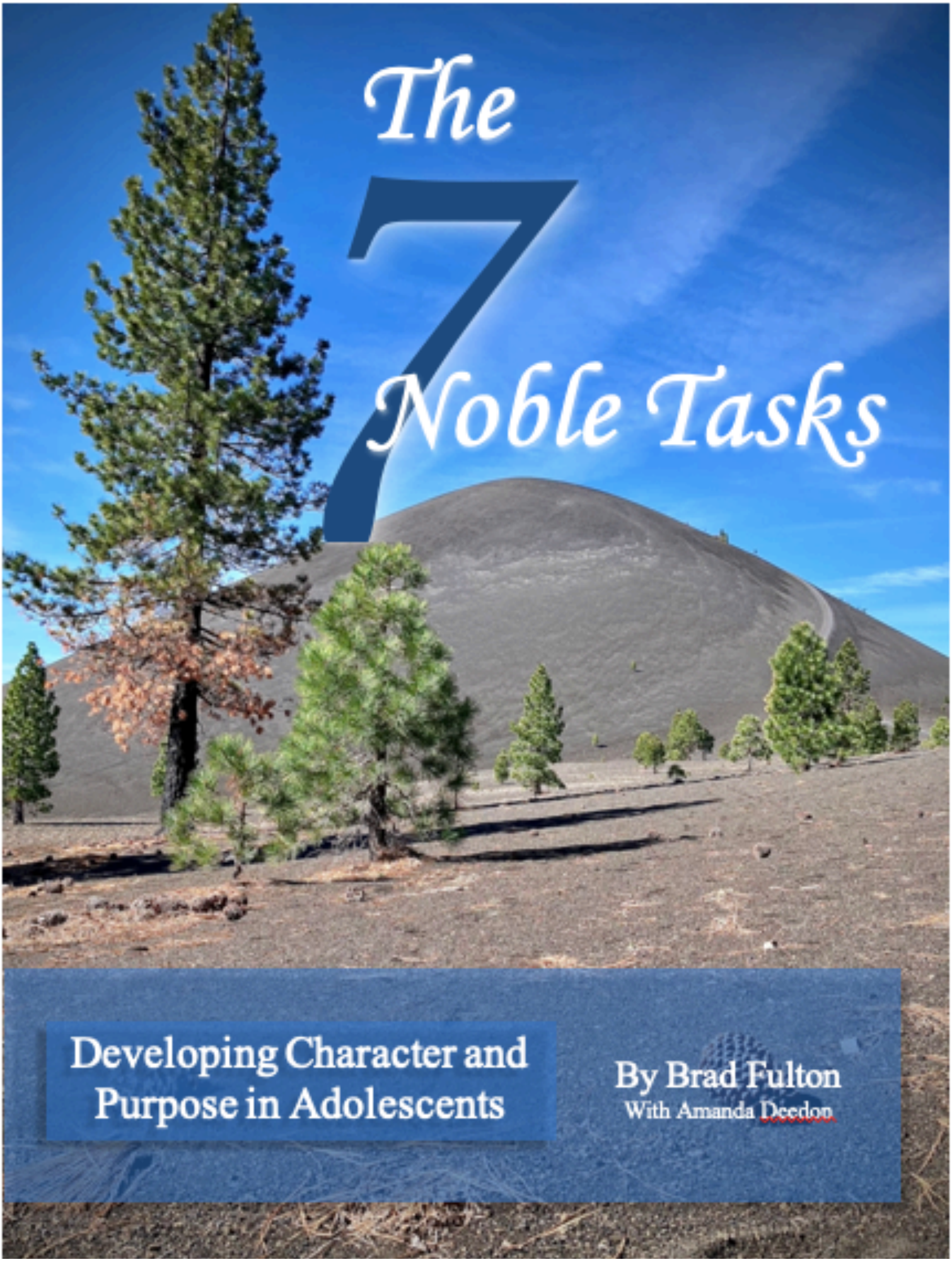
The
7
Noble Tasks
Developing Character and Purpose in Adolescents
By Brad Fulton
With Amanda Deedon

