

On Mountains and Climbing

An illustrated lecture given to the British Mountain Festival at Llandudno
by Gordon Stainforth on February 17th, 1996

I'm not going to talk much about photography, or at least technical photography as such, but really the ideas and values that lie *behind* my photography. About the way I see the hills and mountains, and how this relates to the joy of climbing. I intend to speak not so much as a photographer but as Mr Average Climber. I'm going to start straight away with quite a difficult idea — what I think is the key when we talk about mountains — it's how I started my first book — and that is the *sublime*....

'Suddenly—behold—beyond! ... Clear as crystal, sharp on the pure horizon sky ... Infinitely beyond all that we had ever thought or dreamed — the seen walls of lost Eden could not have been more beautiful to us; not more awful, round heaven, the walls of sacred Death.'

That is Ruskin's famous description of his first sighting of the Alps. It is very 'over the top' by modern standards, but the reason I'm quoting it is that the two main ideas he juxtaposes — awe and beauty — are the two main aspects of the sublime.

Nowadays people are much more simple-minded it seems. They use the language of tourist brochures: words like 'stunning', 'spectacular', and 'wonderful' (rather in the manner of a Tory minister, recently, who spoke of 'our *wonderful* capitalist system'.) This is a very empty, almost meaningless use of language. People trot out the word beauty in relation to mountains quite indiscriminately....

But often they're not really 'beautiful' at all.... The point about *the sublime* is that they're both beautiful and awesome at the same time. *That* is their real fascination.

So this is the first of several contradictory pairs I'm going to introduce today — an oxymoron: **AWESOME BEAUTY**. In place of a simplistic, clinical and vacuous idea of 'beauty' we need a much more honest and complex notion which sees mountains as things which involve us right at the limits of our imagination.

When we see a great mountain for the first time, what we're confronted with, first and foremost, is an extraordinary *image*. It's not just that the thing itself is beyond our comprehension (because we can't even *begin* to imagine its creation through geological time); It's that we can't even understand the *image* of it as we see it. We're not at all sure what we're looking at — in terms of its slopes and its angles. It's all so full of illusions. So, straight away, we're confronted with another contradictory pair: **APPEARANCE AND REALITY**.

And it's not just the appearance at one moment that puzzles us; for the image is changing even as we look at it.... A mountain is never the same twice. This is something we *can* show well in photography — the everchanging surface appearance (as a two-dimensional, colourful, graphical thing.)

But what photography can't convey nearly so easily is the giant, three-dimensional reality. How do we show the true scale? ... Well, we can get in closer. Snow, as here helps.... A sprinkling is better: it shows the structure and power of the mountain. But it's still reduced to two dimensions. We have no real notion of the vast distance between Sgurr na Stri, here, and Gars-bheinn — and again, how steep it really is.

The essence of a mountain is that it is a gigantic three-dimensional structure. This is one of the great fascinations of a mountain landscape: how it fits together, in three dimensions. The French philosopher, Bachelard, uses the term *topophilia* to describe this love of topography, of the sculptural quality of mountains; and he also uses it to describe our desire to get *inside* the landscape, and not just to gawp at it from a distance. To get inside the *frame* of the picture, as it were. To enter the dream world ... and *become very small* ... like Alice in Wonderland ... and the mountain, very big. It's the opposite of the little picture-postcard view of a mountain, now.... Topophilia — this love of the topography — means we want to get to grips with the close-up reality rather than the distant appearance.

But, although we want to explore the reality of a mountain, the extraordinary thing is that it links in some way with the world of our dreams. And so we come to another essential, contradictory pair: **DREAM AND REALITY.**

They are dangerous dreams. The seductive appearance of a mountain *lures* us — a bit like a beautiful (beautiful-looking!) carnivorous plant.... A good mountain line plays on the world of our dreams, our imagination....

The point is, seeing *any* landscape involves using the imagination whether we like it or not. Mountains *have* to involve the imagination, because we can only ever see them from one aspect at a time — in a sense, in a series of fleeting glimpses ... in different conditions ... from different angles, on completely different occasions. We have to *construct* a mountain from all these different images. A mountain, as we experience it, is our mental construct of it. To that extent, at least!, we're all creative, as mountaineers.

