

# Summit or Plummet



**Ama  
Dablam**



**ELEVATION:** 22,493 feet

**HOW LONG TO CLIMB:** Three to six weeks;  
as fast as one day to summit  
if sighted and acclimated

**HOW MANY IN THE TEAM:** Eight Americans and three Sherpas

**RATING:** D+, YDS 5.8

**BEST TO CLIMB DURING:** April to May  
(before the monsoon season)  
or September to October

**ALSO KNOWN AS:** Name means "Mother's jewel box"  
or "Mother's necklace"

### Notes:

This is the 3rd most popular mountain to climb in the Himalayas.

April 2000: A team of climbers has been assembled for a climb of picturesque Himalayan peak, Ama Dablam, with the purpose of using it as a springboard for Everest the following spring. One of the team members is blind.

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*For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways; they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.* — Psalm 91:11–12

*There are only three real sports: bull-fighting, car racing and mountain climbing. All the others are mere games.*<sup>1</sup> — Ernest Hemingway

**A**pril 14, 2000, Day 29 — The relentless storm only added to the drama of retreating that day. With 4,000 feet of air below us, we would descend in what we call “full conditions,” meaning the foulest of weather, over the jagged, rocky, extremely exposed terrain that now had a coat of ice and snow, not only on its surface, but on our ropes as well. It was slick, at least the parts angular enough to collect snow on that steep and often vertical terrain. Rappelling, climbing, slipping, sliding, and banging our way down the ridge in what at times was a whiteout, gave me a new perspective on what it would be like to be in my blind climbing partner, Erik Weihenmayer’s shoes.

The three of us, Chris Morris, Brad Bull, and I, had just grunted our way from the 20,000-foot perch of Camp Two to the lower and more comfortable accommodations of Camp One at 19,000 feet on Ama Dablam. We were tired and very relieved to see our tents just yards away. My tent was one of the farthest from the fixed lines leading us down onto the platform terminating just before camp. My tentmate at this camp would be Dr. Steve Gipe, who had remained at Camp One as the team ascended. Dr Gipe’s intentions were to attempt the summit from Camp One as the team fixed the route up higher, then later rejoin the team as everyone was leaving Camp Three for the summit. As I approached my tent I could almost feel the warmth of my bag and a nice cooked meal, and was already beginning to think of sleep. In fact, I may have been half asleep and daydreaming when it happened. Chris Morris said he thought I was a “goner” and Dr. Gipe kept yelling, “Stop! Stop! Self arrest!” Brad Bull started to pray. I know God heard his prayer.

Camp One is perched at the top of a 600-foot, mostly smooth, yet steep slabby rock face. If you are familiar with the rock formation outside of Boulder, Colorado, called the Flatirons, it would be similar to this with little blocky features that would give a falling person flight at times. I was ten feet from my tent and scrambling over the rocks, which were scattered all over the top of the face. As I made my final few steps to the tent, one of these rocks shifted, toppled over, and caused me to lose my balance and fall to my stomach on top of it. I was caught off guard to say the least, because I had stepped on this particular rock a number of times before, but it was my heavy load and the

thoughtlessness of my step brought on by fatigue that caused it to turn over.

I felt like I was Coyote in a Roadrunner cartoon. My body started to drop, yet somehow my head seemed to linger in space. I hugged the rock and as I did, it started to slide over the edge with me on top of it. I knew that if I didn't let go I would tumble some 600 feet down, being crushed by this rock that was now in my arms. So I decided to let go, and take my chances, hoping that I would be able to grab on to the ledge in front of me as my feet began their way down. With gloved hands hitting the loose and partly snow-covered edge, I had no chance as my hands deflected like a soccer ball off the goal post in a botched goal attempt. This wouldn't be a completely vertical fall. I would, in some moments, be afforded the luxury of abrasive granite shredding me and my clothes.

My head smacked the rock, and as I began my freefall and slide for life, all I could think of was a series of four-letter words. Words like: "Stop! Help! Grab!" And then over again: "Grab! Grab! Stop! Stop! Help! Help!" Perhaps one or two other four-letter words were spoken, but I can't recall what they might have been. People often ask me what I was thinking in that moment. I have to laugh because it's not as though I could have paused in mid-flight and reflected on the matter, concerning myself with the various methods I would have employed to bring myself to a complete stop. In fact, I kid and tell them, "I was thinking what anyone would have been thinking: 'Do these pants make me look fat?'"

The fall was sudden and quick, yet it seemed to last all afternoon. I slid, crested a precipice, landed again on my belly not far below, repeating this endlessly during the course of my rapid plunge. Fortunately, I was still wearing my helmet, multiple layers of clothing, and my backpack, which at times padded me from the impact of the hard granite. During the course of this tumble, had I caught my foot on a ledge or begun to cartwheel, I most certainly would have fallen the entire distance to a rocky death below.

I believe very strongly that it was a miracle I landed on the small, coffee table-sized ledge 150 feet below Camp One. It was as though I was surrounded by angels, and the hand of God Himself caught me at that moment. I sat stunned in disbelief, waving my hand in the air, to signal to the team that I at least thought I was okay. I reached down and felt my legs, was glad to have them both, palpated my arms and knew they were not broken, and lastly, examined my head, at which time I confirmed that I had indeed lost it. The team up above, notably our Sherpa Pemba Galgen, threw a rope down to me. Pemba descended on that line, helped me to my feet and onto the rope. He then climbed up alongside me as I was able to "Batman" (tug and pull on the rope instead of the rock, like Adam West as Bruce Wayne in the original Batman TV series) my way back up to the tent.

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Dr. Gipe put me into our tent and told me to lay low as he made dinner for both of us. Shortly after we ate I fell asleep, only to be awakened at 4:00 a.m. gasping for breath. I began to cough, knowing all too well that this was not a good sign, and rolled over to nudge Gipe awake. He put a small pulse oximeter on the ring finger of my right hand. This device, commonly used in hospitals, will tell not only your heart rate, but by shooting a beam of light through your finger is able to determine the amount of oxygen your blood is carrying. At sea level, most healthy people would have an O<sub>2</sub> saturation of between 95 and 99 percent. My O<sub>2</sub> saturation was near 45 percent. Clinically speaking, it's the next best thing to dead. Gipe told me at that moment what I already knew: that I needed to get down right away or I could die.

### *Meeting Erik*

I could say that it was a blind person that got me into this mess, but that would be inaccurate. Erik Weihenmayer, my blind friend E. W., or Big E, as we like to call him, had merely invited me to be a part of this expedition to 22,493-foot Ama Dablam in the Himalayas; I was the one responsible for the mess I was in. I had met this blind adventurer a few years prior when I returned home from work only to be greeted at my door by a strange and giant German Shepherd named Seigo (pronounced see go). Erik had been invited by my roommate, Darol Kubacz, to crash on our couch after the two had spent the day skiing.