Preface

This book describes a character-building project that was the work of Amanda Deedon and me, Brad Fulton. We are eighth-grade teachers in Redding, California. We have been developing and implementing the project for the last three years. This book is based on a school year, taking the reader from the graduation of one year to the graduation of the following class. Not all the examples are from a single year, though. For purposes of illustration, I have culled stories from the entire three-year period. Though often written from memory, I have tried to maintain the integrity of the conversations and events. To protect their anonymity, the names of all students have been changed throughout the book.

The project has been a benefit to the educational process, to the students themselves, and even to Amanda and me. If an educator wishes to incorporate the program into his or her school, similar benefits can result, even if the tasks must be changed and adapted to fit a different school site. The most important component of the project is this: *whom we teach* matters much more than *what we teach*. If a teacher has grasped this lesson, we believe success will result.

In implementing the program, focusing on the results and principles we have targeted is much more important than adhering to the exact tasks we describe. In fact, we varied the order and content of some of the tasks each year. In the "Act of Service" task chapter, you will read about our "Friends for Life" project. However, the year before, we offered something very different for the service project. Since we are a kindergarten-through-eighth-grade campus, we have many younger students who need the guidance of older leaders. During one of our trimesters, we offered an elective in "Bulldog Mentors." Interested students signed up for the elective and worked with students up to the fifth grade. They were not classroom aides; we already had such an elective. Instead, we polled the teachers for a list of students who would benefit from one-on-one guidance. They gave us lists of students who needed tutoring but also some who needed behavioral and emotional support. One student was assigned to a shy girl who was new to the school and not making friends. Others worked with students who struggled to stay on task. They demonstrated how to focus and persevere. The little bulldogs loved seeing their advocates at lunchtime. High fives were common.

What matters more than the specific tasks is their purpose. The number seven isn't magical either; it just fit. We began our year by listing the character traits we wanted to emphasize and then designed tasks to develop them. In many cases, we fit the trait to curricular tasks we were already using, as in the case of Amanda's "Uniquely You" project.

More ideas on implementation are provided on the resources pages toward the end of the book. Amanda and I are available for consultation should a school or district want more information. You may contact us through my website at www.tttpress.com.

The Seven Noble Tasks
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Why We Need This

We teach a precious generation. As eighth graders, they stand at the crossroads of childhood and adulthood, trying to navigate the terrain before them as best they can. They carry the maps of those who have gone before; they follow in the footsteps of their parents and teachers. But sometimes their maps have become torn and stained by past experiences. Others have lost their maps, or they never had one in the first place. The needle of their compass is skewed by the magnetic pull of the media or by their peers. Some navigate this juncture successfully, but too many do not.

To make the journey more dangerous, we teach a generation raised in comparative affluence. Unlike previous generations, many have never known want or lack. Their parents narrowly missed the recession that began in the mid-1970s. They may have read about the Great Depression or the tough times in the early 1950s, but they have been afforded the luxury of being able to acquire whatever they wanted. They live on the terminal cusp of a great era of economic boom. As we now enter tougher economic times, they may not understand their parents' recent unemployment or financial struggles. Credit cards may stay the inevitable for a moment, but many are hearing their parents say, "No," and "I can't afford it," for the very first time.

Most children of this generation wear designer clothes and carry the latest cell phone, and these provide them with temporary happiness and fulfillment. As a result, many, though certainly not all, do not share the simpler, intrinsic values of former generations.

By contrast, my parents endured the Great Depression and survived World War II. Amanda Deedon's parents paid their dues in the Vietnam War and suffered the ignominy and ostracism of an unwelcome homecoming, as well as living with the ongoing torment of its memories.

Like a muscle that is never forced to struggle or strain, there is an atrophy that weakens the soul. We found in our students an increasing inability to solve the simple problems of life. When confronted with a hurdle, they looked to others for a solution. When sad, they looked to things to make them happy again. When confronted with challenges, they turned and sought easier paths.

