

BRIGHT SHOOTS
of
EVERLASTINGNESS

*Essays on Faith and
the American Wild*



PAUL J. WILLIS

INCLUDES AN ESSAY CHOSEN FOR
Best American Spiritual Writing 2004

“Turn to the piece entitled ‘Inspirational Romance’ and begin reading. You may begin mumbling to yourself, ‘This is so good. . . . This is *wonderful*.’ Then you’ll settle into the steady expectation of delight. Such is the charm of Paul Willis’s splendid essays.”

—JOHN WILSON, editor, *Books & Culture*

“Even readers who know nothing about mountain climbing will find these essays compelling for their humor, their deft description, and the fierce love of place that inspirits them all. No simplistic, spiritualized nature metaphors here. Instead, Willis gently deflates empty religiosity, all the while vividly depicting the forbidding mysteries and dangers of the mountain wilderness that slowly transform the soul.”

—DEBRA RIENSTRA, associate professor, Calvin College,
and author, *So Much More: An Invitation to Christian Spirituality*

“*Bright Shoots of Everlastingness* takes us on a journey of the best kind—an absorbing, honest, and always entertaining wander through the wonders and struggles of a life spent in realms that matter so much: mountains, literature and friendship. Through it all, under Willis’s self-revealing hand, we sense our own fallenness, and with him, we reach upward for grace.”

—LESLIE LEYLAND FIELDS, author, *Surviving the Island of Grace*,
Surprise Child, and *Out on the Deep Blue*

“How did the twin austerities of churchly religion and mountain climbing produce such a wise, lyrical, generous-spirited, fall-down funny, and profoundly human voice as the one we hear in each of Paul Willis’s stunning essays? I know you will like this voice. You will trust it when it is poking gentle fun at its own sacred cows, and yours, because you will feel its warm heart, and you will follow willingly as it takes you deeper into yourself and into the mystery and the beauty of the human spirit.”

—DOUG FRANK, professor, The Oregon Extension of Houghton College

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*to my father,
David Lee Willis,
and in memory of my mother,
Earline Louise Willis*

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The Cresset: “Do You Want Some Company?”

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Image: A Journal of the Arts and Religion: “Spokane: A Triptych”

Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment: “Development Dreams”

Moody: “All the Way Down”

OE Journal: “But Basney Says,” “The Geography of Hope” (poem), and “New Seeds in California: The Contemplative Journals of John Leax”

The Other Side: “All the World” and “Care to Dance?”

Redwood Coast Review: “Accidental Admissions” (as “Hanging by a Thread”)

River Teeth: “Bright Shoots of Everlastingness”

Summit: “SWAGS: The Next Generation” (as “The Next Generation”)

SWAGS Newsletter: “Inspirational Romance” (as “The SWAGS Inspirational Romance”)

Verve: “Manzana Schoolhouse” (poem)

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On Being and Becoming a Mountaineer

*From garden to garden, ridge to ridge, I drifted enchanted, . . .
gazing afar over domes and peaks, lakes and woods, and the billowy
glaciated fields. . . . In the midst of such beauty, pierced with its rays,
one's body is all one tingling palate. Who wouldn't be a mountaineer!*

—John Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra*



FOR SOME DARK DEED in my distant past, it has been my particular penance to serve time as the chair of a department of English. Last fall our new provost asked me the question I most dreaded: “What is your vision for the department?” I tried to excuse myself by saying that George H. W. Bush and I had a little something in common—namely, we did not get this vision thing. But the provost was persistent, so after thinking the matter over for about six months I reported back that I did have a vision after

all, and that it was: To Build a Bridge to the Nineteenth Century. The provost found this hugely entertaining, but I found myself explaining that I really meant it. What we need to do, I said, is encourage the habits of leisurely attention that make the reading of literature both possible and pleasurable. The way to do that, I said, is to model lives of unhurried focus. Eschew the media, linger over meals, and saunter a lot between classes. Spend long afternoons waiting for trains while immersed in Wordsworth or Jane Austen. And if the trains don't come anymore, all the better. Railway stations—abandoned ones—ought to be the perfect place for poetry.

Which brings me to my favorite word, *mountaineer*. It sounds a little like *engineer*, which is what I first wanted to be when I grew up. And it is definitely a nineteenth-century word, both in its era of currency and in its connotations of a leisurely attention to landscape. Whether used by Sir Leslie Stephen or John Muir, the word *mountaineer* was not so much about assault and conquest as it was about a way of dwelling in delight. *From garden to garden, ridge to ridge, I drifted enchanted. . . .* But the word, I think, has fallen off the bridge somewhere between their century and our own. In our time the world and its peaks are full of climbers, but sorely lacking in mountaineers.

I would like to report that I meander squarely among the mountaineers of this present age, but that would be falsifying the data. Especially in my earliest years, growing up near the Cascades, I was wholly and purely summit bound. From the crater rim of the South Sister, our first triumph, my brother and I saw peak after volcanic peak rise northward into the distance. We made a pact to climb them all before the summer came to a close, and almost killed ourselves in trying. With a light heart

and little more than a clothesline, we tempted fate on the Middle Sister, the North Sister, Mt. Washington, Three-Fingered Jack, and Mt. Jefferson on subsequent grueling weekends. The general idea was to arrive at a trailhead at dusk, hike in to a lake by flashlight, get up before dawn, and hurl ourselves at the nearest summit, bypassing any and all older climbers who chose to pause for the quaint purpose of tying themselves into a rope. We were very nearly obliterated by rockfall on Mt. Jefferson, so Mt. Hood, the highest and therefore holiest mountain of our state, had to wait until the spring.

