

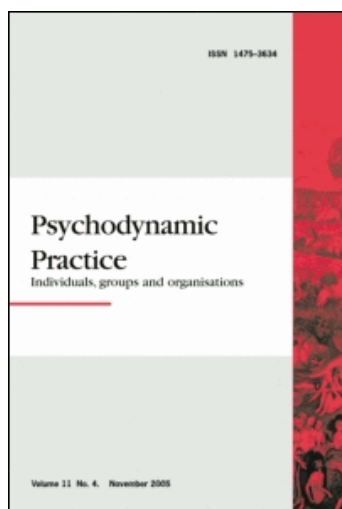
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### 'Touching the void'. Mountains as transitional objects: Climbing as a defence against anxiety

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## STUDENT ESSAY COMPETITION WINNER 2008

### ***'Touching the void'*. Mountains as transitional objects: Climbing as a defence against anxiety**

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Occupational science, a relatively new field of study, explores the political, cultural, social and personal meanings of occupations undertaken by people. However, in describing the 'meaning and purpose' of the activities, little attention has been paid to the unconscious symbolic function of activities for the individual and/or society. The potential for an analysis of the 'activity' (or occupation) as a transitional phenomenon led the author of this paper (an occupational therapist) to think further about the concept of an occupation and its potential for a defensive function, i.e. driven by unconscious anxiety.

By using narratives from mountaineers the paper explores occupations that may be used to defend or deflect the self from anxiety and thus the expression and fulfillment of a need for a relationship with another, in all its complexity, is denied. The author discusses this as a parallel discourse: the 'against all odds' adventure/achievement in society alongside a concealed fear of frailty and a difficulty in establishing a trusting attachment to a secure object (i.e. a person). In looking at the account of a climbing accident (in *Touching the void*, Simpson, 1997a) and its aftermath, the author suggests that Simpson's achievements following his accident, in mountain climbing and the authorship of many books, did not help him to make sense of his experience of vulnerability, as they were activities that reinforced his initial defence, that of a disavowal of his need for others (i.e. his dependency). Mountain climbing, alongside other adventure sports, could be an example of an individual's compulsive repetition of an unconscious defence against the fear of vulnerability, thereby not allowing for the fulfillment of the reparative wishes that could lead to a transformation of the compulsion. This fear of dependency may be echoed in a society that celebrates individualism, independence and self-empowerment.

**Keywords:** psychoanalytic theory; unconscious defence mechanisms; repetition compulsion; leisure; dependency; transformation through reparation

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The way is long, and getting longer,  
 The road goes uphill all the way, and even farther.  
 I wish you luck. You'll need it.

The way is dark, and getting darker.  
 The hut is high and even higher.  
 I wish you luck.  
 There is none.

*The 13 Clocks*, James Thurber (1950)<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

This paper aims to bring some of my thinking about occupational science and occupational therapy into my understanding of psychoanalytic theory. I have used narratives from long-distance rowing, sports marathon cycling and mountain climbing to consider if the occupations that some people choose to undertake during their 'leisure' are examples of activities being used unconsciously as a defence against anxiety.

This anxiety, which is linked to a fear of vulnerability and dependence, can be experienced in its raw form in dramatic accidents, such as the central story used in the autobiographical account of Joe Simpson's (1997a) near death in *Touching the void*. I propose that these high-risk activities, which are often reinforced by a culture that celebrates the achievements of an 'against all odds' (or a 'survival of the fittest') adventure, can be an unconscious acting out as a form of repetition compulsion, thereby not allowing for the fulfillment of the (unconscious) reparative wishes that could lead to a transformation of the compulsion.

What people 'do' (in work, leisure or in caring for themselves) can be understood as a form of communication in which the person uses objects to represent their inner world. This concept of using objects in a transitional space (of time and place) was first suggested by Winnicott (1971, p. 41) in his notion of 'playing'.