These characteristics don't describe every student, of course. They are generalizations, and there are exceptions. But we were seeing a trend—a new generation unprepared for the difficulties and challenges of adulthood.

In over thirty years teaching middle school, I have often been asked if I see a difference between students today and those of my own generation. For the first twenty-five of those years, I quickly replied that, no, I did not see much difference. Children are children, and the wants and needs and behaviors of today are not significantly different from those of many years ago. In fact, I often joked that I had not yet met the student who gave me as bad a time as I gave to my teachers.

However, in the last few years, I have detected a subtle shift. It is difficult to define and diagnose, but there is definitely a change. Other teachers echo this. I don't think it's simply my old age skewing my perspective, as so often happens when a gray-haired generation loses touch with a younger one. It's not that I can't comprehend their fashions and interests; my generation introduced bell-bottom pants, electric music, and long hair to a bewildered, black-tie establishment. The change we were noticing was more than superficial.

In their excellent books, *Parenting With Love and Logic* and *Teaching with Love and Logic*, Jim Fay, Foster Cline, and David Funk describe two dichotomous parenting/leadership styles. One

type of leader is the *drill sergeant*. Drill sergeant parents lead by strong and assertive authority. Intimidation, volume, strictness, and fear are the tools used to coerce their children to follow rules. The result of this type of leadership is often very obedient and seemingly compliant children. However, rebellion is a symptom in later years. Young teens are likely to seek independence from this oppressive force. Worse, they never learn to govern themselves; they are dependent upon this external guidance.

At the other end of the spectrum is the *helicopter parent*. This leader is afraid of the harm that will result from a child's failure. Helicopter parents want to be their children's friends; and for this reason, they follow them around, covering all their bases and shouldering all their responsibilities. They shield their children from the consequences of negative behavior. Such parents are liable to collect their children's missing work for them, sit with them while they complete it, and make sure it gets turned in. Again, teens are likely to rebel against this bothersome presence, and, worse, they never learn to take care of themselves.

Both the drill sergeant and helicopter parent want their children to be successful, but they rarely see that result. Fortunately, the vast majority of parents, teachers, and leaders do not reside at either end of this continuum. Instead, the goal of healthy parents is to ensure that their children eventually learn to live both successfully and *independently*—to stand without the parental support as they mature.

The change we have seen in recent years is that more and more parents are tending toward the helicopter end of the spectrum. Their children seem less and less able to stand on their own, to even know where to begin to solve a problem. They are like drowning victims crying for help because they have never learned to swim.

Combine this with the rise of substance abuse in homes and the increasing likelihood that children are raised in broken homes, and you have a threefold convergence assuring disaster.

Just as this shift is difficult to describe, it is also difficult to quantify. It eludes data. Anecdotes can provide examples, and while anecdotal evidence is no measure of proof, it seems that as the years progress, it becomes easier for me to find such examples. Recently a parent requested a meeting to discuss a problem. It seemed that parent's child didn't want to come to school. The child was struggling academically but was too shy to ask for help, even though we teachers were available during class, before and after school, and even at lunch to help any student who had questions. In attendance at the meeting were both parents, our principal, a special education teacher, a regular education teacher, and the school psychologist. The one person missing was the student. When I asked why that was so, the parent responded that they had tried that last year, but the student cried. How sad it is that the student was excused from a second effort after failing once. What would this teach the child about persevering amid the problems that will assuredly be encountered in adulthood?

I have returned from bus duty to find parents rummaging through my papers to see if their child turned in his or her assignment. Every year I have at least one parent who drops by frequently on afternoons to see if their child turned in the assigned homework, while the child plays outside. This is becoming normal.

A *USA Today* article dated March 12, 2012, reports that organizers of a Colorado Easter egg hunt had to cancel the event due to overly aggressive parents. Author Ron Alsop says this is typical of "millennial children."

