

On The Holiness Of Skiing

Jules Older

From 1972 to 1986, I lived in New Zealand. In the winter of 1981, this normally peaceful country was torn asunder by, of all things, a rugby match. The government of the day had allowed the Springboks, apartheid South Africa's national rugby team, to tour New Zealand playing against our revered All Blacks.

Never have I seen a nation so divided by a single event — brother against sister, parent against child, Maori tribal members against each other. People talked of nothing else; it was the Simpson trial and the Bush-Gore election and Occupy Wall Street all rolled into one. After weeks of demonstrations, police baton charges and endless news coverage, I took my family to the mountains for five days of peace.

We settled into the Tekapo Ski Club hut with a congenial bunch of strangers from around the country. During the week, we never spoke of The Tour — and never spoke of not speaking of it. When a jerk from Wellington broke this tacit vow of silence and weighed in with his opinions, he was promptly and firmly shut up, most forcefully by the friends he'd come with. Instead of national politics, we spoke of the reflection of the Southern Alps in the blue waters of Lake Tekapo, of sunshine and soft snow, of how fast our children were learning to ski.

Ten years later, I spent a week skiing with the National Brotherhood of Skiers at the bi-annual Black Summit in Park City, Utah. The 1991 Summit coincided with the second week of the War in the Gulf. Although every other topic was thrashed and trashed, although most of us were grabbing snippets of CNN at every chance, although some folks had relatives battling tanks in desert sands, the taboo against talking about the war was every bit as strong as the silence in New Zealand a decade before. Instead, we talked of the splendors of the Wasatch, the terrors of Jupiter Peak, the pleasures of lunch on the sun-soaked deck of Mid-Mountain Lodge.

I offer both examples as evidence of the holiness of skiing. “Holy,” Webster tells us, is “associated with a divine power; sacred.” Or, “Worthy of worship or high esteem; revered.” Sacred, revered, worthy of high esteem — all describe how I feel about skiing. But what forces lift this sport out of the ordinary and into the realm of the sacred? The first step to holiness is getting away from the humdrum of ordinary life. And to ski, almost everyone has to purposely go

somewhere, to leave home. That, alone, sets it apart from croquet and Frisbee and miniature golf.

Not only do you have to leave town to ski, you must go to the mountains. Long before the Sermon on the Mount, long before Moses climbed Mount Sinai to collect the Ten Commandments, long before Noah's ark landed on Mount Ararat, mountains have been hallowed places. Maybe it's because you have to struggle ("We are climbing Jacob's Ladder") to reach the peak, maybe because they're the closest points on Earth to heaven. Whatever the cause, mountains are sacred.

We also have a feeling of holiness about beautiful sites. Framed by cerulean sky, green-needled trees and the incredible whiteness of snow, skiing is a pastime of exalted beauty.

But location, no matter how vertiginous and comely, is mere backdrop. I believe it is the sport, itself, that evokes the divine. Ever try to figure your taxes while telemarking? No? How about planning a meeting while running gates? Not that either? What makes skiing extraordinary is that it's almost impossible to concentrate on anything else while you're doing it. Skiing is all-consuming; it demands total attention. And not just on how to get through the next twist in the trail. Often the focus is the giddy, lightheaded feeling that comes when your turns are round, your skiing effortless and your skis carving perfect arcs through perfect snow.

Two final examples. I originally wrote about the holiness of skiing on September 13, 2001, forty-eight hours after thousands of Americans were massacred on American soil. For those hours, I wandered between the computer, NPR and CBS. My wife and I did a lot of hugging. We spoke to our far-flung daughters three, four times a day. My voice was rough with grief. My heart — my whole body — felt weighed down by sorrow. My predominant feeling oscillated between massive hurt and burning rage.

I revisited my holiness-of-skiing beliefs on March 24, 2010, forty-eight hours after President Obama signed the historic healthcare bill into law. Watching the uncertain progress of the bill, the lies told about its consequences ("The end of America as we know it!" "The Soviet/socialist downfall of our country!"), my feelings bounced between quavering hope and utter disgust.

Again, I took to the hills to salve my soul, this time to Whitefish, Montana.

And now, nearly two years later, the country is still mired in discord, with large portions of it willingly voting away their rights, their livelihoods, their decency — all because they've bought into the fears (Mexicans! Homosexuals! Socialists! Gay Mexican socialists wanting abortions!) promulgated by politicians who don't really believe the venom they're spouting.

In these times, like those before, I've gone skiing. In New Zealand, in Utah, in Vermont, in Montana, and now in the High Sierra — during division and disturbance, bombing and bombast, skiing has brought me peace.

Skiing is holy. Let us ski.