Climbing the Matterhorn

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I had wanted to climb the Matterhorn for over twenty years. Or rather, once over twenty years ago, I had wanted to climb the Matterhorn. It's just about the hardest climb an ordinary person can do, and I'm very ordinary. Ten years ago I took a course in technical climbing in the Tetons, and by the second day, as I was desperately feeling a smooth, 200-foot cliff face for a handhold, I swore if I lived I'd never do this again. I vowed I'd build a chapel in the first spot I reached big enough to hold one.

But the Matterhorn, on the Swiss-Italian border, was supposed to be a little easier. This summer I found myself in Zermatt, at the base of the mountain on the Swiss side, for four days, right in the middle of climbing season, and the weather was perfect. The 14,700-foot mountain rose like a huge, jagged canine tooth into a pure blue sky. I had no excuses.

It costs a bundle. You can engage a guide through the Mountain Guide Office in Zermatt, but the guide, rental of crampons for climbing in the snow, a night's stay in the dorms at Hörnli Hut at the base of the climb the night before for you and the guide, and a tip for the guide afterwards for all the times he saved your life, can come to nearly $500. That's a lot of money for one day. But with conditions perfect and me getting older every year, I knew it was now or never. I'm 45. I can still hike fifteen miles a day in the Sierras, and I can jog a not very fast 10 K. A couple of years ago I even ran a marathon. But it gets harder every year to build up to these things and longer to recover.

You do need a guide, unless you're the sort that goes around climbing famous north faces on weekends. They say that any four of the guides can get a cow to the top (and at times I was to feel like that cow), while people who go without a guide frequently fall off. This is serious. Half the Zermatt cemetery is filled with them, starting with four members of the party of seven that first conquered the Matterhorn in 1865. On their way down one man slipped, at a place I would have to pass, and carried three others with him several thousand feet to the glaciers below. But guides don't lose people. It's bad for business.

The afternoon before the climb I hiked up to Hörnli Hut at 10,700 feet on the shoulder of the mountain, just before it gets steep. I knew I was out of my league and in trouble as soon as I arrived. There were several dozen other climbers there, and they were all ten to fifteen years younger than me, slim, and athletic, and had tans you just knew came from cross-country skiing in the Himalayas or kayaking up rivers in Alaska. That night in the dorm I engaged in a little sleep-like behavior, but mostly I worried.

We were awakened at four in the morning. By 4:30 we were roped to our guides—one climber per guide—and we started up the mountain in the dark. You wear a flashlight on your forehead so you can see where your hands go and where your feet go and, if you're lucky, where your guide went, but you can see little else. It's a good thing too. You don't want to see how far you have to fall. Unfortunately, I got a good picture of how far I had to climb. As I dropped farther and farther behind everyone else, I could see the string of their lights going up the mountain at the angle of a steep roof, far beyond where I had hoped the summit would be.

The climb is relentless. For the entire climb, there's never anything resembling a path. If you stop, you can only perch. You're always looking for handholds, and your average step would be like stepping onto a chair, if only the ledge were that big. Always up, up, up.

I have this problem with gravity. Whenever I want to go up, it wants to pull me back down. I get tired, and I keep wanting to stop and pant for air. My guide, Charli, didn't have that problem. He was forty years old and looked thirty. He had climbed the Matterhorn over 200 times. He bounded up and down mountains at this altitude every day. He was in superb condition, and he wanted to get to the top as fast as possible. First he complained bitterly as the other guides and their clients crowded past us on the narrow route. Then he threatened to turn around. Finally he'd yank on the rope whenever I paused. I felt like a dog on a leash.

There's actually a reason to want to do it quickly. As the day wears on, the sun melts the snow and makes it slippery. There were patches of snow we had walked right across in the early morning that we had to make long detours around in the afternoon on our way down.

