

Takhoma

I climbed Takhoma the first time in 1967 with family and friends, in the usual way: hike to 10,000 feet; rest for a few hours; begin climbing at midnight; arrive at the summit at 7:00 am; spend an hour on the summit; hike down and drive home. It was great to do this with my father, my brother and friends, but I felt, at the time, unsatisfied. The experience was a blur. Hiking from sea level to 14,000 feet in two days, - even being young and in shape, we all had headaches and nausea when we got the summit. Memories were a blur. Like the one of my father silhouetted in the sunrise. Without the photo, I'd not remember.



When I came back from a stint in the Peace Corps, I had another notion of how to spend time with Takhoma. I had discovered, living in a rural hill village for two years, without the distractions of modern life, how wonderful it is to just sit for long hours looking down on the earth, watching the clouds form, and the sunlight play on the ridges. I discovered that the longer I watched, the more I saw, and after overcoming the initial hour or two of boredom and impatience, I delighted in noticing a multitude of details, and feeling connected.



Also, on a hike to Kathmandu from my village, a hundred miles of up-and-down, I discovered that if I hiked slowly, rather than a painful chore, hiking was fun. I was helped by a book left by an earlier Peace Corps Volunteer, called "An Experiment in Mindfulness", that described the Vipassana meditation practice of noticing the sensations of walking. I discovered that by paying attention, to each moment, to the simple sensations of walking, walking became a pleasure, and I did it better. Balance improved immeasurably, and it was easy, fun, even with a heavy pack.



So when I returned to the Pacific Northwest, I was set to climb Takhoma this way, slowly. The point was to enjoy the climb, camp in the summit crater, savor the time, and watch the sunset. I talked some climbing friends into doing it a couple times. It worked better than I'd imagined. Later when I described these climbs to other friends, who had never climbed before, they wanted to do it too. It turned out that with a bit of technical training and conditioning, they were able to. This happened every year or two.



It worked out that if friends jogged more than a mile a day for 3 months, and practiced the technical skills of self arrest, prussicing, and the "rest step" and did a shorter preparatory climb, often, Kulshan, - well, we never failed to watch the sunset from the summit in more than a dozen climbs. Each day began at 4:00 am so there was plenty of time. The idea is to never hurry; to climb much slower than seems necessary. We used both standard routes. The Muir route is shorter and less physically demanding, and the descent in a single day is easier. The Sherman route is, I think, more interesting, and safer, though, I recommend taking two days to descend. It became a comforting routine: camp the first night at about 9000 feet and the second between 11 and 12,000. We reached the crater the afternoon of the third day, except once when we had to wait out a storm for a day at 12,000 ft. That trip was special in that we had acclimatized enough that when we reached the summit someone exclaimed "Are we there already?". I learned that if we camped just below the



southern lip of the crater, the prevailing winds from the south, which can be intense, passed right over the top of our camp, and we were in a calm eddy. People often fail to reach the summit either because they have not acclimatized adequately or because of bad weather. Hiking slowly solves the first problem; climbing the last week of July seems to solve the second.



The point is to spend time with the Mountain, and spend time with yourself, in a different way. Tahoma is a very unusual place. This is one place and experience for which the word "awesome" is not hyperbole. It is much higher than all the mountains around it. Watching the sunset from the summit, you can see 100 miles in every direction. You are above half of the atmosphere. You're above all life except the red algae that grows on snow, lichen around the steam vents and the occasional crow that scavenges climbers lunches. You are at the edge of space. The vastness of the universe and the smallness of ourselves is tangible. No one descends unchanged.



I commend to you Hazard Stevens' account of his first ascent of Tahoma, published in the Atlantic Monthly in 1876. He

describes wonderfully the Society of Washington Territory in the late 1800s. I especially appreciated his observations of his Indian guide, Shushkin. And the description of his climb is amazing.

There are a few more pictures on the following pages.



