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Vacation Bible School at Lilyfield Baptist Church in Jamaica

photo provided by the Nowaski family.

Coming Down the Mountain

By Reverend Erik Buteyn

HAVE YOU BEEN TO THE "MOUNTAINTOP?" Religious leaders throughout history refer to an encounter with the Almighty as a "mountaintop experience." Although this is not a reference to the action of mountaineering, it shares the similar emotion and wonder of beholding the majesty of creation from a peak. Although this is not a reference to the physical elevation of scaling a mountain face, it is a direct reference to the emotional high and sense of personal satisfaction one feels having accomplished an incredible task. Although the mountaintop has nothing to do with respect for the size and grandeur of an actual mountain, it refers directly to the sensation that occurs when one stands on top of a mountain and is reminded just how small we are in relation to the world.

The mountaintop is a moment in time, an experience, a glimpse or a revelation. It is a brief encounter and recognition that God exists and we belong to Him. I have personally been to the mountaintop. When I shared my marriage vows with my wife, when I witnessed the birth of my

children, when I saw my grandfather take his last breath, when I accepted Christ as my Savior, and yes, when I climbed a mountain.

Some of us have been to the mountaintop and we have recognized the experience for what it was. And we have savored the memory, the sights, the sounds, the smells. We have beheld the majesty of God, and we have imprinted that memory permanently in our mind's eye. The real question that many of us face isn't "Have I been to the mountaintop?" It is, "What do we do with that memory?"

If you have ever physically climbed a mountain, you might argue that the most difficult part of the experience is the climbing. The change in elevation, the steep climb and the constant wonder of when you will arrive at the top make mountain climbing a daunting feat. I, however, believe differently, and I am not alone. Having hiked several mountains in my life I have realized that the largest percentage of injuries take place while coming down. People slip, and some fall because they become relaxed and grow

careless. Descending a mountain can be extremely traumatic for knee joints, ankles and the body as a whole. For me, coming down is the hardest part.

And this is consistent with spiritual mountaintops. Coming down is the hardest part. A popular way for religious people to seek out "spiritual mountaintops" is the mission experience. Some of us may participate in local missions or volunteer in charities in our hometown, but what I am referring to specifically are mission trips. People travel to distant lands and different cultures to share their love of God by serving humankind. And although these trips tend to cost thousands of dollars, require months of preparation and planning, and try our every nerve with substandard living conditions, the most difficult part is coming down the mountain, returning home, our re-entry into our everyday lives.

"Some of us have been to the mountaintop and we have recognized the experience for what it was."

There was an audible sigh of relief on Wednesday morning, August 10, 2005 when the space shuttle Discovery touched down in California. I was listening to the "play-by-play" on the radio on my way into the office, and I detected a notable expression of joy from the announcers as well as the employees of NASA who were interviewed during the broadcast. Yet, it wasn't the touching down that was most thrilling for those who were watching and listening, it was the re-entry phase. As the shuttle began to re-enter the Earth's atmosphere, everyone was tense. After all, it was only two years ago when the space shuttle Columbia exploded during its re-entry phase and crashed to the Earth. It was a tragedy that we will never forget.

Re-entry is the most difficult part. It isn't identifying those mountaintop



*Barb Cheatham in Sri Lanka
photo provided by Barb Cheatham*

experiences. It isn't feeling the transforming power of God when we are at the peak. It is when we try to come back down. When we return home to our everyday lives. When we re-enter into our families, our communities and our schools, we find that nothing has changed. We returned transformed, but everything else has stayed the same.

Lauren Nowaski, a 16-year-old high school student from Frisco experienced some struggles with her re-entry after spending a week in Bamboo, Jamaica, with her youth group from The First Baptist Church of Frisco. They organized a Bible school program for over 250 native children and devoted their time, their energy and a week of their lives. Lauren expressed that some of the highs of her experience included forming new friendships with people she had known for a while but had never had the chance to get to know well, witnessing the impact her love and faith can have on children in a totally different culture, and the overwhelming satisfaction of uniting with a singular vision and a singular purpose.

But, her re-entry was rocky. People went back to their normal routines. Friendships formed in Jamaica were exchanged for the friends and relationships waiting back in Frisco. People, who had been transformed by the experience, went back to being the same people they were before they left. The joy of service and sharing drifted

away once they arrived back home. Lauren commented, "It felt like everything that was good, everything that was special about the trip was left in Jamaica."

Lauren's experience is not uncommon. Having served as a pastor at The Reformed Church in Plano for five years, I have identified re-entry as a significant problem. This summer I spent five days in Estes Park, Colorado with over 2,500 students from my denomination. We were at the top of the mountains, we were spiritually energized, and we were changed by the love and grace of Christ. However, I noticed that as soon as we started "coming down the mountain," as soon as we set our faces toward Plano and began our trip home, we began to hit the bumps, the jostles and the obstacles of re-entry.

Barb Cheatham is a registered nurse in our community who has been called to minister to people in grief. She has dedicated a large portion of her life to working with hospice patients and their families as well as counseling and encouraging individuals who have experienced death and tragedy. This ministry has taken her to the war torn countries of Africa and most recently to Sri Lanka which was devastated by the Tsunami. Barb spent 10 days teaching and counseling people about opportunities for expressions of grief and healthy ways to experience grief. And, as with all her travels and experiences, Barb has identified re-entry as the enemy.

With her vast experience, Barb has some suggestions for those facing re-entry. First, spend time with your mission group debriefing after the work is done before you return home. Second, plan ahead by scheduling something significant for when you return home in order to reduce the let down and frustration. And third, spend more time seeking mountaintops and less time waiting for them to occur.

The best way to fight the difficulty of coming down the mountain is to get back up and start climbing!

Reverend Erik Buteyn is the associate pastor of The Reformed Church in Plano.