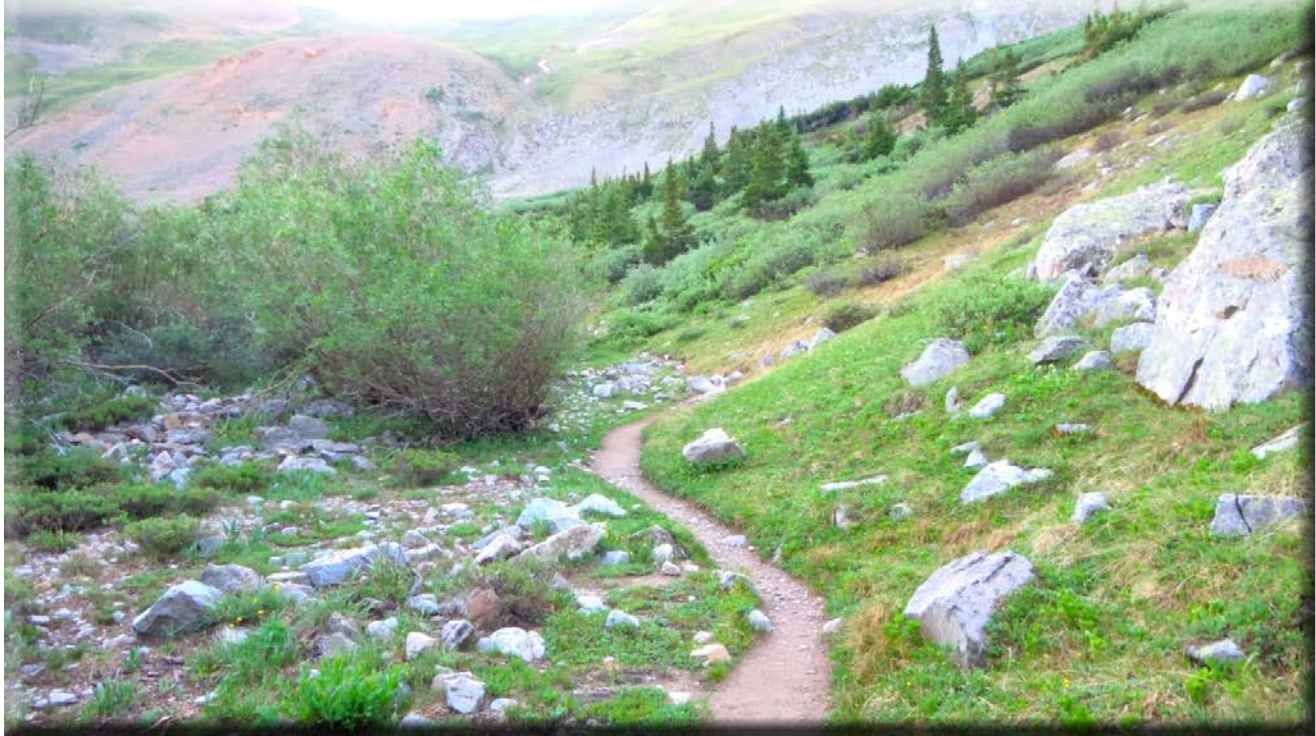


A Temple Not Built by Man

by Bill Barnett, MSPE



(Photograph by Bill Barnett)

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Early morning—more like the middle of the night—I was crawling out of my sleeping bag. The night before, I had hiked up the trail from the trailhead. The river was flowing as I crossed the bridge. If it had been any louder, it would have been deafening. I had been here before but not on this path. Half of the trail was the same. After the avalanches, it looked different. A large portion of the forest was replaced by a tangle of destroyed trees. And the streams were flowing heavily. No more just stepping over them. They were swollen with extra snow melt. It was just above freezing, but a couple of wool t-shirts felt comfortable. An uphill hike produced enough body heat to stay warm.

Packing the summit gear in the small backpack and carrying the camcorder, I left the campsite

and headed up the mountain. The trees glittered in the light of the headlamp. The heavy dew had them covered with water droplets. Maybe this was where someone got the idea of Christmas tree lights. But no Christmas tree could compare. If only the camera could capture this. Knowing it would not work, I tried anyway. Nothing but dark in the camera viewfinder. Another reminder that a better camera is needed.

The trail led me to a stream that looked like a river. *That's not the way*, I thought. Another trail went up but was soon blocked by a snarl of fallen trees, so back to the river. A few logs lay across the river. Now I remembered the crossing, but it was a small stream last year. Ahead was a meadow, but there was no meadow there before. It was a forest last year. The whole slope was covered with destroyed trees, and the trail crew had cleared a path for the hikers. They had

warning signs where they were working. It was dark and difficult to see anything, but the trail was clear. The way down in daylight revealed the disaster scene. An avalanche had wiped out a whole slope of trees.

