



Journey to Freedom: What I Learned about Life from Climbing Mount Baker

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Summiting Mt. Baker in early July 2016 was “epic” for me. That became our team’s catchword of the day. My adult children had decided to give my Mt. Baker dream as a 60th birthday gift. You see, from our house, we have an amazing view of Baker and I had often retorted that I’d love to be able to say, “I was on top of that mountain once looking back at my house”. Now I have. It was epic.

And even for Matt, our friend and faithful guide, the climb that day was a grand feat. Though he had conquered Baker many times, the trek was going to be extra memorable and challenging because of the conditions. Winds to 80 km/hour. Heavy snow fall being driven mercilessly by a storm. Then, the whiteout conditions. No visible markers anymore to guide you. Thus, “epic” took on special meaning because for us the climb would become a legendary, larger-than-life, a benchmark moment. For me – it felt even heroic.

The summiting details are revealing. You park your vehicle at 3600 feet, set up base camp at 6000 feet and summit at 10,700 feet. Put simply – it’s 10 kilometers straight uphill to the top of Mt. Baker and then 10 kilometers back down over snow, ice and rock.

It’s the hardest thing I have ever done in my life.

Running marathons, Tough Mudders or bungee jumping, all in the last 10 years, are mere child’s play compared to my Mt. Baker experience. That day, around 40 climbers had tented at basecamp planning their early ascent to the top. Then the crazy storm hit between 2 and 5 in the morning and greatly changed the climbing conditions. Because of it, though others made their attempt to battle the conditions and the climb, only our group made an attempt for the top. The rest turned back. For me, this was not a reasonable option. Age has a funny way of driving your decisions. With every year I didn’t conquer Baker, it lessened the chance that I ever would.

And through my Mt. Baker summit, I learned a lot about life and about myself. Let me share my observations:

1. **STAY ROPED TOGETHER.** Climbers are attached to one another for safety. If one person loses footing and begins to slide on the snow and ice, others dig in; brace themselves to hold the one falling. The rope which seems often in the way and unnecessary, is actually life-saving if one of your group slips and starts skidding toward a cliff. Further, being only 10 meters apart, you can stay in communication with one another encouraging and warning of any perils ahead. No one gets either lost or left behind. You go the same pace – often that of the weakest link. In this case, ME! The implications are clear. It’s best to journey through life connected to trusted people – family and friends who can be relied on. Wingmen. Accountability Partners. This Band of Brothers. Genuine and caring attachment is a good thing. Look for it. Don’t try to do life alone. The opposite of addiction is connection.

2. **BE PREPARED.** The Boy Scout's motto sure made sense after my Baker experience. I was shocked at the detailed, extensive list of items we needed for the climb. That alone intimidated me. Harnesses, crampons, icepicks, rope, helmets, 100% UV sunglasses for the ascent and even more gear for camping in snow. Beyond that, being in shape sure didn't hurt but I knew I wasn't in my best condition. Then, after we got basecamp set up, our guide gave us a few hours of snow and climbing tips and self-arrest training (stopping yourself sliding down a slope). We even were required to practice the rope maneuver of pulling yourself up out of a crevasse. There is such wisdom in being completely equipped and fully trained. It makes the journey doable. You are prepared for every hurdle. The same is true in life. Just as a dull axe wastes your energy and hampers effectiveness, you sharpen it to really have success. Prepare well in life with solid training by trusted sources to make the most of every step and every opportunity.