Darol, who broke his back in a motorcycle accident, is in a wheelchair and still skis with Erik, but does not ski as his guide. As Erik and I talked, we discovered a common passion we both shared for climbing. My first thought was that this guy must not know what he is talking about. He must enjoy hiking and maybe the occasional rock gym style of climbing. The funny thing is that he was sizing me up in the same manner. It was the middle of winter in Vail and the frozen waterfalls were well formed.

I invited Erik to come up again and join me out on the vertical ice in East Vail. I had worked with a number of blind skiers in the past and was excited to see exactly how blind climbing was going to work. I thought I would run Erik through the paces and maybe educate him a little bit on what real climbing is like, so I started easy. I quickly ascended an easy climb, less than vertical, and he quickly ascended right behind me. *Okay*, I thought, *This guy knows how to use the gear, but let's try something harder*. I set up a line on a harder, now vertical, climb right next to us and quickly he ascended that one, too.

The last climb was a super-skinny pillar, as big around as a ballerina's leg, which wandered upward, getting fatter and steeper until it ended 75 feet up at a powdery snow-covered break over. I went up and must admit that I struggled a little while breaking a sweat, delicately placing my feet on the

pillar so as not to break it off and make the climb impossible. The sweat continued to linger on my brow as I now had a clear view of my thin 9.5 mm rope (about the diameter of a Sharpie marker) posing as a target for Erik's two sharp tools being swung wildly by a man who could not see. This is his lifeline, so if he should hit it that could be the end — of him and my rope. With a great deal of effort, he made it to the top of this challenging climb.

I asked, "Hey, what if you hit my rope? You sure came close, you know?"

He said, "That's why I told you to keep it tight, because I can feel the pressure on my harness and then know the direction of the rope in front of me. When it looks like I am hitting the rope, I am actually scanning with my tools to feel where it is so that I won't hit it, but sometimes I miss. And if I miss, I'll buy you a new rope, how's that?"

I said, "But you'll be dead!"

He replied, "I'm good for it." This was the beginning of a great friendship and climbing partnership that would take me around the globe on expeditions often led by a blind man.

A little over a year later, I was again out on a climb with Erik. August in Colorado is not really the time that one is concerned with snowstorms; however, it is not unheard of to have a blizzard in August or even on the 4th of July. On this day, Erik and I were in the Elk Range near Aspen, and our objective was a route on one of the better-known peaks in the state; a steep and technical rock climb up the north face of Capitol Peak. Erik and I would hike the five or so miles in to the base of the peak the night before so that we could get an early start on the face, and planned on being off the peak before any storms hit.

As we went to sleep that night, it began to rain, dousing our hopes of climbing just as much as it doused the rock. When we awakened the next morning, our route was covered with snow and hail, making it dangerous if not impossible for us to climb. We settled for a later start on the easiest route on the peak — "the knife-edge." As we climbed slowly toward the summit on this beautiful, now snowy August day, my friend Erik and I began to get a bit cold, as we were not quite prepared for a blizzard of this nature. So standing at the edge of the knife, I made a decision to turn around and forego an attempt of this beautiful, prized summit. I figured I had three good reasons: first it was cold, snowy, and slippery; secondly, it was getting late in the day; and finally, my friend Erik is completely blind and that usually slows us down a little.

What I didn't know at this time was how this day and the decisions we made on this day would change not only both of our lives, but also make a dent in the history of climbing. On our descent we spoke of desires, dreams, and goals, of things we had done and mountains we wished to climb. Sliding our way down through the scree (loose, chossy rock on the side of a moun-

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tain which resembles thousands of shards of broken dishware) of little K2, which is Capitol Peak's neighboring summit, Erik told me of a man named Pasquale Scaturro, who was putting a team together along with Erik himself to go climbing in the Himalayas. To me it sounded exciting, the trip of a lifetime, of which I had always dreamed. I would wish him luck and be jealous of his adventure. I wouldn't get to go because I had never climbed in the Himalayas, or so I thought.

Just as I awakened from my daydream of the greatest mountains in the world, Erik asked me if I would want to be a part of his team. At first I thought maybe I should play it cool, saying, "I might have to think about it." Then as my heart attempted to pound its way out of my chest I said, "Does a one-legged duck swim in a circle? Heck yeah, I want to go!"

"We're going to try Ama Dablam, near Everest," he said, "and if it goes well we may even try Everest the next year." I was beside myself thinking of the possibilities, the adventure, the great fun it would be to climb halfway around the world with my blind friend, to think of new ways of moving over a difficult route, and to do something that no one had ever done before, possibly never even thought of before.

Erik and I packed up our wet tent and started the hike out, a bit frustrated that we had not made our summit, but now entertained by the idea of a warm meal and an amazing adventure. It got dark as we walked down the narrow trail, and at one point I led Erik right into a wash where he fell and slid down into the river below. I thought, *If I can't even get this guy down a mellow trail in Colorado, how on earth am I gonna get him through the Himalayas?* It seemed to bother me more than it did Erik, and at this point I knew that with a good attitude a person can go a lot further toward success than by focusing on the problem; keeping one's eye on the goal and not the minor setbacks, and looking past them to keep making tracks.

Throughout the following winter, we would get out on the ice in East Vail and climb its vertical frozen pillars as a means of training and getting to know others on the team. In those times of training, we would also discuss logistics, plans, budgets, and strategy; just another day at the office. I would bike, ski, climb, snowshoe, and run as a part of my training, and it was on one of those colorful fall runs through the golden aspen, which seemed as bright as fire, that I had a poetic moment, giving me this:

*As the trees reach for heaven all afire,  
It is only the mountains all aglow that can reach higher.  
So as I run and live this story  
It is to God above, whom all creation sings the glory!*

## *The Team*

Before we knew it, all our planning was done and it was time to hit the highway, to put up or shut up and go for broke. It was March 17, 2000, and after days spent buying gear, organizing, and then packing it into five-gallon buckets and army duffels, we were leaving on a jet plane for Katmandu, Nepal.

We would leave with an eight-man team, and one woman who was our Base Camp support. Half of the team I would be meeting for the first time on our flight over the sea. This could be a bit scary, climbing one of the world's great peaks with guys I had never met before, but it really allowed us to develop trust and learn to rely on each other's good judgment.

With the exception of Jeff Evans, Michael Brown, Charlie Mace, Sherman Bull, and Base Camp manager, Kevin Cherilla (these five would join us the following year on Everest), the team roster included the following:

**Luis Benitez** resides in Boulder, Colorado. He has spent more than half his life in the mountains, working both as a senior course director for Outward Bound's mountaineering programs and as a professional guide for Alpine Ascents International.

