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Thin air, deep breath: Towards a spirituality of mountaineering

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ABSTRACT

Mountains have long been considered locations conducive to symbolic, existential and spiritual reflection. The present article puts forward a theological interpretation of mountaineering, grounded in an integrated understanding of human motricity. This study draws from a range of disciplines including travel writing, as well as the study of the sublime, to argue that the ascent offers a unifying experience of body, soul, and desire that has the potential to facilitate pathways to transcendence. By examining classic and contemporary mountaineering narratives, this study highlights how altitude cultivates discernment, presence, and vulnerability. The grammar of mountains is suggested as a valuable source of coordinates for a public theology rooted in the gestures of everyday life.

KEYWORDS

Kinanthropology; mountaineering; public theology; spirituality; travel writing

But to those men who are born for mountains, the struggle can never end, until their lives end. To them, it holds the very quintessence of living – the fiery core, after the lesser parts have been burned away ...

On earth there is nothing physically greater than the great unconquered peaks. There is nothing more beautiful. Among their barren snows they hide the ultimate simplicities of spiritual splendour ... (Knowlton 1933, 3–4)

1. Introduction

Among the religions that emerged from the prophetic revolution, or the *Achsenzeit* (Jaspers 1949, 19–42), the sacred mountain appears almost invariably as a symbolic or theological axis (Eck 1987, 130–134). The urge to climb or to cross high mountains however, is older, by far, than these traditions: over five millennia ago, Ötzi (Hansen 2013, 275–304) – the frozen mummy found in 1991 by two mountaineers in the Eastern Alps – had already ventured to these heights.

Recent scholarship in religion and contemporary culture has increasingly explored mountaineering as a place of meaning-making that challenges the boundaries between

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sport, spirituality, and existential reflection (Driscoll and Atwood 2020). Mountains have been interpreted as liminal places where experiences of risk (Le Breton 2020b), vulnerability, and transformation take on particular significance.

The history of humanity is, in many ways, a history of movement (Demoule 2022; Le Breton 2020a). From the very beginning, migration was less a matter of choice than of survival – and, through it, of transformation. Mountains, which today we view as a challenge to be overcome, for contemplative or recreational purposes, were once formidable barriers, subsequently employed as vital passageways, and have ultimately become spaces of wonder (Berner 2020).

Nonetheless, climbing or crossing high mountains remains a relatively dangerous pursuit (Gatterer et al. 2019; Windsor et al. 2009). In addition, exhaustion and solitude seem to be an almost unavoidable experience at high altitudes, as Thomas Hornbein noted:

There was loneliness too, as the sun set, but only rarely now did doubts return. Then I felt sinking as if my whole life lay behind me. Once on the mountain I knew (or trusted) that this would give way to total absorption with the task at hand. But at times I wondered if I had not come a long way only to find that what I really sought was something I had left behind. (2011, 42)

This type of consideration is probably the most common among high-mountain climbers. The question is, therefore: what compels anyone to climb mountains? As well as the ‘love of mountains’ (Bourdillon 1908, 148) that repeatedly draws mountaineers to high altitudes, we contend that there is a deep inner motivation that could be described as spiritual or transcendental, even if not doctrinally framed.

To provide an answer, it is essential to: (1) show how mountaineering experience can open a space for theological reflection grounded in bodily experience; (2) identify traces of spiritual experience in mountaineering narratives; and (3) consider the possibility that such an experience might offer coordinates towards an existential lodestar. This article builds on these perspectives but seeks to go further by asking whether such experiences can sustain a theological interpretation grounded in embodiment rather than dualism.

