

# No Mountain Too High

- John Amatt -

*“Mountains symbolize the indomitable will, an unbending resolution, a loyalty that is eternal, and character that is unimpeachable. When man pits himself against the mountain, he taps inner springs of his strength. He comes to know himself. For he realizes how small a part of the universe he actually is, how great are the forces that oppose him.”*

- William O. Douglas  
Of Men and Mountains

I climbed my first mountain, somewhat reluctantly, in the summer of 1956. I was a shy, underachieving youth, who aspired for success but lacked the confidence to achieve it. I vividly recall a family holiday in southern England when I was about eight years old. While sightseeing we had become lost. It was starting to get dark. As we came to a row of houses in a picturesque village, my father told me to ask someone for directions back to our hotel. Stricken with panic, I refused to leave the car. The idea of speaking to a stranger was something that I simply could not face.

One bleak Scottish day a few years later, we were hiking up the Old Pony Track on Ben Nevis, at 1,344 me-

ters the highest mountain in the British Isles. Now 11 years of age, I was soon to start a new life at a British public school and was proudly wearing my crisp uniform, replete with school cap, necktie, knee-socks, and short pants. For protection against adverse weather, I was wearing a gabardine raincoat.

As we gained height, the rain increased in intensity, the wind driving sheets of mist horizontally across the trail. I was cold, wet, and dispirited. *What's the point of this?* I thought. *It would be so much warmer back in the car parked at the trailhead.* I began to grumble about going back down.

I will never forget my father looming over me with a

stern face, rain streaking his cheeks. “If you turn around now,” he said, “you’ll regret it for the rest of your life!”

His words hit home and I felt the heat of defiant anger rising inside me. *I’ll show him.* I thought as I shot off up the trail with my sister, Susan. Doggedly pushing ahead, my coat pulled tight against the freezing rain, we soon left our parents behind anxiously asking other hikers if they had seen two youngsters up ahead. When they finally reached the top, Susan and I had been there for an hour, shivering in the icy cold.

Although I didn’t know it at the time, this experience would launch me on a lifelong journey of human curiosity, personal exploration, and self-discovery which continues to this day. Unknowingly, I began to follow in the footsteps of Alexander Graham Bell, an adventurous soul whose natural curiosity changed civilization through his invention of the telephone. In 1914, he had offered the following advice:

***“Don’t keep forever on the public road, going only where others have gone. Leave the beaten track occasionally and dive into the woods. You will be certain to find something you have never seen before. Of course, it will be a little thing, but do not ignore it. Follow it up, explore all around it; one discovery will lead to another, and before you know it, you will have something worth thinking about to occupy your mind. All really big discoveries are the results of thought.”***

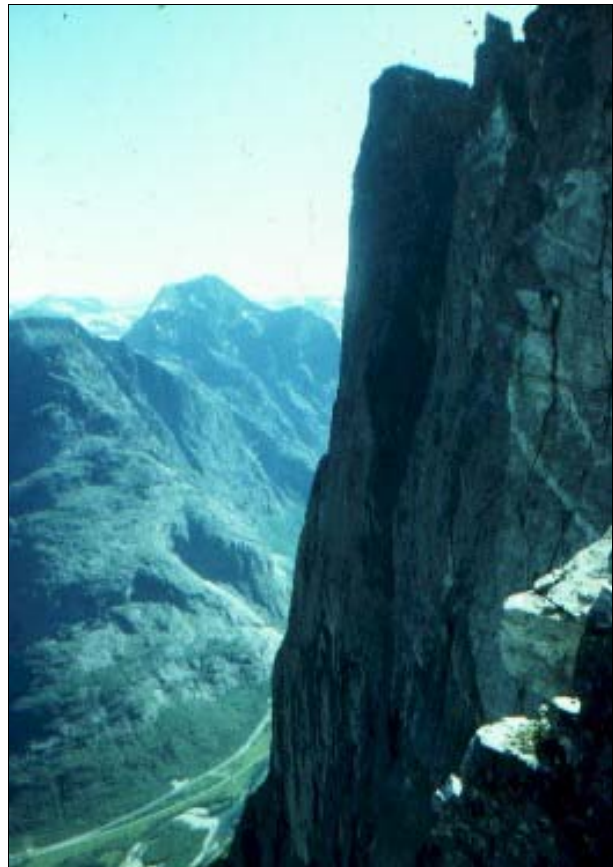
Having succeeded, somewhat reluctantly, on Ben Nevis, I now began to probe my strengths and my limitations, to question my previous beliefs, and to explore my potential by seeking challenges on mountains of increasing difficulty around the world.

