

The Mountain

“The way up is the same as the way down.”

—Heraclitus

There are no paths to the top of the mountain so we each must make our own. It's impossible to get lost. If there are no trails to follow, there are no trails to stray from. Just keep walking upward and eventually you'll get there.

I set out one morning just after dawn. The air was fresh and I was filled with vigor. The slope was gentle with tall trees on all sides.

Just before noon the incline became steeper. I could see a figure climbing a short distance from me. Eventually our paths converged. The figure was a young woman, about the same age as me.

“Which way are you going?” she asked me.

“My own,” I replied.

“It seems we're both going the same way.”

“Then why don't we go together?”

She walked beside me. There was no need to talk. We already understood each other perfectly.

Around mid-afternoon, the woman said, “Well, I'll be seeing you.”

“Which way are you going?” I asked.

“My own,” she replied.

I noticed that her hair had suddenly turned gray.

“OK. See you at the top,” I said.

“I'm not sure if that's where I'm going,” she said. But I knew that already.

She veered toward the left and I kept going straight. I was getting tired. The mountain I climb is myself. The closer I get to the top, the closer I get to the center.

By late afternoon the air was noticeably cooler. The tall trees had become short shrubs. My muscles were sore, but I knew I had to press on.

Finally I reached the tree line. After that there were only rocks. I looked around and saw other people climbing towards the peak from all sides.

I arrived at the summit in the early evening. The woman I had met was not there. In the distance I could see other mountains and other people climbing them. Not only are there different routes up the same mountain. We may also be climbing different mountains.

As I stood there looking out at the crimson sunset, feeling old and worn, knowing that my own hair had also turned gray, I wondered, “After you've climbed to the top of a mountain, how do you go higher?”