**Bradford Bull** is a level-headed architect and climber from Denver, Colorado. Brad had been on four previous Himalayan expeditions, summiting Mt. Everest in 1995, and the world's fourth-highest mountain, Lhotse, in 1998. Brad would be known on our team, and become world-famous, for his perfect hair.

**Jeff Evans** moved from the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia to the Rocky Mountains of Colorado when he was 18, and began his pursuit of high places. He has spent many seasons in the Alaska Range, guiding expeditions and working search and rescue on Denali, often known as Mt. McKinley. He is now a practicing physician assistant in Denver.

**Didrik Johnck** is a global citizen. Didrik would be the designated team photographer. After a successful climb on Cho Oyu in 1997, and running Base Camp for an Everest expedition in 1998, this would be Didrik's third expedition to the Himalayas.

**Chris Morris**, formerly of Wasilla, Alaska, now resides in Boulder, Colorado, where he works as a personal trainer. Chris is known for his endless energy and his ability to hop around from boulder to boulder like a chimp on caffeine, even at 20,000 feet. Chris also keeps heavy situations light with his ability to be positively pessimistic. An example of this would be speaking of how Erik climbs and saying, "He might be blind, but at least he's slow."

**Michael O'Donnell** hails from Ouray, Colorado. Mike comes from a guiding background with a lot of experience in big wall and ice climbing. He has climbed in nearly every major mountain range throughout the world.

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Along with Adrian and Alan Burgess, he made a bold attempt on the south face of Lhotse in 1983. With his penchant for storytelling and his fiery Irish demeanor, he would keep us entertained over the ten weeks we were away.

**Steve Gipe**, from Bozeman, Montana, would be our team physician. Steve, at age 50, has worked as an emergency physician in Bozeman since 1984. He is also medical advisor for the Bridger Bowl Pro Ski Patrol, county search and rescue, and Jackson Hole Mountain Guides. Gipe is a slow-talking, slow-hiking freight train, and a friend to everyone on the expedition. He would take care of everyone's emergency medical needs no matter how small or how large, and was always there to dish out a dose of medicine and a dose of calm encouragement. He was an instrumental part of the team's success as a whole.

**Pasquale "PV" Scaturro**, of Lakewood, Colorado, was our expedition leader. PV has a story about everyone, everywhere, and everything. He has been there and done that. He tells so many stories that most of the time you think he is full of it, and just when you are about to call him on it someone will come down the trail, greet him, and say, "Hey, PV, good to see you. I haven't seen you since that time you tried to castrate that wild bull in Mozambique with your car keys!" A veteran of seven Himalayan expeditions, including summits of Mt. Everest, Cho Oyu, and Pumori, Pasquale also has over 20 years experience running and guiding white water rafting expeditions throughout the world, logging a number of first descents of rivers in Africa, which includes the first full descent of the Nile, which was made into an IMAX movie. Though he is of Italian descent, PV looks like he could be from anywhere east of Spain to the edge of Mongolia. With his thick moustache, unshaven face, and wild mountain hair, PV at times looked like Saddam Hussein after getting caught in a spider hole.

**Kami Tenzing Sherpa** was from Khumjung, Nepal, is a climber and our expedition sirdar and climber. We have nicknamed Kami the "King of the Khumbu," as he is known for leading some of the largest expeditions in the region. Kami is a very quiet and kind man who is able to procure just about anything at anytime in a place as remote as Base Camp.

**Erik Weißenmayer** is husband to Ellie and father to Emma and Arjun, living in Golden, Colorado. He is a writer, adventurer, and the first blind person to climb the Seven Summits: Denali, Kilimanjaro, Aconcagua, Mt. Elbrus, Mt. Kosciusko, Mt. Vinson, and Mt. Everest. Erik has become a great friend and consistent climbing partner in numerous adventures around the globe.

**Kevin Cherilla**, who was our Base Camp manager, is a physical education teacher at Phoenix Country Day School and lives in Phoenix, Arizona. Kevin is married and has two children. He has actually been back to Everest since our trip, and in the spring of 2007 made the summit from the north

side as a part of a small international team. As we climbed the mountain, Kevin would keep us laughing, not always intentionally, by the nature of his comments over the radio from Base Camp.

**Reba Bull** was a helper to our Base Camp manager (she was aka Brad's newlywed wife). Reba came to help with the organization of Base Camp as well as to give moral support. It was a joy having her at camp not only because she was kind and supportive, but because she figured out high altitude baking and was able to make birthday cakes, pies, and other treats even at 18,000 feet on a slow-moving glacier — Martha Stewart, eat your heart out!

**Michael Brown**, from Boulder, Colorado, a filmmaker, director of “Vision of Everest,” and three-time national Emmy Award winner for cinematography. Mike came on to the team originally just as a filmmaker, but as time went on it wasn't long before he was really a member of the team. The documentary he made of our Everest expedition, “Farther than the Eye Can See,” would win him awards and honors internationally.

**Kim Johnson Morris**, from Boulder, Colorado, is a documentary filmmaker, and was the Base Camp camera operator and production manager for “Farther than the Eye Can See.” Kim has worked on a variety of international documentary films, live television, and Web productions.

**Charley Mace** is both a climber and cameraman from Golden, Colorado. So far, he has summited three 8,000-meter peaks (about 26,250 feet), but this would be his first visit to Mount Everest. His photo graces the cover of this book. He was the first American to summit Manaslu (26,751 feet). He also climbed the Abruzzi Ridge of K2 (28,244 feet), and Gasherbrum II (26,355 feet). He is the very proud father of three: Steven, Kelsey, and Ben. Charlie has a knack for just appearing out of nowhere, and likewise has an affinity for speaking in the same way he climbs; that is, he can surprise you with a thought or a word from out of the blue.

**The Sherpas** were the unsung heroes and those who made up the remaining members of our team. Pemba Gyalgin, along with Kami Tenzing, would be our main help on the trip to Ama Dablam, and would again join us on Everest with Ang Pasang, Chuldim Nuru, Lhakpa Tsering, Ang Kami, Phurbu Bhote, Pemba Choti, Lhakpa Tsheri, Ang Pasang Lhakpa Tsering, and Ang Sona Sherpa. These men added strength, ability, calm, kindness, and the ability to work as hard as oxen to make our Himalayan climbs possible.

There was an air of excitement as the five of us from Colorado met at Denver International Airport all dressed in our Mountain Hardwear team jackets. Immediately, we bribed the personnel at the check-in counter with team t-shirts, hats, and books, hoping they would overlook the fact that our bags were oversized and overweight, thereby saving us some money for our expensive journey. We were very fortunate to have sponsors such as

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The National Federation of the Blind and the now defunct Quokka Sports. Without this sponsorship and the hard work of Pasquale and Erik, the expedition would never have happened.