2. Gravity upside down

This section explores how the experience of gravity in mountaineering reshapes the relationship between body and world. In climbing, the body is constantly exposed to limits. Rather than an impediment, it is possible to think of gravity as a condition that enables movement and ascent: ‘Gravity plays an essential role in terrestrial locomotion. Due to gravity, we can hit the ground without losing contact with it. However, because of gravity, work has to be done each step to lift the body even when moving on a level surface’ (Cavagna, Willems, and Heglund 2000, 657). According to the French philosopher Frédéric Gros, this effort to lift the body calls for a reconciliation with gravity: ‘Walking is precisely resigning oneself to being this body that walks, leaning forward’ (2019, 250).

However, what does this body consist of? Manuel Sérgio, a Portuguese philosopher who emphasises the centrality of the body in human action, answered as follows: ‘The

complexity of the human body depends on the fact that it is the place where natural and technical, or even technological, norms converge' (n.d., 150). Sérgio views human beings as 'body–mind–desire–nature–society' (2004, 48), a 'complexity that biological substantialism or metaphysical substantialism cannot comprehend' (2004, 65). What is at stake is, therefore, the selection of an anthropological framework conducive to a more profound understanding of human motricity, one that transcends the limitations of reductive anthropologies.

Essaying an interpretation of Manuel Sérgio's thought, the Portuguese theologian Alexandre Palma aptly synthesises the options at hand:

The sharp critique of what is abundantly described as the 'Cartesian paradigm' should be considered one of Sérgio's main anthropological statements. [...]

It fundamentally has to do with a divisive understanding of Human constitutions versus a unified or integral understanding of it; the first, broadly described as 'Cartesian'; the second being the one assumed by Sérgio. He bluntly criticizes all dualistic forms of Anthropology, whether they are those of body and soul, which he recognizes in several Christian authors; or recent ones, like those dividing mind and brain; or even those, like Descartes, that somehow oppose *res extensa* to *res cogitans*. [...]. To Sérgio, these different approaches to Human constitution tend to share one common problem: they do not value the physical dimensions of humanity, nor do they contemplate the creative interactions between these objective elements of humanity and more subjective ones (like psychological, cultural, social, political or religious elements of human life). (2020, 119)

The mountaineer, then, is not only the body that ascends, but also the mind that intentionally sets the body in motion, impelled by the desire for heights, and who manifests himself as both nature and society.

For anyone with experience in mountaineering or long walking journeys, it is easy to agree with Frédéric Gros, who notes that '[a]bove all, when one has walked for a very long time and is overpowered with fatigue, one suddenly ceases to feel' (2019, 245). Whichever the case, it is always a bodily experience. Otherwise, it would not have a potentially strong impact on the health of the mountaineer exposed to the adverse conditions of high altitudes:

High altitude mountaineering is a sport discipline with several important particularities. First, from a demographic point of view, a very scarce part of the world lives at altitudes of 4,000 above sea level (1). Long term stays at high altitudes and sudden altitude gains have been associated to several health problems such as high altitude pulmonary edema (2), high altitude cerebral edema (3), and acute mountain sickness (4). Moreover, transient neurological dysfunctions (5) and frostbite (6) have been frequently reported. During high altitude mountaineering, energy expenditure can rise and coexist with decreases in energy intake (7). Taking into account the environment in which the sport takes place, the particular demands of this discipline and the potential risks assumed by the practitioners, high altitude mountaineering can produce a big impact on the human body.

One of the main effects of prolonged high-altitude stays is the change of body composition (8). (Sitko, Sastre, and Laval 2019, 1190)

Nevertheless, through this experience, which is bodily in essence, it is possible to detect not only the intention that renders motion as something properly human (Palma 2020, 122), but also to enhance a transcendental experience which is non-

religious, according to Bruce Chatwin: 'I haven't got any special religion this morning. My God is the God of the Walkers. If you walk hard enough, you probably don't need any other God' (Chatwin 2003, 33).

Bernard Amy expressed a similar perspective in his definition of mountaineering:

For the most part, mountaineers are not very prone to introspection. Undertaking their 'sport' in complete liberty seems to them the best way of explaining it or of avoiding largely futile analyses. Perhaps here lies the true meaning of Mallory's declaration that we climb mountains because they are there. Yet there have always been mountaineers who carry their thoughts further and, in particular, compare alpinism with other activities which give rise to similar passions.