I make my idea of play concrete by claiming that *playing has a place* and a time. It is not *inside* by any use of the word. . . . Nor is it *outside*. To control what is outside one has to *do* things, and not simply to think or to wish, and *doing things takes time*. Playing is doing (p. 41).<sup>2</sup>

Winnicott stated that the child and/or adult discovered themselves through the use of the transitional space where experience could take place. This experiencing of the self, as cited above, takes place between the inner reality (constituted of unconscious internalized objects and desires) and the outer reality (and in mountain climbing those realities are the rock face, ice walls and climbing ropes). Playing (i.e. doing) is essentially a creative process, and Winnicott believed that 'playing is itself a therapy' (1971, p. 50) and 'is inherently exciting and precarious' (p. 52). This seems to describe the very

nature of mountain climbing (and other high-risk sports) and the meaning attributed to this 'doing' by a climber may never be fully understood as it constantly shifts and evolves as the climber discovers themselves through their use of transitional objects to the process of symbolization.

It would be possible to understand the transitional objects while not fully understanding the nature of symbolism. It seems that symbolism can be properly studied only in the process of the growth of the individual and that it has at the very best variable meaning (Winnicott, 1971, p. 6).

People may choose to climb mountains as a form of bodily (i.e. physical) aesthetic engagement with nature and many climbers speak of the sheer joy they experience in the natural surrounding of the high mountains. Many climbers, who are also the authors of their adventures (de Klerk, 2007; Krakauer, 1997), write exciting descriptions of their achievements and make insightful comments on why they do what they do and their analysis does not appear to be pathological or defensive. However, the emphasis of this paper is on mountain climbers (or other extreme sportsmen or women) who may be using this kind of activity as a compulsive enactment, which is an unconscious attempt to avoid or deny Oedipal anxieties through a defence of omnipotence. The defensive nature of the need to climb (or row, or cycle) means that the underlying unconscious anxiety cannot be acknowledged as the climber has the reinforcement of surviving each adventure. The unconscious nature of their compulsion remains hidden from view.

### **'The choice' – Rowing across the Atlantic**

In preparing for a lecture to occupational therapy students on the 'Nature of occupation' (in September 2004) I was fortunate enough to hear a half-hour radio interview on BBC Radio 4 called 'The choice'. The programme was an interview between Michael Buerk (the programme convener) and a man (Paul) who had undertaken to row across the Atlantic on two occasions. Paul had not completed either of the journeys, and during the second attempt he had very nearly drowned.

Michael Buerk, towards the end of the interview, posed the question that if Paul, now 40 years old and having recently begun a committed relationship, was to be given a third chance to row across the Atlantic, would he go? 'Oh yes' replied Paul, 'I have to'. When asked if he knew why he 'had to' do this arduous task, Paul clearly expressed his need for an achievement which could emphasize his physical prowess and endurance.

Paul described how he was the only child of a woman who had never married. He was conceived while she was working in Germany shortly after World War II as a British army officer; he said he thought that she had been quite popular with an active social life. Paul said that she had returned to England to give birth to him and she had left the military service.

He described how they had lived a fairly isolated life in fairly impoverished circumstances and that his mother seemed to resent him and often appeared to be cold towards him and dismissive of his achievements. He said that he had attended a boarding school and had always done well at sports, being in the first team for rugby and cricket. After leaving school he had taken up mountain climbing and trekking but he said he wanted to choose something that would tax his physical resources to the limit, and he thought that rowing across the Atlantic would do that.

Michael Buerk asked him if there was something significant he remembered from his childhood that had provoked him to prevail against all odds in his pursuit to row across the ocean. Paul said that one day, when he was about 13 years old, he had come into the rather dreary lounge of the council flat they lived in to find his mother crying over photographs of several handsome men dressed in Army uniform. He said that she looked up at him, and said in a tone of utter derision, that he would never be half the man that his father had been.

Paul said that he could not get this incident out of his head, and that he believed that if he could row across the ocean, he would be able to prove to himself, and her, that he was a man. He said that although he had left home soon after gaining his 'A' levels and had little contact with his mother, who had subsequently died, he still wished he could prove to her (and himself) that he was indeed 'man enough' for this marathon undertaking.

### **Occupational science and occupational therapy**

Occupational therapy, a fairly recent professional group, was formed from an eclectic mixture of theoretical roots, incorporating the ideas of sociology, medicine and psychology. This professional group, which had struggled to establish itself as having a valid theoretical basis of knowledge (Nicholls, 1992), has created a new field of academic enquiry, that of occupational science (Wilcock, 2001, 2002). It is within this science that the term 'occupation' has undergone its most vigorous examination and attempts at a definition.

