

The Tightrope: *Living at Peace* IN A BEAUTIFUL, BUT VULNERABLE WORLD



Giant Lobelia on Kilimanjaro (Photo: Leslie R. Martin)

BY LESLIE R. MARTIN

I am a teacher of environmental ethics who has long balanced on a tightrope between activism and despair, between the promise of an earth made new and the recognition that our historical interpretation of biblical texts is partly to blame for our current ecological crisis.¹ Above all, however, I am a lover of the natural world—particularly its most rugged and raw expanses.

My first close-up encounter with harsh desert beauty was during the *Marathon des Sables*, a 156-mile stage race through the Moroccan Sahara. Because it is a self-sustaining event, competitors carry all of their food for the six-day journey, as well as their bedding, clothes, and required safety equipment in

backpacks while they run. Daytime temperatures top 120 degrees Fahrenheit, but the thermometer can plummet below freezing at night. The group leaves the bivouac together each morning, but variations in speed mean that unless you've made a plan to stick with a group, you'll likely spend

most of the day running alone. It is this solitary journey through the expansive desert that is soul-cleansing.

Deserts have an ineffable quality created by their vastness emptiness—their breathtaking barrenness. Yet despite its vacuity, the diversity of the Sahara is astounding. We

crossed towering dunes that stretched for miles, salt flats peppered with pebbles that challenged every step, craggy ridges,

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Penitentes (Creative Commons Photo: Sastognuti)



Marathon des Sables (Photo: Leslie R. Martin)

and occasional oases with greens that contrasted with the rusty terrain creating an almost painful jolt. It's impossible not to fall in love with such a place—to want to protect it and share it with everyone you know.

Trekking to the glacial summit of Mount Kilimanjaro was another experience that catapulted me into awe and reinforced my enthusiasm for the natural wonders of our planet. There are six routes one might take to the top, each traversing a series of ecosystems defined by altitude. Thus, each day presents new plants such as sage grasses, birds like the bearded vulture, and rock formations beginning in dripping rainforest and ending in biting, icy wind at Uhuru Peak. There were many points during this journey—such as emerging from fog to encounter a low forest of giant lobelia or lying on my back, head on a stone, eyes tracking the skittering clouds above—that made me so grateful for the beauty of the earth that I could have cried. I carry those moments with me, and they pull me inexorably toward the “activist” side as I balance on my tightrope.

Perhaps my most brutal and punishing experience with the natural world was during an attempt to summit Aconcagua in Argentina. As with Kilimanjaro, the multi-day trek bisects a variety of terrains, each with its own set of plants and animals. But in contrast with Kilimanjaro there are more days at high elevation where the weather is severe. Two of our group became ill at the high base camp, leaving only a pair of us to attempt the peak. I will never forget

the morning that, with heavy packs firmly affixed to our backs, we navigated the *penitentes* (a bed of ice-and-snow spires on the trail just beyond a camp with the same name). We were optimistic, strong, and ready for a challenge—and we got it. The next three days were bitterly cold with a howling wind that made each uphill step seem steeper than it was. Bad weather eventually forced our return—

we had gotten above 20,000 feet but hadn't reached the summit. The stark beauty of the mountain, however, had sliced directly into my consciousness, leaving a mark that hinted at pain and happiness.

How does my passion for the natural world inform my teaching? What is my vision for students—how can I help them find the balance on that tightrope which I, myself, struggle to maintain?

I've experienced angst over my own worldview through time—I will admit to having felt helpless and thinking that perhaps conservation efforts are for naught (after all, Isaiah 65:17 promises that all will be well in the end). Maybe it's best to simply enjoy and appreciate the wonders of creation, even if in so doing we also harm. These thoughts tangle with others—a yearning toward self-sacrifice in the interest of the greater good, toward advocacy in its various permutations. Thus, the issue that I endeavor to help students with is the reconciliation of these two internal demands.

One frequent student-generated challenge in the classroom is some version of this: “I know that lots of little

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actions can add up to something big, but if we are honest about it, the behavior of a single person isn't going to make much difference. If I stop eating meat or commit to taking shorter showers to conserve water, it won't even make a dent." And I cannot argue with the observation; it is correct.

It seems counterintuitive, but the best way I can think of to reconcile the reality of a hyper-consumptive world with the benefits (and costs) of personal, environmentally-conscious actions doesn't focus narrowly on the environment. It focuses on the well-being of the individual—not at some future time, but right now.

We are probably all familiar with the uncomfortable feeling that occurs when we engage in behaviors that we recognize (either at the time, or subsequently) are inconsistent with our values, ideals, or beliefs. Leon Festinger formally described this as *cognitive dissonance*² in 1957 and argued that we strive for psychological consistency in our everyday lives—changing behaviors, attitudes, beliefs, and/or values in order to avoid the distress of these internal contradictions. Most people I encounter—students and others—believe that it's important to care for the environment and yet we *all* make choices that negatively affect that environment. We drive too much, and our cars are too big. We take showers that are too long and sprinkle precious water on our lawns. We fly frequently, and we eat too high up on the food chain. And, for those who are concerned about the environment, this creates cognitive dissonance.

Will small, individual actions fix our problems? No. But each responsible decision is a tiny drop in the bucket of stewardship. And the more immediate reward is the reduction of cognitive dissonance. When our behaviors are aligned with our values it simply feels good. There's no internal struggle for reconciliation, no guilt-ridden critiques, no self-justification. There is instead a sense of contentment and harmony. Of course, we may still worry about the environment (and to the extent that this spurs us to do things like voting or engaging in more direct activism, that's probably a good thing)...but our hearts will be at peace. In this state of peace and well-being we are best equipped to engage the natural world. Although there are many gifts (e.g., food, medicine, oxygen) to be garnered from nature, one of the most valuable is spiritual renewal. The beauty of a desert, a

mountain, or a sea can soothe the spirit in a way that little else can. When our actions are consistent with our values we are ideally positioned to benefit spiritually from our forays into nature. This is the lesson I have finally learned and that I endeavor to impart to my students.

Further Readings

Hossein Nasr, Seyyed. *Religion and the Order of Nature*. Oxford University Press, 1996.

Taylor, Paul W. *Respect for Nature: A Theory of Environmental Ethics*. Princeton University Press, 1986.

Safran Foer, Jonathan. *Eating Animals*. Little, Brown, and Company, 2009.



Marathon des Sables (Photo: Leslie R. Martin)

End Notes

1. L. White, Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," *Science*, 155(3767), (1967): 1203–1207.

2. L. Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (Stanford University Press, 1957).



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