It is possible my path was destined by a holiday my parents enjoyed in Grindlewald, Switzerland, during the summer of 1938—when the Eiger North Face was climbed for the first time. As they were leaving the railway station to travel home, their guide told them, “There are four more fools on the Eiger.” In fact, this was the first ascent party of Anderl Heckmair, Ludwig Vörg, Fritz Kasperek, and Heinrich Harrer, and by the time my folks arrived home the story was front-page news in the British newspapers.

As a youngster, I spent many an hour browsing through the yellowing clippings that my Dad had collected from that time. Seeking further inspiration, I devoured his well-worn copy of *The White Spider*, Heinrich Harrer’s classic history of the Face, and dug into his collection of narratives on the early British attempts to climb Mount Everest. As I dreamed of climbing in their footsteps, I poured through the auto-

biographies of modern European climbing heroes, such as Walter Bonatti, Gaston Rebuffat, and Lionel Terray, seeking to understand their moments of self-discovery during triumphs and tragedies on mountains around the world. And as my climbing skills grew throughout my teenage years, I came to know and climb with some of the greatest British mountaineers of the early 1960s, including Joe Brown, Don Whillans, Tom Patey, and Chris Bonington. Their words and deeds became my call to action.

Nine years after Ben Nevis, I found myself at the foot of another cold, wet mountainside, this time in Norway. With three friends, I was bivouacked below the soaring Troll Wall, aspiring to make the first ascent of this “Wall of the Giants,” which is considered to be the highest vertical rock wall in Europe. It was said that a stone dropped from the summit would touch nothing until it landed in the valley 1,500 meters below. At this point in 1965, nobody had climbed, or even tried to climb, the Troll Wall. More experienced climbers had come to look, but had turned their backs and walked away. So, with the audacity of youth, we decided to try. And it was here that I learned the meaning of courage, which Mark Twain defined as “resistance to fear,



**Troll Wall, Norway— at more than 5,000 feet, one of the world’s highest and steepest mountain faces**



**Vertical and even overhanging, a stone dropped from the summit would touch nothing until it landed in the valley 1,500 meters below**

mastery of fear—not the absence of fear.”

As I sought sleep that night, my mind was a turmoil of fear and anxiety; I worried about all the things that could go wrong up on that unknown wall. But as I struggled with these doubts, I knew that unless we started the climb the next morning, we would never discover if we were up to the challenge.

My climbing companion, Tony Howard, caught the mood in an article for the British magazine *Mountain Craft*:

*“Once admitted, fear gnaws away at your subconscious; it prods and probes at every chink in your mental armor. It can mushroom into a nightmare of emotion from which there is no release until dawn; the slow dawn that lights the sky with a golden glow, yet refuses to burst over the black horizon. You wish to hell the sun would hurry. The dark, gloomy rock leers down from above you, hostile, overwhelming, unknown.*

*Finally, you can stand it no longer, the silence, the relentless night-long shuffle of your comrades, the dark unfriendly rock, above all, the inactivity; just waiting, eternally waiting and thinking, second after second ticking slowly into minutes, into long, long hours. The thoughts multiply, obsess you and devour you. You wish you had never set foot on rock; you decide the whole venture is too big for you, and you can only sit and wait, a victim of your own weakness.”*

High on the Troll Wall, I was forced to control my own fear. For eight days, we faced sleet, falling rocks, and gusts of icy wind, while inching our way up the precipice. At night, we tied ourselves onto ledges no more than half a meter wide and tried to sleep. Occa-

sionally, we dozed while standing upright on tiny footholds, before our knees collapsed, jerking us awake.

On the penultimate day, I was climbing last while Tony and Bill Tweedale tackled the final band of overhangs. As they disappeared from view overhead, I was left alone, dangling over a sheer drop of more than one thousand meters. Only the jerking of the rope from above signified progress.

Suddenly, all movement stopped. Anxiously, I waited for the ropes to pull tight, a signal that I could continue. Minutes drifted into hours with no sound from above. Hanging there alone, my mind began to race with worst-case scenarios. Had they reached an impasse? Was someone hurt? Would we be forced to retreat from so high on the wall? Could we, in fact, get down? The ropes were swinging free below my feet, not even touching the rock. Unable to communicate with my companions, it was all I could do to control the growing panic.

A noise from above woke me from my reverie. The rope started to snake upward and became tight. With immense relief, adrenalin surging through my body, I started to climb. Pulling through the final overhangs, I rejoined my companions, relieved to discover that they had been slowed by a particularly difficult section of rock and that the route now lay open to the summit.