It was a 40-hour trip from Denver to Katmandu International Airport in Nepal, yet it didn't matter that we were tired because we were all so excited to be here, realizing a dream of climbing in the Himalayas. Back home, people often said we were crazy or didn't know what we were getting into, and tried to discourage us from going after our dream by saying things like, "Erik is going to die, and he is going to take you with him." I could guess, perhaps, these statements came from the fact that many people feared to live up to and pursue their own dreams, and therefore could not accept that a blind man might accomplish something that they would never accomplish themselves.

Other comments truly did come from sincere concern for all of us involved in this endeavor. The criticism extended beyond the average naysayer to well-known world class Himalayan veterans. John Krakauer even sent Erik a personal letter that read, "I am not at all enthusiastic about your trip to Everest next spring. It's not that I doubt you have what it takes to reach the summit. You've already shown that you have plenty of what it takes. It's just that I don't think you can get to the top of that particular hill without subjecting yourself to horrendous risk; the same horrendous risk all Everest climbers face, and then some. It's a totally different world above 8,000 meters. All kinds of things go haywire up there, and the consequences are so much more serious when they do." I can't fault John for saying this because at times I think every person who climbs at high altitudes must ask themselves, "What am I doing here? Am I crazy?" John Krakauer's experience on Everest alone, from the 1996 tragedy that claimed numerous lives, should warrant that he speak caution to anyone with aspirations of going to the "Death Zone."

While John said he wasn't enthusiastic about the idea, another famous Himalayan vet said he supported Erik, but thought the risks were so great he would want no part in it. I have to say that as a commercial guide, without the bond of friendship, I probably would not want to work so hard and take such a risk either. Ed Viesturs, the first American to climb all 14 of the world's 8,000-meter peaks, was quoted in a men's journal as saying, "More power to him, and I support his going, but I wouldn't want to take him up there myself. Because he can't see, he can't assess the weather or the icfall or the ladders you have to crawl across. There are areas where he will have to move quickly. Trying to dance through them will be very difficult. When I guide, I like people to become self-sufficient. With Erik, they will have to be helping him, watching out for him every step of the way. For me, the risks are too great. It will be the hardest ever guided ascent of Everest, if they pull it off."<sup>2</sup>

Ed was right. Erik can't see or assess the weather, but neither can most

guided parties on big mountains and even guides get it wrong many times. Erik would rely on our judgment and be a part of the decision-making process. Erik was as self-sufficient as most climbers on the mountain, carrying his own pack and gear, standing on his own feet. I was just his eyes, never his pony — though there were times I would joke and tell people, “I got him up there by cutting holes in my pack for his legs to go through; an adult version of the baby Bjorn.”

We did listen to the voices of doubt, but did not let them dictate the direction we would take, for we were all experts with the right amount of experience, and this told us that failure would not come because this was a crazy idea, but because we could not, or would not, work together to achieve our goal. It would be failure due to lack of cooperation either from the team or the weather — not from being blind dream-chasers. The criticisms, doubts, and fears of others, and even of ourselves, only added fuel to the fire of desire.

Still a question that remains for so many people is why would a blind man want to climb a mountain described as one of the most starkly beautiful mountains in the world, due to its dramatic and awe-inspiring features, and how would a blind man live up to the technical challenges at over 20,000 feet? Erik had come a long way over the years and made huge leaps in his knowledge of the mountains and evidenced it by saying, “I knew being crushed by a refrigerator-sized piece of ice would be a bad thing.”

As for the view that would come in many different forms along the journey, and the motivation needed, Erik said, “I climb for the pure love of it, but a wonderful side benefit is that it redefines people’s perceptions about what is possible for blind people and sighted alike. I truly believe that if a blind person can be seen succeeding on some of the most arduous mountains in the world, it will do more than reshape people’s perceptions; it will literally shatter them.”

We would be climbing for the love of the sport and for the exhilaration of the mountains, not to be a circus sideshow telling the world, “Look what he can do!” Rather, what the world would see and perceive would just be a wonderful result of what we would hopefully accomplish. What excited me most was to be a part of something that would be greater than myself. We, as a team, would of course be committed to the climb, but even more so, we would all be committed to Erik and to the well-being of our team. Early on we realized that our success and our strength would be attributed to our ability to work together as a team for a common goal.

Walking off the plane and into the streets of Katmandu for the first time was a shock. The international airport was being renovated brick by brick, and all by hand at a snail’s pace. We lugged our 50 huge duffels through the dirt to the bus that was waiting for us. As we made our way over, we were marauded by kids, beggars, and taxi drivers all trying to get a little bit of

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money to ease their pain; the average annual per capita income in Nepal is \$218. The giving side of me wanted to hire each one, and almost allowed me to believe they all had good intentions. Then from out of the chaos arose some trustworthy faces, this we knew because the t-shirts they had on had the same logo as the ones we wore.

Faces, like that of Norbu, who had come to greet us, gave me a feeling of security so that I could relax and take in all that was going on around me. With bags sticking out all over and people crammed in the overloaded bus, we hit the streets of the city, making tracks for our hotel; a refuge in this off-beat city. Rickshaws and tuk tuks, bicycles, pedestrians, cars, cows, chickens, and goats all made the streets their own. In the middle of all this disorder would be a police officer waving his arms and blowing his whistle, dancing more to his own tune than controlling traffic. He looked to me like a man on a boat trying to control the waves in a storm at sea. After a few near misses, some fancy driving, and a few, “Oh, oh, whoa!” moments, we made it to our hotel, the Marshyangdi, with its fortified walls and its nice, little garden full of flowers and small shrubs.

Stepping inside to the faded sound of car horns made me smile, thinking that my first experience in a third world country wouldn't be quite as rough as previously imagined. We'd unloaded all the gear, found our rooms, taken a nap, and now it was time to go out and explore this wonderful, dusty place of Katmandu. Taking a right out of the hotel driveway into the narrow overcrowded street, I encountered a young teenage boy asking me, “You want hashish? I give good deal, best hash!” Before I could say no, he was asking another team member if they would want some; my ghastly look must have given me away as a non-sale. Two steps later it was the same thing, only this time it was, “You want tiger balm?” A few more strides and then, “You want . . .” something else and something else. It took all of about two minutes to learn to say an emphatic NO before the other person even opened their mouth or to give a distant glance as if you never saw or heard them give their sales pitch. Aside from the aggressive street people trying to hock their wares, I did find that the people of this city were indeed very friendly, humble, kind, and giving; something I would experience to a greater depth upon entering the mountains.

Early the next morning we all went for a run to the Buddhist stupa, known as Swayambhunath Temple, or as we called it, the “Monkey Temple,” which resides high on a hill in the middle of the city. Legend states that it rose out of a lake as a self-created lotus flower, and similarly, the monkeys residing on its flanks came from the head lice of Manjushree Bodhisattva. Hitting the streets before all the vehicles and peddlers were out gave us a different perspective on the city. We saw residents cooking breakfast on the sidewalks,

children in their uniforms preparing for a day at school, and butchers slaughtering goats in the streets. Running in this smog couldn't be too good for us, but for only a couple of days we could manage.

