

Small Steps Out of the Void
Exodus 3
Touching the Void by Joe Simpson
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In May, 1985
Joe Simpson and Simon Yates
were attempting to ascend
a previously unscaled peak in the Peruvian Andes
—and thus begins
one of the greatest climbing stories in recorded history
—Touching the Void.
You may have heard of this story
in either Simpson’s memoir
or seen a recounting of it in the 2002 documentary.

An abridged version
goes something like this.
Simpson and Yates, elite British climbers
in their early twenties
were looking to “bag some first ascents”
and so planned
an expedition
to the remote Peruvian Andes.
Their ultimate goal
to climb the West face
of Siula Grande some 20,000 ft above sea level.

After two nights on the mountain
—sleeping in snow holes they had constructed
in only their sleeping bags
they made it to the summit.
While there--they strolled along the summit
gazing down—
relishing that no person
had ever climbed this peak
using the route they had taken.

And then comes the dangerous part
—what any mountaineer or expedition person will tell you.
Most falls, most accidents happen
AFTER you’ve achieved the goal.

Now they had to descend.
The snow was crumbly,
the ridge precarious.

They were roped together.
Depending upon each other.
One point Joe Simpson tells of looking down
and realizing
that he is standing
on what amounts to a drift of snow
that has collected well beyond the mountain spine.
All that is holding him
above a 4 thousand foot fall
is four inches of snow.

They continue descending
—rappelling down supporting each other.
When Simpson recalls hearing
a sharp cracking sound, t
he ice he was perched upon
gave way and suddenly he was falling
he recalls,
“I hit the slope at the base of the cliff
before I saw it coming.
I felt a shattering blow to my knee,
felt bones splitting and screamed.”
(pause)

Simpson was as good as dead.
An injury of this magnitude
at 19,000 feet
would make it virtually impossible
for him to get off the mountain.
Yates says, he knew it.
He knew it right away.
But there was no way
he could just leave Simpson,
although it put his own life in extreme jeopardy.

Together they cooked up a plan
that Yates would lower Simpson
down the slopes to the end of their short rope.
Then Yates would climb down to Simpson,
untie the rope and retie it—with his frost bitten fingers
and start all over again.
It was agonizingly slow precarious work.
But it did seem to be working.

Until Yates lowered Simpson
on one section and he just kept going.

There was no there there.
 He was hanging out over space.
 Dangling above a giant crevasse.
 Swinging in mid-air.
 And Yates who was dug into the snow above
 found himself sliding toward the edge.
 He held on –dug into the snow
 for an hour
 knowing he could do nothing
 and then
 he realized what he had to do—
 he did the unthinkable and completely understandable—
 Yates cut the rope.
 Yates spent the night on the mountain.
 Tried to find Simpson in the crevasse —
 no luck
 and stumbled down the rest of the mountain.

What Yates didn't know
 is that Simpson had plummeted into the crevasse—
 but amazingly
 landed on a snow bridge.
 Now that he had a purchase, a place to stand
 he thought that he could
 maybe haul himself out-
 but when he yanked on the rope
 it slid through his hands—
 and when he saw the frayed end
 his predicament lodged in his bones.

It became clear
 he could just lie there in pain
 on that ice bridge
 in that crevasse
 and die.
 Or he could move.
 The only way he could move
 was down.
 So he rappelled further into the Crevasse.

Unbelievably,
 he found an opening at the bottom
 onto the mountain.
 He climbed up a crumbly snow ramp
 —taking more than 5 hours to go 130 feet--
 then out of the crevasse—

an amazing feat—
 but now he now had to crawl
 6 more miles
 over a crevasse-ridden glacier
 and a field of boulders.

Amazingly,
 he saw that his path
 was just 10 feet from Yates' footprints.
 Then he describes a voice in his head,
 taking over and giving him instructions.
 So he crawled over the glacier
 eating snow
 to try to keep from dehydrating.

The voice
 told him to curl up in a snow hole and sleep.
 To wake up a few hours later
 and keep going.
 When he arrived at the boulder field
 he could no longer crawl and slither.
 So the voice told him to hop.
 He said, it went like this,
 "Hop, excruciating pain,
 scream, breathe,
 despair,
 hop, excruciating pain, scream"
 —over and over and over—bit by bit.

Knowing all the while that
 he had to make it down
 before Yates broke camp
 Otherwise despite his best efforts he'd be stranded.

He collapsed and became more and more delirious
 —still the voice urged him on—
 until he came to his senses—
 realizing he was surrounded by an incredibly foul smell.
 "Good God---I've made it to the base camp toilet
 —I'm going to die in a pile of muck."
 Then he yelled Yates's name—
 in a hope against all hope.
 And Yates just hours away from leaving—
 heard the strangled cry
 and saw his own version of the resurrection.

An unlikely tale
of an extraordinary event.
From certain death to life,
an epic journey.
But if we look closer,
we see that Simpson's extraordinary feat
is actually a series,
a succession of tiny, tiny steps.
This unbelievable journey
from death to life
is comprised of thousands of small steps.

The same is true for Moses.
Moses...remember his story?
Moses kills an Egyptian,
runs for his life to a foreign land,
marries a daughter of Jethro
and there he is in his new life,
tending his father in law's flock at Mount Horeb,
when suddenly he finds himself
in front of a burning bush,
an angel
and then the voice of God.

Moses, the murderer on the lam,
is in front of the Living God.
Talk about an unlikely tale
of an extraordinary event.
Yet, like Simpson,
Moses' journey is at its heart
a journey of small steps.

If we kept reading,
we'd hear Moses try five times
to explain why he's NOT
the choice for God,
why really he should just stay put
(who can blame him, like looks pretty good where he is)
but the voice of God
keeps calling him.
And in the end
Moses decides to listen to the voice,
to come off the ledge,
and he takes an unlikely small step,
that leads him back to Pharoah and Egypt,
that leads to another,

and another,
 and well, you know the rest of this story.
 Moses eventually leads the people
 out of bondage in Egypt
 into the promised land.
 An extraordinary event,
 but really, in the end,
 a continuous series
 of very small steps.

Maybe the real lesson
 of Moses, and of Simpson
 lies in the bit-by-bit application,
 in each choosing to take
 tiny, tiny steps.

In fact, steps that at times
 seem even fruitless, pointless,
 but lead to life.
 Simpson survives a shattered leg,
 a fall in a crevasse,
 6 miles of crawling.
 Moses survives a return to Egypt
 and leads the people to freedom.

Maybe
 every grand thing
 is simply a succession of tiny efforts.

Sounds a lot like the spiritual journey.
 Sometimes we look at our spiritual lives
 like it's this daunting challenge
 and we're not sure we're up to it.
 But our lives with God
 are really a series of small efforts.
 Steps that may not even seem like much
 ...inches at a time
 across the ice and snow.
 But steps
 that take us closer to life with God.
 For isn't the spiritual journey
 all about our relationship with God?
 With each other?

Tiny efforts.
 Heeding that voice of God

that prompts us, nudges us to take a step.
Reading the bible and gathering to talk about it.
Saying a prayer
because someone is on your mind.
Choosing to say something kind
to someone who really needs it.
Choosing not to say the unkind thing
to someone who really deserves it.

None of it seems like much—
but all of it adds up.
We have to start somewhere.

Every Grand Thing in life,
including our relationship with God
is simply a succession of tiny steps
for the long haul.

May we have the courage to take the first step
and the tenacity
to take the one after that.

Amen.