

Why Mountains?

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Good morning, dear students, faculty, and colleagues here at BYU. Special greetings today also to our nationwide television and radio audience tuning in via BYUtv and BYUradio. On behalf of our entire staff behind the cameras and microphones at BYU Broadcasting, may I first say how much we enjoy bringing these inspiring devotionals to you each and every week. And may I also say, with equal certainty—and on behalf of one justifiably terrified member of our staff today—that it is a lot more pleasant being behind those cameras and microphones than in front of them.

Now I know you came here on this beautiful October day expecting a devotional. Instead, I want to invite you to take a hike with me—well, actually, make that a climb. And if it is heights that bother you, don't worry. As a confirmed acrophobic myself, I promise we are going to be cautious. You should know that I subscribe completely to the sentiments of Mark Twain, who once quipped:

*There is probably no pleasure equal to the pleasure of climbing a dangerous Alp; but it is a pleasure which is confined strictly to people who can find pleasure in it.*¹

Well, despite my fears, my aim today is to convince you that no matter how rocky the road ahead may look or how distant the summit may seem, your effort is worth it. I simply want to urge you onward and upward in your journey, because I promise you that, wherever you are on the path, what awaits you is—in the words of Joseph Smith—a view that is “glorious beyond description” (JS—H 1:32).

A Lesson from Y Mountain

Speaking of incredible views, just to the east of us in the foothills of the Wasatch Mountains is a dramatic mountain known as Y Mountain. It is called Y Mountain because of the 380-foot-tall by 130-foot-wide block Y that trumpets to the world that nestled at its base sits the campus of Brigham Young University.

Michael A. Dunn, managing director of BYU Broadcasting, delivered this devotional address on October 1, 2019.

It occurs to me that it is a good thing they opted to build just one letter on Y Mountain. But painting just one letter on the mountain was never the plan. In April 1906 the concept was to put the letter *B*, the letter *Y*, and the letter *U* on the mountain. But after a fire line of high school and university students worked feverishly for six hours passing bucketload after bucketload of whitewash up the mountain, they were only able to complete the letter *Y*. In a wise reconsideration, it was decided that one letter would be adequate.²

Well, with your permission today—but without President Worthen’s or the National Forest Service’s, I might add—I have decided to not only remodel the single letter on Y Mountain but also rename it, because I believe there is an argument to change it to a similar sounding yet somewhat more rhetorical and profound message: “Why mountains?” [A photoshopped picture was displayed of Y Mountain with “Why mountains?” written in block letters in place of the *Y*.]

Although it took hundreds of thousands of bucketloads of white pixels to pull off this audacious act, I took this liberty in the hopes that every time you hike or even glance up at Y Mountain—or the next time you might be faced with a mountainous challenge—you will simply ponder the blessed question “Why mountains?”

Why do we have mountains? And why are we so compelled to get on top of them? Is it simply “because [they are] there,” as the mountaineer George Leigh Mallory’s pithy quote suggested?³ Or are there grander, higher, and even divine purposes in these pinnacles?

Since the beginning, one of the reasons we don’t just admire mountains but feel so compelled to climb and conquer them is because of the fundamental and foundational truth that, as eternally progressing beings, we are predisposed to take on challenges. That is an essential underpinning of God’s plan of happiness. So you and I are divinely engineered to be dynamic and not static. Being in motion is requisite to progression. Thus we instinctively crave sacred summits—like the temple, general conference, or that summit of summits, heaven. And so even hard and uphill

journeys—like life, for instance—can’t help but foster and develop both our progress and a priceless byproduct of that effort: faith.

Conversely, travel limited to flat or inclined roads impedes our progression and can even foster laziness. Consider Alma’s strong caution about the casualness created by level roads when he said, “O my son, do not let us be slothful because of the easiness of the way” (Alma 37:46).

So think of mountains—and the inherent challenge they pose—as being good for our souls. Learning how to deal with and overcome things that we perceive as hard betters and improves us. That includes many of life’s summits, such as graduation, missions, and, yes, budding relationships trying to blossom into eternal ones. This myriad of essential life steps can easily be viewed as a hard road. But the truth is, all hard roads eventually merge with heavenly roads.