The way we construct our own landscape out of the fragmented layers of our memories is like a *palimpsest* — an old, reused parchment which has had successive texts written on it. It relates to our *inner* landscape, the landscape of our memories. And through hill-walking and through climbing we actually *enter* this world of our dreams....

But it can happen in mountain photography too — especially when it’s a project which you’ve been chasing after for a long time, which you’ve become obsessed with. Suddenly one is presented with an image in the viewfinder which up to then has only existed in the imagination. One’s then in the uncanny situation described by Novalis (it’s a favourite quote of mine) when “dream becomes world, world becomes dream.”

The dream world and the real world are somehow more closely interwoven than many of us care to admit. I know that I’m getting into a very difficult area here.... When we enter the mountains, and start exploring them, the creative side of us somehow enters that inner landscape: it gets right into the very fabric of the landscape, into its very substance.

This is all related to an even more difficult, perhaps even more controversial, point. When I say we enter a world of the imagination, I’m not just talking about *our* imagination. I’m referring to what Ruskin calls *the imagination of the hills*. He talks about them as being ‘centres of imaginative energy.’ This is a very favourite theme of mine which I’m still working on: nature as a creator, nature the artist ... the sculptor, the theatrical manager, the impresario.... This incredible, massive sculpture ... with these incredible *lighting effects*.... The graphic artist, the special effects technician....

So much is to do with the atmospherics, and the weather ... the masterstrokes ... the coups de theatre ... the surprises ... the magic moments ... the brocken spectres and the rainbows....

What I’m claiming is that although the mountains seem at one level to be utterly supra-human — inhuman and beyond our comprehension — yet they seem eminently fitted to the human imagination. It’s a point Wordsworth makes in his uncompleted work, *The Recluse*:

**How exquisitely the individual Mind
... to the external World
Is fitted: — and how exquisitely, too —
Theme this but little heard of among men —
The external world is fitted to the Mind**

And modern science seems to agree with this position more and more. (I’m referring to what’s called ‘The Anthropic Cosmological Principle’ — which we haven’t possibly got time to go into today!)

Now — the big question is — how does all this relate to climbing?! Well, Wordsworth goes on in that same passage to talk of the ‘*creation*’ which man and nature can accomplish together with their ‘blended might’. ‘This is our high argument,’ he says. And it is my

argument today — that *the imaginative adventurer interacts with ‘nature the artist’*. That it is *as if* the mountain landscape has been designed for the human spirit, to fire our spirit of adventure, to *test* us in the widest possible range of ways. I’m saying — I’m a bit biased! — that climbing is a creative thing in a creative world.

I want now to recap the four main contradictory pairs I’ve mentioned so far, which are involved when we look at a mountain landscape:

First, the *beauty* and *fearsome* nature of a mountain landscape — as being two aspects of a single emotional response. And then, the *appearance* and the *reality* of a mountain — as being very different from each other. And, third, our *dream* image of a mountain and the *reality* — as being in a sense inseparable. And, finally, *our imagination* and what I’ve called ‘*the imagination of the hills*’ as interacting with one another.

— and because I’m not a very logical person I’m going to take the third point first: mountain dreams and mountain realities, and see how it relates to climbing.— Because climbing is first and foremost about turning dreams into realities, and doing the apparently impossible....

On the best climbs, in our best climbing experiences, we enter a sort of dream state or dream world; we’re in a sort of trance — in an *other* world, literally — a world above the world.

But, even if we’re in a trance, the mind is operating at two completely different levels at once. Despite the magic, dream aspect of it, there’s still something very rational going on, a shrewd sense of judgement.... This dualism, the whole time: the dream and the reality.

And this links with the second point I made earlier, because the rational side of our being, when we’re climbing, is concerned *only* with the difference between the distant appearance and the reality of a climb. This is the scientific side of the climber, which is concerned only with the precise realities of a climb, never with appearances — however impossible or dreamlike they seem....

We have to rub our noses in it to see the truth. What we’re concerned with now is the hard, but so often surprisingly climbable, reality. Climbing is always this mixture of poetry and science. The emotional hysteric in us is always wrestling with the cold-blooded realist. Although it is the scientific side of our being and our technical ability which makes a climb possible in the first place, it is still the vision, the dream, and our *emotional* drive that gets us up it.

