

## POSSIBILITIES

*Norbert Keliher, O.P.*

John pulled in another breath of snowy air as he placed his foot on the next rock in the path, one his father's foot had just left. He planted his ice pick to his right and clambered up to the next level in the giant's staircase that formed the summer path up Mt. Ellinor. It was the first time that John was hiking alone with his father, finally old enough to try a more difficult trail. Last summer his whole family had hiked the same mountain, but they had used the easier spring route, winding up well-maintained switchbacks the whole way. It had been a tough climb, but it lacked the snow, uneven terrain, and steep incline of their current ascent.

Once they were up out of the staircase, they stopped for a water break. John could see the summit rising up to their left, and his burning legs were relieved that only a series of broad steps and a smaller dirt path remained.

"Good job, John. There were a few tricky spots back there, but you never slipped. How are your legs feeling?" John's father smiled down at him, his tanned face only faintly lined.

"I'm feeling it, but not much more than after soccer practice."

"All right, hotshot, let's get to the top then. If I remember right, there's a little challenge you can try once we get around the next corner."

The two started walking again, and John cast a glance back over the boulder-strewn face they had just climbed. From above, it looked shorter than when he had first eyed it from below. It really hadn't been so bad. Maybe next summer they could climb Mt. Olympus or Mt. Cy. If he kept up with it, he might even be able to summit Mt. Rainier by the time he was finishing high school. Now that would be something!



CASPAR DAVID FRIEDRICH - MORNING IN THE MOUNTAINS

“All right, here it is.” His father’s voice interrupted his daydream. They had come around the corner and started heading directly toward the peak, now lying a hundred yards to the south. Voices drifted down to them from several hikers who were already enjoying the view east toward Seattle. The path cut a couple switchbacks up to the summit, but directly in front of them was a small angled ledge, about ten feet high.

“What do you think, John? Do you want to try climbing it?”

“Really? You’ll let me do it without any safety gear?” Usually his father insisted on safety: harnesses for climbing walls, lifejackets for kayaking, helmets for bicycles.

“Sure. It’s a short fall: the worst you can do is land on me.”

“All right, here I go then.” John slid off his backpack and bounded over to the wall. There were two obvious handholds to start with, and he was halfway up before he really thought about it. But the next available handhold was a little higher than he could reach, and his father told him he could bring up his left foot and

use it to launch up to the handhold. John set his foot and then tried the reach in one quick motion, stretching out for the rough knob; he grasped it, but only with his fingertips. With a lurch in his stomach he fell straight backwards, letting out a gasp. His father caught him and they both tumbled into the snow. His father started laughing, and, after a second, so did John. They stood up, and John looked at the spot he had missed. It seemed like an easy reach from the ground.

“Can I try again?”

“Ok, one more time. But if you don’t make it, we’ll leave it and go up to the summit.”

John climbed again, but with the same result. He fell and his father caught him, staying on his feet this time. He gave John a quick squeeze as he let him go and told him it had been a good attempt. John was disappointed, and when he looked down at his fingers he saw a torn flap of skin.

“I was so close,” he sighed.

“You were! I thought you had it that second time. But we made it to the summit, so there’s nothing to complain about. Ready for lunch?”

John nodded, and followed quietly up the last part of the trail. As they came to the summit the view spread out below them. The Kitsap Peninsula lay between them and Seattle, with water glinting on both sides. Beyond the faintly visible city, the Cascades were a white ridge. To the south of Seattle, Mt. Rainier’s white dome loomed up. John and his father sat down a little way away from the other hikers and pulled out their turkey sandwiches. They talked about the view first, and his father helped John figure out roughly where their home town was. Then they ate in silence for a bit, and a question occurred to John that he had been wondering about.

He cleared his throat and asked, “Dad, do you miss Richard? I mean, you just seem more upbeat than Mom.”

“Well, becoming a priest is a great thing. We should be happy for him.”

“But why did he have to go so far away? Couldn’t he have been a priest here in Seattle?”

“He could have and that would have been great. But it seems like that’s not how God planned it. Some people are drawn to tougher challenges than others.”

“Did you try to talk him into staying here instead of going off to the east coast?”

His father looked thoughtfully at him for a moment, trying to gauge his son’s concern.

“Your mom and I were hoping that he would settle down here, but it wasn’t a complete surprise when he didn’t. He had his reasons, and I didn’t try to talk him out of it.”

As John listened, he wished Richard could be there with them, sharing the view like they did last summer. Instead, he was off in a city John had never been to.

“If it helps you, it is hard for me, but I’ve been trying to make that part of my prayer. Not everything that’s right feels good.”

John let this thought sink in. He had been so reluctant to say goodbye to Richard last week that he hadn’t really considered what his brother was setting off to do. Maybe this was his adventure, his Rainier. He looked down and fingered his cut, which was still stinging. What sort of challenges were worth taking on? He glanced up again, and scattered clouds were drifting across the sky, giving the panorama a slightly different aspect. He sat quietly next to his father and let the sun soak in. After a few more minutes, the two got up and started back down the mountain.

*Norbert Keliher entered the Order of Preachers in 2012. He grew up in the Seattle area and attended college at Harvard University, where he studied Latin and Greek literature.*