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Holes in El Capitan: A Case Study of Ethics and Pilgrimage Culture

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Abstract

El Capitan in Yosemite National Park is arguably the most sacred and inspiring cliff for climbers around the world. Elite individuals test their mettle and skills on the so-called *big walls* of El Capitan which can rise nearly 1000 meters. This analysis is part of a larger effort considering serial El Capitan climbers, who challenge the rock again and again and form lifelong connections to the mountain. Herein, I probe the rising culture of El Capitan, by looking carefully at the ethical orientations of *big wall* climbers. I consider a contentious series of incidents surrounding a controversial new climbing route. This research demonstrates that while these climbers can be seen to be a freedom-loving tribe, significant contestation arises around ethical issues related to the drilling of small holes in the consecrated mountain.

Keywords: pilgrimage, Yosemite National Park, El Capitan, *big wall* climbing, ethics

Under cover of darkness on May 19, 1982, three members of the Yosemite Search and Rescue team, or YOSAR, executed what they understood as an act of justice to address the desecration of El Capitan.¹⁾ This gigantic cliff—El Cap, as it is affectionately called—rises 1000 meters above the Merced River in Yosemite National Park in California. As one of the largest, most formidable, and simultaneously, most accessible pieces of granite, the mountain is known worldwide as the holiest of holies for rock climbers. YOSAR is an elite rescue force, especially recognized for its technical prowess in executing vertical rescues on the huge cliff faces of Yosemite.²⁾ At least one member was as young as 21 years old in 1982, and he describes this mobilization in an online forum post as a response to an attack on “our sacred wall.”³⁾



Image 1: The magnetic allure of El Capitan. Photo by Tom Evans (used with permission)

The target of this vigilante mission was some recently added fixed equipment located on the so-called *Great Slab* of El Capitan. A pair of climbers from outside the tight-knit Yosemite Valley climbing community was attempting a new route, or first ascent, on this section of El Capitan, which is so blank and difficult it had been avoided by even the best climbers in the world. What were the two climbers doing that caused such a commotion? It would be natural to assume that the locals were distraught by the outsiders dumping what would become 39 days' worth of trash and equipment into a legally protected wilderness area.⁴⁾ From the wall, the team tossed paper bags of feces, urine in plastic bottles, food containers, five equipment duffle bags, and hundreds of meters of ropes.⁵⁾ But the principal sin was that the pair were thought to have drilled too many holes into the rockface for the purpose of upward movement. These assumptions were not unreasonable given that these two had no previous experience climbing El Cap via the numerous established climbing routes. Indeed, early on, the team themselves were deeply concerned that perhaps their

route was becoming illegitimate due to drilling.⁶⁾ Their perceived actions were considered nothing less than a “rape” of the holy site.⁷⁾

The YOSAR vigilantes and their aims appear to have been generally applauded by the wider climbing community in Yosemite Valley.⁸⁾ Their apparent act of justice included removing the team’s ropes, which extended several rope lengths up the rockface, chopping their fixed protection bolts, and, demonstrating the force of their spite, defecating on the pile of ropes.⁹⁾ Importantly, at least one of the justice-seekers was intoxicated, and they had made false assumptions about the new climb that would later come to light.

Flush with religious fervor, the pair of outsider would-be *first ascensionists* “prayed unendingly that God would take up our cause.”¹⁰⁾ They shook off the YOSAR attack, as well as a subsequent assault by a French team above them who bombed them with a paper bag of feces. The team eventually persevered in climbing their new route, called *Wings of Steel*, which required a record amount of time spent on the rock. Incredibly, over the next decades, the route-saboteurs would shift from the heroes to villains of the narrative, after the full details of the climb became known.

The above battle is best understood as a conflict among competing pilgrims and their respective visions for a sacred site. Such conflicts are so commonplace, that it has led John Eade and Michael Sallnow to famously state that the essence of pilgrimage is as an “arena for competing secular and religious discourses”; they maintain that the phenomenon must be understood primarily as a location for conflict among rival groups or sects.¹¹⁾ In the above conflict, the outsiders are devout Seventh-Day Adventists, who imagine their climbing efforts on El Capitan as a deep expression of their Christian faith.¹²⁾ For the Yosemite Valley climbing locals, the mountain itself and the climbing it inspires is of ultimate spiritual concern. For them, the sacred importance of El Cap means that any perceived desecration must be addressed, even forcibly.