3. **FACE DANGER BRAVELY.** To be honest, there are more hazards in our climb than I care to acknowledge. They were calculated risks but life-threatening ones nonetheless. Slopes. Drop-offs. Cliffs. Crevasses. Ice. Snow blindness. Cold. Wind. Whiteouts. You have to be constantly aware. You assess each threat. One crevasse is too wide we have to go around it. Another is only 3 feet across, so keep the ropes tight and we'll jump it. This slope is so steep so be sure you kick in with your crampons on every step. Stay back from that cliff, the snow edge might give way. As in life, you watch out for dangers but keep moving. You must. Tackle your fears. There will be many unknowns. You don't know what's ahead. But you can't focus on the dangers. It's about handling the hazards wisely. Face the dangers in life head on.
4. **BE IN THE MOMENT.** Though it's important to get perspective to know where you are going, don't be thinking or looking too far ahead. In the 3 or 4 times that the skies cleared for brief spells on our ascent, we were able to see ridges, vistas and ranges that you'd never get to see from the inhabited world at the valley level. These were highlights. The sun and blue sky were a welcome hiatus from the discouraging and driving wind, snow and clouds. We'd stop and look around in amazement. We took it all in. We'd breathe. I don't do enough of this. Think of it. Here I was, climbing Mt. Baker with my kids. What a moment! I had to be aware of it and not oblivious to it. So, phone cameras and *Go Pros* came out in a hurry to shoot the breathtaking views and of our battling the elements. We captured the moments both mentally and digitally. We need to do this in life too. Right now. Stop and enjoy how far you've come. Savor even the small victories in your journey. Look around you. Keep noting changes. Find someone to celebrate with. Be thankful to God. Soak it in. Cherish these times whether simple or momentous.
5. **GIVE ENCOURAGEMENT.** I felt this myself "big-time" on the climb. My kids are aggressively trained athletes and I was clearly the weakest link. I knew that they were doing this for me. Together, they were trying to get this off my 'bucket list'. So verbally they both affirmed and showed concern. On the Roman Wall with less than 1000 feet to the top, I was reminded by one, "everyone is good if you can't make and we have to turn back. You don't have to do this for us." I replied that I was doing it for me. Another said, "We haven't got this far to give up now. Take the time you need. You can do this." They equally wanted my best. A third spoke out, "You

are doing really good. I know you can make it, Dad.” Though the thinner air and demanding 45-degree slope were gassing me, the encouragement was like a shot of adrenaline – but somehow more real and lasting. The support came in practical ways too. One carried my daypack (an extra 15 pounds) the last and steepest 500-foot climb to the top. Encouragement in life’s journey too, builds, lifts and strengthens people. Be an encourager. Either say something or do something to reassure those you meet. It creates a significant bond.

6. **PERSEVERE.** You’ve already grasped much of the incredibly challenging conditions of our climb. This was not just another hike. It took sheer will for me. The blowing snow ripping at my face, the intense cold biting into every limb, wind gusts that actually pushed me off stride and the whiteout that robbed me of a sense of direction all paled beside the growing exhaustion and the thin air. On the hardest part of the ascent known as the *Roman Wall* (that demanding 45-degree slope) I took only 40 steps before resting for a minute. Resolve. I said to myself as I counted the 40, “One step at a time. You will get there. You’ll always regret if you quit now.” Mental toughness. Focus. WORK! And then MORE work! With Churchill-like grit I tried to just stay calm and carry on. Life can be equally demanding at times. To overcome challenges, determination is mandatory. Never, never give up. Persevere because it will make a difference in the journey.



7. **WALK WITH GOD.** Take every step of your journey into your future knowing that God is there already. He knows the future and all you will face. When I started the day, I didn’t know we’d be traversing around crevasses so gaping you could dump 10 city buses into them or so deep you couldn’t see the bottom. I didn’t know how challenging the storm conditions would make it. I didn’t know how hard the climb would be for me. But in my heart, I was walking with God every step. I always do. We prayed as we started and prayed again rejoicing standing at the top. We faced a new obstacle to even get off the summit as the dense cloud, the whiteout and storm not only blinded us but also buried our tracks for the descent. We wandered, lost in the whiteness, for nearly an hour all the while breathing prayers of guidance. We finally found our exit route – tracks hardly visible now. And yes, we prayed together back at basecamp. I breathed many personal prayers during the many steps. I have experienced again, “*In his hand are the depths of the earth, and the mountain peaks belong to him*” (Psalm 95:4). In ascending Mt. Baker as well as all of life, I learned that God’s got you covered. He knows your every move in your journey– your comings and goings – He’s familiar with all you do and think. He is with you every step of the way (Psalm 139:1-6). No matter what you face, why not trust your unknown future to an all-knowing God? I have and will continue – on and off Mt. Baker.

Enjoy your Journey to Freedom.