

Religious perspective and analysis of joe simpson's struggle



The story of Joe Simpson's struggle to survive the descent from a treacherous fall in the Siula Grande is undoubtedly heroic and a showmanship of the limits of man. While this story has been widely praised and adapted into both literary and film forms, audiences debate over the religious nature Joe's experience on the mountain. Some claim that his experience was nothing but self-realization, especially considering the fact that Joe is a self-proclaimed atheist. However, an experience of self-realization is categorized as a fully "veridical experience" (Stanford), and also highlighted as "realizing a capacity or aspect of our soul, and by extension, an aspect of our true nature as Being" (Nirmala). For these reasons, Joe's journey could not have been anything but a religious experience. During his trek, he experienced heavy hallucinations and a guiding "voice", that he was not aware of being part of himself or his subconscious. He refers to these as guiding forces that are in constant opposition to his natural instincts, and heavily believes in the strength of these forces even after he has returned to safety and is in recovery. Joe Simpson's incredible struggle to survive the harsh conditions of the Andes is strongly influenced by forces that are undeniably aspects of a religious experience.

The first sign of his religious journey is his hallucinations, which are brought on by suffering, fasting, and consistent bodily and mental pain. In many religions, fasting is a voluntary tradition that sometimes triggers religious experiences, however, in this case Joe's lack of food and water forced him to mentally transcend the realms of fact and fiction. The first step to Joe's transformation is his focus on his bodily needs. He claims, "Water became

an obsession. Pain and water. That was my world. There was nothing else” (164). This narrowing of the mind is echoed in the religious traditions of depriving oneself of bodily needs, and the transcendence of this need leads to Joe’s next experience, hallucinations. Joe hallucinates in many regards, sometimes waking up and not knowing where he is, sometimes imagining a song repeating over and over in his head, and even imagining Simon is with him. He starts to lose his grip on reality when he no longer can distinguish his own voice from other imaginary voices. He recalls, “Muttered arguments jolted me awake, and I wondered who I had been talking to; many times I looked behind me to see who they were, but they were never there” (179). The significance of these hallucinations is not that Joe becomes unaware, but that Joe is aware of other aspects of his world than the pain, suffering, and cold. He becomes more in touch with himself and the depths of his mind during this mental struggle, and also reflects on companionship in a new way. This hallucinatory hell is a telltale staple of a religious experience, since he is no longer aware of his bodily self and correct mental wellbeing.

While Joe’s hallucinatory episodes were a large factor in jump-starting his religious experience, the main and most notable factor of this event is “the voice”. “The voice” is something Joe references early and often during his painful descent, and it becomes his guide and lifeline throughout the hardest parts of his journey. While some may argue this falls under the category of hallucinations, its repetitive and integral nature prompts it to be viewed as something more, like a guiding force or deity. “The voice” further establishes its individual importance because of Joe’s acknowledgement of his own voice on page 153, which reads, ““ Instead a voice, my voice, recited

a soliloquy from Shakespeare over and over again...". "The voice"'s commands are mainly to guide Joe in times of trial, and to force him down the mountain when Joe feels like giving up. The presence of a guiding voice is seen in many religions, including but not limited to Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism, and Islam. Much like Joe, these voices become a dependence for those who listen to them. Joe cannot even subconsciously ignore "the voice" or the persuasive power of it; "I tried to ignore the voice, which urged me to move, but I couldn't because the other voices had gone. I couldn't lose the voice in daydreams" (147). Additionally, his reference to his daydreams separate to that of "the voice" has the same effect as his distinguishing "the voice" from his own. This solidifies his belief that "the voice" is something more than inside his head, and is a tangible spiritual force. Its urgent nature- "Instructions tumbled in, repeated commands of what I must do, and I lay back listening and fighting the instinct to obey" (160)- as well as its overarching power to control Joe's actions marks it as a pivotal force in Joe's religious experience. As final proof to discredit the illusion that Joe only temporarily imagines or depends on "the voice", he references it in fear after he has been discovered and temporarily rehabilitated, since he knows it will not be there to guide his journey back by mule. In conclusion, Joe's steadfast devotion to "the voice" and its influence on his physical journey makes it an important marker of Joe's religious experience.

The significance of this religious analysis, in this case, is essential to understanding Joe's internal transformation. One of the strongest counterarguments for Joe's journey being categorized as religious is his strong atheist roots. In his later blog he writes, "That my lack of belief was

tested in a crucible far more testing than most other people have experienced should at very least give me the right to quietly state my beliefs when asked and not be plagued by people who think I am wrong and they are right" (Leppard). As readers we are not imposing a particular religion upon Simpson, which he here so adamantly opposes. Instead, we are using the religious analysis of common factors of religious experience to examine his journey, which is a key point in categorizing this as a general religious experience, not as part of a particular religious group. In conclusion, by focusing on the hallucinatory aspects of Joe's journey and the power of "the voice" in opposition to his bodily and mental struggle, it can be determined that Joe's experience on the Siula Grande was of the religious nature.