Beyond simple descriptions of techniques employed or of ascents made (how many technical manuals or histories of mountaineering have appeared in which writers attempt 'to define' this sport?), beyond lessons on how to climb mountains, one can generally classify every analysis and attempted explanation within certain mainstreams of thought, all of which show that mountaineering, even if a sport in technique, is also through the conception we may have of it 'something more'.

- Many mountaineers stress the aesthetic aspect of the activity. The natural beauty of the mountain draws them and fires their passion.
- For others, the activity principally offers a particular way of life. The methods used by a climber in the course of his ascents and his comportment in the mountains become a code of living which influences his daily existence and constitutes a true ethics. This attitude is especially apparent in those for whom climbing, because it provides success and a means of asserting oneself in the eyes of others, becomes the chief and sometimes only love.
- Others see mountaineering as an art, an activity which, when examined, may be likened to all the classical art forms, most particularly to dance.
- Finally, for some, climbing takes the guise, if not of a religion, at least of a mystique. (Amy 1979, 93)

In the physical effort that resists the weight of the earth, the unity of body, mind and desire manifests itself, as emphasised by Manuel Sérgio, against any dualistic anthropology. The limits experienced in fatigue, in the thin air or in any other extreme conditions can become a space for revelation. Verticality, a physical gesture and a spiritual metaphor, translates the quest for 'something more' that exceeds the dimension of mere sport. Paradoxically, the same weight that binds us to the ground is precisely what enhances the freedom of climbing. Through this tension, a strength emerges that simultaneously roots us to the ground and calls us to the heights.¹ In other words, gravity upside down.

The experience of gravity can offer a valuable insight, in this context. The mountaineer experiences a paradoxical dynamic of reciprocity between the physical limitation of weight imposed on him and his ability to overcome it. This phenomenon, seemingly a limitation, results in the body becoming the sole conduit for ascension, which, from a theological perspective, could be interpreted as implying transcendence emerging through embodied experience.

¹Notre corps de plomb à chaque pas retombe sur la terre, comme pour y reprendre racine. La marche est une invitation à mourir debout' (Gros 2019, 250).

3. Sleeping where the eagles fly

Like the act of walking, which is not regarded by Frédéric Gros as a form of sports activity (Gros 2019, 7–9), mountaineering also does not conform exclusively to that classification. Beyond the technical proficiency and the aesthetic gratification it can engender, mountaineering signifies a profound connection between the mountaineer and the mountains. This phenomenon can be defined as a call that originates internally, as opposed to being externally influenced. In this sense, each ascent has the potential to serve as a nexus where the boundaries of matter converge, encompassing both the physical form of the mountaineer and the immensity of the mountain, and the boundless potential that can be unveiled through these elements.

In fact, a recent report published by the European Commission on ‘Sport and physical activity’ revealed that the primary motivations for engaging in sports activities are health (54%) and physical fitness (47%) (European Commission 2017, 51). In mountaineering, studies suggest that such motivations are less frequently cited, with the following being more prevalent: ‘the natural attractiveness of the mountain environments or the relative ease of organising a mountaineering expedition’ and ‘the need for accomplishment, catharsis, and escapism’ (Galiakbarov et al. 2024, 2). Nevertheless, if we were to consider it a sports activity, without any qualification, we could say that it is ‘the most literary of all sports’ (Dhar 2019, 345).

The experience of the sublime is characterised by a tension between fear and fascination, between the ‘creature-feeling’ (Otto 1926, 8–12) as described by Rudolf Otto, and the perception of a reality that lies in the realm of the extraordinary: ‘In a significant number of narratives [...], the theme is signalled by words such as infinity, eternity (especially with a capital E), ecstasy, reverence, salvation, humility, and climbing accounts that speak of a “mysterious harmony”’ (Lester 2024, 96).

