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The Zen Of Climbing

By Francis Sanzaro

THE ZEN OF CLIMBING By Francis Sanzaro (Saraband, 2023). Paperback, 216 pages, \$14.95.

Near the middle of *The Zen of Climbing*, Francis Sanzaro offers a succinct and gripping account of finding himself perched precariously on a ledge and staring down into the abyss. It's a moment he refers to as "the ask." He was young and inexperienced. "It was the first time in my life," he writes, "when I saw myself dying." We've all been there. In Sanzaro's case, it forced his mind into "places it hadn't gone before"—and it changed the course of his life. "It was my first Zen experience." Ultimately, this led to the writing of *The Zen of Climbing*.

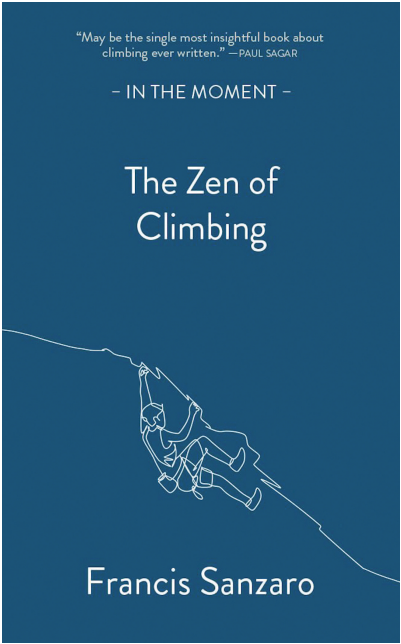
The title is perhaps a bit misleading. Sanzaro has comparatively little to say about "Zen." For that we must be grateful, as what is there to say about a spiritual practice that aims for a realm beyond words? No book is small enough to do that. Fortunately, *The Zen of Climbing* is mostly about climbing—or rather, Sanzaro's philosophical reflections on the sport of climbing. He is well-credentialed for such a project. With more than three decades of climbing experience under his belt, he is the author of two previous books and served as editor in chief of multiple climbing magazines. On top of that, he has a Ph.D. in religious studies. He writes with admirable clarity and precision, anchoring his more rarefied thoughts in felicitous prose. Given the compact size of this paperback volume, you might even be tempted to throw it into the gear bag for those times when you're waiting to climb at a busy crag.

The Zen of Climbing is replete with sage counsel for the climber less concerned with upping physical strength than with improving mental acuity. Indeed, Sanzaro's most pertinent advice can be summed up in a familiar phrase: Pay attention! "That sounds so simple," one is tempted to say, "a three-year-old could understand it." "Ah yes," says many a venerable teacher, "the three-year-old easily understands, but a person of 80 years is still unable to practice it." Sanzaro himself draws upon a variegated array of sources—including philosophy, social science, and religious studies—to make the same point. To pay attention is to open a new window on the world: "For climbers, you may discover you climb for all the wrong reasons and that your friends do as well. You have to recalibrate." Part two of the book consists of a series of mini-essays—bearing such titles as "Routes. Moves"; "Mistake Management"; and "The Myth of Mental Toughness"—each of which investigates from distinct angles this notion of "recalibration."

Sanzaro returns frequently to a notion popularized by Suzuki Roshi in his book *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*—namely, a contrast between two styles of consciousness. According to Suzuki: "If your mind is related to something outside itself, that mind is a small mind, a limited mind. If your mind is not related to anything else, then there is no dualistic understanding.... Big mind experiences everything within itself." Baffling as these words may seem, it gets even trickier. As both Suzuki Roshi and Francis Sanzaro will tell you, these two styles of consciousness are actually one and the same. No difference. So what's the big deal, then? Ah, but this is where the Real Climbing begins. Or as Sanzaro aptly sends it: "If you digest what is in these pages, you will appreciate your climbing more...have more fun, complain less, develop better technique and...become a better athlete."

—John P. O'Grady

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Article Details

Author	John P. O’Grady
Publication	AAJ
Volume	65
Issue	98
Page	
Copyright Date	2024
Article Type	Book reviews