

Earplugs

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I lay in bed listening to the wind howl, wondering what I had gotten myself into. The inn at Paradise is old and it shudders and groans in the wind. The mountain is in a bad mood. It is August but there is snow everywhere. Tomorrow I am supposed to climb Ranier and already I am questioning my judgment.

It had taken me several years to get to this point. Some years earlier my wife Claudia and I had spent a week hiking in Mt. Rainier National Park. The park is stunning and the mountain beckoned. We had hiked up to Pebble Creek, which at 7,200 ft is where the trail ends and the permanent snowfield begins. Camp Muir was three miles and almost 3000 vertical feet above us. Muir serves as base camp for many of the climbers on the mountain. It consists of a couple old buildings, one of which serves as a backcountry ranger station, and an outhouse. Beyond Muir the mountain is heavily crevassed. From Pebble creek we could spot Camp Muir through our binoculars and we were both drawn to it. Claudia didn't think she was up to the hike but she urged me to go. And so I went.

The hike up to Muir was strenuous and hot, but uneventful. Above Muir lies the upper part of the Cowlitz glacier. A National Park Service sign warns against un-roped travel. This warning was reinforced by the numerous crevasses visible on the Cowlitz. Since I had left Claudia at Pebble creek, I spent little time at Muir and hurried back down. But I knew I would like to the climb Rainer. I had never done any real climbing though, so this seemed unlikely. That evening I shook with fever and chills. I had not taken enough

water or used enough sunscreen and the high altitude sun reflecting off the snow had fried me. I swore then and there that I would never let this happen to me again.

Several years later Claudia and I were hiking in Yosemite and saw that you could take a one-day “learn to climb course” from the Yosemite climbing school. Claudia urged me to take it. I am sure she now regrets this. I was over-weight, out of shape and initially hesitant but in the end I decided to take the course. I was more than a little nervous since my only other climbing experience had been repelling in Alaska, and there I had almost been killed.

However, the Yosemite climbing school is perhaps the best in the world and professional instruction makes a difference. I learned the basics of belaying, repelling and climbing and enjoyed it. Back in Cincinnati I had the opportunity to climb in the Red River Gorge in Kentucky and I started climbing in a local climbing gym.

We had a vacation planned in Portland during the break between summer school and the start of the fall quarter at UC. Claudia had to return early for some no doubt meaningless committee work and she suggested that I stay out and climb Rainier. I jumped at the chance. I signed up with Rainier Mountaineering, also known as RMI. RMI offers three different summit climbs. The quickest way to the summit is to take their two-day course. You spend the first day in snow school learning the basics of using an ice axe, walking in crampons, tying into a rope and self-arrest. You spend the night camped at Camp Muir and attempt to summit the next day. You go as a large group of 20-25 with two guides. I rejected this approach as both dangerous and unaesthetic. The summer before there had been a bad accident on an RMI climb. A group of clients on a two-day course were swept off the mountain by a large ice fall. One was killed and several others were injured. I felt the accident had happened because they were on the mountain too late in the day and that they had been late because the group was not fit enough. I was also concerned because none of the clients had the skills needed to rescue themselves. Besides, I didn't want to climb with a large crowd. I learned later that the guides call these courses “two day death marches.” The other two options were both five-day courses and included full crevasse

rescue courses. The difference between the two courses was in how much you carried. If you took the easier course, you camped at Muir using tents, stoves and fuel that the guide service had stashed there. The harder course was their expedition course. You carried all your gear. The brochure promised that this course “would prepare you for expeditions to Alaska and the Himalayans.” The brochure warned that this was their most physically demanding course and stated, “ You can not over train for this course.” I signed up. My application was accepted; I paid a deposit and immediately came down with the flu. I could not walk up a flight of stairs without needing to rest, let alone climb a mountain.

