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Mountains

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*Are not the mountains, waves and skies a part
Of me and of my soul, as I of them?*

Byron¹

In the 1960s, in the West, several ideas rather suddenly gained strength. Respect for unindustrialized societies increased. The strange fact was acknowledged that people in some stone-aged communities feasted much more and worked much less than in our “rich” countries. They worked less than half the hours we consider normal. Missionaries told about the abysmal poverty, about the abominable things these people were forced to eat, such as roots of trees and heads of insects. In the 1960s, students who learned their languages found that they had a richer and more nourishing diet than we have. They enjoyed talking at length about what they should have for dinner; they sometimes could choose between as many as 80 possibilities. Of course, there were also stone age communities in severe poverty, but what was important was the new way of looking at the *rich* countries: from the outside and well aware of their weaknesses.

At the same time of this new way of looking at our own “richness,” the long range, international deep ecology movement gained momentum. When people talked about the resources of the Earth, supporters of the deep ecology movement would ask: “Do you mean resources for wolves, for eagles, or just for humans?” When people deplored the excessive population increases in the “undeveloped” countries, the supporters would remind them that a baby born in the richest country heralded more damage to nature than 100 babies born in Bangladesh. But the unfortunate distinction of “undeveloped/developed,” and the later distinction of “developing/developed,” established itself and installed the horrible idea that through economic growth all over the world, the non-industrial cultures could and should reach the material

standard of living, including the level of consumerism, waste, and crime rates, of the richest countries. Here again a minority fought the dominant, catastrophic notions, but even today the notion of universal economic growth, not that of economic-ecological progress is accepted by a majority in the rich countries.

An offshoot of the critical attitudes toward the arrogance and provinciality of the West concerned Western mountaineering. Thousands of small and big expeditions visited mountains in non-industrial countries and found in many communities a totally different attitude towards mountains than the dominant, or at least culturally accepted, attitude in the industrial society. I read about the Sherpa tribes of the Himalaya in the 1960s that I planned to see for myself. It resulted in a series of small expeditions, starting in 1971, with good friends, centred around the Sherpa community of Beding in Rolwaling Himalaya. Straight up from Beding there are three mountains, the “three gods” (*Tridevas*) about 20,000 feet high and there is a colossal one, Gauri Shankar. That mountain, in spite of causing great storms, avalanches, and dangers, was venerated even more than the others.

At the frequent great feasts, people would throw a little beer towards Gauri Shankar, called locally *Tseringma*, “The Mother of the Good Long Life.” I found an attitude that reminded me of my own attitude held towards *Hallingskarvet*, a great Norwegian mountain, since I was about ten. [Where Naess now has his mountain cabin *Tvergastein*.]

When I started climbing, I felt that the walls and ridges *invited* me cordially, saying “Come on, little speck of dust, come and partake in the greatness of both of us together. I have cracks and many more holds than you can see from where you stand. Trust me! I shall warn you when storms are near. I shall warn you when my snow or ice is ready to move down. I shall warn you of any so-called danger! But focus on me, not on achievement!” When bad things happened, it was by ignoring warnings, by not lovingly having the mountain itself in focus, but some silly question relating to our own success.

In the literature of Western (and Japanese) climbers, the features of superb mountains and glaciers have been characterized in ways that are not those of love and respect: as threatening, menacing, repulsive, revolting, insecure, untrustworthy, unreliable, treacherous, hostile, and malevolent. The mountain is attacked, assaulted, besieged. It retaliates, resists, sends down avalanches . . .

There are enough conflicts in society and the lives of all of us. It is not necessary to experience mountains in the same way.

A strong reaction against the idea of the hostility of grand nature started in the 1960s. But large expeditions cost a lot of money, and in order to get that money, expedition leaders often must let journalists dwell on the horrible. And as a jargon, and only a jargon, climbers may persist in talking about a mountain as an enemy.

Impressed by the high cultural level of the Sherpas of Beding, we asked the people whether they would like expeditions to come and “conquer” Gauri Shankar, leaving a lot of money in the village, or see to it that no humans should walk on the sacred mountain, in the way they conceived sacredness. The leader of the little democracy assembled the 46 families and asked that question. Result: 46 voted for saving their Mother of the Good Long Life from being degraded by expeditions. Never mind the money. Their leader, Gonden, and I walked seven days to the government palace with a strong appeal to the King not to permit an assault. There were more than 30 applications for expeditions, and it was high time to prevent the government from opening up the politically sensitive region along the Tibetan border. No answer was received, but there was still hope: That alpine clubs would give up their requests to attack the sacred mountain. To no avail. To most of the climbers, it did not at that time make sense to “save” a mountain. The respect of the wishes of the local population was not yet deep enough. Today the attitude has changed. Mountains are treated with love and respect by a sharply increasing number of climbers. Even the status of conscious, serious risk-taking is decreasing.

But, some climbers may retort, if you do not take serious risks, you are not going to try the most difficult climbs. Wrong again. Often whether on Mount Everest or other mountains, the less risky are often the more difficult. For instance, fantastic long and difficult ridges with lots of pinnacles. Superbly safe from avalanches and many other so-called dangers, but as difficult as anybody can wish. The challenges are there as before.

Did my mountain Hallingskarvet always warn? One of my best friends fell down the precipice near my cottage and was killed. There was no warning. But we had behaved utterly foolishly for several days: building a small hut on a ledge that was not horizontal but had an angle such that a false step meant certain death within three or four seconds. We were irresponsible towards our nearest. He did not suffer, but his parents did, the rest of their lives. In the dark autumn evenings, seeing

the precipice, what I saw was something cold, dark, and indifferent. But not any longer. The accident reminds me that something may always happen which makes us see a kind of darkness everywhere.

It is curious how, within a short time, new ideas can get powerful enough to change basic attitudes, or at least, contribute significantly to the rapid change that other forces of history have prepared. To “fight nature” was a largely accepted metaphor in the 1950s. To fight “imperialism and nature” was even used in political programs. Still, the Antarctic is generally called hostile, but not mountains any longer. Now we need to be done with all forms of imperialism, including language use, and to actively care for nature and cultural and individual richness.

Here are some books that I feel are worthwhile on these subjects:

Tobias, Michael C., & H. Drasdo. 1979. *The Mountain Spirit*. New York: Overlook Press.

LaChapelle, Dolores. 1970. *Earth Wisdom*. Los Angeles: Guild of Tutors Press.

Nicolson, Marjorie H. 1959. *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory: The Development of the Aesthetics of the Infinite*. Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press.

Note

¹ From George Gordon Lord Byron (1788-1824) *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage: Canto the Third*.