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Intimations of Mount Harvard: The Story of the Parent/child, Contiguous United States, Five Highest Tops

A year ago, I authored an article poking fun at mountaineers' penchant for applying mathematical calculations to every imaginable aspect of the sport. As a quick illustration of this odd proclivity, two speakers at a convocation I attended recently both used scattergrams, graphed onto Cartesian coordinate systems, to illustrate their decades-long compilation of climbing achievements.

I'm guilty of this approach as anyone. There I'll be, traversing under an azure sky, surrounded by iridescent snowfields and soaring rock faces, utterly oblivious because I'm busily calculating my elevation gain per hour and my target summit's placement on scales of topographic isolation and prominence.

This is sick behavior, so several years back I resolved to return to my pre-peak-bagging, Romantic roots. I wandered river valleys. I plucked wildflowers and hearkened to bird song. I breathed deep the air.

I was horribly bored. After my years chasing quixotic numerical goals, my efforts at a Wordsworthian rebirth failed to blossom. This outcome has left me with a guilty dissatisfaction that I'm loathe to subject to a searching and fearless examination, but one point has emerged with crystalline clarity: my addiction to STEM-adjacent mountaineering is unshakeable. And nothing illustrates this affliction more than my pursuit of a challenge of my own invention--climbing the Contiguous United States, Five Highest Tops, all with my beleaguered son Nathan in tow.

You can be forgiven fuzziness about the Five Highest Tops. Summiting the group is a fanciful activity recognized by few, like pickleball or half the sports currently in the Olympic Games. I myself chanced upon this quest like a person beginning a hike down an unmarked trail, only to emerge in a clearing where a neon signpost flashed: "Man, you are on to Something!" Then I personalized the journey, upping the level of difficulty by requiring Nathan to pose atop each peak beside me, despite his petulant attempts at living a somewhat normal existence of his own.

In order, the Five Highest are:

California's Mount Whitney at 14,505 feet

Colorado's Mts. Elbert (14,440); Massive (14,428); and Harvard (14,420)

My own Washington State's Mount Rainier at 14,411

The tale of our 15-year struggle to attain the Parent/child, Contiguous US, Five Highest Tops is worthy of consideration, for two reasons: first, for those wilderness enthusiasts and outdoor adventurers out there, the mountains are sublime. Secondly, the undertaking works as a stress test of the bonds between parents and children, illuminating these complex and often disquieting relationships. In my family's case, I love Nathan, heart and soul, but he maintains a belief I conned him into mountaineering, lying pathologically about the traumas implicit in this lifestyle. Anytime I now use standard phrases like, "It's right around the next bend." or "It's just over this false summit," my words are met with derisive laughter.

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Truth is, Nathan brought his involvement in peak-bagging on himself. As a toddler, he could have pitched a tantrum on the trail. Instead, he marched doggedly forward. By age four, he'd appeared in a local paper, described as a boy who could out-climb and out-talk the average adult. At age seven, he made his first roped winter ascent and at ten traversed a glacier and hopped his first crevasse. Soon after turning fifteen, he announced his desire to be the first student in his high school to scale Mount Rainier.

Unbeknownst to us then, that 2007 Rainier assault began our expedition toward the Five Highest Tops. Rainier is the hardest of these climbs, the only one with technical requirements. It's also a tricky mountain, no more than a hard workout in good conditions but, at worst, impossible. This realization surfaced all the pitfalls of my bipolar parenting style. Initially, I swelled with pride. The triumphant photo of father and son posed atop Rainier shown so vividly in my mind I could have picked out the frame. I pooh-poohed the mountain's inherent dangers. Then, as our departure day neared, a knee-weakening terror gripped me.

Frantically, I enlisted four of my climbing partners to shelter my baby from harm, protecting him on the rope's either end. They enthusiastically agreed, but, unfortunately, they then performed with their usual reliability. One dropped out the night before and, without consulting us, signed on a non-climber in his place. Two others arrived at the Paradise Lodge hours late, suffering from terminal alcohol poisoning. As we slugged up the Muir Snowfield, they repeatedly yodeled Nathan back so they could shift items from their packs to his.