Embracing Life’s Challenges

So why mountains? Well, mountains—like those before us in this big-time adventure called life—tempt us, terrify us, test us, and try us. Mountains stretch us, break us down, and can sometimes even bring us to an exasperated halt. At the same time, they stir our souls, inspire us, and have this transformative ability to rekindle hope, steel our resolve, and hone our faith, step by courageous step. This mandates a never-before-thought-possible ability to push ourselves to unthinkable heights, for it is only in testing our limits that we find out how limitless we are. It is only then—when we push ourselves beyond our perceived capacity—that we discover within ourselves the courage, fortitude, and faith to continue the journey. As the Australian mountaineer Greg Child put it, “Somewhere between the bottom of the climb and the summit is the answer to the mystery of why we climb.”⁴

As if an uphill climb isn’t enough, one common challenge of any high-altitude journey is that there is usually always some kind of pesky obstacle that inevitably pops up in our path. Most often this happens at inopportune and unexpected times. And no matter the size, shape, or form, unforeseen

obstructions can discourage, detour, and even even derail the strongest and most determined person.

Those are the times when some might rightly ask, “Is this really worth it?” or, “I don’t see any way around this.” To which I unequivocally say: “Yes, it is worth it. It is so worth it. And yes, you will get through it—if you decide to.” Continuing on is simply a matter of first accepting and embracing the doctrinal reality that obstacles are an essential and embraceable feature of the plan of salvation and the pathway of happiness and that the covenant pathway is not only oftentimes uphill but strewn, end to end, with these aggravating hurdles and hitches.

President Dallin H. Oaks affirmed that problem-solving is an inherent part of the plan:

*All of us face obstacles. All of us have challenges. We all walk paths that lead us toward heights we think we cannot ascend. Sooner or later we all stand at the foot of cliffs we think we cannot scale.*⁵

Note that President Oaks referred to “cliffs we think we cannot scale.” Often our perception of what we think we can and cannot do is far different from the reality of what we can and cannot do. I believe we are more limited by our desire than we are by our capacity. The English language idiom “making a mountain out of a molehill” captures perfectly the phenomenon that occurs when someone like me makes too big of a deal over an obstacle that, in reality, is actually pretty small.

To be sure, there are very real, dark, chronic, and major physical, emotional, and spiritual problems that many people unfortunately face. I do not intend for a moment to minimize or be dismissive of the myriad of very vexing issues that many—including some of you here today—face on a daily basis. But what I have found as I have analyzed my personal struggles is that the reality is that most of these problems really are more molehills than Mount Everests.

Elder Horacio A. Tenorio, a General Authority Seventy, gave an interesting perspective on those obstacles and spoke about the remarkable traits that emerge within us when we find the fortitude to move beyond these impediments. He said:

*Problems form an important part of our lives. They are placed in our path for us to overcome them, not to be overcome by them. We must master them, not let them master us. Every time we overcome a challenge, we grow in experience, in self-assuredness, and in faith.*⁶

Summitting My Mount Everest

One summer nearly twenty-five years ago, I learned this lesson firsthand as my adventure-loving wife, Linda, somehow persuaded me—her “fraidy cat” husband—and a small group of our friends to join her in doing something she had dreamed of doing since she was a little girl. That was to summit a 13,775-foot peak in Wyoming known as the Grand Teton. And while it was her biggest dream, it was more like my biggest nightmare! My feelings were best summed up by the comedian George Carlin, who once said, “I don’t have a fear of heights. I do, however, have a fear of falling from heights.”⁷

Admittedly, as rugged and daunting as the Teton Range appears, it really is one of the most stunning postcard-perfect mountain panoramas in the world—and especially so for me when viewed from the bedrock security of the valley floor!

But it wasn’t these mountains and their breathtaking summits that terrified me. Rather, it was the moment, which I will forever remember, in our mountaineering school when I first learned about a fabled and much storied obstacle that we would face on the route to the top of the Grand Teton. In reality it was just a simple, yet very technical, rock protrusion, but from the minute I heard about it, I started to get nervous.

Brad Wieners, in writing an article for *Sports Illustrated* about climbing the Grand Teton—which, by the way, didn’t exactly quell my anxiety with the title “Countdown to Tragedy”—called out the main obstacles on this iconic mountain:

The real challenge of climbing the Grand Teton isn’t maneuvering on rock, “it’s the exposure”—that is, exposure to dizzying falls.