We ran up the steep wall of 1,000 stairs (365 in reality) that lead to the stupa. At the entrance we ran past concrete statues of Buddha with people prostrated before them. Behind these same statues we would see children sleeping on straw mats and our hearts would break, knowing that these kids had most likely spent a number of nights out on the streets and that their hopes were being put into these statues made of concrete that could never fulfill them. Monkeys screeching above us and chasing each other through the trees took our attention from the children out onto the streets and up the steps leading to the temple. The small monkeys would line the steps jumping onto people's backs, as if to assert their territorial authority, and were allowed to have their way because they are considered to be sacred reincarnated relatives.

I discovered the speed and grace with which some of the Sherpas climbed, soon almost believing myself that these had to be Chris Morris's relatives. Atop the stairs sat a large white dome with a towering stack of 13 blocks representing the path to enlightenment. With the painted eyes of Buddha looking in all four directions, this dome was surrounded by close to 100 small cast scroll-like wheels, the size of coffee cans mounted into the walls all the way around. These wheels are filled with prayers written on bits of paper, and when spun it is believed these prayers go to the heavens where they are heard. Many of the team took the opportunity to make clockwise circumambulations and spin these wheels, with Erik running his hands along the side of them to feel the shape and cast inscriptions.

Because of my personal faith in Jesus, I forewent the ritual of spinning the wheels, and instead quietly prayed for the people of Nepal, my team, and our safety. This was a religious ritual to an idol and not something that I could participate in. I didn't advertise the matter, and wasn't asked to participate, so no conflict ever arose. I simply felt that even in these small matters, thought to be of little consequence, I could honor God, so I sat back and took in all that was around me and had engaged my senses.

Erik had no trouble using the rest of his four senses to experience Kathmandu. It was alive with smells (pollution and incense), sounds (car horns, people, chanting, animals), tastes (Nepali food), and things to touch (prayer wheels, flags, monkeys, and dead rats in the street). From here we would run to the Hindu side of the city. It is the Hindus that really govern it, and with the king in power it is somewhat of a monarchical democracy, with Hindus making up most of the city's population.

Entering the Patan District, where the largest Hindu temple for Shiva exists, Pashupatinath Temple, really gave a quick snapshot of this culture when

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we saw, though first smelled, bodies being cremated in public. The bodies would be burned and then dumped into the Bagmati River; the same river in which children would be playing and women washing clothes. We wandered the area and were very impressed by the people we saw; some looking very authentic and some just out to make a buck. There were men with 27-year-old dreadlocked hair 30 feet in length, and other men painted, covered in ash meditating high on a wall or concrete block. Some were charging for a photograph of themselves. One even claimed to have had nothing to eat or drink but milk for the last 15 years of his life, calling himself the “milkman.”

It would take us a couple of days in this city to get all of our permits, visas, trekking groups, and gear organized. We set up our tents on the rooftops and tied on new stronger lanyards by which to lash them down. We laid out all our fuel, stoves, climbing hardware, and compiled and inventoried all of it, packing it up in a suitable fashion for zopkios, yaks, naks, and porters to carry.

A couple of days in this city was plenty for me. It was time to trade the smog and congestion for clean air and unnamed peaks of 20,000 feet and higher. It would be a small plane that would carry us from Katmandu to Lukla at just under 9,000 feet. Flying in to begin our trek, we all sat cramped in the same small plane with our packs on our laps and nothing stowed under the seat in front of us. This “cowboy” style of flying didn’t provide much comfort, as it demonstrated that the air service was just as crazy as the ground transportation.

Bouncing our way through the rough mountain air into Lukla, we caught a glimpse of the dirt strip that was to be our landing zone, perched on the edge of a huge precipice overlooking a valley; the entrance to these majestic peaks unlike any other range of mountains on earth. The landing strip, running uphill at an opposite angle from our approach, ended short of the town of Lukla, which was under construction and in the middle of a huge growth spurt. This airfield had seen its share of catastrophes, and Pasquale attempted to put us all at ease when he said, “Brad, dude; look at that! They cleaned up all the old plane carcasses that used to line the airstrip. Guess they thought it might scare away the tourists!” How nice.

We held our breath as we went in for the landing, and when the pilot pulled up the nose at the last second, turning what was our dive into a climb, he put us in perfect position to hit the upward-angling strip. We all cheered and clapped as we hit the dirt with huge grins and high fives, all of us feeling as if we had just landed the plane ourselves.

More spectacular than the flight in, and even the landing, was the first sight of these mammoth mountains. After we got out of the plane, I asked a Sherpa standing next to me, “What’s that peak there?” pointing at what I thought was one of the greats.

He replied in a carefree tone, “Oh, it doesn’t have a name.” And thus I

became acquainted with the Himalayas.

It was the first time we would meet a lot of our Sherpa support and porters. Sherpas are a tribe of people who years ago emigrated from Tibet to the east. *Sher* actually means east and *Pa* means people. They occupy primarily the high mountains of Nepal, and are known for their strength, endurance, patience, and peaceful, humble nature. People often confuse the word *Sherpa* as synonymous with the word *porter*. Though many Sherpas work as porters, this is not the case. The job of porter is often filled by Sherpas and people from the lowlands as well, sometimes young in age and rarely women.

In the city, many of our Nepalese staff were able to meet with Erik. They thought the blind guy got along well enough, but for them this first day in the mountains would be very interesting to see. As a team, we all knew that Erik had already climbed Denali in Alaska, Kilimanjaro in Africa, Aconcagua in Argentina, El Capitan in Yosemite, and Polar Circus in Canada — a resume that would look good for any sighted climber — but this meant nothing to the Sherpas. Even though the Sherpas accepted Erik for who he was, and how he was, he was going to have to prove himself on this peak if he was to get a shot at Everest.

We would take ten days to reach Base Camp, stopping in villages along the way and staying in teahouses from time to time, though not exclusively, as this is so often how people get sick in the mountains. Viruses are passed from other trekkers and climbers as well as from the unwashed hands of the cooks. A few days into the trek we found the comforts of home in Namche Bazaar, where there now exists an Internet café and even a coffee shop. A total surprise was to see the exact jacket I was wearing in a shop of this high mountain village.

Moving forward, we went on up the valley passing Ama Dablam, heading instead toward Imjatse, which means Island Peak. We would really begin the process of acclimatizing here with an easy ascent and later be able to progress more quickly on the technical slopes of Ama Dablam. On day nine of our trip, we would stop by the monastery of Tengboche. Here we would spend one night, have a quick visit, receive a blessing, and then continue on toward Island Peak Base Camp.