While these are only three examples, they provide a view of a bigger picture.

Parents are afraid that their children's failure will lead to—well—failure. In fact, it does not; children are smarter than that. Shielding children from the normal failures of life shields them from learning how to handle and avoid it in the future when the stakes are higher. When we experience moderate degrees of failure, we don't enjoy it; so we take action to learn from and avoid those mistakes the next time.

I don't mean to sound bitter or pessimistic—we have many wonderfully capable students and parents—but we felt as if a rising current were sweeping us downstream and we needed to fight against it. We knew that life wouldn't always be easy for our students, and we wanted the best for them. Yet we also knew that statistics reveal that in the next four years of high school, the two greatest threats against their well-being would come from driving under the influence and teen suicide. They were too precious to surrender to either of these enemies. We decided to fight.

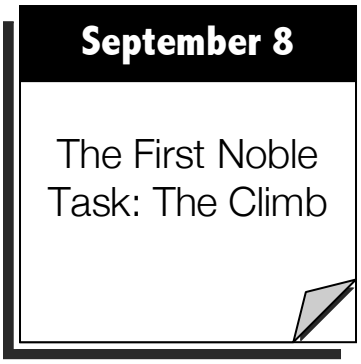
In his wonderful tribute, *Lessons from a Father to His Son*, Senator John Ashcroft speaks of the legacy his father left to him—not a financial inheritance but a legacy of character. He says, "He prayed that our hearts would be ignited and inspired to do *noble* things, which would have eternal consequences. 'Turn your hearts from the temporal, the physical, and the menial,' he prayed, 'and turn us toward the eternal, the spiritual, and the noble.'"

That is what we wanted for our students. In a phrase, we wanted to connect people to their purpose. We had always tried to empower our students with decision-making skills. We gave them the task of planning their eighth-grade trip. They were allowed to make effective seating charts. Students formed a leadership team at our school, and they planned the assemblies and trained the other students in character development. Their spirit and integrity spread throughout the student body. Even new students were quickly assimilated and transformed by the personality of the school. When a food fight broke out in the cafeteria one day, we asked them what they wanted to do about it; and they decided to write an apology letter to the custodian since they had made his job more difficult. They also wanted to spend an afternoon emptying all the trash in the school to make his job easier. Because of this school climate, Mistletoe was one of only three schools in California to win the "Schools to Watch Award." But we wanted even more for our students.

That was how this undertaking was born. We designed seven tasks that would become the milestones of their journey into high school and beyond. Each task would require a great effort from them and give them something intrinsic and personal in return. None of the tasks would be easy. All would require selflessness. Each would be meaningful. Like levels to be conquered in their video games, each task would bring them more power and strength. Every culture has it rites of passage that transform the young into adults, but these would be *our* traditions and would reflect *our* culture. And so began our journey together with our students through the seven noble tasks.

September 8

The First Noble Task: The Climb



It's the climbing that makes the man; getting to the top is an extra reward.

Robert Lipsyte, *The Contender*

"You will hate us at the bottom of the mountain," we warned our students, "but you'll love us at the top. You will think you can't do it. You'll tell us it's impossible. But you *can* do it, and regardless of what your body or mind may be telling you, it *is* possible. We know this because we've done it. And others who came before you have done it too. You'll ask us why we are making you do this, but once you get to the top, you'll understand."

Cinder Cone is a tephra volcano rising abruptly 700 feet above the surrounding mountain plateau. It is far from the highest climb in Lassen Volcanic National Park, but it is clearly the steepest, the most daunting, and the most dispiriting climb. Devoid of trees and other substantial plant life, it is one of the few places where you can see the complete route during the ascent, and thus your progress during the climb is barely perceptible.

Cinder Cone looks like an anthill on steroids. Formed from a series of eruptions ending in 1851, a double crater caps the 30-degree incline. If you dumped a pile of sand in your yard, it would fan out to form this same angle of repose. It is the steepest slope that loose debris can attain without collapse. A narrow trail spirals precipitously toward the top.