The purpose of this treatment is simply to uncover the foremost ethical issues for climbers of El Capitan. While this paper's scope revolves around only a handful of individuals, the examples presented here can be seen to have had a significant impact on the evolving culture of the sacred journey. I argue that while El Cap pilgrims can often be seen as

freedom-loving, important contestation arises around the sacred site primarily regarding ethical issues connected to the drilling of holes in the stone.

An Investigation into the “Insane” Vertical Tribe

The thematic examination of climbing ethics in this paper is part of a larger investigation considering serial *big wall* climbers of El Capitan. *Big walls* are simply the tallest, steepest, and most challenging rock faces in the world, and most are over 300 meters high. For all but the expert climber, *big walls* require a multi-day effort and sleeping on the rock face. El Capitan is the premier *big wall* destination, and the massive cliff boasts roughly 100 climbing routes of this type. The technical, physical, and mental challenges of *big walls* make them an outlying aim even among avid rock climbers, perhaps attracting less than one percent of all rock climbers. Indeed, the extreme challenges of El Capitan are evidenced in the fact that its *first ascent* by Warren Harding and his team was not accomplished until 1958, five years after the first climb of Mt. Everest. As such, we need to recognize that El Cap climbing ranks among the most extreme human endeavors and that the impulse is difficult to rationalize for those outside of the so-called “lunatic fringe.” When probed at the top of El Cap by a reporter in 1970 about why they are doing this, Warren Harding remarked simply, “Because we are insane, there can’t be any other reason.”¹³⁾

This ongoing research is an ethnographic look at contemporary El Cap climbers who have scaled the rock more than 100 times, by means of 50 or more different routes, or those individuals progressing quickly to this type of record. As such, it considers extreme statistical outliers among the already outlying population of *big wall* climbers. Data for the overall project includes extensive interviews with serial ascensionists, while this foundational treatment draws primarily from sources in the public domain. I should also note that the larger project includes valuable participant observation. Notably, in the spring of 2022, I climbed El Capitan for the first time myself (after four previous failed attempts) over seven days with Dr. Steven Wright of the University of Lancaster.

In some initial work related to this research, I have established the genuine utility of a pilgrimage lens to consider the phenomenon of serial El Cap climbing. I have considered, in detail, the notion of “vertical pilgrimage”, including its primary characteristics and some global examples.¹⁴⁾ Additionally, I have deconstructed the movement of El Cap climbers and

considered *big wall* climbing as a type of asceticism, linking it to the sort of empowering pilgrimage journeys that exist in many spiritual contexts.¹⁵⁾ Finally, work published together with Ian Reader looking specifically at serial pilgrimage on the contemporary Shikoku *henro* provides a solid methodological and theoretical background for this investigation.¹⁶⁾ The extreme nature of serial climbers on El Capitan makes them somewhat challenging to fit with analytical models, but my work has shown that pilgrimage offers high utility as a theoretical perspective.

Freedom, Ethics, Asceticism, and Pilgrimage

It is a widely accepted notion that pilgrimage is a pervasive and universal phenomenon in large measure because of the freedom it offers. Early theoretical conceptions of sacred journeys by Victor and Edith Turner posited that pilgrimage frees one from the obligations of everyday life.¹⁷⁾ While not strictly defined, implicit in this and other treatments is a “freedom” that is emancipatory and tied to individual choice. As such, the promise of liberation on and through the road has attracted and sustained pilgrims across time and in many sacred contexts.

This observation has been confirmed with data well outside of the Christian holy sites that spawned such theories. For example, in Japan, Karen Smyers maintains that the pilgrimage to Mt. Inari in Kyoto offers a means of individual expression in a culture known to have collectivist pressures.¹⁸⁾ My own research undertaken with Ian Reader on the Shikoku *henro* includes notable informants, who—having tasted the freedom of the pilgrim road—find it impossible to return to the conformist life they see being led by other Japanese.¹⁹⁾ Ammon McNeely (1970-2023) was a serial El Cap climber and a legend who claimed 75 ascents of the stone via 62 distinct routes and established 12 speed climbing records.^{20) 21)} He explains his attraction to the pursuit stating simply, “the freedom you feel up there is indescribable.”²²⁾