What is the experience of climbing like? — We come right back to our starting point of **BEAUTY and FEAR** combined. This, for me, is always the essential conflict in the

mountains. The thrill — dare one say, the *fearful* thrill — and yet the overall beauty of the experience. In climbing, at its best, they’re completely interwoven.

I hope I speak for the average climber here, in admitting that I am often afraid in the mountains. Quite often, very afraid.

As I see it, there are three main types of people who climb: those who can see the beautiful probability, and have very little apparent fear (the best climbers); those who can see the beautiful possibility, but have a lot of fear (the wimps like myself!); and those who have no fear and can’t see the beauty either (the macho idiots). Idiots — because if you’ve no fear and you can’t see the beauty (which taken together means you can’t see the *truth*) you’re very likely to hurt yourself.

I think climbing necessitates being, to some degree, a split personality. There are certainly at least *three* different emotions going on at once. First there is the incredible feeling of excitement and adrenalin. And, secondly, as I say, there’s always *fear* (with me anyway). And beyond all that there’s the *fascination* — more than just the technical fascination — which amounts in the end, I believe, to nothing else than an a sort of *appreciation of beauty*. And it is this last emotion, I think, which is the most important of all.

The conclusion of all that I’ve been saying is (perhaps paradoxically — another paradox!) — it’s not primarily about risk. It’s not really about risk at all. We always want the adventure, but never the misadventure. I think at its most basic level it’s an aesthetic/athletic thing, the solving of beautiful, gymnastic puzzles. It’s all about movement, the feeling of flow and power — about doing the apparently impossible ... In this respect it’s like any great sporting or artistic skill.... To flow effortlessly upward over the rock. *This* is what we never get tired of.

But, having said it’s not really about risk, there is always one very real risk: the risk of failure. The climbing adventure (as I was saying earlier of a mountain itself) is never the same twice. Or, never quite the same. Or we wouldn’t go on doing it. It is always something new.

Every good climb is an adventure, like a good story or screenplay in which the outcome is always in some doubt. (Actually, a good climb is not *just like* a good story, it *is* a good story!) We set off on a climb not because we *know* we can do it, but because we *believe* we can do it. To climb properly we need total conviction; and yet, at its best, it is always a sort of gamble.

It may not primarily be about risk, but it sure involves using a lot of adrenalin! The point is, a good climb always *feels* dead scary. For all our surface cool, deep down it’s a very

emotional thing. So it's motion and emotion combined, and the magic feeling of that. When one is climbing well, there is an almost magic feeling of weightlessness. I guess this is what my enthusiasm for the rock is all about....

Enthusiasm. En theos. A god within. To have miraculous, almost godlike powers. For a while, to have a sort of superhuman ability. But, in the sense I'm using it, this also means: overcoming oneself, overcoming one's own weaknesses and limitations. In a way, rising *above* oneself.

In essence, I think climbing is a totally non-bullshit activity (unlike practically all other activities!) So now we come to another great oxymoron in climbing: the *humble ego*: humility (particularly, a humility towards nature) versus our ego. In practical terms this will come down to shrewd judgement versus foolhardiness, realism versus heroics.

How strong we feel when we're going well! How weak we feel when it's going badly.... How weak we really are!

What I'm really saying is that climbing must be based above all on a deep respect for the mountains, and a sort of humility towards them. Motion and emotion; now I want to say it's about mental balance as much as about physical balance. About correctly judging the underlying truth under the appearance.

Now, the fourth point I made earlier was about imagination: *our* imagination and what I called (after Ruskin) 'the imagination of the hills.' At a risk now of sounding extremely pretentious (even more pretentious!) I want to say that climbing is, at best, a beautiful, direct form of *imaginative* communication with the very stuff of the earth, in which we interrelate with the design and artistry of the rock itself.

Professor Richard Dawkins (the Professor of "Public Understanding of Science" at Oxford) has said: 'You are right to ask the "Why" question of a bicycle's mudguards or the Kariba Dam, but not of a boulder, a misfortune, Mount Everest, or the universe.' He is resolutely opposed to any 'Argument from Design'.

