot tracks led variously. Jeff checked his GPS and declared that camp had to be up on the rise to our left and that somehow we must have past round it. I said I'd hike it up and check it out and as I trekked off, I could see the others proceeding down in what looked to me to be a fan-out. I assumed that Jeff had instigated a search pattern. I was a bit alarmed then to discover that they were nowhere to be seen when I finally got to the top. Finding no tents, I descended and took a broad sweep back to take in as much terrain to the left as possible as I arced back to the right where I hoped I would find my companions. I trekked holding my altitude now for what seemed like a good 1/3 mile or so when finally, gratefully, I spotted one of our group who hailed me. It seemed they had just identified the tracks of the fellow that had descended earlier. Jeff had determined that he had misread the GPS the 1st time and together with the footprints knew the camp was only a few hundred yards away. I am not sure why they hadn't tried to recall me before I got too far on my reconnoitering trek, but they were very happy to see me now as I was them.



The camp was a very welcome site and as we made the last jaunt, I mulled over in my mind lessons learned about keeping together and counseling together and having very specific plans and directions. We normally think of these things when anticipating possible whiteouts, but though bright and sunny, the terrain turned out to be less distinct on return that I ever would have

imagined and I tell you that a few wands stuck in the snow at key inflection points several times on this trip would have been very handy indeed. Despite all our high tech gear, sometimes old-school is still the best plan.

It was now after 4pm and wind gusted furiously around us as storm clouds gathered height and pushed up towards our high camp. Discussion turned to stay or descend. A terribly long decent (about 13 miles) on Sunday of all days did not appeal to me at all and after some discussion, I managed to convince the crew that we could double time breaking camp and be descending in 1 hour flat. That would leave a good 2 hours or more to



make the tree line and hopefully afford some protection from the worst of the storm.

As we broke camp Jeff implored to all – “whatever you do - don’t let go of the tent.” He recounted more mountain tails of retrieving tents blown off the mountain into crevasses. This was a lesson well worth heeding! In record time we hustled off the ridge with heavy packs now weighing us down into the snow, but the mountain still had a lot of steep left so we butt glissades ever chance we could. In-between though I kept post holing so badly in the late afternoon sun that finally I donned my snow shows. There was no good plan, though, as they then got in the way of glissading and instead of helping caused me to get a little behind the rest of the crew. If we weren’t sliding it was a forced march/trudge/stumble until about 8 or maybe 9pm we spotted a decent flat spot in amongst the trees just off the trail and there we stopped – quite bushed and very wet. The storm however never materialized and we had little wind at all making for a pleasant respite.

Jeff and I continued during such quiet times to take on more topics of religious natures, this time discussing in depth the LDS Articles of Faith until fatigue lay firm claim on the mountain’s trespassers.



Sunday morning came too early it seemed and taking inventory; I could see my food was getting low. I new that nary a crumb would remain before this day was done.

The walk out now seemed interminably long and the only things that help pass the “tree overload” was more spirited and intriguing discussions; being Sunday - more relevant than ever, I reasoned. Over the 4 days, the other two fellows never joined in but stratified into two walking groups and today was about the same,

until, being a bit closer as we took a rest stop, something must have been said that cued the other fellow – (yes another Baptist preacher) that there was a Mormon in their midst.

I must interject that the other 3 fellows are *all* from Tennessee and all seemed to delight almost as a redneck contest as to who could out-drawl the next fellow. Even I began to speak southern “smack talk” as they called it.

With that in mind, the prison minister blurted out in his best smack.” Say, did you say, Ah mean did ya say that you was a Mormon, Ah mean are you really a Mormon??? you know with the magic underwear and all? Ah ah you wearen ‘em right now???

I flung it right back “dyed in the wool through and through but unlike many ministers that wear their priestly vestments outside for everyone to see, I wear mine close to my heart to remind just me of my promises to God.”

That seemed to put a cork in it and Jeff and hefting our packs, we proceeded on down the snowy road continuing our discussion with no further interruption of that sort, but I did ask Jeff; now in my best southern smack talk, “say is that a weddin ring? Ah mean is that there a weddin ring? So, what does it mean?” Jeff smiled at my Tennessee imitation and would offer several suggestions. I would ask for more until all the common symbolisms had been vetted. I then pointed out



the similarities in those symbolisms of the Mormon priestly vestments of commitment to what is right, to constraining our passions and to daily prayer kneeling in supplication for God’s guidance and that seemed to cement the point and we then moved back onto the remaining Articles of Faith.

By the end of the trail with the cars in sight we had covered about every topic possible and remarkably with no disagreeable dissention calling each other freely brothers in Christ. We had dispensed from many trite arguments as poor understanding rather than fundamental. In many regards I see that mountain as a bigger climb, and a key cherished experience. Naturally, there remained a few very interesting and even fundamental topics to follow up on, but that will have to wait for another trail.

Steve