Freedom is often associated with the transgression of social norms or morals, but as famously noted by Jean-Paul Sartre, making an ethically or edifyingly right choice is also an exercise of liberty.²³⁾ In other words, placing restrictions and requirements on one’s pilgrimage is likewise an expression of freedom. In spiritual contexts, asceticism is the concept most often associated with placing limitations and obligations on one’s behavior for the purpose of edification.²⁴⁾ Many pilgrimages of the world are known to have ascetic

orientations or elements. Geoffrey Galt Harpham defines asceticism broadly as “any act of self-denial undertaken as a strategy of empowerment or gratification.”²⁵⁾ He maintains that 1.) culture arises from the self-denial of asceticism and what he calls the “ascetic imperative”²⁶⁾ and 2.) that ethics itself is “inescapably ascetical.”²⁷⁾ Following this analysis, we can understand that ethical decisions made on pilgrimages flush with freedom create the culture of the sacred journey. As such, there is a through-line that connects the ethics of El Cap climbers to the emerging culture of the illustrious and sacred stone. Likewise, the treatment herein offers pilgrimage studies a concrete example of how consideration of ethical decision-making can be a primary tool to uncover meaning.

Ground Rules and Free Spirits

The curious irony of a discussion of ethics regarding serial El Cap climbers is the notable disdain they have traditionally shown for laws, rules, and the social norms of society on the floor of Yosemite Valley. Indeed, a popular recent film titled *Valley Uprising* is constructed entirely on the premise that Yosemite climbers are a rebellious counterculture. Therefore, as a point of departure, we should distinguish between rules and standards imposed from without and those imposed from within the tribe. Traditionally climbers have been indifferent or antagonistic to the outside rules, while being generally careful of the standards of the climbing community. As such, the primary ethical orientations of serial *big wall* climbers mostly stand independent of outside influences seeking to impose their will on them. Indeed, as we shall see, the sense of right and wrong for the most insatiable El Cap climbers is almost non-sensical to those outside of this adventure niche.

As a young teenager voraciously reading climbing magazines, I had an image that El Capitan was something like an offshore zone where climbers did as they please and laws did not exist. In reality, climbers are often the target of various types of park rangers seeking to impose a measure of law and order. *Dirtbags*, i.e. semi or fully-itinerant climbers, can run afoul of an entire range of legal issues and park rules, including illegal camping, unlicensed guiding, tossing equipment bags from the top of the rock, illegal use of power tools in a wilderness area, abandonment of gear on the rock face, and base jumping. In recent years, the park service has implemented a new permit system for *big wall* climbers,²⁸⁾ and now rangers routinely patrol the base and summit of El Capitan and even occasionally climb big wall routes to check on conditions and climbers.²⁹⁾ It is safe to say that El Cap is no longer a

lawless liminal space, if it ever was.

Alcohol and non-narcotic drugs (especially cannabis and hallucinogens) seem to account for a significant measure of the traditional conflict between law enforcement rangers and climbers. Indeed, famous El Cap routes are named in homage to mind-altering substances, including *Mescalito*, *Tangerine Trip*, and *Magic Mushroom*. *Dirtbags* have often been arrested and done time in the Yosemite Jail for things like smoking cannabis while bouldering or slacklining (balanced walking on tensioned straps) around the climber's campground³⁰⁾ or "disorderly conduct" in or around the Mountain Room Bar at the Yosemite Lodge. Indeed, such arrests have been so common that climbers have amusingly given the jail a nickname, the "John Muir Hotel," in reference to the climber and explorer who is the patron saint of Yosemite and the U.S. National Park System.³¹⁾ Other *big wall dirtbags* have been the subject of lengthy criminal investigations, ticketing/fines, and even expulsion from the park.³²⁾

Holes in El Cap

It is in the mechanics of upward climbing movement that we can understand the primary ethical debates among climbers regarding holes in the rock face. The first routes on El Capitan were accomplished almost exclusively using steel pitons for both upward progress and as a means to secure the rope for safety. Pitons are something like nails that goes into cracks in the rock, and they come in a range of styles and sizes. Since steel is harder than stone, the repeated use of pitons leads to scarring holes that steadily grow, as the pegs are continually placed and removed. Limiting piton use by substituting non-damaging chocks and later spring-loaded camming devices was an early ethical effort by Yosemite *big wall* climbers.³³⁾ There are few hard and fast ethical rules, but *big wall* climbers are expected to use "clean" equipment over pitons whenever possible to avoid the further enlargement of piton holes.