Yerxa, Clark, Jackson, Parham, Stein, & Zemke (1989) described occupations as 'specific chunks of activity within the ongoing stream of human behavior which are named in the lexicon of the culture, for example, "fishing" or "cooking", or at a more abstract level, "playing" or "working"'. Occupations are described as the things that people do that are seen to be culturally appropriate, socially sanctioned and personally satisfying (Townsend, 1997).

All of these aspects of occupation may be true for individuals and within societies, but occupations may also act to defer or defend against anxiety. This use of occupational 'busyness', as a defence against anxiety, is well

understood by those who know that the procrastination that can occur before engaging in a difficult task (such as writing a paper) can often result in a spring-cleaned house!

Paul's story provided me with a narrative which confirmed a growing concern I had with the recent renaissance that occupational therapists were having with the concept of an occupation. It seemed that occupational therapists were celebrating all and any choices that clients made for an activity, without any analysis of (or thinking about) the unconscious representation that those activities may have had for the individual. It seemed to me that the profession needed to distinguish between occupations that enabled the self to express its innermost needs, and those that defended or deflected the self from the expression and fulfillment of those needs.

Did occupations:

- *defend* the self against its experience of need?
- act as a means of *identity*?
- form a *container* that provides a structure for our experiences?
- give us an opportunity for a *creative expression* of our desires for relationship, reparation and recovery?

Wilcock (2002) stated that 'occupation, that is, purposeful activity, is a central aspect of the human experience' and the 'need to engage in purposeful occupation is innate and related to health and survival' (p. 3). What she was suggesting was that occupation was a goal-directed behaviour that is part of a person's innate drive. What has not been explored in the recent literature in occupational therapy or occupational science is the possibility of the unconscious having a powerful influence on a person's occupational engagement. It was both the previous account of Paul's compulsive need to row across the Atlantic Ocean and my thoughts about adventure climbing that led me to the hypothesis that people could use activities (occupations) to defend themselves against an anxiety of vulnerability and/or a fear of dependence. Some occupations (such as rock climbing, marathon cycling, etc.) could act as displacement activities, offering the competitor a sense of physical sureness, perhaps the overcoming of an external obstacle, and what had not been considered is what function this may have for the individual on a symbolic or unconscious level.

As a means of relaxing, climbing is unique. Whatever preoccupations a leader may have before starting the climb, within a short distance of leaving the ground they would have been pushed to the very back of the mind. It is the *ultimate displacement activity*. ... a word with a very particular meaning for climbers ... 'commitment' ... Being committed means, whether it is on a fifty foot crag or a mountain wall two miles high, going beyond the point where retreat is feasible, where it is almost certainly easier to go on up and reach the top than to climb back down (Rose & Douglas, 2000, p. 30).

Why we do what we do may well be related to the early experiences we have encountered in our families; e.g. becoming a nurse as a need to care for others as a reaction formation to having a depressed mother. Nevertheless people who achieve great success in their chosen careers or leisure pursuits would seldom seek therapy for the things that may have contributed to their 'drive'. As Lance Armstrong (2000), winner of seven Tour de France races, stated when writing about his childhood experiences, in which he had a harsh punitive stepfather who would beat him for the slightest transgressions in their family home,

Athletes don't have much use for poking around in their childhoods, because introspection doesn't get you anywhere in a race . . . You need dumb focus. But that said, it's all stoked down in there, fuel for the fire. 'Make very negative into a positive', as my mother says. Nothing goes to waste, you put it all to use, the old wounds and long ago slights become the stuff of competitive energy. But back then I was just a kid with about four chips on his shoulder, thinking, *Maybe if I ride my bike on this road long enough it will take me out of here* (p. 22).

An analysis of the activities that people undertake, which may represent hidden hurts or early experiences of deprivation, could be of interest to armchair adventure occupational therapists, but most likely would not be of much concern to the average person who enjoys high-risk sports. My interest in the nature of these activities was in relation to their element of compulsion; many climbers cannot conceive of a time that they will not desire another peak to summit, or crack to conquer. This led me to wonder if the activity offered the climber an equal measure of fulfilment and an experience of the existential void that had provoked the need to climb, in other words it was a form of repetition compulsion, thereby never allowing for a resolution of the underlying anxiety.

