

STEADY AS A MOUNTAIN

(From Conquerer To Pupil)

By: David P. Crowley

It was a blazing June Sunday afternoon on the island of Oahu, in Hawaii. This was it! I was about 15 feet from accomplishing one of the greatest fetes of my entire life. I was desperately clinging to an electrical cord tied to stumps of bushes with dried roots precariously exposed. It was not a comforting sight. They looked like they had one too many climbers in the past clinging for life on them. They could pop out any second. It was near vertical. One slip and I'd be headed over the near 500 cliff on either side. The "trail" barely clung to the front side edge of the peak. By this time, I had to stop every five feet or so to catch my breath and somehow hide from the scorching sun.

This was our third attempt to "Conquer" this beast that stood mighty and tall at over 1,000 feet. My poor dog, Spaz, even with two more claws than I, was barely staying up and on the trail. One panick move on either of our part would be the end. But this time, I was not to be denied. In just a few more aching yards, this would be my trophy for my up-coming 49th birthday! How did this stupid "conquering mentality" start? And why is it now so relevant to the final strange outcome to this story? Hang on tight and pay close attention, as I will take you on a story winding to and fro, with a life lesson that will change your life, as it profoundly did mine. Come with me...back...a few years.

The river was super low. The cliff had grown in the last month to a frightening fifty feet high. It was the summer of '62 in the gorgeous river above the world famous landmark, Rainbow Falls, in Hilo, Hawaii. I was eleven and had just moved to Hilo from Japan where I had grown up since a baby. I had much experience in being the "oddy" as well as being discriminated against. The oddity I could handle. In fact, out of that oddity was born a strange and often dangerous clownish show-off attitude. I'd stand up to a dare in a heartbeat...just to prove that I was normal, and in fact far above normal, brave and distinct. However, the discrimination in my new home of Hilo was scary. I was a "haole" or a "white boy" in common terms. And from the first day in Hilo Intermediate, I was picked on, punched out, spit at, pushed around, cussed at, and made fun of. I needed this jump from the cliff real bad. News would travel...it was a small town...yes, I needed this ultimate respect. Dave Crowley, the chubby haole-boy jumped off the top cliff above Rainbow Falls! Perhaps I could acquire and build a "bad" reputation of being a fearless cliff-jumper! Then, perhaps they would just leave me alone.

I was shaking from head to toe. This was for the bigger boys. I was the kid of the bunch and I had heard enough razzing all during summer. Joe jumped and disappeared. All we heard echoing through the river canyon was a shriek and a yell like I had never heard before...Joe was really pumped on this jump. We all had just "conquered" an awesome water slide up the river that morning....so we were all in "victory" mode. John was next. He was a regular from the top-point called "four mile" and wasted no time screaming a goodbye to the cliff edge. Louis was next. He was 13...the one closest to my age. The summer before was his glorious graduation when he "conquered" Four Mile. I started to head to my

usual point of jump of only thirty feet high called "Banzai Point", but my steps stopped cold to that horrible sound of screaming from below. "Chicken-Out again Crowley"!!! I had had enough. This had gone on all summer long. In spite of my young age, I had done some pretty scary jumps with them just to prove that I could keep up with the gang. They respected me for that, and I guess felt it was now time for me to finally take on Four Mile. In my mind that big day for me would be next summer, as no eleven year old had ever taken on Four Mile. I was perfectly content at just leaving it at that...by now, I had grown in self confidence...I was pretty brave for my age...but I was NOT stupid. Four Mile was just too much for me to handle now...or so I had always thought. There was just something different about the screams and haunting that day at Four Mile...every other time in the past, I would just take the teasing, shrug them off, and quietly head to my usual spot at Banzai Point. But today, they stabbed into my brain like long daggers. I came to a dead stop...turned back up towards the top-point and stood at the cliff's edge. The haunting turned into cheers of approval and urging. I stood there many times before wondering what it would be like and when I would have the guts to one day do it. Well, it was becoming fast apparent, that one day had come. The screams kept churning the canyon sides...louder and louder...it seemed the canyon walls began to shudder and scream in sequence...it was eerie and frightening. I knew I had to do something. It seemed, this time, the boys were not going to swim to the rocks until I had jumped.