. . . As long as you’re fit, you can handle the physical effort of summiting the mountain, but you have to [ramp] up your courage for features such as . . . a large flake of rock on a ledge that requires you to either go

*up and over the flake or out and around it, over a deep abyss. It's terrifying or exhilarating—or both.*⁸

For me, there was no debate—it was terrifying! And how ironic was it that, in a climb that would take two days over thousands of vertical feet, the scariest part to me was just a single small “step” in the middle of the ascent?

That step—officially called the Wall Street Step Across—is no more than three feet wide. It is part of the fabled Wall Street section on the Exum route, and it marks the beginning of where the ascent of the Grand gets really serious. You begin by climbing onto a very comfortable fifteen-foot-wide ledge. But as you inch your way along this ramp, often in the darkness, it ever so slowly but dramatically begins to tilt outward while narrowing down to a width of no more than a few feet across at an abrupt end of the ledge.

At that point there is a gap in the rock and an abyss, such as was referred to in the *Sports Illustrated* article. Across this gap of less than a meter is an outcropping of rock that forms a blind corner. This requires the climber to take an unseen step around this corner, where they—hopefully—find footing on the other side of the ledge. That is right—you can't see where you are stepping. And as if a blind step isn't scary enough, you step across this gap with nothing but 1,500 feet of very thin, frosty air beneath you.

All during the long hike to the basecamp the day before, I agonized over this little problem I was going to encounter. That night I found it difficult to eat. And obsessing over and over about this one simple step kept me wide-eyed and sleepless the entire night before the summit attempt.

In hindsight, it wasn't that I was incapable of making the step; it was a very simple move. For me—and for any of you—a step of that kind in any other situation would have been no big deal. Reflecting on it later, it wasn't that I couldn't do it; it was simply that I didn't have the courage to conquer this particular fear.

This is the interesting thing about fear: Fear can freeze us. It can paralyze us. It can stop us in our tracks and keep us from moving forward. Its

gripping chokehold suffocates our sapling faith, and without that faith we cannot move forward.

Elder Boyd K. Packer affirmed that faith is both the beacon and the propellant that keeps us on our journey:

*Faith, to be faith, must center around something that is not known. Faith, to be faith, must go beyond that for which there is confirming evidence. Faith, to be faith, must go into the unknown. Faith, to be faith, must walk to the edge of the light, and then a few steps into the darkness.*⁹

As students, you may be feeling that stifling fear as you face what the late apostle Elder Robert D. Hales described as the “decade of decision.” In summing up the road before you, Elder Hales observed that in the next ten years or so you must step to the edge of the light and even a few steps beyond as you engage in the major decisions of your life. These include school, a mission, the temple, dating, marriage, a career, graduate school, and, especially, forming and firming up your testimony of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ.¹⁰ Considered all at once, the sheer size and number of these perceived obstacles may look like an avalanche headed your way. They might even cause you to momentarily lose sight of the summit beyond them. Taking them on all at once can be overwhelming and sometimes even debilitating. Or decisions can be tackled one at a time using a combination of faith, courage, and simply taking that very first step—and then another and then another—until we find ourselves moving again toward the summit.

As tough as those first few steps can be, I will tell you that nothing is as exhilarating as simply putting ourselves back in motion. It is so freeing that it neutralizes fear within us because it causes us to dig deep to find the courage to conquer anything on our horizon. That courage is the catalyst of faith, which, as you know, cannot commingle with fear. But it will exact a full-on effort on your part.

President M. Russell Ballard talked of the price to be paid when he said:

*It will require every bit of our strength, wisdom, and energy to overcome the obstacles that will confront us. But even that will not be enough. We will learn, as did our pioneer ancestors, that it is only in faith—real faith, whole-souled, tested and tried—that we will find safety and confidence as we walk our own perilous pathways through life.*¹¹

Believe it or not, I somehow found this kind of faith on that summer morning nearly a quarter of a century ago. As you ponder your approach to that next critical step looming in your life, let me tell you how I did it.

Our seasoned guide, Jack, would be the first one to take that step. And just as he had done in our beginning and intermediate mountaineering classes, Jack promised he would lead and show us the way. At basecamp he assured me that he had full confidence in my ability and would not let me fail. Well, as I sat there, crouched and shivering against the rock ledge, I marveled as he deftly and confidently made the move across the gap and stepped around the corner.

Not hearing a fading scream echoing off the rocks, I was pretty sure he had made it safely. But then came the scary realization that, as the weakest climber in our group, I would be next. Just after concluding my 687th prayer that morning, I found myself at a critical juncture in this climb as I heard the chilling invitation coming from our unseen guide around the corner as he said, “Climb, Michael.”