Joseph (1989) wrote about the symptom of repetition compulsion, initially identified by Freud in the repetitive play that children used to 'work over in the mind an overpowering experience so as to make oneself master of it' (p. 17). She stated that the enactment of the compulsion cannot bring resolution to the individual as it carries 'a particular balance between destructiveness and love, and how the very nature of this balance in itself can lead to no progress, but only to a blind compulsion to repeat' (p. 17).

### ***Touching the void – Climbing mountains as compulsive activities***

Joe Simpson, in the book and film *Touching the void* (1997a, 2004), gives a vivid account of his struggle for survival following a fall high on a remote mountain in the Peru mountains, the Siula Grande. Joe, after summiting a remote and dangerous peak, falls and breaks his right leg, leaving him dependent on his climbing partner Simon Yates.

We both knew the truth; it was very simple. I was injured and unlikely to survive. Simon could get down alone. While I waited on his actions, it felt as if I was holding something terrifyingly fragile and precious. If I asked Simon to help, I might lose this precious thing. He might leave me (1997a, p. 79).

In rapidly deteriorating weather conditions of snow, wind and ice, Simon began to lower Joe down a steep slope, using a long climbing rope that was attached to Joe's harness and was linked to Simon as he established himself in a 'bucket seat' dug out of the snow on the steep slope. The pivotal point in the book (and film) takes place when Simon is forced to cut the rope which linked the two climbers. Joe falls into a deep crevasse and lies winded on a small ice shelf within the crack, afraid to move off the shelf deeper into the crevasse and unable to climb up and out of the hole.

Joe described a night of terror and tears in which he considered that he would die.

I thought carefully of the end. It wasn't how I had ever imagined it. It seemed pretty sordid. I hadn't expected a blaze of glory when it came, nor had I thought it would be like this slow pathetic fade into nothing. I didn't want to be like this (Simpson, 1997a, p. 114).

This realization seemed to provoke Joe to take some action and he eventually abseiled off the ice shelf, not sure if his rope would reach the bottom of the crevasse. He did not take any precautionary measures with him (that would have allowed him to climb back up) when he slipped off the shelf and began to abseil down into the void below.

The idea of waiting alone and maddened for so long had forced me to this choice: abseil until I find a way out, or die in the process. I would meet it rather than wait for it to come to me. There was no going back now, yet inside I was screaming to stop (Simpson, 1997a, p. 130).

Joe survived his ordeal and the story is a testimony to his physical courage and sheer stubbornness to keep going until he reached the base camp four days after the fall, where Simon and Richard were preparing to leave for the long journey back to Lima. Joe wrote that what had kept him going was the fear that he may die alone (Simpson, 1997b).

Following the success of his first book based on this experience, Simpson has become an acclaimed author and has written several other books which tell further tales of his climbing adventures. He has stated that although he had to have several operations to repair his broken and damaged leg, and although his parents struggled to accept his decision to return to climbing mountains, 'recovering from my injuries and getting back to the mountains were my priorities' (1997a, p. 206).

This wish to continue to climb seemed perfectly understandable; after all, isn't one told to climb back onto a horse the moment one falls off?



However, what if the act of climbing reinforced a defence against vulnerability that did not allow Joe to recover from his ordeal at a deep emotional level?

In his subsequent books Simpson (1997b, 2003) has written many vitriolic attacks on the new breed of mountain climbers who, in their relentless pursuit for the summit, would walk past injured colleagues or ignore the call for help from an abandoned team-mate. He said that walking past someone who is injured and possibly near to death may be a way in which the climber can ignore their own fear of death, and thereby continue with their mission that carries such a high personal risk. He has been highly critical of the actions of climbers who keep themselves warm and safe and do not seek to comfort or reassure those who cannot go on, or go back. I couldn't help noticing the strong theme in Simpson's books of those who get left behind, as if he cannot recover from his own experience of aloneness, experienced as a void, or perhaps at an unconscious level, an abandonment.