What drives us into such situations? Why do people voluntarily seek out such discomfort and uncertainty in the mountains? And what do we learn from such exposure to the unknown that makes us better people in our everyday lives? Perhaps the late Anatoli Boukreev had the answer. When taking part in a seminar on *Alpine Voyeurism* at the Banff Mountain Film Festival in 1997, he concluded: “What becomes of the effort is that we can know ourselves better”.

It is only when forced to confront adversity, often by external events beyond our control, or when we choose



**At the top of the ‘Vertical Mile’**

to struggle by seeking out a challenging new route to a mountain's summit, for example, that we find out what we are capable of achieving.

But it is not during the struggle that the learning takes place, or even when standing on the summit having achieved the goal. The learning takes place afterward, when we can step back and digest the experience. Having reflected, it is then possible to gaze out toward many more mountains of opportunity, which are only now possible because of the new learning that has taken place.

Looking back at our first ascent of Norway's Troll Wall in 1965, I realize today that the most significant part of that climb was our willingness to try, to commit to an effort that others had rejected, and to find the courage to begin. During that sleepless night at the foot of the climb, I began to appreciate that when you move toward fear and look it directly in the face, it recedes in front of you; when you run away from fear, it only grows in your mind. And I began to think of fear and anxiety as simply being nature's way of keeping us focused on the task at hand. Once I understood that fact and made a commitment to start the climb, all the other pieces quickly fell into place.

By every measure, our Troll Wall experience symbolized the very essence of adventure. It was a true journey into the unknown; no one had been up that mountain face before. If we had gotten into trouble, there were few that could have come to our aid given the extreme nature of the climbing and the remoteness of the location. But I was exactly where I wanted to be at the time. And it was this success on the Troll Wall that opened my personal sense of possibility, which years later would take me to Nepal as a member of the first Canadian team ever to try to climb the world's highest peak.

The Canadian Mount Everest Expedition in the fall of



**29,035 foot Mount Everest— the highest point on earth**

1982 was a controversial project from the start: a traditional style, large team effort with major corporate support and extensive media coverage. With a nationalistic agenda, the objective was to place a Canadian on top of the mountain for the first time.

Departing Kathmandu, we embarked on a three-week walk to the foot of the mountain, establishing Base Camp toward the end of the monsoon rains. Two weeks into the climb, we had established the route through the tortuous Khumbu Icefall and moved on into the Western Cwm. Everything was going well when, over a two-day period, our effort was decimated by two tragic accidents in which four people died. Seven climbers were buried in an avalanche that fell hundreds of meters from the West Shoulder of Everest. Three Sherpas moving together along the fixed ropes were killed. Then, two days later, cameraman Blair Griffiths perished in a collapse in the Icefall. In both cases, we had been in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Looking back today I believe that, prior to the accidents, we had started to build a bubble of invincibility around ourselves. Because everything was proceeding as planned, we were already reflecting on the achievement to come. In effect, we were looking toward the summit with tunnel vision, when we should have had peripheral vision, should have been checking around every day and adapting our approach to the changing conditions on the mountain. Without realizing it, we had fallen into the trap of complacency—the greatest danger in extreme situations. We were implementing a plan that had been developed in the comfort of our homes in Canada—a plan that was based upon a series of assumptions as to what it would be like on Everest, half the world away. On arriving at the mountain, we had not checked to see if these assumptions were correct.

In the face of these tragic events, our initial reaction was to place blame. When something goes wrong, we have to have a reason; something or someone must have been at fault. We were blaming ourselves, thinking that if we hadn't been so selfish as to want to climb this mountain these men would still be alive. But the Sherpas view such events from a different perspective. Being Buddhist, they believe in karma and reincarnation. They came to us and said, "This was meant to be. If these men hadn't died on Everest today, they would have died somewhere else today, because this was their day to journey on into their next life." Rather than place blame, they encouraged us to continue with the climb.

The accidents on Everest were beyond our control. Nobody could have predicted the second when an ava-



***Climbing in the treacherous Khumbu Icefall***

lanche would fall from hundreds of meters above our heads. Neither could we know exactly when a collapse would occur in the Icefall. It could be said at the time of the tragedies that we had failed. But by reflecting on what had happened and adapting our plan, we knew we still had a chance to complete the climb. The tragedies had shaken us out of our complacency, burst our bubble of invincibility, and brought focus to our effort.