It was go time. There was no turning back and no other reasonable option—although I had pondered everything from a parachute to a helicopter to a hang glider! In that moment, and after a very deep and calming breath, I somehow bubbled up enough courage to make a very simple decision. Here is what I decided: Instead of churning over and over again what disaster might befall me, I would instead focus on the basics and on my guide’s example. I would rely on all the fundamentals I had been taught in mountaineering school. In other words, I would only worry about the things I had control over.

In that same moment I visualized my ultimate goal. As I saw myself, hands raised in a

triumphant manner, stepping proudly onto the summit of the Grand Teton, the doomsday scenarios that I had so vividly rehearsed and played out in my head over and over again during the preceding days faded quickly to the background. Unexpectedly, a warm feeling of calmness and assurance washed over me. That feeling was faith—faith sufficient to displace the fear and backfill it with the courage I needed.

This infusion of faith also allowed me to find focus. Even if my legs were wobbly, my faith was firm. I stepped to the edge, locked my focus like a laser on that rock across the gap, and felt as committed and self-assured as I ever have. I did not look back, and I certainly did not look down. Instead I did everything I had been taught and was capable of, and I took that step.

Never has there been a more glorious feeling in my entire being—body and soul—than when my climbing boot found purchase on that blessed, solid rock around the corner. With a secure foothold, I shifted my weight and confidently pulled myself across and onto this newfound next level. From the triumphant—no, truth be told, make that primeval—scream of joy that I let out, you would have thought I had just summited Mount Everest, which, for me, in this tiny moment of victory, I actually had! I had literally and figuratively turned a corner. Giddy with confidence, I shouted encouragement to those coming next—much to the chagrin, I am sure, of those braver and more skilled climbers who followed me. Brimming with joy, relief, and elation, I again offered a short but very sincere prayer of thanks heavenward and then raised my arms in celebration.

Then I felt something else—this time something physical. But it was not until I made that upward motion with my arms that I realized there was so much more to my successful crossing of the Wall Street Step Across. The moment I put my arms up, I felt the taut pull of the rope securely fastened by a figure-eight knot looped through the carabiner in my climbing harness. I glanced over at Jack, who flashed me one of those I-told-you-you-could-do-it smiles. As I watched him get ready to belay the next climber

in our group, I realized that his belay had held me securely through the entire move. In fact, I am sure he had held me tight enough that I could have dived headfirst into that Wall Street gap and still not even had a scratch! But he had given me just enough slack in the rope to let me do it on my own. And although in my anxiety I had completely forgotten about this protection and could not see him or even sense him, he was literally there to save me from “the fall.”

Similar protections are promised you by the Lord that are even more sure and secure than even the stoutest climbing rope. Our Savior and Seasoned Guide has promised:

There I will be also, for I will go before your face. I will be on your right hand and on your left, and my Spirit shall be in your hearts, and mine angels round about you, to bear you up. [D&C 84:88]

Finding Faith and Courage to Move Mountains

That simple test gave me the courage to go on and face other challenges, including, believe it or not, a return to Wall Street. Against my better judgment—but with the encouragement of Linda and my newfound confidence—we actually made it a family tradition, a rite of passage, to climb the Grand Teton with each of our children to celebrate their high school graduations. (This was one time that I was so thankful I only had three kids!) And although I still have a chronic case of the willies when I am at those heights, I have indeed become braver and bolder with each return trip. My confidence in myself and in my God has grown exponentially. The legendary mountaineer Sir Edmund Hillary is said to have expressed it another way: “It is not the mountain we conquer but ourselves.”¹²

Dr. Seuss, in his infinitely wise and whimsical way, also attested to your better-than-you-know abilities when he wrote:

And when you're alone, there's a very good chance you'll meet things that scare you right out of your pants. There are some, down the road between hither and yon, that can scare you so much you won't want to go on.

...

*So be sure when you step.
Step with care and great tact
and remember that Life's
a Great Balancing Act.*

...

*And will you succeed?
Yes! You will, indeed!
(98 and $\frac{3}{4}$ percent guaranteed.)
KID, YOU'LL MOVE MOUNTAINS!*

...

*Today is your day!
Your mountain is waiting.
So . . . **get on your way!**¹³*

Your mountain is indeed waiting and is ready to tackle. As you take it on, you will find inner and yet-to-be-discovered strength by combining the formidable tandem of courage and faith with God's promised protecting and enabling blessings. That is even better, by the way, than what Dr. Seuss promised because it is 100 percent guaranteed—especially as we live worthy of those promised blessings.