My debilitated friends abandoned us at Camp Muir, and our surviving team of four started for the top after sunup, hours after the recommended time for beginning summit day. Altitude sickness repeatedly struck our novice team member, but, impressively, he kept shuffling forward, only pausing to vomit on his boots. Our pace, to coin a phrase, became glacial. In mid-afternoon, we tagged the top while the snow bridges below us softened dangerously. I shouted myself hoarse, urging my team to hurry each time Nathan crossed a crevasse, precariously balanced on an impossibly fragile arch of snow. After a grueling twenty-hour day, we finally reached the car, with hallucinations haunting each of us from the shadows.

In reflecting on this fiasco, I at first blamed my sorry group of friends. Later, more objectively, it became evident my judgment and conditioning were equally suspect. In a couple of photos, Nathan sits, arm wrapped around his ice ax, looking like a little boy some fool has dropped onto a steeply canted glacier. In many others, he's a strapping young adult, one who could have been a Patagonia gear model but for being regrettably yoked to me, a wheezing geezer. My helmet perches like an inverted tulip on my head. I vaguely resemble a soldier of Gondor, one of those nameless LOTR extras marching off to get bludgeoned by orcs.

The following September, with Nathan still in high school and thus still at the mercy of my vacation scheduling, we jetted to Vegas and drove across Death Valley, heading for a campsite at Whitney Portal. Our goal was Mount Whitney, twenty-two miles and six thousand feet of elevation from our tents. We hiked by headlamp through pine forest and then above tree line. The sun set Wotan's Throne and the surrounding palisades

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aflame with liquid fire while the air held still as glass.

At Trail Camp Pond, we wolfed snacks, ascended to the cables, and hiked the ninety-nine switchbacks—which I naturally counted to ensure mathematical accuracy. We topped out at Trail Crest then pressed beyond the junction with the John Muir Trail. Over those last miles, Nathan suffered from altitude sickness, so much so I worried he might turn back. But, as he'd done from toddler days, he persevered. We strode past the summit hut and onto Whitney's vast rocky summit, Muir's range of light spread in glory around us.

That gave us two of the five, the hardest and the highest, but my burning bush vision of the Five Highest Tops didn't hit till six years later, after Nathan graduated college and I stole a few days from work.

In 2014, we set off to Colorado's Sawatch Range, home to over a dozen enormous, lumpy fourteen-thousand-foot peaks—known affectionately in the state as Fourteeners. We arrived not even having set our targets, knowing we only had two days to climb. For whatever mysterious reason, Mount Massive became our Day One objective. We charged up the six-mile trail, the weather perfect, a deep blue sky etched with horsetail clouds. We were alone on the mountain, just the two of us chattering as we crossed the silent tundra of Massive's eastern slopes. At a saddle near 14,000 feet, we gained the final ridge. The wind chuffed at us then built into an unrelenting blast. We lost the trail, scrambled a spiked crown of shattered rock, and then our route rematerialized below. Soon after, we grabbed a scrap of cardboard scrawled in magic marker and snapped a selfie with it held under our chins—Mount Massive, 14,421 ft.

That afternoon, we stopped at a Chinese restaurant in Leadville. Tellingly, we were the only customers, but we barely noticed. We were starving. Our egg drop soup included wilted lettuce leaves and the kitchen's every spare can of mixed vegetables. The chef plopped down at a table nearby, staring at us, as if evaluating whether hungry climbers would indeed eat anything.

I paid him little mind because a plan was burbling in my subconscious. That evening, over beers in a Vail bar, it burst forth formed fully as Athena from Zeus' forehead. At home I had numbered logs of my highest peaks. I had counts not just of Colorado Fourteeners but of every trip above 14,000 feet. I charted my progress on Washington State's Homecourt and Backcourt 100 lists. But now I'd discovered something better, something unique to my son and me. We had one climb left before returning to Seattle. Holy Cross, I informed Nathan, was off the list. So was Huron. Did he realize our little team had summited the first, third and fifth highest peaks in the contiguous US? Did he understand we were embarked on a grand journey toward the Parent/child, Contiguous US, Five Highest Tops?