In truth I had a problem. Although I had been in excellent shape in the past, I wasn't in very good shape at the moment. A series of serious running injuries had sapped my fitness and I was fat and out of shape. With Rainer as a goal, I sharply cut back my food intake and began serious training. It was hard, both physically and mentally. I was tired and hungry all the time. Worse, I remembered when the workouts which now felt so hard, had been easy. But I kept at it. The weight dropped off. Several friends and colleagues tactfully enquired about my health, was I OK? I assured them I was. I was training to climb Rainer I explained. But I could tell they did not believe me. It was clear that they thought I had cancer. As my training progressed, workouts once again became easy and on a diet of 80-mile weeks coupled with weightlifting, I became lean and fit. I honed my self-rescue skills at home and in the climbing gym. I was ready to climb.

We had a delightful vacation in Portland. We sampled the restaurants and shops that Portland had to offer, hiked in the Columbia River gorge and snowshoed on Mt. Hood. I cut back my physical activity in Portland, tapering as if I was running a marathon. As a result I felt fat and out of shape, but snowshoeing on Hood reassured me. The altitude didn't bother me and I felt fit and fast. At 9000 feet I found a pair of men's sandals, Tevas size 10. They fit perfectly. Claudia flew home and I left for Rainer feeling confident.

My confidence did not last long. After a pleasant drive from Portland I arrived at Paradise. Here the road ends and there is an inn called Paradise Inn. The inn and the area

are named for the stunning beauty of their surroundings. I was shocked by the amount of snow. Geography has conspired to make Rainer the snowiest place on earth. Moist air rolls in from the Pacific, is pushed upward by Rainer and turns into snow. If Rainer were closer to the coast, the ocean would moderate the temperatures and much of the snow would fall as rain. If Rainer were further from the coast some of the moisture would drop out before hitting the mountain. Rainer is fairly far north and the second highest mountain in the lower 48. As a result the weather on Rainer is usually bad and many climbers use it to train for Everest. When I had last been to Rainer it had been a low snow year. This year they had a record year and Rainer received over a thousand inches of snow. It was early September and there was snow at the 3000 ft level.

Upon arriving at Paradise, I take a quick hike up to Pebble Creek to work my altitude acclimation. It is cold, gray, and windy. At Paradise it is sleeting but it turns to snow as I go higher. I am fit and gain altitude quickly, but the weather erodes my confidence. On the way up I pass a great many climbers who are returning. They tell horror stories. The winds on the mountain reached 80+ miles per hour last night. The returning climbers tell stories of tents being shredded and blown off the mountain. Some have lost sleeping bags and packs as well. None have summited and many have spent the night huddled together in the buildings at Camp Muir. They look completely whipped. Many are clearly near tears. Only the RMI guides are cheerful. They all say they are “doing awesome.” It seems forced. I hike back down, eat a bad dinner and try to go to sleep. The wind howls.

The next day I meet my climbing partners and guides. There are three guides and nine clients. The senior guide is named Keil. The other two are Jeff and J.J. J.J. is the junior guide. I don't know the difference, but I will soon learn that junior guides are at the bottom of the food chain. The other eight clients are all good friends. They are all in the furniture manufacturing business in North Carolina and have been planning this trip for a year. They have black vests with yellow embroidery reading Mt. Rainer Expedition 1999. Old friends, they refer to each other by a variety of nicknames. This makes it hard to learn their names since no one is ever called the same name twice in row. The

situation is unfortunate since as the only outsider I will never really fit in. It would be much better to be climbing with a group that did not know each other.

I am eager to get started but the guides spend the morning inspecting everyone's gear. At last we are ready and pack up. The guides distribute the group gear. I have been very worried about how heavy my pack will be. For group gear I get tent stakes, food and a shovel. I nip back to the car and drop a few items that I now consider luxuries. Running shoes for wearing around camp, clean underwear and some clean socks all get dumped as unnecessary weight. I put my pack on and the weight seems tolerable. It will be OK. Then J.J. walks over and hands me a one-gallon metal container full of white gas. Here he says, "Take this." I stuff it in my pack. My pack now weighs about 70 pounds and I have no idea how I will carry it up the mountain.