President Oaks explained more about how this formula works when he said:

Nothing is impossible to those who keep God's commandments and follow his directions. But the blessings that carry us over obstacles do not precede our efforts; they follow them. . . .

What do we do when we face obstacles in the fulfillment of righteous responsibilities? We reach out and climb! The blessings that solve problems and carry us over obstacles come to persons who are on the move.¹⁴

My dear brothers and sisters, I ask you today to ask yourselves just one question: Is your life on the move? And if not, why not? Whether you find yourself shuffling or skipping up the covenant pathway, it really doesn't matter; being in gear does.

As you face the hard and uphill road ahead, please remember that you are not alone. We all face different and yet similar trials. As a reminder, periodically please remember when you look up at Y Mountain to ask yourself the question “Why mountains?” My prayer is that you will remember that they are there not to befuddle us but to bless us.

May we also remember the matchless example of our guide, Jesus Christ, who went first and showed us that more perfect way. As He beckons you to take your turn and climb, may you rally the courage and faith to do it on your own while at the same time relying fully on the absolute certainty of that heavenly belay.

Finally, remember it is likely you will face mountains of doubt and have faith sufficient to move mountains—and sometimes have both experiences in the very same day! But I pray that you will have the vision and fortitude when you encounter deterrents—be they mountains or molehills—that you will see them for the heaven-sent opportunities they are, that you will charge headlong into them, seeking those summits offering views “glorious beyond description,” and that you will bravely and confidently declare as Caleb of old, “[Lord,] give me this mountain” (Joshua 14:12).

In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. Mark Twain (Samuel L. Clemens), *A Tramp Abroad* (Hartford, Connecticut: American Publishing Company, 1880), 411 (chapter 36, “Zermatt”).

2. See “Y on the Mountainside: 1906 to the Present,” Brigham Young High School History, byhigh.org/History/Ymountain/Yletter.html; see also Harvey Fletcher, *Autobiography of Harvey Fletcher* (Provo: H. Fletcher, c. 1967), 15–16.

3. When asked why he wanted to summit Mount Everest, climber George Leigh Mallory responded, “Because it’s there” (quoted in “Climbing Mount Everest Is Work for Supermen,” *New York Times*, 18 March 1923, x11).

4. Greg Child, from an interview in Jonathan Waterman, “The Natural: Greg Child,” in Jonathan

Waterman, ed., *Cloud Dancers: Portraits of North American Mountaineers* (Golden, Colorado: AAC Press, 1993), 280.

5. Dallin H. Oaks, “The Message: Reach Out and Climb!” *New Era*, August 1985.

6. Horacio A. Tenorio, “Teachings of a Loving Father,” *Ensign*, May 1990.

7. George Carlin, *Napalm and Silly Putty* (New York: Hyperion, 2001), 210; emphasis in original.

8. Brad Wieners, “Climbing the Grand Teton,” sidebar in Wieners, “Countdown to Tragedy,” *Sports Illustrated* 115, no. 2 (18 July 2011): 61.

9. Boyd K. Packer, “What Is Faith?” in Spencer W. Kimball and others, *Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1983), 42; also Packer, “Faith,” *Improvement Era*, November 1968, 62.

10. See Robert D. Hales, “To the Aaronic Priesthood: Preparing for the Decade of Decision,” *Ensign*, May 2007.

11. M. Russell Ballard, “You Have Nothing to Fear from the Journey,” *Ensign*, May 1997; emphasis in original.

12. Often attributed to Edmund Hillary, this phrase is thought to have originated with mountaineer George Leigh Mallory, who wrote, “Have we vanquished an enemy? None but ourselves” (“Mont Blanc from the Col du Géant by the Eastern Buttress of Mont Maudit,” *Alpine Journal* 32, no. 218 [September 1918]: 162). See Garson O’Toole (pseud. of Gregory F. Sullivan), “It Is Not the Mountain We Conquer, But Ourselves,” *Quote Investigator*, 18 August 2016, quoteinvestigator.com/2016/08/18/conquer.

13. Dr. Seuss, *Oh, the Places You’ll Go!* (New York: Random House, 1990), 35, 40, 42, 44; emphasis in original.

14. Oaks, “Reach Out and Climb!”