

Chapel Talk, Commencement  
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Good morning.

Last summer I read Jon Krakauer's best-selling book *Into Thin Air*, a personal account of what has come to be known as the Mt. Everest disaster. As some of you may know, this book describes an attempt on the world's highest mountain by two commercial climbing expeditions that, tragically, resulted in the death of five climbers. Some of these climbers were among the most accomplished in the world, but most were novices with relatively little climbing experience. What they had in common was a certain degree of athleticism, 60,000 dollars in cash -- the going price in May of 1996 for a guided attempt on Everest -- and of course enormous drive and ambition. Most in fact were successful professionals of one sort or another who, it seemed to me, looked to find on the slopes on Everest something that was missing in their own work-a-day lives.

I must admit, I have no ambition to climb mountains -- though this spring I courageously lead a team of 11 students to the Imax theater in Philadelphia for a viewing of the film Everest. This film and Krakauer's harrowing account of life above 28,000 feet in what is called the "death zone" powerfully confirmed my disinclination to climb. Mountain climbing, as Krakauer himself, a devoted climber, admits, is "primarily about enduring pain." Which leads one to the inevitable and often asked: Why climb?

For some time now I have been obsessed with this question, at least in part because Krakauer, for all of his gifts as a writer, was unable to offer a satisfying answer. In the end the whole terrible disaster, including his own irrational urge to climb, seems beyond his comprehension.

Since reading Krakauer's book, I have become a something of a student of climbing and of climbers. I have read books about the first successful climbs of K2 and Annapurna, of a winter assault on Alaska's Mt. McKinley, of Shackleton's attempt on the North Pole, of

Richard Burton and John Speke's search for the source of the Nile in the mountains of Africa. But of the books I have read, one, written by an Englishman named Apsley Cherry-Garrard and published in 1922, stands out. It's called *The Worst Journey in the World*.

In outline *The Worst Journey* is not unlike Krakauer's personal account. It describes a trek to the South Pole in the year 1914 led by the great polar explorer Captain Robert Scott. Much of Cherry-Garrard's account is taken up describing this attempt and reconstructing their failed return, for like the members of the Everest Expedition, Scott and his party achieve their goal only to die of exhaustion and starvation on the return journey. But the "worst journey" of the title, and the heart of the book, refers not to Scott's celebrated polar attempt but to the so-called "Winter Journey" of the previous year taken in the dead of an Antarctic Winter (and hence in total darkness) by the author and two companions to one of the most isolated and inaccessible areas of Antarctica -- the rookery -- that is the birthing grounds -- of the Emperor penguin. They went for, of all things, its egg which at the time were believed to have enormous significance for the study of evolution. And, in the end, after three months of terrible trekking over ice falls and crevices in temperatures 100 degrees below the point of freezing and in total darkness, they got their egg.

It's a great story this journey in the dead of night for a penguin's egg, though I know that by this point you and your parents are probably thinking that I may have read a few too many adventure stories. You may be asking yourself, rightly I think: what do penguin's eggs have to do with anything, much less my graduation? I will tell you. But before I do and because I know from experience that you will forget almost everything that is said to you here today, I will provide you with what I hope is a pithy and memorable sound bite.

My advice, for what it's worth, is this: Forget mountains, go for the egg.

I mean by this, conceive of yourself, as Cherry-Garrard and his companions did, as explorers rather than mere climbers. The world is full of climbers -- of men and women

who want to go higher than the next person, who conceive of life as a race rather than a journey, and who look at the world and see mountains rather than eggs. And I admit, it's easy to confuse the two. I have often done so myself.

Cherry-Garrard of course knew the difference. After their return to England the surviving members of Scott's expedition were much criticized and second-guessed. Why, for instance people wondered, did not Scott's party jettison the many pounds of rock they had collected at the pole, even though this extra weight slowed their return and contributed to the exhaustion that left them snowbound and dying. The answer, Cherry-Garrard tells us, is that they did not see these rocks as extra weight; rather they saw in the mineral samples and fossils they had collected clues to the ancient flow of continents and the hidden history of life on earth. That is, they saw their world as scientists, as explorers, and as students (though they were also outstanding mountaineers). When the wind blew in an endless night of darkness these men charted the geography of Antarctica and recorded their many biological and meteorological observations. And of course, when they were tired and cold and near death they did not complain or abandon hope, they read aloud to one another from King Lear and Dickens' *Bleak House*. I can't help thinking, as I look back on their extraordinary journey, that but on the tundra of Antarctica they had created the perfect school.

Or rather they took school – the spirit of school – with them wherever they went and whatever they did. And I think that if we – your teachers, friends and family – have a hope for you it is that you too will carry school with you – that you will journey as a student rather than a climber. “There are many reasons which send men to the poles,” Cherry-Garrard concluded, “but the desire for knowledge for its own sake is the one that really counts.... And I tell you, if you have a desire for knowledge and the power to give it physical expression go out and explore. Some will tell you that you are mad, and nearly all will say, “What is the Use?” And so you will sledge alone. [But in the end] you will have your reward, so long as all you want is a penguin's egg.”

So, go for the egg. And while you're at it, take a book.