Then I noticed something peculiar. I wasn't shaking. I was looking down and catching my breath. I was actually readying myself for this! The screams were slowly growing silent in my ears. Then, I could not hear a thing...although I could plainly see the boys shaking their arms with their mouths wide open. Then, strangely, even they disappeared. I saw nothing else but that dark green of the point of contact. I was ready to change my life forever. That fateful day began my quest to conquer and defeat challenges, trials, and obstacles before me in my journey through life.

There after, for the next forty some years, I made it a ritual to jump that cliff on or before my up coming birthdays...each and every one. Just to prove to myself that I could still do it. Even at my older age, I could still "Conquer". But over the years, that river and I began a wonderful love-affair of beautiful moments of seclusion, peace, tranquility, and much needed escape. My Cherokee blood, with all its rich tradition of respect and admiration for all things nature, especially of river and mountain, allowed for many soothing and spiritually insightful and uplifting encounters over the years.

I had "conquered" it in my childish thinking at eleven, but as the years went on it began to speak to me in untold manners and revelation. But the mask of the "conquerer" had reared its ugly head once more. This time I was weeks away from 49.

I had been away from Hilo for four years. I had not my sweet river friend to

engulf me into her cool waters as I made my yearly jump. Now, the thought of turning 49 was horrendous. It was an ugly number. The last number before that BIG-FIVE-0...the beginning of the end. I had done my share of wild and crazy things over the years, but I had to upstage anything I had ever done. Just to prove that even at 49, I could still accomplish the impossible. I needed something to "conquer" once again.

A year and half ago, I moved to a quaint little town on the windward side of Oahu, named Ka'aawa. Population...maybe 800. I had already been on Oahu for two years prior and had passed through that town hundreds of times before. Little did I know that I was passing something that would impact me like few other things, events, or people had ever done in all my life.

At this point, I must interject a very key element. For without this seemingly irrelevant factor, I would not have experienced this tumultuous event to happen on that mountain. In 1991, I had invented a concept for basketball that would revolutionize the sport for generations to come. It would do for basketball what the pitching machine/batting cage invention has done for baseball. However, I was beset with one turndown and rejection after another over the years. I just could not seem to find someone with the foresight, vision, and brains to see the potential, come up with the funding, and give the concept a try on the market.

As timing would have it, I ran into this someone just a few months following my move to Ka'aawa. His name was Ken Sadoyama, a humble one-man-show electrician, who easily saw the potential of millions to be made. I was ecstatic...finally something good was going to happen in my life, after years of failure and disappointment. We immediately made plans to begin a search for a warehouse space/site to build a single-lane prototype to show potential bankers and investors. But, as fate would have it, Ken ran into some tough months in his own business and he went MIA on me. We joke about it now, but not hearing from him for weeks at a time, and the painful realization that perhaps this would never end up getting off the ground, hit me very hard. I was extremely depressed. Yet, another dastardly tease by fate of the taste of potential success to come...I had so many of those over the years. My own work in construction and painting was extremely slow and I spent many a day at home just rotting away watching TV, in total depression...my life was a total wasted effort.

Just down the road from my home, maybe a half mile or so, was one of the most beautiful bays on the planet, Kahana Bay. Just to get out of the house, I would often take my six month old puppy and enjoy the cool and tranquil waters of the shallow bay. I would spend hours in the water just starrng in awe at the majestic beauty of the two maintain ranges which cradled the lush river valley. One mountain in particular captured my curiosity. It was the same mountain that loomed high over my home just down the road. At its base stood a famous landmark called "The Croaching Lion". Some could see the form...some could not. I could.

