



## BLIND AMBITION: THE ROSS WATSON MESSAGE

By Ian Urquhart

### Every Picture Does Not Tell the Whole Story

This story begins with a picture. The photograph is of three mountaineers, roped together, who are deliberately, methodically, working their way up a slope of hard-packed snow. Brilliant sunshine bathes their ascent. From the photograph it appears the slope they are ascending must be in the neighbourhood of 45 degrees; ice axes and ski poles are used to steady the climbers and assist them up the steep incline.

This picture falls far short of telling the whole story. It does not reveal the climbers' goal – the west summit of Mount Logan, Canada's highest mountain. At 19,551 feet (5,959 metres) Logan is the crown of Kluane National Park in the southwestern Yukon; only Alaska's Mount McKinley (or Denali, "the Great One," in the Athabaskan language) is higher in North America.

It also does not disclose that, during the 19 days in May 2000 this climbing team took to reach the summit, the climbers were buffeted by 60 kilometre per hour winds and endured overnight temperatures of minus 35 degrees Celsius. Nor does the photograph tell you that, as relatively pleasant as I thought it would be to climb in brilliant sunshine, climbers actually cook in that sunshine.

What looks comfortable to the untrained eye actually depicts circumstances where climbers could suffer from heat exhaustion.

But the most important omission concerns the second climber in the trio. He is blind. He is Ross Watson, manager of the William Watson Lodge in Kananaskis Country and a Cochrane town councilor. Another Ross, the author of the previous article in this issue of the *Advocate*, calls him a "very special person." When I sat down with Ross over coffee and Lindsey tarts in Cochrane it was clear why Ross Wein complimented him so.

### From Brick Walls to Rock Walls

A pellet gun accident robbed Ross of the sight in his right eye when he was ten years old; complications from that accident left him totally blind two years later. The practice then, as told on Ross's website ([rosswatsonspeaker.com](http://rosswatsonspeaker.com)), was to send blind children to residential schools. So Ross left Calmar for Vancouver. At the age of sixteen one of the school's supervisors encouraged Ross to enroll in a climbing club. He tried; the club turned him down.

Ross corrected me when I asked why he refused to accept that verdict. He, when he was a teenager and a young adult, did accept it; he accepted the belief

that his blindness meant that, a personal ambition such as climbing, could not be realized. "At that time I accepted it," he said, "because you hit a brick wall and you walk away. That's it." For seven years he kept his ambition to climb in a drawer. Then, during his university years, he tried again. He phoned a climbing school in Colorado and was told that, while the instructors had no problems working with a blind person, the school felt that perhaps its "normal" clients who had paid a hefty fee for the course would object. Again, Ross had hit a brick wall.

Denied the opportunities these more formal routes would have offered him Ross only took his first hiking and climbing steps when he moved to the mountains. There he found like-minded, open-minded, souls who did not view blindness, by definition, as fatal to his ambitions. They offered him what clubs and schools had not to that point in time – opportunity.

In May 2001, almost one year to the day after Ross and his team stood atop Mount Logan, the American Eric Weihenmayer became the first blind person to reach the summit of Mount Everest. Weihenmayer's triumph spoke emphatically to the importance of opportunity. "When he (Weihenmayer) was sixteen," Ross told me, "he went to a school where climbing was a mandatory

part of the curriculum. When I was sixteen I was denied the opportunity.... The key message there is opportunity. Given the opportunity blind mountain climbers would not be rare.”

Social attitudes and the policies and practices they inspire may transform brick walls into rock walls; too often in our past, however, they have reinforced them. Ross and I agree on the point that Canada has a long way to go when it comes to offering the disabled the same recreational opportunities other groups receive. But he is optimistic: “I have seen a marked shift in society for the better and government. We’re not there but it doesn’t mean that we’re not going there.”

### **A Different View From the Top**

The last hike I took with my father was in the Valhalla Ranges of B.C.’s Selkirk Mountains. The view from our camp at Gwillim Lakes was exceptional. To the southeast loomed Asgard, Gimli, Midgard and the other peaks of the Devil’s Range. To the north were Lucifer and Bor. To the south a carpet of smaller mountains stretched uninterrupted to the end of the horizon. Undoubtedly some are drawn to hike to high elevations or climb mountains because of the “view from the top” those excursions allow. That, and the opportunity to be together in the outdoors, was why Dad and I chose to go to the Valhallas.

Obviously, Ross cannot share the view we enjoyed. Why, then, climb at all? Remoteness is part of his answer. Through his hard work on a mountain Ross knows he stands where few other people ever have; he feels that experience also. That combination of knowledge and feeling creates a personal, powerful sense of achievement. “It is an innate and visceral feeling of being out in the wilderness that you really only gain when you have worked hard to be there... It really becomes something very visceral, very spiritual.”