Lucien Devies, President of the Himalayan Committee of the Federation Francaise de la Montagne, writes in heroic terms of the struggle for the summit in his preface to Maurice Herzog's *Annapurna: The First 8,000 metre Peak*:

***“Man overcomes himself, affirms himself, and realizes himself in the struggle towards the summit, towards the absolute. In the extreme tension of the struggle, on the frontier of death, the universe disappears and drops away beneath us. Space, time, fear, suffering, no longer exist. Everything then becomes quite simple. As on the crest of a wave, or in the heart of a cyclone, we are strangely calm—not the calm of emptiness, but the heart of action itself. Then we know with absolute certainty that there is something indestructible in us, against which nothing shall prevail.”***

In the days that followed, bad weather forced all the climbers down to Base Camp, allowing for a period of catharsis. As time healed our wounds, the simplicity of our desire to climb was rekindled. We would return with a smaller team, moving more quickly through the danger zones. We would abandon our hopes of climbing a new route via the South Pillar and opt instead for the easier South Col route. And we would still aspire to achieve our goal. The summit beckoned.

Five weeks later, Laurie Skreslet, Sungdare, and Lhakpa Dorje stood on top of the world. It was so clear they could see to where the horizon curved, with Kangchenjunga in the far distance and Makalu and

Lhotse closer at hand.

Two days later, Pat Morrow, Pema Dorje, and Lhakpa Tshering followed. On the summit that day, the temperature was minus 40°F, so cold that the batteries could not charge Pat's camera, prohibiting him from exposing his film correctly to the light. Removing his mitts, he was forced to manually operate the camera, taking multiple shots of the same view, each with a different exposure. By bracketing several exposures, he knew he would get one, and only one, perfect image.

Now a world-renowned adventure photographer, Pat is often asked how he takes such great photographs. With considerable understatement, he answers, “f-8 ... and be there!” suggesting that he must f-8 the camera, to ensure the film is correctly exposed to the light, and be there in the right place to click the shutter.

This phrase also represents a metaphor for life! To achieve our own destiny in these changing times, we too must expose our minds correctly to the world in which we live and be there to meet new challenges. Only by controlling our fears of the unknown and by leaving the beaten track can we discover what we might become in the future.

Eighteen months after returning from Nepal, I found myself walking across the giant stage of Radio City Music Hall in New York, the largest indoor theatre in the world. I was there to relate my story of Everest as the closing speaker of the 57th Annual Meeting of the Million Dollar Round Table, a global association of life insurance agents. There were 6,000 strangers in the audience. As I spoke, I reflected upon how the mountains of my life had inspired me to change from a shy, underachieving youth that could not face one stranger, to a man who could now speak to thousands. ■



***Summit of Mount Everest—one of the world's rarest spots***

## WHY BOOK JOHN AMATT?

John Amatt is unusual amongst Adventure Speakers in that he did not reach the summit of Mount Everest on his celebrated expedition. Instead, he was a leader of a dedicated team that suffered four tragic deaths in two unpredictable accidents before placing six climbers on the peak. John's mission in going to Everest was to place the first Canadian on top of the world's highest peak. In his own words ... *"It didn't matter who reached the summit, because when one person stood on the highest point, we knew the whole team had climbed the mountain. I was totally fulfilled the day we reached the top, because I was proud to have played a crucial role in the achievement"*.

- John Amatt is a superb storyteller and one of the world's most experienced Everest Speakers. In a 25 years career, he has delivered over 1,800 keynote presentations to corporate and professional audiences in 44 countries worldwide.
- Everest is an international symbol of success and John's stories resonate equally on the international stage. In the past two years, he has spoken at a VIP event in Doha, Qatar, where the audience included members of Emir Sheikh Hamad Bin Khalifa Al-thani's ruling family, and has addressed business audiences in Chile, South Africa, Egypt, Kenya, Mauritius and Morocco, as well as in Canada and the United States.

## QUOTES FROM JOHN'S KEYNOTE PRESENTATIONS

- **Motivation** – *"Success in this generation will belong to those who are **visionary** enough to predict the future and prepare for it – and **adventurous** enough to explore new ways of doing old things."*
- **Teamwork & Trust** - *"No team can perform effectively unless you trust others in the team. And trust only exists in teams who have struggled through difficult times together."*
- **Change** – *"Change is the one constant you should expect in life. Embrace change! Create change by always questioning the 'status quo' of the past."*
- **Commitment** – *"The roots of our commitment to goals lies in our core values and basic beliefs, both personally and within a team."*
- **Complacency & Risk** – *"The real danger in life is not in taking risks! When you're taking risks you're aware, you're paying attention. The real danger in life is in allowing yourself to become complacent, because that's when mistakes occur."*
- **Positive Dissatisfaction** – *"You must always remain "positively dissatisfied" with your performance – dissatisfied, but in a positive way, always looking for improvement."*

***"One veteran senior executive described  
your presentation as the best he had ever heard."  
American Express***

***"I've heard a lot of Everest speakers over the years  
and your talk today was definitely the best."  
IBM***

**[www.johnamatt.com](http://www.johnamatt.com)**