There was something strange about this mountain as it shot up like a rocket over 1,000 feet into the sky just 50 yards from the coast line. Its jagged edges, strewn with deep cliffs and jutting peaks painted a weird but awesome picture up against the sky. On occasion, I would notice tiny images of bodies slowly making their way up a trail of sorts. The hikers seemed horrendously close to the edges of the cliffs all along its rising edge. My curiosity grew each time I noticed these dare-devils making their trek to the top. But my curiosity was just that I was in my 25th year of smoking and I knew I would not be able to make it up to even the tip of the Crouching Lion, much less the top!

But as weeks dragged on in my depressive and "who gives a shit" attitude, that curiosity grew to a toying with the absurd idea of climbing that beast. I began to imagine myself at the top of that mountain. I began to think of it as a trophy. For a guy, soon to be 49, I was in pretty good shape. Over the years, I often pumped weights and jogged. Pretty soon this wild and crazy impossible fete turned into a doable challenge in my brain. I had actually talked myself into doing something I had never done before...to actually scale a mountain to the very top!

I knew the risks...or so I thought. I knew it would be deadly dangerous. I could have a heart attack...I could lose my footing and fall, never to be found...and no one would know for weeks or even months. I was never in touch with anyone on a regular basis...as I had turned into pretty much a recluse. By this stage in my life I was used to not hearing from anyone on the planet for months and even years at a time...so I learned to do the same and not keep in touch with anyone as well. I had learned to be perfectly okay with it. Just in the six months I had been in my new home, the rescue choppers were in search of lost hikers on that very mountain. One disappeared for two days and was found stranded at the bottom of a deep ravine with a broken leg, unable to move. My neighbor told me that one hiker died a few years back, He had slipped at some point on the edge and plunged over 500 feet to his death. I later found out, AFTER my experience, that this trail is one of the most dangerous in all of Hawaii (also, two years after this writing another man lost his life falling to his death).

But the challenge was on. I began starring at it from my backporch every single day. It was psych time. I desperately needed this, especially considering my weak and pitiful mental state of mind. I needed a rush of something in my life. I needed to create an explosion. I needed a challenge so great that it would dwarf, even temporarily, my mental state as well as the seemingly stalled state of my life around me. To "conquer" this beast would be a super morale booster to say the least. Little did I know that I was walking smack into a collision I would never ever forget.

So there I was, desperately clinging to life and heaving Texas size breaths into my pleading lungs. I knew I was close because all I could see was blue sky right above me through the dense brush. The trail, at this point, was a pathetic

excuse for anything passable with rocks and dried clumps of dirt slipping and falling at every desperate step of our feet and claws. Spaz was quickly becoming a huge risk at this point. She had to be either in front of me or behind me. But the situation now was code-red critical. If I let her behind, she would end up heading back down in total fear. She had already tried it. She had to be above me. So with one hand clutching and pulling myself up to the next step, the other hand was pushing and shoving her up the near vertical trail. This was our third attempt in three weeks. I was not giving up until I touched the top. A bush gave way and we slid down the trail about three feet. We somehow both landed on a large rock jutting into the path. The adrenaline kicked into over-drive. The last ten feet seemed like ten miles.

I had visions of this grandeur upcoming moment...visions of glory and wild adulation. Stupid visions of casually taking the last few steps to the top and then quickly standing erect like a victorious warlord with hands raised in joyous victory. A scream to shake the world would follow very quickly. But my soon to be mountain friend had other plans.

The planting into my soul of the first of many lessons was now being initiated. He knew my soul. He knew my desperation in my life. He knew my intention. He knew my total state of mind. He felt my depression. And he knew that all of that had somehow clouded my usual respect for all things nature. My Cherokee blood was still running. It just got drowned under the circumstances of my present conditions. He was about to teach me...just WHO was conquering who.