In the course of her analysis of the metaphor of the mountain in literary history, Amrita Dhar identifies a number of reasons, with religion (or spirituality) being first on the list (2019, 347). She refers to a ‘spiritual yearning’ (2019, 348) that animates the use of this metaphor by the Old Testament prophet Isaiah, Po Chü-I, Petrarch, John Donne, Bashō Matsuo, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, John Keats, Percy Bysshe Shelly, and Walt Whitman, among others (2019, 348–349). However, even though the genre of mountain travel writing, which developed mainly in the 20th and 21st centuries, no longer appears to be inspired by spiritual motivations, the author states: ‘a trace of the early spiritual imperative remains even among the most hardened of mountain wanderers’ (2019, 349). It seems, therefore, that a sort of ‘secular yet mystical communion continues to be one of the most recognisable forms of mountain travel’ (2019, 351).

In Daniel Light’s historical account of mountaineering, the narrative begins and concludes with the question posed by a journalist to George Mallory, in 1923, regarding his aspiration to climb Everest: ‘Why?’. The British mountaineer’s reply was likely both disconcerting and challenging: ‘Because it is there’ (Davis 2011, 465). The response that Daniel Light imagines Mallory to have given appears to be more aligned with aesthetics than ethics or technique:

Go ask the past.

Go ask the pioneers.

Go ask the mercenaries and spies, risking their lives, wearing disguises so good they fooled themselves. Ask soldiers and surveyors, labouring through the lowlands, forcing frozen passes, in the stamping ground of somebody else's gods. Ask the alpinists and cragsmen, showmen and charlatans, peasants and princes, writing their names into record books and sometimes into stone. Ask the amateurs and professionals ... ask them all, who first clapped eyes, set hearts, fixed hands on the highest mountains in the world. Go ask the past, demand your truth from visionaries and seers. (Light 2025, 2–3)

After a long journey through the history of mountaineering, the author opens the door to the mystery that remains in Mallory's brief reply: 'In his final moments, he knew what we all know. That the mountain is within. The why is all we have. We die on the slopes of our own ideals' (Light 2025, 374).

In 1912, George Mallory published an article in the *Climber's Club Journal*, in London, entitled 'The Mountaineer as Artist,' in which he defines mountaineering as something 'above the common recreations of men' or 'as something that has a special value' (2012, 16). However, Mallory argues that its aesthetic value cannot be separated from the experience as a whole:

We do not think that our aesthetic experiences of sunrises and sunsets and clouds and thunder are supremely important facts in mountaineering, but rather they cannot thus be separated and catalogued and described individually as experiences at all. They are not incidental in mountaineering, but a vital and inseparable part of it; they are not ornamental, but structural; they are not various items causing emotion but parts of an emotional whole; they are the crystal pools perhaps, but they owe their life to a continuous system.

It is this unity that makes so many attempts to describe aesthetic detail seem futile. Somehow they miss the point and fail to touch us. It is because they are only fragments. If we take one moment and present its emotional quality apart from the whole, it has lost the very essence that gave it a value. If we write about an expedition from the emotional point of view in any part of it, we ought so to write about the whole adventure from beginning to end. (2012, 20–21)

Furthermore, Mallory concludes that the aesthetic emotion enhanced by the practice of mountaineering is more akin to that elicited by art:

To what part of the artistic sense of man does mountaineering belong? To the part that causes him to be moved by music or painting, or to the part that makes him enjoy a game?

