

The Seven Noble Tasks

September 8

The First Noble
Task: The Climb

It's the climbing that makes the man; getting to the top is an extra reward.

Robert Lipsyte, *The Contender*

“You will hate us at the bottom of the mountain,” we warned our students, “but you’ll love us at the top. You will think you can’t do it. You’ll tell us it’s impossible. But you *can* do it, and regardless of what your body or mind may be telling you, it *is* possible. We know this because we’ve done it. And others who came before you have done it too. You’ll ask us why we are making you do this, but once you get to the top, you’ll understand.”

Cinder Cone is a tephra volcano rising abruptly 700 feet above the surrounding mountain plateau. It is far from the highest climb in Lassen Volcanic National Park, but it is clearly the steepest, the most daunting, and the most dispiriting climb. Devoid of trees and other substantial plant life, it is one of the few places where you can see the complete route during the ascent, and thus your progress during the climb is barely perceptible.

Cinder Cone looks like an anthill on steroids. Formed from a series of eruptions ending in 1851, a double crater caps the 30-degree incline. If you dumped a pile of sand in your yard, it would fan out to form this same angle of repose. It is the steepest slope that loose debris can attain without collapse. A narrow trail spirals precipitously toward the top.

Tephra cone eruptions occur when loose bits of lava are spewed into the air and then fall back, forming a cone of loose debris around the base. Unlike a Hawaiian volcano with its gentle slopes and massive base, a tephra cone is diminutive but steep. And unlike a plug

dome volcano with its sheer cliffs, a tephra cone can be climbed—barely. You’d wish it couldn’t. I have counted that it takes a thousand steps to reach the top, but for every two steps you gain, you slide back one in the loose volcanic cinders, so you end up climbing it twice.

To get there, the students rode seventy-five miles on winding roads that took them from the Central Valley of northern California up to an elevation of 6,000 feet in the Cascade Range. Then it was six miles of dirt roads to the campground at Butte Lake. This part was fun for the students, who saw it as an opportunity to get away from the classroom and all of its lessons. Then they enjoyed a level hike through a shaded pine forest for a mile before the trees parted and the volcano erupted into view in sheer desolation.

“You expect us to climb *that?*” they protested. “You’re crazy!” Immediately, they began to tell us they couldn’t do it. Others may have succeeded, but certainly they could not be expected to make it. Some charged the trail with false bravado, only to slow to a crawl a few feet into the climb. In fact, many did drop to their hands and knees pretty quickly and crawled up the trail. They walked forward a few paces then bent at the waist with their hands braced against their knees as they gasped for oxygen in the crisp alpine air. They looked up but saw that the summit looked no closer than it did before. They glared at us with looks that revealed their agony. A few more steps, and they paused to suck on the water bottles they had brought. Their faces were already reddened and soaked with perspiration. A few more steps, and they began to peel off the layers of sweatshirts they had needed only a few moments before, yet still the summit was a distant and mocking peak. More steps, more water; more steps, more perspiration. If discouragement had a face, you could see it already, and they’d barely begun. If defeat has a face, it too was beginning to show as they looked toward the top. And then they turned around.

Looking down the precipitous incline, they saw that they already had achieved such height that they momentarily experienced vertigo. The friends behind them were dwarfed on the plateau. The view swept away like that from an airplane window. With renewed hope they turned back to look at the summit and were shocked to see that it still seemed no closer. It was as if the base of the mountain were dropping away and yet the peak was ascending at the same pace they were.

From the base, you would have to watch patiently to detect movement in the ascending line of students. Each time we passed by students, we endured their complaints. “Why are you making us do this?” Invariably, some turned backward to see if walking in reverse was easier. It wasn’t. Their leg muscles were burning. We knew because ours were burning too. Our calves and thighs felt rock-hard and ached as if they had been pummeled. Our strength was robbed. We looked like tottering old folks taking mincing steps up the trail.

Any hope of looking pretty vanished. The boys were dripping. The girls’ makeup was smeared. Up ahead a lone and twisted pine stood like an abandoned climber frozen upon the trail. I sat down nearby and grinned at the students as they passed. One by one the students reached me and muttered oaths. “I can’t believe you! This is the worst day of my life! You’re right: I *do* hate you!”

They didn't know about the tree because they had never been there before. What they saw as an isolated waypoint was really a goalpost. The tree marks a bend in the trail, and as they turned past it the summit sprawled open before them.

