

Protagonist Corner

Joseph W. Berry

First Presbyterian Church, Athens, Georgia

"I'm sure glad my wife doesn't know exactly what I am doing," I reflected. No, I wasn't with another woman. No, I wasn't involved in a drug deal. No, I wasn't engaged in a shady monetary transaction.

At 17,500 feet, I now needed to use both hands and feet to continue my climb of Mount Kilimanjaro, in Tanzania, Africa. I realized that if I lost my footing, the best I could hope for would be a seventy-five to one-hundred-foot tumble onto rocks the size of cars.

Needing a rest, I opened my water bottle and sat on a boulder overlooking a forty-five degree slope. As I assessed my environment, I noticed that clouds were now below me. Through a hole in them I saw the site where we had camped the night before at 16,000 feet. A small wooden building there looked like an item from a doll village.

"Hey, Joe! You bring crampons?" a native Tanzanian guide asked, breaking my contemplation.

"I didn't know I was supposed to," I meekly replied.

"We go this way then." Using a slow pace I had come to identify as "rest step," we began the 1,000 foot ascent to the rim of the dormant volcano. There we would make camp for the night. A summit attempt to Uhuru Point, the highest point on the rim, would, we hoped, take place the next day.

As I resumed the trek up the steep slope, I was neither exhausted nor energized. I was neither fearful nor euphoric. Rather, I seemed to be proceeding on a personal version of autopilot: step-rest-step-rest-step-rest. That pace was not fast. Yet for one who had only half the amount of oxygen that is available at sea level, it was significant progress.

I had known from the start that getting to the top was by no means a given. Depending on the route chosen, the company leading the expedition, and the number of days allocated for the climb, the success rate at summit varies widely. The low is about fifty percent, meaning one out of two fail to summit, an alarming rate to me.

I chose the firm I went with partially because they claimed a higher success rate, a figure in the nineties. I was willing to commit to the extra days to have a better probability of reaching *the* summit before reaching *my* summit. The critical difference was that in taking longer, one has greater opportunity for acclimatization.

The sheer cold conditions, at those altitudes, can largely be overcome through use of correct clothing. The physical demand of a forty-five to fifty-mile trek can be prepared for through conditioning. To some degree the altitude can be addressed through the use of Diamox, a prescription drug. Nevertheless, there is a significant unknown regarding how one responds to altitude. "You can be the healthiest person in the world and not make it," I've heard one informed person say.

As I climbed, I thought back to an incident that for me was a key turning point in deciding to attempt this ascent. My wife, my doctor, and my counselor all encouraged me to get checked out medically before making a decision to go. This assessment involved what is known as a stress electrocardiogram.

Besides wearing comfortable clothing and running shoes, my only preparation for this assessment was prayer. I had told God that this climb was something I would like to do but realized that it was a bit unusual for one unaccustomed to mountaineering and especially for one who didn't like heights. I told God that if my desire was improper, such as a mere ego "trip" or male menopause, let me flunk the test. If I flunked, I would try to turn my attention elsewhere.

But when the test came, I did fine. The stress test involved six settings of speed and elevation of the treadmill. I made it through level five before my cardiac rate hit the maximum they would allow. The cool off period went well, meaning normal respiration and cardiac rates resumed within the recommended time frame.

"Why are you in here taking this test anyway?" the cardiologist asked.

"I want to know if it is okay for me to climb Mount Kilimanjaro," I replied.

"You can climb any mountain you want to," he said and turned his attention to another on the treadmill.

"God," I prayed as I picked up my sweater. "God, are you sure it's okay for me to do this?" I asked as I walked into the hallway. I still felt unsettled. Then I noticed a song that was being played over the hospital sound system. It was a song from the *Sound of Music* – "Climb Every Mountain."

I realize coincidences occur. I realize, too, there is danger associated with reading meaning into events. Regardless, all the hair on my arms and back of my neck stood straight up. On some level, I sensed that song as being a presage. A trek across the Shira Plateau and up the western breech in quest of summit would follow.

"Hey, Joe! Ten steps—you there," my guide said. Sure enough, after cresting the next ledge I saw something I hadn't seen in a week—flat earth. I was on the rim of the volcano!

My initial response was tears. I'm still slightly embarrassed about that. It seems that I would have been in more of a celebrative mood. Yet the tears came. They weren't tears of disappointment or pain. Certainly they were not tears of sadness. Nor do I believe they represented merely a sense of relief. I may never understand the meaning of the tears any more that I can understand my visceral response to the music outside the cardio-stress test lab.

My best guess is that the tears had several origins. First, there was *a sense of peace*. I sensed that it was okay to be me, to be doing what I was doing and to be standing where I was standing. Too, I felt a *sense of harmony* with myself, the porters, the guides, the cooks, my fellow trekkers, and really with God. Also, I felt a *sense of achievement* because I had accomplished something that I personally wanted and was deeply satisfying. Maybe this sounds grandiose, but I had the sense that God was happy, too. Overall, *I was caught up in the moment!*

There are times when I have wondered if part of what I experienced was merely an expression of the hypoxia that we all inevitably experienced. I suspect the reduced oxygen density may or could have been a factor. However, whenever I relive those moments at 18,500 feet, I again get a sense of the ineffable. I currently live at an elevation of approximately 850 feet. That returning sense of awe is not simply an expression of hypoxia.

"We're all crying, Joe," said a climbing companion who sensed my discomfort. He gave me a hug. So did others. Dinner was quieter than usual. Following instructions

from our guide about the press for the top on the morrow, we were in our tents by 7:00 p.m.

Around 2:30 a.m., I woke up. Unable to resume sleep, I walked outside. I don't know what the temperature was, but we were told to prepare for zero degrees Fahrenheit. I was wearing every piece of clothing I had brought. While I initially felt a sense of annoyance at being awake, this feeling vanished when I looked up.

The sky, unlike the deep navy blue I am used to, was Stygian black. With no visible moon, the stars glowed like fiery embers. I've heard astronauts offer similar descriptions. I thought one would have to be in outer space to see such a sight. Not so, for the thin atmosphere allowed a vista I'd never seen. Literally, that moment shall remain etched on my psyche.

The next morning at 8:29 local time, on July 25, 2001, we stood on the highest peak on the continent of Africa, Uhuru Point, elevation 19,340 feet. The temperature was approximately fifteen degrees Fahrenheit. A well-constructed sign, lettered in flawless English, congratulated us. Multiple photographs by everyone captured the moment. It was then time to begin the descent.

Before leaving, I had a twofold agenda. First, I collected a small sack of gravel as a souvenir. Second, I had an object to bury. I brought along a symbol of a destructive part of my past that I wished to ritualistically leave behind.

To my dismay, the ground was frozen so hard that I could not even etch out a small cavity. Testing a snow bank, I found success. Some day, or some century, somebody may find the object I buried and wonder why it's there. Regardless, I've had the satisfaction of knowing that in a remote, and largely inaccessible corner of the world, *I left something behind that I no longer need.*

In looking back, I learned multiple lessons. One has to do with physical ability. While I am not particularly athletic, barring severe illness, I may have several decades left. This awareness raises the question, "How am I to use this time?" I also learned that a group of strangers can develop community when involved with common purpose. Finally, I learned the significance of a supportive environment.

Yet, one other lesson comes to mind. Our head guide, Mr. Kapanya Kitaba, told me, "Learn your pace; honor it and your pace will serve you well." It is true that we were created to live in community. Yet we are each unique. It seems to me that in our fast-paced western culture, an important understanding is to honor our uniqueness. Thanks, Kapanya!