Tephra cone eruptions occur when loose bits of lava are spewed into the air and then fall back, forming a cone of loose debris around the base. Unlike a Hawaiian volcano with its gentle slopes and massive base, a tephra cone is diminutive but steep. And unlike a plug dome volcano with its sheer cliffs, a tephra cone can be climbed—barely. You'd wish it couldn't. I have counted that it takes a thousand steps to reach the top, but for every two steps you gain, you slide back one in the loose volcanic cinders, so you end up climbing it twice.

To get there, the students rode seventy-five miles on winding roads that took them from the Central Valley of northern California up to an elevation of 6,000 feet in the Cascade Range. Then it was six miles of dirt roads to the campground at Butte Lake. This part was fun for the students, who saw it as an opportunity to get away from the classroom and all of its lessons. Then they enjoyed a level hike through a shaded pine forest for a mile before the trees parted and the volcano erupted into view in sheer desolation.

"You expect us to climb *that*?" they protested. You're crazy!" Immediately, they began to tell us they couldn't do it. Others may have succeeded, but certainly they could not be expected to make it. Some charged the trail with false bravado, only to slow to a crawl a few feet into the climb. In fact, many did drop to their hands and knees pretty quickly and crawled up the trail. They walked forward a few paces then bent at the waist with their hands braced against their knees as they gasped for oxygen in the crisp alpine air. They looked up but saw that the summit looked no closer than it did before. They glared at us with looks that revealed their agony. A few more steps, and they paused to suck on the water bottles they had brought. Their faces were already reddened and soaked with perspiration. A few more steps, and they began to peel off the layers of sweatshirts they had needed only a few moments before, yet still the summit was a distant and mocking peak. More steps, more water; more steps, more perspiration. If discouragement had a face, you could see it already, and they'd barely begun. If defeat has a face, it too was beginning to show as they looked toward the top. And then they turned around.

Looking down the precipitous incline, they saw that they already had achieved such height that they momentarily experienced vertigo. The friends behind them were dwarfed on the plateau. The view swept away like that from an airplane window. With renewed hope they turned back to look at the summit and were shocked to see that it still seemed no closer. It was as if the base of the mountain were dropping away and yet the peak was ascending at the same pace they were.

From the base, you would have to watch patiently to detect movement in the ascending line of students. Each time we passed by students, we endured their complaints. "Why are you making us do this?" Invariably, some turned backward to see if walking in reverse was easier. It wasn't. Their leg muscles were burning. We knew because ours were burning too. Our calves and thighs felt rock-hard and ached as if they had been pummeled. Our strength was robbed. We looked like tottering old folks taking mincing steps up the trail.

Any hope of looking pretty vanished. The boys were dripping. The girls' makeup was smeared. Up ahead a lone and twisted pine stood like an abandoned climber frozen upon the trail. I sat down nearby and grinned at the students as they passed. One by one the students reached me and muttered oaths. "I can't believe you! This is the worst day of my life! You're right: I *do* hate you!"

They didn't know about the tree because they had never been there before. What they saw as an isolated waypoint was really a goalpost. The tree marks a bend in the trail, and as they turned past it the summit sprawled open before them.

Joining them at the top, you would think these were not the same students. They were elated, energized, and empowered. Only their sweaty attire belied their enthusiasm. "This is incredible!" they shouted, as they scanned the massive double crater and took in the 360-degree view of the volcanic landscape. "Can we hike into the crater?" they begged. These were the same students who didn't want to take one more step one step ago. But off they ran. Their muscles were renewed and invigorated, and all thoughts of exhaustion were forgotten. A new energy born of triumph propelled them, for accomplishment propels all of us.

