

A Steep Climb: The War-Torn Veteran and the Un-scholarly Spiritual Eccentric

J. M. Joseph

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This is a heartfelt memoir about a man's quest for mental peace, another man's pursuit for spiritual truth, and the friendship that sustained them.

A Steep Climb: The War-Torn Veteran and the Un-scholarly Spiritual Eccentric by J. M. Joseph is a heartfelt portrait of a friendship between the author and his childhood best friend.

The two boys, John and Lou, grew up next door to each other in Hawaii, and the book begins with a day that set the course for both of their lives: December 7, 1941, with the bombing of Pearl Harbor. The boys grow up, and the book follows Lou's military service, beginning in 1954 and spanning the Korean and Vietnam wars. Meanwhile, John lived a life of school, work, and family on the home front. Over the years, the two shared thoughts on the horrors of war and the simple difficulties of adult life. Their continued friendship, Lou's postwar struggles, and John's spiritual searching led the men into deeply complex yet life-giving spiritual discussions. The book follows the friendship until Lou's death at the age of sixty-eight.

While the book is about both John and Lou, and ultimately about the power of their friendship, Lou is the central figure—a mark of the author's selfless friendship. And yet, through his love of his friend, the author truly shares himself. Lou suffered through not only the atrocities of war but also their devastating aftermath: PTSD, alcoholism, and poverty. The book's deepest points of empathy happen as John attempts to help his friend.

Many who are friends with veterans, especially those dealing with mental illness, will find resonance in John's helpless, sometimes frustrating, feeling of simply being there for a suffering friend, when there's no way to ease their pain. Through it all, John's messy quest for faith sustains him. Throughout the conversations recorded in the book, he shares humble, hopeful insights, even when he's confused and overwhelmed by faith: "God is simple. In fact, God's simplicity has made creation so beautiful." Passive sentences, wordy construction, unclear narration, and stilted dialogue hinder the author's voice, but the heart of the project is clear: he cares about his friend.

This book will appeal most to veterans and friends of veterans, particularly of the Korean and Vietnam war eras, who know the ugliness of war and the difficulty of going on with life afterward. These readers will find solace and hope in John and Lou's committed friendship. The book will also attract others who have been through the beauty and difficulty of decades of life with a friend.

A Steep Climb shares one man's quest for mental peace, another man's pursuit of spiritual truth, and the friendship that sustained them.

MELISSA WUSKE (March 2, 2016)

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