Just after noon we start up. My pack is extremely heavy, doesn't fit well and moves around on my body. The weather is poor, it is snowing and by the time we reach our camping spot at 8000 feet on the Fuhrer glacier everyone is cold, wet and tired. I am sure that I will be cold for the next five days and resign myself to this. The group is fit though, and no one complains. We camp on the Fuhrer glacier where we will spend the next couple of days. Visibility is poor and we can't see anything.

Our first task is chopping out tent platforms in the ice. This is done with ice axes and shovels and the trick is to get the platform absolutely level and smooth. We are carrying three-man tents and my tent mates are Rich and J. B. Every time we think that we have got the platform level, one of the guides wanders over and says, "Doesn't look level to me." We chop more ice. The job of chopping out the kitchen area falls to the junior guide J.J. I feel sorry for him and can't justify sitting around while he works so I go help him. Besides, working helps me stay warm. The last chore is digging the latrine. Not surprisingly this too falls to J.J. J.J. is trying to get dinner organized so I dig the latrine. Anyway, I need to use it. Dinner is bean burritos. The guides all seem pleased and proud of the food. We are all tired, wet and cold and are unimpressed but this is apparently the culinary high point of the trip. Not a good sign. Crawling into my sleeping bag feels

great. Rich and J.B. both snore but the pre-climb literature warned about this so I have brought earplugs.

Sunlight steaming through the tent wakes me up. It is a struggle to dress in the small cramped space available in the tent. My alpine boots are in the tent vestibule and are hard and stiff from the cold. Leaving the tent I find that only J.J. and I are up.

The sky is a bright blue and cloudless. The mountain, which was invisible yesterday, now looms above us. Breakfast is bad bagels and “hot drinks.” There is no coffee! All the hot drinks are packets of various powders mixed into hot water. Only instant is available. I pass on the instant coffee and settle for the same spiced apple mix that I had with last night's dinner. Under ordinary circumstances, I am sure it is unpalatable, but on Rainier it tastes pretty good. We take advantage of the sun and drape our wet clothes on the walls of the tents so that they can dry in the sun. With the sun, everyone's spirits improve.

The day is spent training on the glacier. We learn how to walk in crampons and how to use an ice axe to belay either ourselves or another climber. The guides pick a safe slope with a gentle run out, and we practice self-arrest. Few skills are more critical. A climber who falls on a steep icy slope has only seconds to stop himself. Failure means rocketing down the slope with ever increasing speed. Un-roped you are almost certain to be killed or injured. Roped you must hope that your rope-mates can stop you when the rope comes tight against them. If they fail, the whole team will be pulled off. The technique is in theory, simple. Locate your sharps; you don't want to impale yourself with your ice axe. Control your axe and with your uphill hand wrapped around the top of the adze and your downhill hand firmly gripping the shaft of the axe, you plunge the pick of the axe into the snow. You then bring your body weight over the axe, being careful not to gash yourself with the adze. While sliding you need to keep your feet elevated and off the ice since if you catch a crampon point you will almost certainly break an ankle and tumble. We practiced over and over in every possible position. Falling head first, feet first, on backs, and on our stomachs. Most of the group mastered the technique quickly but a few never seemed to get it quite right. Closely related is team arrest. Team arrest is used to stop a

falling rope-mate and to hold a crevasse fall. The guides tie us into a rope and we practice walking as a rope team. When roped everyone must move at the same speed. If you walk too fast you will drag the person behind you and there will be too much slack between you and the person ahead of you. If you are too slow you tend to pull the climber ahead of you off the slope. Proper rope management is critical and can make the difference between a minor fall and a tragedy. Rope management is fairly easy, except when the team is turning corners, a common maneuver used to avoid crevasses. The climber turning the corner has to walk a longer distance. The other members of the rope team must adjust their speed or they will tend to pull the climber in a straight line, which in this case will be into the crevasse. Neither Rich nor J.B. get the hang of turning corners, which is unfortunate since we will be climbing on the same rope team.