By putting the question in this form we perceive at once the gulf that divides the arrogant mountaineer from the sportsman. It seemed perfectly natural to compare a day in the Alps with a symphony. For mountaineers of my sort mountaineering is rightfully so comparable; but no sportsman could or would make the same claim for cricket or hunting, or whatever his particular sport might be. He recognises the existence of the sublime in the great Art, and knows, even if he cannot feel, that its manner of stirring the heart is altogether different and vaster. But mountaineers do not admit this difference in the emotional plane of mountaineering and Art. They claim that something sublime is the essence of mountaineering. They can compare the call of the hills to the melody of wonderful music, and the comparison is not ridiculous. (2012, 28)

However, the experience of the sublime is rendered superficial when an attempt is made to explain it, thereby reducing its depth and complexity. This may be the rationale behind Mallory's perplexing response of 1924: 'Because it is there'. This premise allows us to postulate the possibility of an interpretation from a theological perspective. At least, that seems to be the path indicated by Isaac Rosenfeld:

The distinguishing characteristic of Mallory's words is that they are primarily religious in nature: their exact equivalent in meaning is to be found in the sacred writings of the Hindus, in our own Holy Bible, and no doubt in similar texts. In the Sanskrit it is written, *Tat tvam asi*, which means, 'That Thou Art'; and the Lord says to Moses, 'I am that I am'. All three statements are alike in being ontological – they make the assertion of existence, that it is ... Mallory was speaking the language of theology. (1955)

This interpretation of Mallory's words cannot serve as foundation for an epistemologically robust theology. However, it could be argued that a spirituality of mountaineering is indeed possible, given that the concept of spirituality also refers to 'a dimension of the human being that is often referred to as the "heart," i.e. the "soul," the inner self, and the capacity to establish a relationship with God' (Louth 2014, 1344).

Let us therefore reflect on this inner experience, or on that outer action with inner meaning (Clift and Clift 1996). In *Sacred Mountains of the World*, Edwin Bernbaum speaks of a sacredness in the secular sense that accompanies the experience of mountaineering, 'an aura of ultimacy' (2022, 321). In addition to ultimacy, the author explores the idea that contemporary Western societies are also axiologically grounded in the values of achievement and conquest, a triptych that he readily associates with 'the sense of meaning, purpose, and direction that institutional religion used to provide, but no longer does' (2022, 322).

Beyond a possible moral judgement on the potential materialistic countervalue of unbridled capitalism that such values may entail in mountaineering,² Edwin Bernbaum glimpses a hidden spiritual dimension, stating: '[r]ather than conquer the mountain, the climber vanquishes himself, much as a hermit or yogi overcomes the enemy of his own pride and arrogance on the way to attaining his goal of self-transcendence' (2022, 323). The argument is based on Mallory's aforementioned response, which might represent an expression of an inner desire not unlike the ultimate concern (Tillich 1958, 1–4), to use Paul Tillich's well-known phrase:

The first question which you will ask and which I must try to answer is this, 'What is the use of climbing Mount Everest?' and my answer must at once be, 'It is no use'. There is not the slightest prospect of any gain whatsoever. Oh, we may learn a little about the behaviour of the human body at high altitudes, where there is only a third of an atmosphere, and possibly medical men may turn our observations to some account for the purposes of aviation. But otherwise nothing will come of it. We shall not bring back a single bit of gold or silver, not a gem, nor any coal or iron. We shall not find a foot of earth that can be planted with crops to raise food. It's no use.

So, if you cannot understand that there is something in man which responds to the challenge of this mountain and goes out to meet it, that the struggle is the struggle of life itself upward

²To provide a comprehensive analysis, it would be necessary to consider the socio-economic environment in which mountaineers operate. Furthermore, the increasing prevalence of elite and luxury tourism, for example, in the Himalayas, as an epiphenomenon of a particular capitalist-style *civil religion*, should be taken into account. Regarding the ecological challenges related to the practice of nature sports, cf. Booth (2024).

and forever upward, then you don't see why we go. What we get from this adventure is just sheer joy. And joy is, after all, the end of life. We do not live to eat and make money. We eat and make money to enjoy life. That is what life means and what life is for. (Mallort quoted by Hornbein 2011, 116)