While here in this beautiful setting, a lama invited us in to the monastery to observe a ceremony that was taking place. The setting was surreal, with the ornately decorated building brightly painted, and standing atop a prominent point, but still well below the backdrop of the icy domes and steely crags of the mountains twice our elevation. The gate led to a courtyard where the chanting monks and cymbals could be heard. Rising from the courtyard into the dimly lit entry of the cold building was a long series of stairs. Here visitors are asked to remove their shoes and quietly go inside, being sure to sit on the floor to the side of the room. Here on the floor, visitors would be in a position

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lower than the monks, elevated side-by-side on one long bench covered in pillows. The benches lining each side of the room faced in toward a vacant aisle.

At one end of this aisle was our group sitting on the floor near the door, and at the other end was a giant imposing golden statue of Buddha. Some of the instruments that the monks played reminded me of what I called noise-makers when I was a kid. Little drums, cymbals, a large gong, and a large drum all filled the room with sound that seemed to have no score or melody. I sat still and observed for as long as I could, but when the chanting began, I began to feel uneasy. The chanting is a deep guttural monotonic groan that seemingly continues on forever, with monks rarely taking breaths. It may be that they have trained themselves how to breathe through the process of making this chant.

To some, this experience is something of a beautiful inspiration, possibly even one of conversion. I have to admit, for me it was one of aversion. I felt my stomach knotting up, and a wave coming over me like the darkness of a storm. The air was getting heavy, and it became hard to breathe. This is called a spiritual place, and I agree it was spiritual, so much so that I had to leave. I quietly but swiftly got up, put my shoes on, and exited the gates of that place. Immediately, the heaviness lifted, my breathing became normal, and the storm clouds rolled away. I stood there pondering this matter and wondering how such an oppressive spirit existed in the midst of such kind, servant-like, humble, and genuine people like the Sherpas. Moments later I was joined by two other guys, trekkers, Jim Doenges and his friend Dave Lesh. I looked at them, they looked at me, and almost at the same time we asked each other, "Did you feel that?"

"Feel what?"

"That heavy, oppressive feeling that nearly took your breath away!?"

"Yes, that's why I left!"

"Me, too!" Then I asked, "Are you by chance a Christian?"

To which they both replied, "I am."

The Sherpas believe that there are mountain spirits and that Mt. Everest is the goddess mother of the earth. They believe that certain things must be done to appease these spirits for good living and for safe passage through the mountains. While I do not believe that Everest is a god in any form, I do believe that these people are indeed captive to many spirits; deceptive and controlling. This experience showed me two things: who my fellowship would be with on this trip, and the reality of what forces I could well encounter here in the mountains. Many people travel from the West for this religious experience, and many mountaineers are drawn in by the piety, karma, and teaching that it offers. I made it a point now more than ever to be reading the Scripture, tak-

ing Jesus to be what He said He was and is, “the Way, the Truth, and the Life.”

To this point all was fine and I wasn’t too worried about my sore throat slowing me down as we readied to depart the following morning for Island Peak’s 20,000 foot summit. I was worried, however, about Jim Doenges, the trekker with our team who had developed a nasty cough, something commonly referred to as the “Khumbu crud.”

**March 29, Day 13** — Departing at four a.m. for the summit of Island Peak, we made good time and were up to our high point at 19,900 feet well before noon. By this time it was starting to heat up, and so was Jim’s cough. He had to get down, as the cold dry air of this altitude was aggravating his cough, and I was amazed at the guy’s toughness. It became so bad, in fact, that he broke two ribs just from coughing and the next morning had to descend to Katmandu, heading home earlier than planned so that he could heal and prevent further injury. At this altitude he would not heal, making a rapid descent his best medicine.

Island Peak, though we did not summit due to the poor conditions just below the peak, taught us a lesson about contentment, acclimatization, and obstacles. In a blind man’s words, “It was a scree nightmare. I was thinking this peak might have been a little out of my element. If it was rock climbing I could handle it, if it was a snow couloir, no matter how steep, I could handle it; but this was jumbled-up steep rocks, and it was miserable.” If he only knew what awaited him in the coming days.

Only two days of trekking away was Ama Dablam Base Camp. We were so glad to be on our way toward this magnificent peak and zeroing in on our real objective. It had been a long time both trekking and in Katmandu, and we wanted the good stuff. Making the final approach to Base Camp, coming down the trail in the distance, we spotted an old friend of P.V.’s and decided we would play a joke. I would pretend to be the blind Erik, and Erik would go on trying his best to not be noticed, posing as a sighted climber.

I stumbled my way up toward this Himalayan veteran, making sure to look like an idiot so Erik would be embarrassed. When he reached out his hand to introduce himself, I reached right toward his kit and caboodle at which he jumped and said, “Whoa there, friend, try my hand up here.” I had a hard time keeping a straight face after everyone else started howling with laughter, so the trick was over at that point. This kept us laughing until we broke over the ridge onto the flat football-like field that was our Base Camp.

At first sight of this camp, my jaw dropped. In all of my years of climbing, backpacking, and traveling I had never seen such a great site as this. It was perfectly grassy, as if mowed on the weekends, flat and level with a small stream running right through it for fresh water, direct from perhaps the most beautiful mountain on earth. Now standing directly above us with

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its arms stretched out as if to embrace us and welcome us to its home was Ama Dablam. In Nepalese, *Ama* means “mother” and *Dablam* means “jewel box.” The mountain stands tall like a mother and has a hanging glacier just below the summit, which looks like a locket of sorts earning its name as the jewel box.

The mountain also has two ridges going off in opposite directions, hanging like outstretched arms covered by a long, flowing white shawl of snow. Directing my glance downward from the summit, I now saw the camp coming into view — almost as impressive as the mountain itself was Kami Tenzing’s creation of our little mountain village. On one end was the kitchen, made with walls of stone and covered by a large yellow tarp. Next to this was our dining tent; a MASH-style tent with tables and chairs inside. From here, stretching out in a semi-circle, were our eight individual tents, each suited for three people. The semi-circle ended in a large dome tent we called the “love dome,” because it is where we communicated with the outside world via satellite phone and Internet, “sharing the love.”

On bad weather days, it was big enough for us to be inside playing hacky sac, and cranking tunes. Beyond this, we also had a gear and food storage tent. Himalayan veteran Brad Bull described it as “the most luxurious and thoughtfully master-planned Base Camp that I have ever experienced. In fact, I think that Thomas Jefferson would be impressed,” referring to our interpretation of Jeffersonian architecture and its implementation into our design. One added great feature is that the toilet tent was just far enough from our campus to make it accessible without worry of complications odiferous in nature.