Joining them at the top, you would think these were not the same students. They were elated, energized, and empowered. Only their sweaty attire belied their enthusiasm. "This is incredible!" they shouted, as they scanned the massive double crater and took in the 360-degree view of the volcanic landscape. "Can we hike into the crater?" they begged. These were the same students who didn't want to take one more step one step ago. But off they ran. Their muscles were renewed and invigorated, and all thoughts of exhaustion were forgotten. A new energy born of triumph propelled them, for accomplishment propels all of us.

* * *

Psychologists once told educators that if we worked on students' self-esteem, everything would be okay. If students had high self-esteem, they would not be a behavioral problem. They would work hard; they would learn more; they would be happier. Then we were told to put our chairs in a circle with one student in the middle. We took turns telling the student how special he or she was. We said we liked the student, and that he or she was unique and wonderful. Then we put the chairs back into rows and began our geography lesson, and the center of attention would resume the manufacture and launch of spit wads.

It sounded so logical—how could such a system fail? The truth was, we later discovered, that the diagnosis about self-esteem was true for the most part, but the cure was wrong. Our self-esteem does indeed govern many of our actions. But we don't get it from others. We gain it in a very specific way: our self-esteem is a measure of *our* perception of *our* accomplishments. How others feel about it is distantly secondary. Those significant voices in our lives, such as parents and respected peers, will have some influence on how we feel about ourselves but only as reinforcements and confirmations of our own beliefs. The problem with our approach was that the person who needed the self-esteem boost was accomplishing nothing as we layered warm fuzzies upon the person. If we want our students, or anyone else for that matter, to achieve their potential, we must ensure they have a good self-image. And if we want them to have a good self-image, we must guide them to achieve greatness. That sounds like circular reasoning, but it's not. By facing mountainous goals that are beyond us, by assaulting those obstacles and overcoming them, the view we have of ourselves changes as surely as the view of a distant landscape below.

*Our self-esteem is a
measure of our perception
of our accomplishments.
How others feel about it is
distantly secondary.*

So often as parents we want to help our children avoid failure, frustration, and pain. It seems to be our parental duty. To some degree it is, but if it is overplayed, we deny our children the opportunity to conquer, to achieve, and to solve problems. If they don't get this exercise in the minor confrontations of childhood, they will soon be adults with character that is too atrophied to overcome the inevitable and more significant struggles of life. Children in our relatively affluent society naturally are more susceptible to this. Allowing them the opportunity to face problems within safe limits is one of the greatest

gifts we can give children. Expressing our belief that they are up to the task is another equally valuable gift. In this garden of nurturing care, the self-image of the child will grow step by step.

* * *

And step by step, they climbed Cinder Cone. We told them we knew they could do it, not because they were warm and fuzzy, but because we had already walked those same steps.

Nearly all the students had made it by now. We were missing only a handful. Most years, some of them give up and never make the summit. Other years we get 100 percent attendance at the top. We were ready to hike down, when I heard some students cheering. A boy from our special education class was inching up the trail in mincing steps. Two students from a Christian school who were also climbing the cone flanked him. Starting later than we had, they picked up the straggler and encouraged his every step. He too made it to the top and was elated by his accomplishment.

We gathered the students, unfurled our school flag, and took our class picture.

Now came the fun part. We released the students for the hike down to the lake, where we would enjoy our well-earned lunch. Some sprinted down the trail with reckless abandon. Their strides vaulted them down the trail with such uncontrolled speed that they wouldn't be able to slow down and stop until they reached the level ground at the bottom.

I followed in the rear, guiding our special education student down the trail with the help of one of our parent volunteers. Then we saw him, our last missing student, paused halfway up the mountain. Again the students congratulated him on how far he got. He was a popular student but physically out of shape, and he was clearly exhausted. "Are you going to finish the climb?" a friend asked him.

"I don't think so. I'm pretty tired. I'll probably turn back with you."

"I'll go up with you," she offered.

"So will I," another friend joined in.

The student looked toward the distant summit while battling doubt. "I'll go with you too," I added.

He hesitated. "I don't know if I can do it," he drawled. "I'm not feeling good."

"I *know* you can do it," I encouraged. "I know what you are going through, but you are over halfway there. We will take it one step at a time, and we'll walk with you all the way."

He trudged a few more minutes up the mountain and paused again. "I don't think I can do it," he warned.

Knowing that he was a grade-motivated student, I explained, "You are nearly 80 percent of the way there. That's a B-. Let's go for the A+." He took a few more steps and then doubled over, heaved, and collapsed. After losing every drop of his breakfast, he got up, cleaned up, and finished the ascent with his friends and me walking alongside.