

# Eagle's Wings

By RICHARD LaFOUNTAIN

*"We found God's strength when ours was gone"*

An icy blast of wind ripped through our thin clothes and slapped angrily at our loose fabric in a mocking attempt to hurl us off the steep 13,000-foot mountain face. I knew we were in trouble when my 6' 3" son curled into a fetal position, trembling, shivering, teeth chattering, and stuttered these words, "Dad, I am so cold! My head is splitting. I don't think we're going to make it."

A quick reconnoiter of our assets confirmed his prognosis. We were dressed in only light jackets and spring hiking clothes. My 24-year-old son and I, his aging 50-year-old father, found ourselves on Pike's Peak's eastern face in snow at times up to our hips. Freezing temperatures and howling snow flurries pelted our faces and chilled our sweat-soaked bodies. Our jeans and hiking shoes were sopping wet from the grueling nine hours of steady climbing up this steep snow-covered peak. We had not found the hiking trail that would guide us to the top, so we followed the snow-covered ravine that drained the mountain slope.

Despite our own apprehensions and stern warnings from mountain guides and experienced hikers that the trail was impassable and no one had yet made it to the summit that spring, we ventured on in a euphoric, oxygen-starved, sophomore, father-son adventure.

## **Second Thoughts**

My son's words, "I don't think we're going to make it," echoed only too familiar in my mind. It had been a hard snowy winter in Colorado in the spring of 1998. Reports of lost hikers and frozen bodies peppered the news. Inexperienced hikers too often misread the elements and their own abilities, only to discover themselves trapped, disoriented and ill-equipped for the sudden snowstorms and intense cold. Now we were about to become another tragic statistic. I acknowledged my son's fears and responded, "I know Andrew. I don't think we can make it either." What had we gotten ourselves into?

Indeed, we were in more trouble than we realized. I was sick with abdominal cramps and periods of abdominal distress. Andrew, visiting from England, was not yet acclimated to the altitude, thus his splitting headache, nausea and now hypothermia. Just two years before coming to Colorado I had three angioplasties to open clogged coronary arteries. I was fully recovered but every step up this steepest route to the summit left my heart pounding and my lungs gasping for breath.

We were stuck. It was too far to head back down the mountain. We would never make it before dark. Looking up toward the summit, we could see the observation deck and the train that carried smart visitors to the top this time of year. It was still a long way off, and the mountain terrain was getting even steeper, often blocked by deep drifts of snow.

We wrung out our shoes and socks, then put on the extra pairs of socks I had thrown into my backpack at the last minute. I had also tucked a couple of plastic grocery bags into one of the pockets, which we put over the dry socks before getting back into our shoes. That helped.

We had no alternative but to turn ourselves toward the summit and plod on. How far, we did not know. How long it would take, we had no idea. We assumed that the last train would leave at 5:30 p.m., but we weren't sure. The sun was already behind the mountain. We had to hurry on legs of rubber and over-stretched lungs and with energy we no longer had. I hated this calf-

cramping, lung-bursting, heart-pounding, blood-pressure stressing, my-head-is-dizzy, wondering-why-I-am-doing-this climb.

In my heart I knew it was hopeless. Humanly speaking, without a miracle, we would spend the night on the wind-blown, sub-zero mountainside. I began to pray,

*“Oh, God forgive us for what we have done. How foolish we were. It is hopeless. Help my wife to understand and forgive us. Tell her I love her. Take care of my daughter. Dear Lord, please send us help from somewhere! Give me the wings of eagles because I can't take another step.”*

### **"We Need Wings"**

Every step was painful. We took five or ten steps, then had to stop to catch our breath. We began to shout, whistle and wave our arms in hopes that someone on the summit would see us and send help. No one was looking, and certainly no one could hear our faint cries on this vast mountainside.

The mountain became suddenly steeper, almost vertical, in the last half mile. We left the snow, which was too deep to traverse, and headed for the rough boulders. They were steeper, but at least we were out of the snow. Andrew was so ill that I was now leading the way. Every step I prayed, "The wings of eagles, Lord--please give me the wings of eagles!" Many of the rocks were impassable, so we skirted the biggest, feeling our way, often on our hands and knees, crawling and clinging to the rocks to keep from falling backward.

Andrew later told me that at one point he was so weak and dizzy that he lost his grip on a rock. He found himself leaning backward, helpless to prevent himself from falling, when suddenly he felt a hand on his back that literally pushed him forward onto the rock. Was it an angel, the wind, the wings of eagles?

The last quarter mile was just a blur. At 4:25 p.m. we climbed over the last huge boulder to find ourselves staring at the train tracks and the train still waiting. We entered the station in time to hear the announcement that the last train was leaving at 4:35.

I have returned to the top of Pike's Peak twice since then--by car. Each time I was astounded at the impossibly steep snow-covered rocks we climbed to get to the top. Once I descended the peak, hiking down. Along the way I have stopped to tell hikers our story and show them the path we took. As we stood like dwarves among those boulders, I reveled at the miracle of God's care. Each time I told it, they would give me a curious look and slowly smile, saying, "You're making that up, aren't you?" I would affirm it to be true, but inevitably they would look back at the trail we took and, shaking their heads, would say, "Impossible. Absolutely impossible. Nobody could do that."

As I meandered down the mountain with tears in my eyes, I, too, looked back again and again, shaking my head and saying, "Yes, Lord, it was impossible. But you gave us the wings of eagles!"

*"But those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength.  
They will soar on wings like eagles;  
they will run and not grow weary,  
they will walk and not be faint" (Isaiah 40:31, NIV).*

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