Of course he didn't. He's more or less sane. But, next morning, he rose and trudged with me up the gigantic blob of Mt. Elbert. Unhappy high school teachers and their grumbling charges littered the featureless trail. On the summit ridge snow fell and a Cascade-quality whiteout shrouded the top. We dug another of those cardboard signs from a snowdrift—Mount Elbert, 14,440 feet--snapped our selfie and headed down. Dull it assuredly was, but Elbert was Colorado's highest peak. We'd conquered the

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second-ranked of the Five Highest. We stood 80 percent of the way home.

Only Mount Harvard barred our path to this stirring mountaineering accomplishment. Lamentably, Mount Harvard is cursed. For two years, work kept me away. Then Nathan had the temerity to move off for a job of his own, and he didn't seem enthralled with the idea of blowing limited vacation time to climb with me. He had grown remarkably impervious to guilt. Finally, in 2018, he briefly relented and we returned for Harvard, but freezing hail and sporadic bolts of lightning forced us off the mountain. Soon afterwards, the pandemic shut us in. It took till this past fall for the stars to align. We landed in Denver and drove to Leadville, at which point a witchcraft-induced medical affliction knocked me flat. The invaluable days we'd set aside for Harvard were lost.

The trip wasn't a total waste. Nathan climbed three peaks in the Mosquito Range with friends. We took a light hike up to an alpine lake as I recovered. But, in our Denver hotel room the night before flying home, sleep eluded me. The dream of the Five Highest Tops was slipping away. No rationalization about the folly of my mathematically grounded goals would erase the sting of its loss.

I kicked off the covers, rose and pulled back the drapes. Lights glistened icily from the city's skyscrapers and cranes. I had failed again, in multiple ways this time. I had promised I would curtail my invented quests, enter the wilderness more spiritually, and stop ringing up peaks like winnings on a slot machine, but here we were, enduring brutal flights, burning cash and vacation time, all while pursuing my selfish nonsense. Nathan surely couldn't give a rip about the Five Highest Tops, yet, with three am darkness in my soul, I knew I'd disappointed him too. I'd dropped my end of the rope. My body was crumbling. Harvard, all fourteen miles and 4600 feet to climb, grew higher and more distant each passing year.

I turned away from the window. With his back to me, Nathan slept. Only a tousele of his dark hair showed above the blankets--but that glimpse felt hopeful somehow, resonating with just an ember of success. I had no right to take any credit. I'd just spent our mountaineering adventure flat on my back. I hadn't just sung my now-grown son to sleep. I never even worried if or how well he slept anymore. He wasn't that little boy, the one who had hiked so fearlessly into the mountains, any longer, yet I watched him sleep and felt an instinctive, undeniable victory. My child slept peacefully, and that knowledge filled me with warmth and relief. And in that moment, I finally realized our actual objective wasn't the Contiguous US Five Highest Tops. It was the parent/child part of the equation.

Had I been a good father? I'd hesitate to ask. My guess is my fatherly performance approximates that of my checkered climbing career—great highs punctuated by numerous pratfalls and the rare flashing-light emergency. What's certain is that mountaineering has given me precious time with my son, times where we have moved in tandem, where we relied on one another's grace and judgment. The Five Highest Tops were a legacy, a frame constructed to hold memories of the days we were best together.

Harvard was still out there. It wasn't the Dawn Wall or North Face of the Eiger. Already a future expedition began forming in my mind, its out-

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line indistinct as a ridge through fog. Nathan might protest, but already I felt intimations. I could have sworn I felt the jostling of the Forest Service road, heard the car doors' echoing slams, and strained for the trail sign's words under my headlamp's light.