The 'extras' section of the DVD edition of the film, *Touching the void* (Macdonald, 2003) contained a video diary done by Joe Simpson as he returned to the Siula Grande, 17 years after the accident, to assist the film producers with their project. This video diary carried a few intimate moments when Simpson revealed that he has not recovered from his ordeal – he described, when he returned to the place in which he was finally found by Simon and Richard, a feeling of panic that the past 17 years hadn't existed and that he was back in 'that place'. He said that he had been reluctant to return to Peru in case the good fortune (referring to his publications and international fame) that he had discovered following the accident would suddenly dry up – as if a magic circle would close and he would be left outside it.

I have wondered if his angry outcry at the culture of interpersonal neglect amongst the climbing community and his feelings of panic when returning to the place of his accident were symptoms that related to the compulsive nature of climbing. Joe had described his need to return to the crags as soon as his leg had recovered from the operations he needed to correct the damage he had sustained on the mountain; was this compulsion to climb linked to an unconscious defence that has to be enacted in order to maintain the person's sense of their integrity, as Joseph (1989) has indicated? The nature of repetition compulsion is that it keeps a balance between purposefulness and protection that causes it to repeat itself.

In a moving account of his final crawl to the camp where Simon and Richard would have been, Simpson (2004) described how he called out into the darkness; he said 'at that moment when no-one answered the call – I lost something. I lost me'. It seemed Simpson experienced, at the most profound level, what all of us fear: being left behind, forgotten, abandoned and ignored. This painful reality of one's vulnerability, an experience of a loss of control over one's fate, is an anxiety that lurks in us all. It has seemed to me

it was at this point that many people are often confronted with life's existential realities and can make fundamental and profound changes in how they live their lives and treat others. Simpson, having experienced this profound sense of loss, returned to climbing mountains as proof that he was not vulnerable and was not dependent on others for their approval, affection and recognition.

Craib (1994), a sociologist and group analyst, writes of his experience of learning that he has cancer:

I had never before allowed myself to recognize the fear of death that must be common to us all, and neither had I properly understood its implications: that life is immensely precious and the links we have with people, in all their dreadful complexity, are all that we have, and if there is such a thing as evil in the world it lies in the deliberate breaking of those links (p. vii).

My interest in occupations which may be compulsively enacted by clients is as an occupational *therapist*. The analysis and support of occupation(s) is the central tenet of our therapy, and we aim to understand the personal meaning and cultural relevance of clients' chosen occupations to promote health and well-being in our client's lives and communities. However, if what a client insists they love doing is a form of defence (i.e. repetition compulsion) – should we be facilitating a process that accepts this uncritical choice or should we be finding a mechanism to challenge the defence?

### **Climbing mountains; feeling the edge**

Climbing a mountain may be the particular choice or need of an individual, and as such belongs in those lexicons of personal occupational preferences that occupational therapists are always so keen to affirm, but as Wilcock (2002) stated, occupations are unique and 'motivated by socio-cultural values and beliefs' (p. 3). Many societies endorse the occupations of hill walking, trekking, rock climbing or summit 'bagging', but as Macfarlane (2004) pointed out, this leisure pursuit is a fairly recent phenomenon. He has described this new fashion of 'fear sports' (p. 72) and linked it to 'survivalist values' (p. 90) that arose in part, he argued, from a theory of survival of the fittest, or as he described it, a 'pungently masculine Darwinism' (p. 90).

Lewis (2000) proposed that in 'adventure climbing'<sup>3</sup> the climber enjoyed the physical contact with rock and sense of achievement that was 'an act of intentionality that thwarts the desensitizing and pacifying proclivity of the body under modernity' (p. 58). These thoughts were echoed by Breton (2000) who said that extreme sports provided the risk of death that could have given a sense of a limit that modern society no longer provided. 'The clash occurring between the body and nature is like seeking the ultimate truth of Western individualism, it is seen as the only partner of any value, the only speaker worthy of respect' (p. 2).

These writers supported the undertaking of high-risk sports such as mountain climbing, and eulogize about its positive impact on the individual and within society. I have wondered if the adventure sports they praised represented an antidote to modern society's ills or an enactment of a culture that valued rugged individualism and physical achievement, thereby unconsciously denying frailty, vulnerability and dependence.

Hoggett (2000) wrote about the loss in modern society of an ethic of care (social responsibility), where members no longer valued the contribution they made to each other's lives through service and nurturance. 'Ours is a culture which disavows the continuing shadow that nature casts upon all our lives: one which manifests itself in illness, disability, ageing and the prolonged helplessness that the infant human being ... undergoes' (p. 166).