The first part is mostly rock, but after three and a half hours we reached a large and steep stretch of snow. I balanced precariously on a rock about the size of a human skull to put on my crampons. As Charli bent over to help me fasten them, he slipped but caught himself. “God forbid!” he gasped—in English—which I took to mean, “God forbid I should die for this turkey.”

As we set out up the steep snow bank, I was startled to notice that Charli hadn’t put on his crampons! Nothing but bare boots! I thought, “If I pause and he tries to pull me, he’ll slip and we’ll both go.” In utter panic, I raced desperately to keep up with him. That pleased him immensely; he said, “You must be feeling a lot better now.” It wasn’t until then that he decided we’d make it all the way to the top.

The worst was to come. Shortly before the top the route is nearly vertical. Ropes have been attached permanently, and you pull yourself up them in the stiff and frigid wind, scratching madly at the cliff with the spikes on your crampons searching for toeholds. To make it worse, this is the place on the mountain where you meet all the people who raced ahead and are now on their way down. It was a traffic jam. As you’re trying to pull yourself up, someone else is crowding past you on the same rope trying to get down, crampons in your face and then reaching for the rope between your two hands. In the middle of it all, I’d have turned back at the least suggestion from the guide.

I declared victory as soon as I caught sight of the summit, and when I actually reached it, I didn’t feel the need to walk the hundred yards to a point that might be a few feet higher. Especially since the top is—well, one side is a sheer rock cliff and the other side is a steep slope of snow and the top itself is a track of footprints in the snow at the edge of the cliff. If your right foot slips, you end up in Switzerland. If your left foot slips, you end up in Italy. It's not a place to linger. A moment for the thrill of looking down on snow-capped peaks, a few pictures, and half a candy bar, and we began our descent.

"At least it's all downhill from here," I thought. But that didn't mean it was easy. The first problem came on the ropes. I couldn't find any footholds to take my weight, and as I was lowering myself with my hands, my arms gave out. It wasn't a matter of thinking, "I can't hold on any more," but rather of thinking, "I've got to hold on," and having my grip simply stop working in the middle of the thought. But Charli was above me the whole time on the descent, keeping close watch, and before I had fallen a foot, he caught me and lowered me gently to the next landing. It was the first of about half a dozen times he stopped my fall.

I could have caught myself most of those times.

The second problem was going the rest of the way down. On the ascent fighting gravity had been hard work, But negotiating the route had been easy. Going up, your eyes are where your feet will be in a few seconds, and it's easy to find footholds. Going down, however, your feet lead, and they don't have eyes to see where they should put themselves. Moreover, during most of the descent we were facing away from the wall, so I was looking out over the glaciers, with crows and the occasional helicopter flying beneath me, trying to balance on my heels in what would have been perfectly good toeholds. Add exhaustion to that. I was having more and more trouble looking away from the sheer drop and just not thinking about the possibility of tumbling to the galciers below. Hörnli Hut, visible the whole time below us, didn't seem to be getting any closer.

But Charli was encouraging all the way down. Not a complaint, even as my steps got shorter and more tentative with every half hour. He knew the best strategy for getting all this over with was being real nice to me. As for myself, my one source of pride during those last couple of hours was that I didn't break into tears. But that could have just been dehydration.

The whole climb, up and down, took ten and a half hours, every minute of it difficult. I didn't think that time was so bad. I had read that ten hours was average. But Charli said, "No, that's for people without guides. They keep getting lost." He'd have preferred seven hours.

The rest of the day I couldn't bring myself to look back at the mountain. It was simply too traumatic. The next morning I could look at it, but I didn't feel any sense of conquest at all. All I could think was, "How could anyone ever get up that mountain?" Not only that—the mountain no longer looked beautiful. It just looked mean. Mean and hostile. It was as if it was saying, "You think you conquered me, do you? Consider what your body feels like now and think again." Taking the train out of Zermatt, I had a good view of the mountain. As we entered a tunnel, I thought, "That's the last I'll see of the Matterhorn." But as we emerged from the tunnel, it was still there, standing defiantly, as if to say, "I'm not done with you yet."