Back in the forest, there were more switchbacks and a larger river. Some logs were in the middle, but they did not cross to the shore. No trail was visible on the other side. There was a side trail that disappeared into the forest and ended after a few hundred yards. The trail I rejected was the good trail. It was the crossing. After returning, it was not as difficult to cross as it looked, and the continuing trail was clear when I reached the other side. Lesson learned. The forest had changed, and the streams were bigger, making the trail look different. Later, in daylight, it would be clear.

More switchbacks in the forest led to another stream. It seemed as unlikely a crossing as the others, but I crossed it. The continuing trail was visible only after crossing the stream. That was the last forest-stream crossing. The switchbacks continued through the forest. The trees began to look small, like a fairy forest at tree line, but then more big trees appeared. There was 2,200 feet of elevation to gain before leaving the forest. As the sun was coming up, the trees thinned out and became small for real. Now this was the fairy forest. Tiny old trees looking like something from a magical kingdom surrounded me. It was as if elves and fairies should be coming out, dancing and flying around. Just fairy tale stuff. It was good to begin to see everything. The camera could only make dark pictures now. That is better than in the forest. Soon it would see everything.

The tundra lay before me. I have never seen an arctic tundra. Maybe it is like the alpine tundra or maybe not. Flowers are everywhere, and the short grass is vibrant green. The switchbacks continue, lined with rocks that are hidden by grass everywhere else. There are some rock outcroppings to scramble over. People are catching up. I am too slow. One guy is running uphill. He has a strange stuffed animal tied to his

small backpack. He topped out and passed me running back down before I could get near the top. The summit before me is a false summit, and the trail turns right and later left. Finally, the trail joins the ridge going to the top. There is a line of false summits on the ridge.

The great size of the temple is now becoming imaginable. Getting close to the top, it now has scale, no longer being a speck in the distance. There is still a ways to go. Rounding the corner of the last false summit, the top is in sight. There is a ridge of rocks looking pretty impossible, and to the right is steep, loose dirt. The steep dirt descends a few hundred feet, and below that is a thousand feet of steep, loose rock. Some people walk confidently on the loose, steep dirt and some very cautiously. It would have been good to bring spikes to cross this. They are at home. Carefully, I cross the loose dirt. Now there is just a couple hundred feet of elevation gain to the top. The top is secure rock. A crowd has gathered there.

A 4,450-foot elevation gain is like a 445-story building. No elevators. No stairs. Just five miles of trail. This is halfway. The top is not the end. It is not a successful climb until the climber is safely back at the beginning.

The summit is majestic. A thousand cathedrals cannot compare. A thousand choirs could not compete. No man could make this. Mecca may draw a bigger crowd by a thousand times. It does not compare. No Pope, no Vatican can come close. Few will see it because few will make the ascent. There are too many worries and distractions in life to go there. The tyranny of the urgent has stolen the experience of the majesty of the mountain from most of humanity.

Imagine a guru sitting on top, meditating and training his followers. The mountain does not need one. Everyone is in the meditative state. Hypoxia, runner's high, the power of nature: it all adds up to a changed state of mind. An herbal or chemical drug cannot produce this high. The addiction is not with the body. The body loathes the hypoxia. The addiction is limited by how long

a person can stay there and when they can return. Quickly, everyone will be gone, and the mountain will stand in solitude again.

This is truly a temple. Man could not build it—couldn't even come close. He is less than an ant in comparison. Even his biggest machines are like an ant next to the mountain. The best he could hope for is to make a few tiny scratches.

Is God here? We are told He is everywhere, but we seldom feel Him. The mountain is different. The ascent is like a fast from all the distractions of life. Some say there is no God, but their moral compass belies their statement about God. They are as awestruck by the majesty here as the believers—and sometimes more awestruck. People tell me there is no spirit, no soul, no free will, no consciousness. They say the only consciousness is what arises in man and then ends when he dies. That is all there is, many say. Before science proved different, people believed

in spontaneous generation of life. Flies, mold, and everything just came alive from nowhere. That was disproven. Is it not as silly to assume the soul and spirit in a man spontaneously generates and comes from nowhere?

Time to leave. The visit was too short. But the soul is fed and the body disciplined into the fast it did not want. Even consuming water and trail food is a fast here. The body screams for more food. It rebels while the soul is ecstatic.

Down is easy. The route is always clearer looking down from above. It's the same in life as on the mountain. Soon the alpinist will be back in the routine of life. But he will never be the same.

(There are videos of this mountain and others on my YouTube channel, "The Wilderness Hiker - How To See The World," [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I9wcx92xk_w&feature=youtu.be.](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I9wcx92xk_w&feature=youtu.be))
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*“The mountains are calling
and I must go.”
—John Muir*