Krakauer (1997) wrote a riveting account of the tragic events that occurred in 1996 when several disparate groups of climbers attempted to summit Everest, and like Simpson (1997b), he believed that much of the tragedy could have been avoided if individual climbers were less concerned with getting to the top and more aware of each other. He uses a quote to begin one of his chapters which I think speaks to the heart of the uses to which mountain climbing is put by individuals and society.

How much of the appeal of mountaineering lies in its simplification of interpersonal relationships, its reduction of friendship to smooth interaction (like war), its substitution of an Other (the mountain, the challenge) for the relationship itself? Behind a mystique of adventure, toughness, footloose vagabondage – all much needed antidotes to our culture's built-in comfort and convenience – may lie a kind of adolescent refusal to take seriously ageing, the frailty of others, interpersonal responsibility, weakness of all kinds, the slow unspectacular course of life itself (Krakauer, 1997, p. 145).

As Macfarlane (2004) pointed out in his study of climbers, 'there is no undeniable need to put one's life at risk on the mountainside or a cliff face. Mountaineering isn't destiny – it doesn't have to happen to a person' (p. 99). However, as we have seen in the earlier examples of Paul (the Atlantic rower) and Joe Simpson, they feel compelled to return to their chosen activities, and this need is seldom questioned (that is confronted or challenged) by society. Breton (2000) said that the high-risk adventurer found 'an elegant way of putting one's [their] life on a par with death for an instant in order to steal some of its power' (p. 7). I have wondered if climbing mountains could be an attempt by the individual, reflected in the public's celebration of the climber's achievements, to overcome death and perhaps even to escape the destiny of ageing?

### **Oedipal anxiety and the acceptance of one's fate**

What has always fascinated me about the story of Oedipus is that although he solves the riddle of the Sphinx,<sup>4</sup> which was essentially about the

existential truth of ageing and its concomitant frailty, he was condemned to the fate of one who ignores (denies) the predicament (the reality of vulnerability). Oedipus may well have been able to understand the riddle because of his own use of a stick from a young age due to his own disability, his scarred and injured feet. His ignorance of (or blindness to) his real parents (the father he killed at the cross-roads and the mother who he marries) may have been due to his difficulty in experiencing any goodness – after all it was his parents who had left him out to die! However, ignoring the process of ageing carries a denial of certain other realities – those of our dependence on others (parents) at the start of life, an increasing dependency on others as we become old and frail and our certain succumbing to the final ‘other’ at the end of life – a death.

As Steiner (1993) pointed out to us in his discussion on ‘Turning a blind eye’, Oedipus’s life showed an omnipotent disregard for consequence; he did not enquire about the circumstances of the King’s death (the father he had killed) or about the age of his wife (his mother). This disavowal of his fate seemed to be an echo of one that adventure sportsmen seem to embrace, a denial that becoming old is a fate that awaits us all, and with it a physical frailty and a need for, at times, an intimate dependence on others.

In describing the narrative of a climber who was on a treacherous route, Breton quoted, ‘I was no longer frightened or tired; I felt as if I left as though transported through the air, I was invisible, nothing could stop me’ (p. 9). This sensation of ‘personal transfiguration’, said Breton, ‘forms such a strong memory that the player does everything possible to relive it’ (p. 10). These acts and actions are discussed by this author as a form of art, or as a ‘state of grace’, but I interpret them differently and see them as acts of repetition compulsion in which the actor can continue to avoid the underlying anxiety by engaging in the activities that both provoke fear and counter it with a sensation of omnipotence.

Hill walkers speak of mountains, or rock climbers of crags, as if these mountains or crags have personal qualities. This substitute of the rock face for the ‘Other’ can provide the sportsman with a sense of personal intimacy often seen in the descriptions of the activity. Lewis (2000) wrote of a climber Murray’s ‘sensuous knowledge’ of the landscape;

it is by our physical presence on the cliffs and ridges, by the exploration of their gullies no less wandering the plateau ... that we fully come to know these mountains and win the high reward of intimacy (p. 76).