On the one hand, it seems pointless. On the other hand, it 'becomes the central pre-occupation of [the mountaineer's] walking thoughts and the recurring image of their nightly dreams' (Bernbaum 2022, 326). It is within this almost dreamlike dimension, characterised by feelings of reverence and wonder, that the mountaineer experiences a sort of 'paradise on earth' (Bernbaum 2022, 328). It is precisely for this reason that Edwin Bernbaum asserts that '[m]ountaineers often approach a mountain as pilgrims do a sacred peak' (Bernbaum 2022, 333), as witnessed by Anatoli Boukreev:

Mountains are not stadiums where I satisfy my ambitions to achieve. They are cathedrals, grand and pure, the houses of my religion. I approach them as any human goes to worship. On their altars I strive to perfect myself physically and spiritually. In their presence I attempt to understand my life, to exorcise vanity, greed, and fear. From the vantage of their lofty summits, I view my past, dream of the future, and with unusual acuteness I experience the present moment. The struggle renews my strength and clears my vision. In the mountains I celebrate creation, for on each journey I am reborn. (Boukreev 2001, 36–37)

If David Tracy is right in saying that 'we must feed imagination; [that] we must be alert to the possible presence of some disclosure' (Tracy 1981, 129), then we could consider the possibility of sleeping where the eagles fly, which the practice of mountaineering gives us access to, as a potential place for some sort of spiritual revelation, like the one recounted by Stutfield at the Alpine Club in London, on 4 June 1918:

We have, too, our seasons of repose when more tranquil, and perhaps deeper, emotions are in the ascendant. A midnight bivouac under the stars, beside some moonlight glacier amid high mountains, raises a host of august and indelible impressions. In the deep red flush of the evening Alpine glow we yield ourselves to Nature's witchery: bathed in the sensuous magic of the hour, our spirits are at peace. In the going forth of the morning in robes of saffron on the peaks, the pale glamour of dawn is as a faint reflection of a radiance not of this earth. At these and similar times the impression of a species of spiritual exaltation, some subtle kind of communion with the unseen world, may easily become an apprehension transcending that of the mere visionary's dream. One may say then – if in a somewhat different sense – as was said of old time on another mountain-top, 'It is good for us to be here.' (1918, 247)

4. Life lies under your feet

Bourdillon asserted that 'the mountains we gaze at are not the mountains we climb' (1908, 150). The former belongs to the order of desire and dreams; the latter are those that are actually climbed. It would not be too bold to say, I believe, that the ones that occupy us most are the former, and they are indeed the condition that enables the latter to be climbed.

Michel Onfray alludes to the notion of a driving force that initiates a journey – we would say, akin to the experience of a mountain expedition – in Platonic terms:

[...] details, memories, ideas, concepts, everything contributes to the solicitation of desire: we discover, sustain, and feed desire, then enjoy it; it constructs us as much as we construct

it. In a very Platonic way, we seek the idea of a place, the concept of a journey, then we set off to confirm the real and factual existence of the desired place [...]. Dreaming of a place, in this state of mind, allows us not so much to find it, but rather to rediscover it. Every journey hides and reveals a reminiscence. (Onfray 2007, 33)

The crux of the issue does not pertain to the potential for a fixed and dualistic view of human nature, which would invariably culminate in a dualistic anthropology, thereby contradicting the proposition for a profoundly unitary kinanthropology as delineated by Manuel Sérgio. The use of Platonic language here is merely instrumental: it serves fundamentally to emphasise, on the one hand, (1) the paradoxical distant proximity between the dreamt and the climbed mountain and, on the other, (2) the significant weight that the desired mountain can have in the valleys of everyday life.