Unlike yesterday it is sunny and warm. By afternoon it's hot and the sun beats down unmercifully. A glacier is a very harsh place and living on a glacier requires constant self-discipline. Success on a climb is often determined not by how fit you are or by how well you climb, but by how well you take care of yourself. If it's cold and wet can you stay warm and dry? Do you use enough sunscreen? At high altitude the sun reflecting off the snow can fry you in no time. You must always wear a hat. A warm hat if it's cold and a billed hat if it's warm. You need to eat and drink enormous amounts. The high altitude dry air sucks the water out of you and it is easy to get dehydrated. Dehydration increases your susceptibility to altitude sickness. Altitude suppresses your appetite but you can burn 10,000 calories a day climbing at high altitude. Food is so important that the guides have stressed that lunch begins right after breakfast and extends until dinner. Over and over we are told we need to eat and drink at every rest break and in every spare moment. Can you get enough sleep? It's hard to sleep at altitude, yet you need more sleep than at sea level.

My past experience serves me well on the glacier. Having been fried by the sun years earlier, I slather on sunscreen and always wear a hat. Like most distance runners I believe that water cures most physical ills and I drink like a fish. We are responsible for our own food for lunch and snacks. The summer before I climbed Longs Peak. It's a non-technical

climb. A hike really, but Longs is over 14,000 ft and I lost my appetite at 12,600 trying to eat a frozen bagel. As a result, I have selected my food carefully. It's all things that I really like and they come from the finest bakeries and delicatessens in Portland. I am also much fitter than last year on Longs. I eat like a horse. Nevertheless, I can feel my weight dropping.

One member of our group, Fred has not been sufficiently disciplined. He forgot his sunscreen, does not wear a hat, and does not drink enough. We all offer him sunscreen but he usually refuses. By mid-afternoon he is vomiting and must return to the tents. His summit chances look grim.

Late in the afternoon the guides announce that we will go for the summit tomorrow. They are satisfied with our skills and the weather report is good. I am somewhat alarmed since we have not yet practiced crevasse rescue. The guides are unconcerned. I learn later that all guides believe that clients are incapable of carrying out a crevasse rescue.

Dinner is three-cheese pasta, although no Italian would recognize it. My feet hurt. I have been worried all along about my alpine boots. The others all have rented boots and crampons but I have bought both boots and crampons. The crampons that RMI rents are old-fashioned strap-on crampons. They are a pain to get on and off especially in the dark with gloves on. My crampons are modern step-in jobs. They snap on like a ski binding and are easy to get on and off. My boots are another matter. They don't fit quite right. The salesman had assured me that they would be fine once I had broken them in. He is wrong. Before bed I carefully inspect my feet. They hurt but there does not seem to be any serious damage. I put on some new moleskin and a pair of clean socks. I have lost my earplugs. I know they must be somewhere in my pack or in a pocket but I cannot find them. Rich and J.T. both snore loudly and I don't sleep very well. I haven't been disciplined enough to always put my earplugs back in the same place. I won't make that mistake again.

The guides wake us up at 3:00 am. J. J. has clearly been up for while since he already has snow melting for hot water. Breakfast is instant oatmeal. J.J. pours lukewarm water into our bowls and we mix in a package of oatmeal. It begins to congeal almost at once and is completely tasteless. I eat all of it plus half a chocolate bar. I need the calories. It takes an hour to get everyone organized, in crampons and tied into the rope. Fred says he is feeling better and thinks he can make it. We are climbing as three teams of four. J.J leads my rope team, with Rich next, followed by myself, with J.T. bringing up the rear. We are climbing with fairly light packs. To keep the weight down the guides have instructed us to carry only two water bottles each. I slip a third bottle into my pack. At 4:00 am we are off, climbing by headlamp. Spread out at 40 ft intervals no one talks. The only sound is the crunch of crampons on the hard snow. Its over cast and the my world shrinks to the pool of light cast by my headlamp. We are camped fairly low on the mountain and we need to gain 1000 ft to reach Muir, which is where most parties start. The glacier is rough and uneven, covered with snow hummocks. It's very different from the first time I was here. At Muir we take a 10-minute break to rest, eat and drink. From Muir we move onto the Cowlitz glacier and head toward the Cathedral rocks. It is still dark but the first hints of dawn are appearing and I can see that the glacier is heavily crevassed. We cross through a gap in the Cathedral rocks onto the Ingraham glacier and into the area known as the Ingraham flats.