* * *

Psychologists once told educators that if we worked on students' self-esteem, everything would be okay. If students had high self-esteem, they would not be a behavioral problem. They would work hard; they would learn more; they would be happier. Then we were told to put our chairs in a circle with one student in the middle. We took turns telling the student how special he or she was. We said we liked the student, and that he or she was unique and wonderful. Then we put the chairs back into rows and began our geography lesson, and the center of attention would resume the manufacture and launch of spit wads.

It sounded so logical—how could such a system fail? The truth was, we later discovered, that the diagnosis about self-esteem was true for the most part, but the cure was wrong. Our self-esteem does indeed govern many of our actions. But we don't get it from others. We gain it in a very specific way: our self-esteem is a measure of *our* perception of *our* accomplishments. How others feel about it is distantly secondary. Those significant voices in our lives, such as parents and respected peers, will have some influence on how we feel about ourselves but only as reinforcements and confirmations of our own beliefs. The problem with our approach was that the person who needed the self-esteem boost was accomplishing nothing as we layered warm fuzzies upon the person. If we want our students, or anyone else for that matter, to achieve their potential, we must ensure they have a good self-image. And if we want them to have a good self-mage, we must guide them to achieve greatness. That sounds like circular reasoning, but it's not. By facing mountainous goals that are beyond us, by assaulting those obstacles and overcoming them, the view we have of ourselves changes as surely as the view of a distant landscape below.

Our self-esteem is a measure of our perception of our accomplishments. How others feel about it is distantly secondary.

So often as parents we want to help our children avoid failure, frustration, and pain. It seems to be our parental duty. To some degree it is, but if it is overplayed, we deny our children the opportunity to conquer, to achieve, and to solve problems. If they don't get this exercise in the minor confrontations of childhood, they will soon be adults with character that is too atrophied to overcome the inevitable and more significant struggles of life. Children in our relatively affluent society naturally are more susceptible to this. Allowing them the opportunity to face problems within safe limits is one of the greatest gifts we can give children. Expressing our belief that they are up to the task is another equally valuable gift. In this garden of nurturing care, the self-image of the child will grow step by step.

* * *

And step by step, they climbed Cinder Cone. We told them we knew they could do it, not because they were warm and fuzzy, but because we had already walked those same steps.

Nearly all the students had made it by now. We were missing only a handful. Most years, some of them give up and never make the summit. Other years we get 100 percent attendance at the top. We were ready to hike down, when I heard some students cheering. A boy from our special education class was inching up the trail in mincing steps. Two students from a Christian school who were also climbing the cone flanked him. Starting later than we had, they picked up the straggler and encouraged his every step. He too made it to the top and was elated by his accomplishment.

We gathered the students, unfurled our school flag, and took our class picture.

Now came the fun part. We released the students for the hike down to the lake, where we would enjoy our well-earned lunch. Some sprinted down the trail with reckless abandon. Their strides vaulted them down the trail with such uncontrolled speed that they wouldn't be able to slow down and stop until they reached the level ground at the bottom.

I followed in the rear, guiding our special education student down the trail with the help of one of our parent volunteers. Then we saw him, our last missing student, paused halfway up the mountain. Again the students congratulated him on how far he got. He was a popular student but physically out of shape, and he was clearly exhausted. "Are you going to finish the climb?" a friend asked him.

"I don't think so. I'm pretty tired. I'll probably turn back with you."

"I'll go up with you," she offered.

"So will I," another friend joined in.

The student looked toward the distant summit while battling doubt. "I'll go with you too," I added.

He hesitated. "I don't know if I can do it," he drawled. "I'm not feeling good."

"I *know* you can do it," I encouraged. "I know what you are going through, but you are over halfway there. We will take it one step at a time, and we'll walk with you all the way."

He trudged a few more minutes up the mountain and paused again. "I don't think I can do it," he warned.

Knowing that he was a grade-motivated student, I explained, "You are nearly 80 percent of the way there. That's a B-. Let's go for the A+." He took a few more steps and then doubled over, heaved, and collapsed. After losing every drop of his breakfast, he got up, cleaned up, and finished the ascent with his friends and me walking alongside.