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Accompanied by two close friends and their guides, Spencer West—a man without legs—climbs to the top of Mount Kilimanjaro during 2012. This photo depicts him during the ascent. Image online via Free the Children. Click on the photo for a better view.

Before he attempted to climb Kilimanjaro, Africa's highest point, Spencer West believed in his own physical abilities, despite having no legs. He had been tested, repeatedly, throughout his life.

This, however, would be the hardest test of all.

Positively influenced by his parents, who encouraged him throughout his life, Spencer was also influenced by a passage in *The Alchemist*, a book by Paulo Coelho:

Before a dream is realized, the Soul of the World tests everything that was learned along the way. It does this not because it is evil, but so that we can, in addition to realizing our dreams, master the lessons we've learned as we've moved toward that dream. That's the point at which most people give up. It's the point at which, as we say in the language of the desert, one "dies of thirst just when the palm trees have appeared on the horizon." (*The Alchemist*, by Paulo Coelho, at page 132 of the 10th Anniversary Edition.)

Spencer would not give up. Using at least some protection for his hands, he kept moving higher up the mountain.



What did he learn about himself as he, and his buddies, were making that Kilimanjaro climb?

... we were hoping that I would be able to do half on my hands and half in a wheelchair because I've had a previous shoulder injury and, you know, contrary to popular belief, your arms aren't meant to be walked on, so I need to hang on to all the limbs that I've got left, so to speak. But when we got there, it was walking about 80 percent on my hands and about 20 percent in my chair. (NPR Interview with Michel Martin on July 22, 2014.)

Was he willing to accept help from his friends?

Halfway through, our guide and my buddies were like, look, Spence, like if we're actually going to make it to the top and back down again, you're going to need to let us help you a little bit. So I sort of relinquished and let them carry me a bit here and there, still walking most of it on my own, but accepting help when I needed it. (NPR Interview with Michel Martin on July 22, 2014.)

Then something completely unexpected happened. Although Spencer did not get altitude sickness, his two friends did. Now, instead of his buddies just helping *him*, Spencer had the chance to help *them* :

...when we got towards the top, I didn't get altitude sickness at all but my two buddies did. And it was really the first time in my entire life where I wished that I had legs that day...so I could be the one to carry them. But obviously that wasn't the case so I did what I could do, and I stood in between them and in tandem ... we walked slowly together until we reached the top. (NPR Interview with Michel Martin on July 22, 2014.)

It was an extraordinary feat, not just for Spencer West personally but as an example for every individual who faces obstacles (and thinks that perseverance is a concept which only applies to others):

...there's this stereotype that because maybe you are disabled or you've lost limbs or whatever ... your challenge might be, is that you don't have something to offer to society ... I remember one time when I was working at a retail job, a woman came in and she said to me, well, at least you can work. And I thought, what does that mean? Of course I can work. Why wouldn't I work? So I think that's what's sort of happening now, is we're sort of proving that, hey, it doesn't matter what we look like on the outside; we all have something to contribute to society. (NPR Interview with Michel Martin on July 22, 2014.)

Was there anyone (or anything), in particular, helping Spencer get to the top of that mountain—and—to surmount the other extraordinary difficulties of living a legless life?

For me in particular, it goes back to my parents and how we always focused on what I could do instead of what I couldn't do. There is no can't or won't, only how. (NPR Interview with Michel Martin on July 22, 2014.)

When Kenny West's son was born, he had another thought in mind. He wanted his boy to be named after "Spencer's Mountain," a film (starring Henry Fonda) which features this catchphrase (paraphrasing the British writer James Allen)

The world steps aside to let a man pass, if he knows where he is going.

Given his name, and the sentiments which motivated it, maybe Spencer West was always meant to climb a mountain—with, or without, legs.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

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Media Stream



Spencer West Climbs Kilimanjaro

Photo of Spencer West, climbing Mount Kilimanjaro, online via Free the Children.

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Spencer West Climbs Kilimanjaro on His Hands

Spencer West, during his 2012 climb to the top of Kilimanjaro, online via Free the Children.

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