Here Fred can go no further. Sick, he has been gutting it out but he has reached the end of his strength. He is "tagged and bagged." The guides stuff him into a sleeping bag and we leave him. He has strict instructions; he is not to move unless authorized to by a senior RMI guide. We will collect him on the way back. I feel very sorry for him. He has been stupid, but months of training and a considerable amount of money are now wasted. It will be a long wait. The Ingraham flats are, not surprisingly fairly flat and serve as rest.

Soon we reach the "icebox" and Disappointment Cleaver. This is the crux of the climb. The glacier is steeper here and very heavily crevassed. Looking into the crevasses I can see the blue glow from ice under pressure. The crevasses are beautiful, alluring and terrifying. Entering the "icebox" we have to walk across a long extension ladder that has

been thrown across a large crevasse. It is just like the pictures I have seen of Everest and walking across it in crampons concentrates the mind. The “icebox” is safe in the early morning cold but it will not be safe on the return trip. The “icebox” was the scene of the worst mountaineering accident in the history of North America. Here eleven RMI clients were swept to their deaths by an ice avalanche in 1981. Only last year an RMI client was killed and several others injured in the “icebox” area. We move quickly through the “icebox” and into the Cleaver. Disappointment Cleaver is well named. Many a climber’s hopes are dashed here. The Cleaver is long and both mentally and physically draining. This is the only sustained section of the climb where we climb on rock. The rock is loose and rotten and walking on it in crampons requires the utmost concentration. There is no stopping in the Cleaver; the rock fall hazard is too high. We exit the Cleaver and take a ten-minute break. The summit looms above us. I can see another team on the mountain approaching the summit. They look like ants. Everyone is tired. The guides warned us about this. They told us it is “OK to be tired here, everyone will be. We will be. It is not OK to be completely exhausted. If you are, you must tell us.” Keil has been explicit “we are experts, and even if you lie to us we will know how tired you are.” As a distance runner I am an expert in concealing fatigue and I know I could lie if I had to. But, I don’t. I am tired but I know I can maintain this level of effort for hours. Besides I have extra water and am drinking heavily. The guides ask each of us how we are doing. They question Joe especially closely. He is tired but says he is OK. We move on. After a 100 yards Joe says he cannot go any further. The guides are pissed. Very pissed. They yell at Joe, “We asked you a minute ago and you said you were fine.” Joe is un-roped and “tagged and bagged.” Only my rope team is now intact. I feel terrible for Joe. I would hate to be in his situation. The incident costs us 10-15 minutes and increases our chances of being late on the mountain but we are moving well and I am not worried. We stop once more before the summit but the rest of the climb is anticlimactic. We top out at a little over 14,400 and drop into the volcanic crater that forms the summit. I am starving and finish my food. I also finish my second water bottle. Rich is looking green and is uninterested in food. I eat his lunch. The highest point on the mountain is Columbia Crest and is on the other side of the rim. The guides emphasize that we have all summited and then ask who wants to walk over to Columbia Crest. About half of us do. It’s flat and the

walk is easy. We sign the summit registry and admire the view. The day is crystal clear and we can see Seattle and the San Juan Islands as well as Hood, Adams and Jefferson. The guides say that this is the best visibility they have seen this year.

Soon, we start down. Going down is easy, until we get to the Cleaver. This is the most dangerous part of the climb. Accidents in the Cleaver and the “icebox” almost always happen on the descent, after it has warmed up. We collect Joe and the guides issue strict instructions. Move quickly and quietly. Noise might trigger rock or ice fall. Stay alert. If you see rock or ice falling yell. Dodge if you can, otherwise turn and let your helmet and pack take the impact. Don’t fall! In the Cleaver, down is worse than up. It’s harder to descend loose rock than to climb up it. We exit the Cleaver without incident and stop for another 10 -minute break before entering the “icebox.” Here the guides issue additional instructions. We will move through the “icebox” one team at a time. That way if an accident happens there will be two rope teams available for a rescue. The first team is about to start down when they are stunned to spot a solo climber taking his lunch break in the middle of the “icebox.” He has picked the most dangerous spot on the mountain to have lunch. He past us earlier and asked the guides for information on the route. The guides figure that we can work around him and Keil leads the first team down. On the way down he suggests to the soloist that this is not a good lunch spot. Keil’s team clears the area and the second team starts down. One of the guys lets loose with a hog call “Suewee.” I cringe, and Jeff the guide on his team tells him to shut up. For reasons I don’t understand hog calls are big among the North Carolina boys. For the past three days they have been yelling “Suewee” at odd moments.