The use of drilled holes, especially for use with bolts, is at the top of the list for ethical scrutiny. Indeed, Joseph E. Taylor III notes that there was some hesitation regarding efforts to make a *first ascent* on El Capitan in part because climbers knew it would require many bolts.³⁴⁾ With much labor, a climber can strike a concrete drill bit with a hammer and can thereby drill holes to accommodate sturdy anchors virtually anywhere on the rock. Likewise, drills are used to create divots or holes that can be hooked with specialty gear. Semi-

permanent bolts increase the margin of safety significantly, while allowing the navigation of sections of rock that are completely devoid of naturally climbable features. While such bolts are required to accomplish essentially any *big wall* route on El Capitan, if they are used excessively, imprudently, or subsequently added to existing routes, they are generally considered an ethical violation of the highest order. McNeely explains that to those outside “hole counts might seem trivial,” but “in the world of aid climbing³⁵⁾ such things determine the righteousness and purity of a line, and its difficulty.”³⁶⁾

Ongoing debates regarding bolting ethics in the late 1960s and early 1970s culminated with a single route contested by two pioneering vertical pilgrims: Warren Harding and Royal Robbins. This would become an archetypical example of bolting intolerance by Robbins and his followers. Robbins had accused Harding of excessive bolting on his visionary *first ascent* of the *Dawn Wall*, a steep and foreboding section of the southeast face of El Cap that required 330 drilled holes and an astounding 27 days to climb.³⁷⁾ Yvon Chouinard, the famous early Yosemite *big wall* pathfinder and founder of the company Patagonia, called Harding the “mad bolter” after the *Dawn Wall*.³⁸⁾ Robbins set about to erase the climb, by climbing it a second time and using a chisel to chop off the offending anchors. Somewhat disingenuously, the ethically-driven team used Harding’s bolts for vertical progress, only to remove them once their ropes were fixed above. However, Robbins became humbled by the difficulty of the climbing, and the would-be justice seeker abandoned his efforts to destroy the route.³⁹⁾ As seen with this example and countless others, it is hard to understate how emotionally charged bolting issues can be in the climbing community. Bolting debates have destroyed many friendships and have led the righteous to extreme measures.

Ammon McNeely: A Pirate Looks at Ethics

“El Cap Pirate... f@ck the tool [law enforcement rangers], We will base jump when we want ...” Quote from a *big wall* satirical animation video⁴⁰⁾

A look at Ammon McNeely (1970-2023) captures both the curiosities of El Cap culture and the ethical debates that sometimes engulf the mountain. As stated above, his record places him among the exalted ranks of top serial El Cap climbers. Known as the “El Cap Pirate,” this guise was cultivated by his rebellious spirit, his propensity for pirate-themed speech, his *dirtbag* lifestyle forcing him to scrounge “booty” (abandoned climbing gear), and a

knack for flying the Jolly Roger flag on his vertical quests. As if life were imitating art, McNeely's pirate persona grew inadvertently when he lost his right leg in a base jumping accident, forcing him to use a prosthesis.⁴¹⁾ Indeed, he even climbed El Cap one more time in 2020 via the *Muir Wall* after the amputation, only to have his artificial leg accidentally fall off more than 600 meters to the ground.⁴²⁾

To call McNeely a “free spirit” would be a notable understatement, like calling El Cap merely “tall.” His wild ways often brought him trouble on the ground, and he was arrested more than once by Yosemite law enforcement rangers. Most infamously, he was electrocuted by a stun gun in *El Capitan Meadow*, while being apprehended for an illegal parachute jump from the top of El Cap.⁴³⁾

McNeely's most iconic episode on the “big stone” demonstrated his general disdain for conventional expectations and his love of routes untamed by holes. He nearly died while soloing *Surgeon General*, a route first ascended by Eric Kohl and known as a “horror show” for its difficulties and dangers. In a first-person description of the climb, McNeely expresses his love of Kohl's artistry that creates “macabre, unusual [route] lines” for “a truly raw experience.”⁴⁴⁾ In short, *Surgeon General* is attractive to him precisely because the route was not tamed by the drill. The Pirate took a terrible 24-meter fall resulting in a smashed helmet and “clear goo” oozing from his skull. His situation was observed from the ground and efforts were made to organize a rescue replete with a helicopter. McNeely dramatically refused, reportedly with his middle finger raised to his would-be rescuers viewing him through high-power lenses. As the concerned gazed on in consternation and dismay, McNeely sat dazed on a ledge drinking a beer and smoking cannabis from a pipe. He eventually rallied himself and finished the climbing while conjuring in his mind the image of the climbers who had died before him. He felt himself “tiptoeing right up to the edge of the abyss,” while avoiding the “dirt nap,” a common *big wall* epithet for the grave.⁴⁵⁾

For an individual with a general disdain for authority and rules, McNeely held a strong sense of “should” with respect to the *big walls* of El Cap. During his incredible career, he found himself in various positions regarding disputes concerning offensive holes in El Cap. In one instance, he led a charge online through the SuperTopo Forum, something of a “virtual campfire” around which Yosemite climbers chatted. He accused another famous serial El Cap

climber of drilling “chicken rivets” on the iconic route called *Lost in America*.⁴⁶⁾ Such an allegation from a climber with the stature of McNeely brought about stern condemnation for the accused, who vehemently proclaimed his innocence and provided logical evidence that he had used the bolts in question but had not drilled them himself.