I see now that we resembled nothing more than locomotive engineers. Locomotives do not exactly drift enchanted; they charge purposefully through the landscape down a prescribed track, imposing time on a timeless world. John Muir had unkind words for the tourist industry of his day which delivered whole trainloads of people at high speed against designated scenic targets. They could briefly disembark, dust themselves off, and declare that they had been there. I'm not sure we treated the Cascades any better.

My brother went off to college in Santa Barbara, where he climbed sandstone, and I to the suburbs of Chicago, where I climbed elevator shafts. In the summers we started to guide backcountry trips in Yosemite. The canyons and peaks of the northern part of the park began to work on us, the vast measureless calm of those Sierra days, but still there were the restless hormones of ambition that rushed us onward (something more and something less than the "glad animal movements" that Wordsworth recalls from his own "boyish days"). We felt it our duty to hike our charges past the point of exhaustion, and then to climb them well beyond the point of terror.

Ambition found its apogee in an expedition we formed one spring to Mt. McKinley. The coldest and highest summit on the continent would surely afford the ultimate chance to prove ourselves. Get to the top of *that* mountain, and we'd have bragging rights for a lifetime. It didn't work out that way. After three weeks of blizzard and cold, I found myself hallucinating, knees buckling, still eight hundred feet from the top. My brother had it a lot worse. Trying to care for another exhausted team member, he lost his hands and feet to frostbite. There was an epic three-day struggle back down to our high camp.

This is the experience that made us into mountaineers. It didn't happen right away, but it may have started the day a copy of Steve Roper's new *Climber's Guide to the High Sierra* arrived at the Anchorage hospital. Looking through it, my brother said something like, "Why did I come to Alaska when I could be running around in shorts in the High Sierra, having fun?" I may not have been there at the time—I may have been back in the Sierra, dutifully hiking groups of trekkers into the ground. But sooner or later I heard about his saying this. It is one of the things about our tragedy that moved me, and one of the things I may have learned from.

My brother became a mountaineer when he got a horse. At first he used her to try to do climber things, things that horses shouldn't do, such as ascending granite slabs and steep snow. But after a while he got to where he liked just to poke around in the trees and meadows for days at a time and smoke cigars by the campfire. The primary sense of the word *mountaineer*, even in the nineteenth century, was "mountain climber." But the sixteenth-century sense of the word, found for example in Shakespeare, was the somewhat derogatory one of "mountain dweller" (as in "some

villain mountaineers” or “Yield, rustic mountaineer,” spoken by Cloten in *Cymbeline*). This is the sense that John Muir reinvents, changing local habitation into a positive quality of being, and this is the sense I am beginning to understand.

One of the more heartwrenching moments of John Krakauer’s famous book on the 1996 Everest tragedy, *Into Thin Air*, describes the last night before the summit attempt. The group has staggered, one by one, onto the bleak wasteland of the South Col and disappeared into their tents. It becomes obvious to Krakauer that they aren’t really a team at all, just an assortment of paying customers, united only tenuously by the fierce desire of their egos. The loneliness and terror of this realization surpasses even the terror of the storm that comes the next day to claim the lives of half the party. In that moment of vision, that glimpse into a moral abyss, Krakauer and his companions are pure climbers, mere climbers, people who have gained a mountain but lost their souls.

For some reason I want to contrast those lonely consumers shivering on the South Col with my own family and the family of an old friend, camped together last summer at a lake far from any trail in the northern part of Yosemite. We had brought a rope to attempt a commanding summit across the lake but settled for a small knoll because of the danger of thunderstorms. We chose to call it Elf Mountain, after the propensity of our daughters to see elves in every rock and flower and stream about them. Our youngest children led the way, choosing the most circuitous route imaginable. We sat on top and looked out on Tuolumne Meadows in the distance as long as we liked, then slid down the same snowslope several times until we felt like wading in a sandy pool trapped between a meadow and a long, sinuous granite slab. Toward lunchtime, we followed a tiny outlet stream down a series

of cascades and columbines until we found our packs again and took up the serious business of having to get somewhere by dark. I am forty-one years old as I write this and have touched more than a few summits since first climbing the South Sister at the headstrong age of fourteen. But Elf Mountain may be the first peak I have wholly climbed as a mountaineer.

Gary Snyder says it gently in his poem "For the Children":

stay together
learn the flowers
go light

And John Muir says it grandly:

Climb the mountains and get their good tidings. Nature's peace will flow into you as sunshine flows into trees. The winds will blow their freshness into you, and the storms their energy, while cares will drop off like autumn leaves.

When Muir asks, "Who wouldn't be a mountaineer!" he is so sure of the answer that he substitutes an exclamation for a question mark. But the real answer to *Who wouldn't?* is most of us, most of the time. For the invitation is to both a narrow way and a pathless way. The gentlemanly Sir Edmund Hillary, returning from the summit of Everest, told his companions that he had "knocked the bastard off." But as someone else once said, someone who once beheld all the kingdoms of this world from a mountaintop, the way of the mountaineer is to enter the sacred not violently but as a child.