My team goes last and we descend to the Ingraham flats without incident. Here we pick up Fred and go down to Camp Muir. There is water at Muir and everyone drinks like mad. I have just finished the last of my illicit quart when we get to Muir and I am clearly feeling better than anyone else. Even so I am dehydrated and guzzle water. From Muir it’s an easy hike to our tents.

I borrow J.T.'s cell phone and quickly call Claudia to tell her that I am all right. We are all tired and crawl into our sleeping bags. I nap for a couple of hours and wake up when the wind starts to howl. I am afraid our tent may blow away so I bang in a couple of extra anchors and re-guy the tent. I try to rouse the others to fix their tents but I cannot get anyone else up. Not even the guides. I say screw it and go back to bed, only to wake up an hour later. I am starved and want dinner. No one else is up and finally I start melting snow. J.J. gets up and we cook dinner. This gets everyone up and we all wolf down bad food. As the sun goes down the North Carolina boys pull whisky out of their packs and start drinking. Alcohol at altitude is generally a very bad idea and I pass. As soon as the sun goes down I get cold and crawl into my sleeping bag. My feet hurt and are covered in raw blisters.

The next day is an instructional day and we spend the morning learning to set snow anchors. It's great fun and mostly just applied physics. The afternoon is spent practicing crevasse rescue and ice climbing. I get lowered into a crevasse so that I can practice climbing the rope in order to get out. The crevasse glows blue and green and is filled with interesting features. I won't want to be in a crevasse unintentionally, but this is great. I love it. We also learn to construct pulley systems for hauling injured climbers out of crevasses. This is also great fun and easy for a physicist. It is no accident that most of the guides I have climbed with have been scientists or engineers. We end the day with ice climbing. We are lowered back into the crevasse so that we can climb out with a couple of ice tools. I fell in love with ice climbing immediately and decide then and there that I want to learn to climb frozen waterfalls.

That night my feet are raw, bleeding and swollen and I am worried about the walk down tomorrow. Everything smells and Rich and J.B. both snore like hell. I don't get much sleep. It's cold that night and my water bottle freezes even though it's in the tent. It's sunny and nice in the morning; the morning is supposed to be spent glacier walking and climbing in and out of crevasses. None of the other clients wants to do this. Keil makes it clear that this is my call. I desperately want to do it, but I can barely walk and I reluctantly pass even though I fear that I am passing on the opportunity of a lifetime.

We pack up and start down. Since we must pack out all our trash, our packs are only slightly lighter than on the way up. The walk down is hell. My feet are so swollen that it is hard to put my boots on. Walking hurts with every step. We pass several groups of RMI clients on the way down. They are just starting out. The expedition groups look hard and fit, the two-day death march people look soft and I know that many will not summit. All ask us if we have summited. We say yes and Fred and Joe look at the ground. As we get lower we start passing non-climbers. It is clear that we are coming down from high on the mountain and many of the women give us admiring, clearly sexual looks. One woman is brutally honest. "Phew, you guys are ripe," she says. There is no doubt that she is right.

At last we get to the parking lot at Paradise. We meet an old lady there; she must be 80. "You boys down from the top?" she asks. We say yes. "Why I first climbed that mountain 50 years ago", she says. We dump our packs and I hobble to the car and change into my Tevas. They are the only shoes I can wear for the next two days. It is several hours before I can check in and shower. We all head to the bar and spend the afternoon drinking beer.

Finally I check in and take my first shower in five days. It's one of life's great pleasures.