I disagree with him profoundly. Although, at bottom, rock is a complete, deep, unfathomable mystery, I have often had — as I'm sure many here will have had — a lurking sense that a climb was *made* to be climbed. That it was designed as a climbing puzzle all along. That it was designed for *us*, to play *this* particular game. It's *as if* this climbing problem has, as it were, been locked in the rock all the time — long before it is discovered, like one of Michelangelo's 'Sleeping Prisoners'. This seems to me to be one of the profoundest secrets that the mountain landscape holds...

... the cleverness (sometimes the deviousness and devieny?) of the rock — what Mallory called ‘the *genius* of the rock’. The inventiveness of the climbing puzzle. Its beautiful variety, and ... its *imagination*. I’ve said that nature is an impresario and an artist, now I’m saying it’s a jester and a setter of puzzles.

... The big premiss of an adventure story or filmscript: the big ‘*what if?*’ What if I was to get up there? What will it be like on that shoulder, that headwall? Could I ever do that? It’s the extreme fascination of crossing boundaries, of venturing into the unknown.

And then, afterwards, the extraordinary satisfaction when we have done it ... Was I really up *there*? ... The mountain retreats once more into that magic realm of the unreal, into the world above the world, and our memories revert to the same status as our dreams.... The magic world that we entered for a while ... the magic world so far removed from the ordinary, quotidien world, the world of grot.

To my mind, Wester Ross and Westminster are at absolutely opposite poles.

So many of the values I’ve been talking about today seem to be in danger of being lost — or at least, *devalued*. I think primarily it’s about a lack of respect for nature. Society seems to be gripped more than ever by the artificial, by spectatorism and by the need to be continually entertained by something at a far remove from us. In climbing we entertain ourselves, and we let ourselves be continually surprised by nature, in a what is, after all, a totally interactive environment.

What I personally *don’t* go into the mountains or hills for is something like an ordinary competitive sport — on an artificial court or a pitch, or in an arena with spectators. It’s everything but that, surely.

Let us not force our egos too much onto the mountain environment. The end of that road is damage, modification, and degradation — be it pincushions of bolts, or the wearing of named and famous paths, or the planting of human signs and monuments. Let’s try and leave the mountain environment, as far as possible, exactly as we found it — or rather, as the first climbers found it.

Let’s not become obsessive slaves to consumerism — and all the narrow, quantifying, point-scoring values that go with it. It is difficult to stand up here and say this today when society seems ever more gripped by the metaphors of shopping and consumption. The idea that an experience of any worth is something that you can *buy*! We see a short flight on Concorde, costing hundreds of pounds, billed as ‘the experience of a lifetime.’

Well, as everyone here knows, a great climb really *can* be an experience of a lifetime — an experience that really does contribute to the sum of one’s life. And, once we are there, it costs nothing (except a lot of adrenalin!)

Climbing is much more than just appreciating the genius of the rock and our own cleverness. It’s the setting, the ambience ... the everchanging, million varieties of light and weather conditions — something an indoor climbing wall can never begin to imitate (enthusiastic, actually, as I am for indoor climbing walls.)

None of the elements I’ve been talking about can be separated from each other — it’s all part of the rich experience of a day in the mountains: the changes, the surprises ... the problems and the solutions ... the fear, the excitement, the quiet satisfaction, the laughter, the rain and the sun — the movement and the light. (How the light and weather touches the very heart and soul!)

And so we go through life, with our limbs almost continually aching from climbing and hill-walking. But — isn’t this what keeps us alive? What keeps us *young*? Moving upwards in the light, out of the mire.

To enter the landscape in an appreciative, imaginative, adventurous, spirit — with others of the same spirit — is to find a sort of paradise on earth. A world as far removed as it is possible to imagine from all free-market kidology, and materialistic nonsense (‘the mass media din, and advertising’s imbecilic smile,’ to borrow a phrase from Milan Kundera.)

A final contradiction, then, for the climber: climbing as being right on the edge of life, and yet central to it — as perhaps the most important thing of all. It has more meaning, it is *souder*, than (practically) anything else I’ve ever done. It has epitomised everything that in the end has proved to be of any lasting value.

In the end, then, it’s about appreciating *what really matters*. In this climbing world of ours, in the hills and mountains (rather than gymnasiums), let us never lose sight of this — of *what really matters*. Let us do our best to preserve it. To preserve what nature gives us ... the beauty, the magic, and the richness of it.