Images 2 and 3: Left, Ammon McNeely drinking his signature King Cobra Malt Liquor at *El Capitan Bridge*. Right, McNeely climbing solo on *Surgeon General*, the route that would nearly kill him. Photos by Tom Evans (used with permission)

However, even the fearless and revered McNeely found himself in a short-lived bolt controversy. Lost on the lower expanse of El Cap’s southwest face without a topographical map, he found himself bogged down in a formidable wide crack that swallowed his body.⁴⁷⁾ Desperate for a reprieve, he mistakenly drilled an anchor on one of the rock’s most consecrated features, the *Hollow Flake* on the *Salathe Wall*. The *Hollow Flake* has a fearsome reputation for the natural challenges the gaping crack poses. It is something of a barrier gate to one of the mountain’s most popular climbing routes. As such, as far as the Yosemite climbing community is concerned, it is arguably the worst place on the entire mountain to add a safety bolt. The Pirate returned within days after summiting to erase the offending bolts. This incident shows that even the most prodigious *big wall* climber, given enough time and exposure to the rockface, can find themselves in a predicament that causes them to reach for the drill.

In the case of *Wings of Steel*, McNeely became the ultimate judge of this controversial route. Taylor writes that second ascents of El Cap routes were generally a test of the climb's legitimacy, acting as something of a "peer review" of the first ascenders.⁴⁸⁾ McNeely and his associates crowd-sourced funds to make a video somewhat akin to a reality TV account of his attempt. The Pirate found the climbing so challenging and stressful that—by his own admission—he stayed drunk on whiskey and beer through much of the ascent. After one particularly torturous day, he writes:

That night I felt like a bombshell victim, traumatized by all the falls I had taken, and worse, the falls I knew I had yet to take. I convulsed awake after "feeling" the sensation of falling. I'd never before experienced nightmares on a wall.⁴⁹⁾

Averaging six lengthy falls a day totaling a staggering 152 meters in plummets, and suffering a dislocated shoulder in one spill, McNeely declared *Wings of Steel* to be not only legitimate, but likely the most difficult route on El Capitan. While hard and valid, McNeely did not find the climbing to be enjoyable or of a classic quality and suggests that he "would not wish it on his worst enemy."⁵⁰⁾

Discussion: The Hole-y and the Holy

The above personalities and narratives start to point to the simple but salient truth that ethics regarding El Cap is not really about the physical holes, but the features' relationship to the fundamental meaning of this almost incomprehensibly extreme activity. El Capitan as a concept, as a pilgrimage location, as an ascetic monastery, and as means of personal testing is more than the sum of its massive parts. Indeed, the rock is roughly 1,190,000 square meters in size,⁵¹⁾ while the offending holes for bolts are generally 10mm or less in diameter. Climbers on *big walls* sometimes have trouble seeing bolts and drilled holes in bright sunshine or dark shadow, even when they are nearly on top of the preexisting ones. Likewise, El Capitan is not some eternal granite substrate; entire sections of this ancient volcano core routinely and naturally peel off and crash to the ground.⁵²⁾ Eagle-eyed climbers have even spotted climbing bolts in rocks that have fallen to the base. The comparatively tiny holes have outsized meaning because they change the experience and, therefore, the significance of subsequent ascents.

From an ideological perspective, the holes relate to issues regarding the preservation of adventure, which—put another way—often means the preservation of danger. The first generation of El Cap climbers in the late 1960s and early 1970s is said to have “fetishized risk” and “risked their lives for their ideals.”⁵³⁾ In the aforementioned clash over *Wings of Steel*, you have the remarkable orientation of the Yosemite Search and Rescue members, ostensibly the guardian angels of the vertical tribe, advocating for a route on El Cap that is more dangerous. As seen with McNeely’s perspectives, the significant meaning found in the danger and difficulty is thought to be violated by offending holes.