I don't know how long I lay there on that mountain peak, somewhat of a flat area of about ten feet by ten, with a slightly higher point in the center. All I remember was coming-to with my face in dirt and rock. I was still panting and heaving for breaths. Evidently, after I made it past the last of the verticle I had literally crawled on my stomach to the final peak point at the center. I gingerly looked up to see Spaz sitting next to me and starring in the direction of what must have been the edge of the front cliff, just feet away. She was panting wildly with a dazed look on her face. No, this wasn't the way I had envisioned this moment. The mountain...the beast...He must have been chuckling to himself as he felt my heart pounding up against his coarse skin. So you'd think I would have caught the first lesson...one of humility. Not so. I had to begin my celebration. It went right over my head.

I gingerly got up and stood. I felt a tinge of dizziness. Then it hit me. Oh my God! I DID IT!!! I DID IT!!!! I ACTUALLY CONQUERED THIS BEAST!!! Before I began to take in all of the sights around me, I began to scream, jump, yell, laugh and raise my fists into the sky just above...I was now IN the sky. I had to make true what I had dreamed and envisioned the many days and nights prior. I grabbed the camera out of the back-pack and proceeded to take those "I took myself" shots of me with the distant ocean in the background far below. I have yet to see them. As the reality of my quest and victory began to sink in, I then began to step back and feast my eyes on the beauty before me engulfing

me in every which direction. What a spectacular moment that was. What a rush! All that beauty! The thrill of victory...it was immense. I had tasted only the agony of defeat for so many years. And this tasted so very sweet. I had climbed my first mountain...OR SO I THOUGHT.

His next lesson would hit me like a brick over the head.

The trail continued all along the razor edge tip of the mountain ridge going back miles into the valley. I forged ahead for another hundred yards or so. Spaz was smart. She stayed back laying down at her comfortable spot. It wasn't all that difficult as it was somewhat horizontal, except for a few outrageous peaks screaming upwards into the sky a few dozen feet. But the non-vertical nature of the trail at the top of the ridge could easily lull someone into a false sense of security and safety. I saw for the first time what "razor top" really meant. Like a fool, I kept on going, wanting to see what it would be like doing a high wire balancing act on a razor-top with cliffs falling hundreds of feet on both sides. The "path" was less than twelve inches wide at some points! After a few of those, I had had enough. I should not push my luck any further, I told myself. I carefully made it back to the peak's front tip where Spaz awaited. She had moved...and sat herself down right at the beginning point of the trail going back down the mountain. She wanted out of there Big Time! But I wasn't ready. I needed to spend sometime engulfing my aching lonely soul into the serenity and energy of the mountain top...it was indeed spiritual...about the only right thing I did that day. An hour or so went by. I stood up and bid farewell to my 49th birthday's handsome trophy. With one last look, I turned toward the beginning of the trail going down.

However, within two steps back down the trail, I knew we were in huge trouble. Spaz slid down nearly ten feet and landed into a clump of squiggly loose bushes. The edge was just inches away. I did not do much better as I nearly fell forward as a branch I was hanging on to broke away. We both starred at each other and just sat there for a long time. It was a close close call. Then, I remembered an old saying..."going down is sometimes tougher than climbing up", or something to that effect. As I sat there clinging to branches and trying to come up with a different strategy of safer footing, the thought hit me..."Boy, just my luck, I'd end up dying on the way DOWN this damn beast"!!! After finally surmising the situation, we began to ever so slowly inch our way down the trail going down backwards with stomach facing the mountain just like the way we climbed up! We needed to just get past the first hundred feet of near vertical where the trail would be just a bit easier...or so I thought yet again! The next 400 feet down the trail was a nightmare. We were slipping and sliding like two blind drunks. I don't know how many times we starred into the face of death in those horrible next few hours. And to think now...that all the while He had his eyes on us...He had his plan and purpose in keeping us on his trail. Then came his second message of wisdom. The first one I missed...but this one I got Big Time.

About 700 feet down, I had to, by then, stop every ten or twenty feet to catch my