Up to this point, I had been able to avoid the “Khumbu crud,” and other ailments that usually cause one to run for the outhouse. The trip had been most impressive, and I knew that the most spectacular bits were still ahead. The climbing team and the trekkers who accompanied us had been getting along great, considering that we shared tight tents, teahouse rooms, and a small dining tent without much time apart. Instead of arguments typical of many large groups, most nights we would go to bed with a stomach ache from laughing so hard. For the most part, the weather had been great. Temperatures in the day were sometimes warm enough for just a t-shirt, ending in the evening with small snow flurries and high winds.

Having time at the Base Camp in such beautiful surroundings causes one to reflect a bit, and inevitably the question comes as to why we climb, and how success is defined. Climbing and the outdoors had always played an important role in my life from the time I was introduced to it as a teenager. It gives me a chance to play in and appreciate creation, to leave the worries of everyday life behind, and to focus on the task at hand step-by-step up the mountain. We are forced in this way to rely on others and just as much to dig

deep inside for personal strength, and for strength from above in order to achieve success or just to survive, as I would come to find out later.

Some people think that choosing a blind climbing partner is unsound. Erik, however, is stronger than most sighted climbers I know, especially when it comes to mental toughness and maintaining a positive attitude, which in the mountains is the key. For us, obvious success would be to reach the summit, but we preferred instead to define the summit as teamwork; collectively making the best and safest decisions at the right time.

Everything was set, and the first carry to Camp One was underway. Half the team made the slow climb from Base Camp at 15,000 feet to Camp One at 19,000 feet, and then down again to Base Camp, which, all told, was a nine-hour day. While that half of the team was working hard to carry heavy loads up high, I was working hard below to digest my words. The night before, what I thought was a routine trip to the smallest of our tents became a violent attack of giving back to the earth what had come from the earth. All I needed to do was open the door to this small, smelly tent, stand inside, and hover briefly over the five-gallon, Hefty sack-lined bucket. Seconds later, I was sprinting out into the open, painting the lawn with all that was inside me.

The day before I was so proud of how I was one of the few that had not been sick, and now here I was unable to climb because of a stomach bug. The good thing was I was commiserating with Erik, who also had a virus with which he was wrestling with. Dr. Steve Gipe gave us a bit of Cipro, the Himalayan miracle drug, and soon we were ready to get outta Dodge and head for Yak Camp (the first camp on the way up, named after the high point to which our beasts of burden could carry; not after what Erik and I could potentially be doing).

We left for our ascent, with Erik, Gipe, and I staying at Yak Camp while the others would go on to Camp One. The next day they would try for Camp Two as Erik, Gipe, and I would negotiate the boulder field and 600-foot slabs below Camp One. Erik and I made it through the boulder field unscathed, which is amazing since this is without a doubt the hardest kind of terrain for a blind person to negotiate. Erik said, "If I really hated a blind guy, I'd drop him in the middle of this boulder field from a helicopter and say, 'Have fun.'"

Speaking rhetorically, he said, "Who talked me into this climb? Shouldn't I have done a little more research on this mountain and terrain?" He called me "patient" for getting him through this "1,000 feet of rocks piled on top of each other, ranging in size from baseballs to trucks, with treacherous gaps in between each one." I would tap my ski pole on each rock for him to hear where he should step and/or scoot on his backside just as often. He would hear the sound of the small bear bell I was ringing and it would give him an auditory clue as to the general direction to follow, along with my voice and

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verbal instruction.

Sometimes, due to these strong aural abilities, I joke and call him Batman. Climbing with his custom-made Leki poles, Erik would probe and jab, slide, scoot, and walk awkwardly across the field of boulders. Once we'd reached the slabs, smiles hit both our faces as I could see the tents above and the end of this nightmarish struggle to get there. I was worn out from the effort, and my patience was worn thin, just like my voice. As we strolled into camp, we overheard via the radio what the rest of the team was doing: fixing the yellow tower for our ascent to Camp Two. They would also set up some tents so the next day when we made our way to Camp Two, 1,000 feet higher, all would be established; one of the joys of teamwork.

**April 7, Day 22** — It was a good night's sleep, considering we had a drop of 600 feet on one side and 4,000 feet on the other. I suppose it was due to the fact that we were so drained from fighting our way through the boulders below.

What for most people is the hardest part of the climb, and the scariest, is exactly the part to which my blind buddy was looking forward. I was also excited to uncover the more technical difficulties of the mountain. Moving away from Camp One, the terrain began to steepen and we would begin using ropes. Still with Erik, I helped him negotiate the terrain and let him know when to clip into the rope and when it was safe to climb without. It went smoothly and faster now that he could use his hands and feet to feel the rocks and had to rely less on the people and voices around him for guidance with every step.

Before I knew it, I was glancing up a vertical piece of rock that towered at the already obscene height of 3,000 feet above the deck. I knew these would be our last moves before we could settle in for sleep. Didrik Johnk described the sequence of moves just below Camp Two in this way, giving rise to a new name for this part of the route: Abject Terror. "The southwest ridge presents many climbing challenges including an intense traverse with one move we call 'letting it all hang out,' because you step out onto a wall with about 3,000 feet of air beneath your feet; there are two bomber handholds but no footholds. To make the move work, you must grab the handholds, let your butt hang out over the ledge, and smear the bottoms of your shoes against the vertical piece of rock. Some call this spot 'abject terror.' " For me, watching Erik negotiate this was indeed abject terror. I would hold my breath until he had completed each move.

Soon came my turn to trust that skinny bit of rope and climb in my big boots with a heavy pack. Just above this is a part of the route called the Yellow Tower, which in technical terms is 5.6 to 5.8 in difficulty. At sea level it would be a cruise, really pretty fun, but at 20,000 feet with a heavy pack, big boots,

and no eyes (prosthetic anyway), it would be a little stressful. Here we began to practice something called positive pessimism; a gift from Chris Morris that would keep us amused for years to come. It works like this: One takes a bad situation or negative element and adds to it another negative situation, but saying it in a happy way that contradicts rational thought. Climbing the Yellow Tower with its aged skinny ropes we would say things like, “The drop may be 3,000 feet, but at least I can’t rely on these weathered, old ropes.” Another example: “It sure is cold, but at least it’s windy!”

I would look up and offer suggestions to my friend saying, “Reach up, a little higher, now out left, six more inches. Trust me on this, lunge straight up for the hold!” In this manner we would move up the tower. Erik made the last few moves in such a way that I thought he had been yanking our chain about being blind. We cruised up the Yellow Tower without a hitch. From there, it was just a few paces to Camp Two. The best way to describe this place is to think of what the Base Camp was in all its glory and splendor, and think of the extreme opposite.