One contemporary example which pointedly illuminates this issue of a perceived need for risk is the replacement of climbing anchors. The hardware has a limited lifespan and poor and/or tired climbers have often cut corners on the quality of their original anchors during the *first ascent*. As the climbing community comes to understand that those old anchors are hazardous and need replacement, there has been a very curious philosophical debate about the proper strength of the replacement hardware. Many climbers have advocated the somewhat preposterous position that the replacement gear should be of notably weak strength to preserve a measure of the danger/adventure that existed before replacement (but generally not at the time of the *first ascent* when the equipment was new).⁵⁴⁾

Overt religious/spiritual discourse has likewise made the ethical climbing debates more emotionally charged than if they were just rules for sports. Royal Robbins categorized the practitioners as “pilgrims of the vertical”⁵⁵⁾ and sought to usher in a series of best practices and standards to respect the sacred rock and the ascetic activity of climbing. In an intricate description of this history, Joseph E. Taylor III would characterize Robbins and his followers as the “Moralists.”⁵⁶⁾ The YOSAR vigilantes can be seen as the successors of the Robbin’s moral camp and its spiritual vision for El Capitan.

Warren Harding disdainfully rejected the dogma and fundamentalist overtones of the Moralists that had often accused him of drilling too many holes. He pejoratively branded these ethicists “Valley Christians” and in biting satire depicted them as holding their moral principles as a climbing version of the Old Testament’s “Ten Commandments.”⁵⁷⁾ Harding was not reckless with the drill, but he would flaunt his often drunken and farcical style in marked contrast to the first generation of El Cap ethicists.



Image 4: High on El Capitan, the author transitions from a suspect rusty bolt stud to a series of challenging moves on steel hooks. Note how tiny the bolt looks in this environment. Photo by Dr. Steven Wright (used with permission)

The *Wings of Steel* team were “Valley Christians” of another sort, devoted Seventh-Day Adventists that spent nearly an extra week on El Capitan, because they forwent climbing on the Sabbath.⁵⁸⁾ One pilgrim of the team writes: “If I would remain a Christian, I must climb! I cannot honestly call myself a climber when I am retreating from this [*Wings of Steel*] climb.”⁵⁹⁾ As such, their simultaneous struggles against the righteous locals and the blank face of granite are billed as a “powerful spiritual odyssey” and as a potent metaphor for Christian inspiration. They elaborate in their account: “Christ has a climb for each of us,”⁶⁰⁾ and “we can have faith Jesus has done the climb, and that He climbs with us.”⁶¹⁾

Interestingly, Harding's contesting voice would emerge in commentary on the *Wings of Steel* saga. He was romantically involved with the mother of one of the *Wings of Steel* climbers⁶²⁾ and wrote the foreward to the book recording the climb. Harding explains that "climbing ethics is not an exact science" and that the local climbers take the activity "so seriously that they must establish 'rights' and 'wrongs.'"⁶³⁾ He wonders aloud if the m  le   was "more territorial than ideological?"⁶⁴⁾

The *Wings of Steel* saga, a dramatic second-generation fight concerning El Cap ethical issues, has a mostly happy ending nearly three decades later. By risking his own body, McNeely climbed the route and counted the holes. The El Cap Pirate found the overall number to be close to the 157 reported by the first ascensionists, though there were 30 mystery holes of unknown origin.⁶⁵⁾ This number was considered legitimate by most in the wider climbing community, and McNeely proved that their vision had been misunderstood for too long. Urged on by another famous serial El Cap climber, one of the original vigilantes, who is himself among the most accomplished El Cap climbers, came forward with a public apology for their behavior and treatment of the team.⁶⁶⁾ The *Wings of Steel* team, in good Christian style, forgave the provocateurs and new friendships blossomed as a result.⁶⁷⁾

Notes:

- 1) "Wings of Steel - A Confession-ALL with an Olive Branch: SuperTopo Rock Climbing Discussion Topic," accessed April 15, 2023, <http://www.supertopo.com/climbers-forum/1689566/Wings-of-Steel-A-confession-ALL-with-an-olive-branch>.
- 2) Due to the sensitive nature of these ethical issues, I mostly avoid use of names herein. The exceptions are several deceased climbers with a large presence in the public domain.
- 3) "Wings of Steel - A Confession-ALL with an Olive Branch: SuperTopo Rock Climbing Discussion Topic."
- 4) The team did return to scrounge the base for their trash and dumped equipment. They state that this pattern was standard practice at the time.
- 5) "Wings of Steel: SuperTopo Rock Climbing Discussion Topic," accessed April 15, 2023, http://www.supertopo.com/climbing/thread.php?topic_id=72849&tn=0&mr=0.
- 6) Richard Jensen, *Wings of Steel: A Climber's Perspective of the Christian Life, and the Story of a World Record : 39 Continuous Days and Nights on the Side of El Capitan* (Hagerstown, MD: Pacific Pr Pub

Assn, 1993), 56–57.