This amalgam of knowledge and feeling, most importantly perhaps, is not fleeting. Choosing his words carefully Ross explained: “They create a feeling that doesn’t just last a minute. It actually does something for you that you can call on in other times of your life... The high points in your life... take you across the long stretches of... disappointing times.” Climbing is one route Ross takes to

produce something we all should seek – a sense of self-achievement and self-worth able to sustain us for long periods of time.

### **Teacher?**

Ross is too modest to claim he teaches either other climbers or people like me through his alpine experiences. Underline “too modest.” Especially on longer climbing adventures some of his fellow climbers have suggested they start to “see” the mountain differently when they climb with Ross. “They start,” he offers, “to experience the same thing I do.” His words underline sight’s great power as a means of interpreting our surroundings. As such it often overwhelms or displaces our other senses and the emotions, reactions and thoughts those senses inspire. “If you are around a person that’s blind for a long length of time when you’re on the mountain it isn’t that something new is happening to you it’s just that you actually close your eyes and think about it... That’s what I think. I think that vision, in essence, becomes this powerful medium that overrides the other emotions... not that they’re not there, it’s just that it overrides them.”

He tells me that, when it comes to wilderness, we must “feel it, touch it” in order to get the maximum experience possible. He strengthens his point by talking about how some park interpretation programs will take people out on night hikes, hikes that should give them a very different understanding of the landscape they may know very well in the daylight. There is far more to Mother Nature than our customary sensory patterns of interacting with Her tell us.

When we talk more generally about creating opportunities for disabled people to get into nature for recreation, a subject Ross knows intimately given his managerial responsibilities at William Watson Lodge, social justice themes (justice with respect to subjects such as opportunities and privileges) loom large. Again, his words have much to teach us and those who govern on our behalf.

When it comes to parks and recreation he convinced me we have a very static, as opposed to dynamic, perspective on how we imagine the public and what we consequently offer the citizenry. We need to build facilities for everyone, not just able-bodied thirty-something fellows with rippling biceps, and build them, in

Ross’s words, “for the whole scope of their lives.”

He also argued that, in my words – not his, we treat the outdoor recreation interests of the disabled like many would treat a homeless beggar in Edmonton or Calgary – with little sympathy and even less coin. Alberta subsidizes “normal” climbers and hikers (why shouldn’t we be even more generous to them, I wonder, given how we cater financially to petroleum in Alberta). His message though is less confrontational than mine. He just wants equality between the “normal” – the vast majority of hikers, climbers and campers we see in the outdoors – and the disabled. He just wants to silence remarks such as “isn’t it nice that we are doing this for the disabled” when a special commitment to the disabled is made or a subsidized facility such as William Watson Lodge is created. Thirteen percent of our fellow citizens in Alberta have disabilities. Is anywhere near thirteen percent of provincial spending devoted to meeting the needs of that community? When it comes to accessibility to outdoor environments do we do enough?

Alberta – all governments in Canada for that matter – have more than enough information to make those environments accessible; sadly those governments and arguably those who elect them just do not have the heart to respect those needs.

Ross knows all too well, as the manager of William Watson Lodge, just how great the demand is for the services the lodge offers to the disabled and seniors. They are, to put it mildly, oversubscribed. When it comes to booking accommodation at the lodge for July and August the entire facility is completely booked within the first three hours they accept telephone reservations. June and September are slower months – the facility is not booked completely until the end of the first day reservations may be made.

This situation harkens back to an earlier observation – government could certainly do more. But, on this issue, Alberta is a leader among laggards. No other province has a facility like William Watson Lodge. We lead the country when it comes to providing this type of facility for the disabled and the success of the lodge fuels the interest in and demand for a second one. Some have suggested that Lakeland would be a strong candidate for

William Watson Lodge North. Is it too much to hope for that our government might regard it as imperative to act on this interest and demand?

### **Looking Ahead**

Having been too often disappointed in the past by our provincial government I prefer to look ahead and anticipate more likely outcomes. This summer will see Ross headed back to climb the peaks he loves. His ambition is to climb the

ten highest mountains in the Canadian Rockies. Logistical problems and bad weather have frustrated three previous attempts to scale Mount Robson. And, to avoid a dangerous nighttime descent, his party turned back from a push to the summit of Mount Temple when it was within their reach. The last week of July will see Ross and three other climbers leave the relative comfort of the Hind Hut before dawn to try to reach the summit of Mount Assiniboine. At just over 3,600

metres Assiniboine is regarded widely as the “Matterhorn of the Rockies.” I wish Ross and his fellow climbers the very best in this summer’s attempt on Assiniboine. As I imagine him on the top of the summit near the end of July I hear him saying the words he said to me over coffee and Lindsey tarts at his dining room table: “This makes everything worthwhile...and you are willing to take on more.” 🍪