

Touch the Top of the World: A Blind Man's Journey to Climb Farther Than the Eye Can See

by Erik Weihenmayer

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Reviewed by:

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An inspiring biography, Erik Weihenmayer's *Touch the Top of the World* is a narrative of emotion, triumph, setting goals, and pushing one's self beyond boundaries. Weihenmayer was born with an eye disorder which resulted in complete blindness by the time he was 13 years old. His loss of vision and the doubts of others did not stop him from reaching amazing heights within his life—literally. He was the first blind person to become a sponsored climber, summiting Mounts McKinley, Kilimanjaro, El Capitan, Aconcagua, and eventually Mount Everest.

The first half of his biography focuses on Weihenmayer's childhood. He talks about the gradual loss of his eyesight and his adjustment process. At 13, he was understandably angry and frustrated by his vision loss. The aggravation of his initial onset of blindness required hard work and strong support. His support came from his family and his first seeing-eye dog, Wiz. Erik was introduced to climbing at a month-long skills camp for the blind and was drawn to the activity: "Climbing a rock face seemed dangerous and risky and defied reason, and because of these elements, I was immediately attracted" (p. 93).

In the second half of the story, Weihenmayer talks about his loss of a loved one. Just as he was starting to adjust to the loss of his vision, he had to cope with losing his mother. Weihenmayer then shared his story of what it was like for him beginning college. He had to start over with building friendships, meeting people, and proving himself in a new environment. Post-college, he took a job teaching and fell in love with a fellow teacher. All the while, he continued to push himself in his discovery of the climbing world. Eventually he left teaching to focus full-time on climbing mountains. There are vivid descriptions of his mountain climbing adventures and excursions. What is striking is how much peace Weihenmayer seemed to gain from his climbing. As he explains, "Perhaps it was the freedom to make my life be what I wanted it to be, or at least the freedom to try, or to fail in the trying. Perhaps freedom itself was unobtainable and the goal was to only reach for it....Perhaps the importance was in the reaching out" (p. 219). The book ends with an afterword detailing Weihenmayer's experience in preparing for and actually summiting Mt. Everest. Again, in-depth details are shared so the reader can gain a sense of just how dangerous a feat this is for any climber.

Touch the Top of the World has numerous messages for the reader: surpassing limitations that other people place upon us, never giving up, setting self expectations high, and believing in dreams. One can see some correlations between the mountain climbing of the author and the emotions many first-year students might have as they face new challenges in their new world on campus. It is easy to draw comparisons for two things that may seem so

different, but really invoke the same self-motivation and courage from within. He says:
Maybe I was simply dreaming beyond my ability. Sometimes my doubt completely filled me up, but amidst these feelings emerged a more powerful surge of hope, flowing out through my fingertips....In this place I knew that my hope would smack up against the cold bluntness of reality. I knew I had a long way to go, but if a way existed, I would find it. (p. 223)

Often new students feel like they are in over their heads when they come to college—like they are beyond their ability and become filled with doubt. This book included several passages with inspirational words that could encourage students to reach beyond expectations others might have for them or even beyond limitations they set for themselves, and push themselves to achieve.

As a potential book for new student reading programs, this would certainly serve as a stirring and inspirational choice. *Touch the Top of the World* could serve as a common reader or perhaps as a text for a themed freshman seminar or learning community. Potential focuses include environmental studies, biography as literature, and athletics. Additionally, it might be interesting to tie this book in to an outdoor orientation program so that students could experience the actual act of rock climbing/hiking, relate their struggles to that of the author, and learn lessons of strength and self-motivation to take with them and utilize when they are back on campus.

The length and story line of the book are very digestible for readers of multiple levels of reading strengths. The author has a website that might provide supplemental materials such as DVD's, newsletters, photos, and even author contact information:

<http://www.touchthetop.com>. A word of caution—some sections of this book go into deep description about tools and technical aspects of mountain climbing. Therefore, this book might appeal to some students more than others. While the book is very detailed, the overall message of hope, courage, and dreams is not lost in the details.