⁷⁾ Jensen, 79.

⁸⁾ Jensen, 79–80.

⁹⁾ “Wings of Steel - A Confession-ALL with an Olive Branch: SuperTopo Rock Climbing Discussion Topic.”

¹⁰⁾ Jensen, *Wings of Steel*, 79.

¹¹⁾ John Eade and Michael J. Sallnow, *Contesting the Sacred: The Anthropology of Christian Pilgrimage* (Routledge, 1991), 2.

¹²⁾ Jensen, *Wings of Steel*, 70.

¹³⁾ *Valley Uprising* (Sender Films, 2014).

¹⁴⁾ John A. Shultz, “Vertical Pilgrimage: Japanese Mountain Religious Experience and American Big Wall Climbing,” *Kansai Gaikokugo Daigaku Kenkyūronshū* 112 (2020): 91–108.

¹⁵⁾ John A. Shultz, “The Epic Pilgrimage: The Way of the Ascetics of El Capitan,” *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage* 10, no. 4 (2022): 78–90, <https://doi.org/10.21427/7ahr-8j48>.

¹⁶⁾ Ian Reader and John Shultz, *Pilgrims Until We Die: Unending Pilgrimage in Shikoku* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

¹⁷⁾ Victor Turner and Edith Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978).

¹⁸⁾ Karen A. Smyers, “Inari Pilgrimage: Following One’s Path on the Mountain,” *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 24, no. 3/4 (October 1, 1997): 427–52; John A. Shultz, “Black Swans in White Clothing: Outliers and Social Scientific Theory Considered Through a Case Study of the Shikoku Henro,” *Kansai Gaikokugo Daigaku Kenkyūronshū* 100 (2014): 153–63.

¹⁹⁾ Reader and Shultz, *Pilgrims Until We Die: Unending Pilgrimage in Shikoku*.

²⁰⁾ *Assault on El Capitan: The Second Ascent of Wings of Steel* (Accidental Productions, 2013).

²¹⁾ As mentioned below, McNeely appears to have climbed one more El Cap route, the *Muir Wall*, after this statement.

²²⁾ *Assault on El Capitan: The Second Ascent of Wings of Steel*.

²³⁾ Jean-Paul Sartre, Arlette Elkāim-Sartre, and Annie Cohen-Solal, *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, trans. Carol Macomber, Annotated edition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

²⁴⁾ John A. Shultz, “The Way to Gyō: Priestly Asceticism on the Shikoku Henro,” *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 43, no. 2 (2016): 275–305; Shultz, “Epic Pilgrimage.”

²⁵⁾ Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *The Ascetic Imperative in Culture and Criticism*, 2nd edition (University of Chicago Press, 1992), xiii.

²⁶⁾ Harpham, xiii.

²⁷⁾ Harpham, xi.

