

THE LADDER

(1981)

Where do you lead...
where is the next rung?

Am I trapped here?
I want to yell out "Don't dare block me"
but who am I talking to?

No one can block me
should block me
why do you try, damn you.
Who are you?

Looking back, how did I get here?
I know how I got started,
yes it was my choice to start the climb
but now I wonder why... and did I
ever think what happens ...where it end?

And what wall I'd be leaning against?
How did I get here? As if awakening from a dream,
I need an overview
Yet I know how dangerous it is to
stand on the top rung of a ladder.

New rungs were always there in the climb...
even in the descent into myself in Israel, the writer existential
or with a beloved in Asia, the river of love so closely entwined.
Let's return and share our new wisdom and values...

And then degrees but is this the right rung? Maybe time to get off
fear of being swallowed by society. Are we still choosing?
Then travel to France, to Switzerland, to be free.
But society is always there...

So we return and the joy of two children and jobs and yes, success
and climbing higher and higher, each rung now easier to find

upward, we let some fame and money climb us
and another child...and then a house in which
we build another layer, more stairs.

And now no more stars in sight. No more rungs on the ladder
Will a new one open? Am I supposed to just wait meditatively
to let a path of heart emerge with strength and energy to follow?
Awaiting a vision...

But for now all I see is no more rungs, blocked doors,
entangled in red tape and meaningless meetings and
I see my mind is so weak I let it flounder at this dizzying height,
yet to complain about "them," ..

....is really hiding, because at least
it's easier than the unknown of this non-step to where?
And none of my trapped complaining takes me
one step closer to where I don't know...

Is there another ladder? New stairs? A new wall?
Where do you will go next, not even understanding why?

Outside? Inside?
How long will I remain in this dizzying unknown?

* * *

J's comment (2021, 2023)

This is a very interesting poem. It starts off focused on your anger externally at not having perfect freedom, yet you soon realize that you don't know what happens at the end of , stairs, or where they will lead. or whether and if the or the next rung of the ladder . It becomes less angry and more just confused even anguished It's a very personal, authentic piece of writing, examining with honesty that sense of mid-life confusion and despair – where next? Just keep looking for new rungs, new ladders, new walls? It expresses genuine emotion and existential struggle.

You tie in the concept of climbing or descending to our earlier travels and societal efforts. Loved the line "we let some fame and money climb us..." really good. I had to say "aww" at the line or with a beloved in Asia, the river of love so closely entwined

At the end, you return to your anger and frustration initially with an external focus:– you need the stairs, the next rung of the ladder and you are willing to go where they lead, but you are blocked at every turn. Your note below (2023) adds helpful context and acknowledges your internal confusion. That was to be resolved - or at least with the potential for resolution - with the more spiritual God-inclusive orientation that emerged in Bali. I'm not sure of the last line – maybe you've lost Jacob's

ladder, you are unable any longer to ascend? But I like the way the poem works on many levels – the literal stairs, the stairs and ladders of the world, and maybe inner stairs and ladders as well!

D's comment (2023)

This poem was written in 1981. We had returned from Asia to seek to share what we had learned in Asia (cooperative values, more egoless living). And also to see how to integrate into society and our next phase of life (career and kids). We got our Ph.D.'s had 2 kids and one on the way. We'd had some success; I'd written two books and two on the way; co-founded a professional graduate school of psychology, , co-founded an Institute and given conferences to thousands, now on faculty at UCI, as was Johanna. Still living the existential /Zen/Self-control philosophy.

And my energy was running out and not sure what to do next. Feeling blocked externally (and internally). As I read it now, Johanna's comment is brilliant! And Prophetic. But at the time, I think I was feeling I didn't know what to do next; no more ladder to climb that seemed of worth. (I'm reminded of Huston Smith's quip: "Be careful of climbing the ladder of success, for when you get toward the top, you may find it's leaning against the wrong wall!:)

Johanna's comment is BRILLIANT re Jacob's ladder—amazing. I didn't recognize that foreshadowing in this poem... clearly when I wrote it, but even when I recently re-read it. This poem was written right before I received the Kellogg Fellowship, and went to Bali...which was fertile soil for a transition from a solely self-control existential Zen framework, and did help lead me to Jacob's ladder☺