To a certain extent, mountaineering has the capacity to point beyond itself without leaving the body behind. Those participating in hiking activities are aware that each ascent is invariably followed by a descent, and that peaks invariably open onto valleys. The act of walking at altitude is characterised by the consistent undertaking of ascents and descents. Every summit passes more quickly than one expects, and the return to the valley has a way of reminding one where the journey began. At the same time, the rhythm that mountaineers teach their bodies to follow becomes a quiet metaphor for life itself – a movement shaped by effort and rest, by stretches of solitude and unexpected companionship, by the alternation between height and depth that marks any human path.

The present essay argues that, with each step taken in a state of decelerated rhythm, accompanied by a deep breath reminiscent of a litany, a manner of inhabiting the world begins to materialise. This inhabiting of the world is characterised by a cultivated attentiveness to small details, such as the whistling wind that warns of an impending storm, the precariousness of a rock that necessitates caution, a companion who requires confirmation on the proper adjustment of their backpack, the need for water, the solace of a sunbeam piercing through the clouds, or the sense of mystery in being immersed in a dense bank of fog. It is a way of learning attentiveness that can extend to the plains of everyday life. The ethics and aesthetics of the heights may become the threshold into an everyday spirituality of care, compassion, and contemplation. Thus, the experience of the mountain, longed for and dreamed of, can be regarded as a pedagogue for everyday life. Indeed, the same virtues required for mountaineering are required in daily life. This attentiveness can carry into everyday life, shaping how one relates to time, other, and personal limits.

High places offer a kind of wisdom that exceeds the simple effort of pushing oneself upward; they quietly reshape the way one looks at the world on the way back down. Altitude seems to sharpen a mode of discernment that is neither only spiritual nor merely ethical, but something in-between – a capacity to identify what truly matters. The exposed ridge or narrow ledge does not allow for distraction. It is evident that every gesture is executed with meticulous intention, and each inhalation is a conscious act of attention. In such conditions, the mountaineer rehearses a kind of civic spirituality – an embodied vigilance that later unfolds in the lowlands of daily life. In Judith Wolfe's account, the concept of theology enters the public sphere when the ways in which human beings inhabit the world – their experiences, inherited practices and shared responsibilities – are held together within a unified interpretative horizon

(Wolfe 2022, 266–267). The mountain cultivates a unique intersection, offering a clarity of perception that resists both escapism and abstraction.

This is the reason why the discipline of altitude can offer more than metaphors; it offers criteria. A body accustomed to keeping its balance becomes quicker at sensing where the world itself is fragile; someone who has learned to hold fast to the rock often grows more attentive to the precarious footing of others. And the thin air of altitude does not place the climber above anything. Instead, it shifts the way the landscape below is seen, making its familiar lines appear more tentative, more dependent, than one usually realises. When someone is high up, everyday life seems different: it is not just something that one has to put up with, but something to enjoy and take responsibility for. One might consider that mountaineering functions as a portal to day to day spirituality, insofar as it engenders a mode of existence that is concomitantly, attentive, sober, and available. These qualities, it is argued, are not those of the solitary mystic but rather of the citizen who is cognizant of the necessity to act with care, in a deliberate and step-by-step manner.

5. Conclusion

The descent is crucial for understanding the full meaning of the experience. What happens after the mountain becomes central (Ceriello 2020). Mountaineering offers a way of interpreting human life. In this sense, mountaineering can inspire a public theology of everyday life, offering a spirituality expressed through universally human actions such as walking, resting and breathing. Transcendence emerges through embodied experience. The fundamental question of motivation – encapsulated in the question Why climb? – takes on a different significance at the culmination of the journey.

This article does not aim to explain, but rather to offer a perspective on life through the lens of the grammar of the mountains. Climbing can be defined as the act of inhabiting the space between earth and sky without uniting the two elements. Elevation and vulnerability remain closely intertwined, and what is glimpsed at height often returns later within the modest, sustaining gestures that compose daily existence. In this sense, the mountain can be regarded as a hermeneutics of life: a means of interpreting one's own finitude without resignation. The mountain can return us to the world with this renewed awareness of finitude and responsibility.

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