This romantic notion of a landscape as having personal qualities may well be a defence against the real risk of intimacy with a person; consider the understanding of the term commitment above. Authors who praise the act of rock climbing as an experience of near-death which provides the individual with an appreciation of life may be substituting a concrete risk with the use of rock and rope for the emotional risk of love and intimacy. If

climbing provides the climber with a near experience and/or a deeper appreciation of loss, so does love where a person cannot control the object or its fate. To love is to encounter loss.

Joseph (1989) wrote that acts of repetition compulsion were related to 'problems stimulated by dependence on the primary object or part object, the mother or the breast' (p. 17). This fear of dependence accompanied an envy of the object that could have provided the comfort and/or food for the infant. It has seemed to me that mountain climbing could substitute this fear and envy of the other with a very real object (a mountain) which can be 'summit'ed, overcome and conquered. But this action could never lead to fulfillment of the impulse, as this impulse (or need) was essentially experienced as a void, and so it was compulsively repeated in reaction to an ever-pressing need for the experience of omnipotence (that is an overcoming of the need – as seen in summiting an inaccessible and high peak). The omnipotence served to deny the need that formed the compulsion, but as omnipotence is an immature defence against the experience of need (Segal, 1973) the sense of achievement quickly evaporates and the need to climb begins again. While this cycle of fear of vulnerability – defence against anxiety (that is omnipotent enactment) continues – no change can occur. The climber does not mature (emotionally) and no mountain will ever be high enough.

### **The opposite of fear**

Andy de Klerk (2007), a South African rock climber and base jumper,<sup>5</sup> has written a passionate and insightful book on his adventures and people who have shared his love of high places. In a chapter called 'The opposite of fear' he mused on his desire for adventure sports. He explored 'why I felt such a pressing need to put myself at risk in the mountains and jump off cliffs with a parachute. And I needed to understand why it was worthwhile' (p. 145). Initially de Klerk said that he thought that the opposite of fear, in which he writes that beneath the fear of death was the fear of being alone, was courage. Later in the chapter he explores the notion of 'courage' further and recounts a story of a time he and his partner Julie were stuck on the edge of a mountain in a terrifying electric storm in which he was sure his life would end.

It was a deeply personal hour, but also intimately shared because Julie was there. With alpine climbing the partnership of the rope is very close. You're still alone, but there is another presence, another human to help ease the load. ... We travel across sharper edges of the world connected by a thin rope, but also connected in the existential void all around us. Climbing embraces so much more because of this shared connection. ... What I finally understood is that the opposite of fear is not courage, it is love, and armed with that it's easy to face the darkness (de Klerk, 2007, p. 151).

Perhaps as therapists (and occupational therapists) we need to be cautious about classifying certain activities, such as mountain climbing, rowing or polar ice walking, as having their own intrinsic motivational structure. It seems that we need to consider what the activity means to and represents for the actor. Perhaps through a cautious sensitivity and respectful inquiry there is a possibility for a thoughtfulness (on behalf of the therapist and the client) that can allow for an understanding of the activity. This may allow the client's occupational choices to be negotiated or shifted from a compulsive repetitive cycle to one that can allow for a form of reparation and/or healing. As de Klerk recognizes, the sportsman can move beyond their unconscious fears (of death, of being alone) to their desire for another – that is to love.

### Notes

1. A poem inscribed on a plaque, half way up a mountain, Waaihoek, in Western Cape, South Africa.
2. Italics from original quote by Winnicott (1971).
3. A particular type of climbing in which the climber's safety relies on the skilled placement of removable devices, into which the climber/s can clip the rope and falling off the rock can be hazardous if the securing devices are unable to hold the climber's weight or angle of fall. This is differentiated from 'sports climbing' in which the climber is secured to permanent bolts (Lewis, 2000).
4. Oedipus, on attempting to enter the gates of Thebes, is asked a question by the Sphinx. If he does not answer the riddle correctly he will be devoured by the Sphinx. The question was; 'There is on earth a thing two footed and four footed and three footed that has one voice ... but when it goes on on most feet then its speed is feeblest' (Steiner, 1993, p. 118). Oedipus answers correctly – a man, who 'crawls on four feet as an infant, walks on two as an adult, and hobbles with a stick in old age' (Steiner, 1993, p. 118).
5. This is an extremely dangerous sport where the jumper launches themselves from a fixed point, often a tall building or cliff edge, with a parachute. The sport carries a high rate of fatalities.

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