- ²⁸⁾ “Overnight Climbing Permit System Beginning on Friday, May 21, 2021,” *Yosemite Climbing Information* (blog), accessed April 22, 2023, <https://www.climbingyosemite.com/services/covid19/>.
- ²⁹⁾ see “Zodiac, November 2020,” *Yosemite Climbing Information* (blog), accessed April 22, 2023, <https://www.climbingyosemite.com/portfolio/zodiac-november-2020/>.
- ³⁰⁾ While recreational cannabis has been legal in California since 2018, it remains illegal on federal land, such as national parks.
- ³¹⁾ Cedar Wright, “Climbing Fast, Loose, and Dangerous with Yosemite Legend Ammon McNeely,” Yahoo Finance, February 21, 2023, <https://finance.yahoo.com/news/climbing-fast-loose-dangerous-yosemite-190216975.html>.
- ³²⁾ Michael Brick, “For Rock-Climbing Guru, the Sky Is His Roof,” *The New York Times*, September 29, 2008, sec. Sports, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/30/sports/othersports/30chongo.html>.
- ³³⁾ see Nathaniel T. Kenney and Galen Rowell, “Climbing Half Dome The Hard Way,” *National Geographic*, January 1974.
- ³⁴⁾ Joseph E. Taylor (III), *Pilgrims of the Vertical: Yosemite Rock Climbers and Nature at Risk*, American First edition (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2010), 154.
- ³⁵⁾ Aid climbing involves means to ascend the rock not confined to simply climbing with one’s hands and feet.
- ³⁶⁾ Ammon McNeely, “El Cap’s Hardest: Wings of Steel,” *Rock and Ice Magazine* (blog), September 27, 2018, <https://www.rockandice.com/snowball/el-caps-hardest-wings-of-steel/>.
- ³⁷⁾ Taylor (III), *Pilgrims of the Vertical*, 170.
- ³⁸⁾ Taylor (III), 170.
- ³⁹⁾ Considering the example of Robbins, one YOSAR vigilante from the Wings of Steel incident would later reflect that they should have attempted to reascend the route before erasing it.
- ⁴⁰⁾ *Walls in a Push*, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2cis-fnK5Zo>.
- ⁴¹⁾ “Ammon McNeely Seriously Injured in BASE Jumping Accident,” *Climbing* (blog), October 4, 2017, <https://www.climbing.com/news/ammon-mcneely-seriously-injured-in-base-jumping-accident/>.
- ⁴²⁾ James Lucas, “The Life of Ammon McNeely, The El Cap Pirate,” *Climbing* (blog), March 8, 2023, <https://www.climbing.com/people/ammon-mcneely-the-el-cap-pirate/>.
- ⁴³⁾ Lucas.
- ⁴⁴⁾ Ammon McNeely, “Full Value,” *Alpinist*, Autumn 2008, 92.
- ⁴⁵⁾ McNeely, 94.
- ⁴⁶⁾ “Lost in America/Chicken Rivets: SuperTopo Rock Climbing Discussion Topic,” accessed April 22, 2023, http://www.supertopo.com/climbing/thread.php?topic_id=48563&tn=0&mr=0.
- ⁴⁷⁾ The author followed this story in real-time as it was published on the SuperTopo Forum. The thread included an admission by McNeely, but this material was subsequently deleted. On April 14th, 2023, I

received a copy of a corroborating email sent to another serial El Cap climber from McNeely's partner during the drilling incident. The email provides significant details about the events.

⁴⁸⁾ Taylor (III), *Pilgrims of the Vertical*, 158–60.

⁴⁹⁾ McNeely, "El Cap's Hardest."

⁵⁰⁾ McNeely.

⁵¹⁾ Roger Putnam is a famous contemporary serial El Cap climber and a leading expert on the geology of the mountain. He calculated the surface area of the rockface by breaking it up into three sections.

⁵²⁾ see Roger Putnam et al., "Plutonism in Three Dimensions: Field and Geochemical Relations on the Southeast Face of El Capitan, Yosemite National Park, California," *Geosphere* 11, no. 4 (June 11, 2015): 1–25.

⁵³⁾ Taylor (III), *Pilgrims of the Vertical*, 160 and 174.

⁵⁴⁾ "Erik Sloan's Latest Victim – Ten Days After: SuperTopo Rock Climbing Discussion Topic," accessed April 19, 2023, http://www.supertopo.com/climbing/thread.php?topic_id=83680&tn=0&mr=0.

⁵⁵⁾ Royal Robbins, "Talus of Yosemite," *Summit*, June 1968, 33.

⁵⁶⁾ Taylor (III), *Pilgrims of the Vertical*, 148–74.

⁵⁷⁾ Warren Harding, *Downward Bound: A Mad Guide to Rock Climbing*, 1st edition (Prentice Hall Trade, 1976); *Valley Uprising*.

⁵⁸⁾ "Wings of Steel: SuperTopo Rock Climbing Discussion Topic."

⁵⁹⁾ Jensen, *Wings of Steel*, 70.

⁶⁰⁾ Jensen, 14.

⁶¹⁾ Jensen, 14.

⁶²⁾ "Wings of Steel: SuperTopo Rock Climbing Discussion Topic."

⁶³⁾ Jensen, *Wings of Steel*.

⁶⁴⁾ Jensen.

⁶⁵⁾ McNeely, "El Cap's Hardest."

⁶⁶⁾ "Wings of Steel - A Confession-ALL with an Olive Branch: SuperTopo Rock Climbing Discussion Topic."

⁶⁷⁾ A curious postscript is that one member of the *Wings of Steel* team engaged in a scathing online ethical attack on another serial El Cap climber concerning bolts. From the discussion, it seems that he did not see the hardware in question firsthand. See note 54.

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