Perched on a little ledge thousands of feet above anything was our humble, little home. It was literally like camping on a cloud; a very small cloud. I looked at it and thought, *That is our tent, huh?* It has a rope right to the front door so blind Erik can grab it when he needs to take care of business, leaving the tent without making a wrong turn and meeting his Maker sooner than expected. At closer inspection, I noticed that one of the corners of the tent was not even touching earth. This observation led me to think, “Cool, Erik is blind. He can sleep on the left side (the side overhanging the abyss).” He isn’t stupid, however. While I was out observing the scenery and the site, EW was in the tent getting situated, being sure to leave his foul and rotten underwear on the right side, which I would not touch, as he knew and admitted, forcing me to then take the left with just the thin nylon wall separating me from forever. As we made ourselves comfortable in our lofty abode, the rest of the team descended to Base Camp to get more supplies.

The team got down and the storm came in. Big E and I were pinned to the side of this mountain alone at Camp Two for what would turn out to be six long days. The pressure on me was extremely high. If the storm worsened, if I was hurt, or if one more thing should happen to him, that could be it. We had to be cautious, and just like any partnership, we had to share duties. I wasn’t exactly scared, but I was well aware of the burden of responsibility this put on me. I also could not help but think of Erik’s pregnant wife back home and how she must be feeling. Lucky for him he remembered his book on tape, which could take his mind off the stress of the situation.

Six days — and I had left any form of entertainment below, trying to keep the load light. No problem, I thought. Since the rest of the team is 5,000 feet

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below and can't climb in these conditions, I will take advantage of the solitude and the beauty around us. These are, after all, the most beautiful mountains in the world. How often will I get to enjoy such a view, and what a great place to contemplate the complex profundity of life. I sat outside the tent in the cold air and enjoyed what moments I got of the view through breaks in the storm. By day two, I was so bored I was pleading for Erik to share his book with me. It didn't help my cause when I made fun of the fictional book based on the old Roman Empire because Erik said, "Hey, I didn't exactly force you to read this. You can go back outside and contemplate life if you'd rather!" So I would shut up for a while and listen to the story, dozing off to sleep quickly. Given the altitude, a boring story is like being put under heavy anesthesia at the hospital, and is the reason I think he liked the story to begin with.

Being just the two of us, it became my responsibility to do all the cooking, cleaning, and camp management. Erik would go on short forays, gathering snow and ice to melt for water, which enabled us to cook and stay hydrated. I didn't worry too much that if he went the wrong way he could tumble thousands of feet. No, the camp was rigged with fixed lines, so as long as he stayed attached, there would be no problems. It was also by staying attached to these fixed lines that Erik could answer nature's call all by himself, and in answering that call one day, I took one of my better pictures of him and the view. Looking as though he was ready to take flight off the edge of the cliff, I thought EW was commencing a bombing raid on Nepal, and it turns out I was right. I got a picture of four cheeks, and he even cracked a smile. I still use the photo for blackmail to this day.

Earlier on, before the storm, the team had attempted to go higher and shuttle some gear and supplies up the mountain only to have to turn back, leaving a cache of food and fuel higher up the icy slopes. On our fourth day, our food and fuel began to run low and we needed to do something. Our only option was to climb higher and retrieve the cache. This was good, as we needed to stretch the legs anyhow. We took off with a rope and worked our way over the corniced cliffs to the place we knew the cache would be. With EW anchored to the bottom of the face, I climbed up the steep, choppy ice pitch, happy to find the food 75 feet higher. What a perspective it offered to climb higher and peer down over the dramatic and sheer west face.

We made our way back to camp, though at times I would get caught up in looking at the view, forgetting about the place where Erik may need to place his next step. I turned around to see him veering off toward the edge of a cornice and a bottomless void, and I calmly said, "Turn to the right just a little," knowing that if he had eyes he would have just filled his britches having seen where he was headed. There was no real grave danger since he was clipped in to the fixed rope, nonetheless, it sure keeps things exciting when

your partner at 21,000 feet on a knife-edge ridge can't see a thing. Funny that this alone would put most expeditions into a desperate state of emergency, wondering how to evacuate the sightless one. For us, however, it was just business as usual.

We made it back to our camp, and to our surprise were soon briefly joined by a Sherpa who dared to brave the elements and iced-over slopes to bring us some more gear, fuel, and food. This also served as a mission to stockpile the camp, as the team would also soon be joining us. For me it was great because he brought me a little gift from Brad Bull — a copy of *The Hobbit* by J.R.R. Tolkien. I read it in no time, and from that moment on thought of myself as a Hobbit in a strange land on a strange adventure. The smell and the hair growth made this a very small stretch of the imagination.

Two days later, the rest of the team rejoined us at Camp Two to plan our bid for the summit. By now we had used a lot of our reserve food and fuel, and didn't have a lot of time to waste. Either a small party would go to the summit, taking their time while the rest of us went down, or we would all have to move upward right away. We chose to move on as a team, and Chris Morris took off leading the charge. For a couple of hours he struggled to push the route forward. But, with the new snows and the thin ice left on the rock from the constant melting and freezing, this was not easy and pushed the limits of the risks we would be willing to take on this expedition.

It was time to make a tough decision, and I am glad that it did not rest solely with me, because I would have wanted someone to reach the summit, if for no other reason, just to show the doubters back home that we could. Pasquale made the final call along with Kami taking input from the team, then said, "Fellas, we have done our best to climb this thing. I have never been with a stronger team, even on Everest, but as much as I hate to say this, it's over." Just that quickly, and without argument, we turned from this beautiful peak and began our descent, somewhat dejected but trying to remain optimistic.

Into my brain shot the words I was sure to hear upon arriving home: "We told you so! What made you think you were worthy to try a Himalayan mountain? Everest, not a chance! You couldn't even succeed on this lesser peak, how will you succeed on Everest!?" I put it out of my mind but was not at all looking forward to returning home having "failed." The reality of the situation, however, was that we had been terribly successful. Even with a blind climber, we had fixed 90 percent of the route for other teams, and as a team, we got along tremendously well. We had all put a Himalayan experience under our belts, and learned that we, as a team, had what it takes to succeed. It was the weather and conditions that contributed to our not reaching the summit, not our abilities or even blindness.

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In the eyes of the world, success is so often seen and measured only in dollars, distance, time, firsts, titles, position, power, status, and summits, whether they be corporate ladders or mountain peaks. Our success had now been defined on a much more personal level of brotherhood and wisdom. We had become good friends and exhibited the excellent decision-making capabilities in extreme pressure situations. Without arguing or even raising voices, we cooperatively made the best possible decision: abandon the climb. Consequently, only two teams made it higher than we did. A Mexican team made it to Camp Three, but in the process two of their team members received concussions, and the other I believe to have been Russian, putting a man on the summit, though he lost a number of fingers to frostbite.

**April 14, Day 29** — Engulfed in a storm, we began our descent from Camp Two to Camp One at 19,000 feet. I threw a rope down over the yellow tower from which we could rappel, and having just spent six days at Camp Two, I was one of the first ones down, along with Chris Morris and Brad Bull. Just as we made it to the bottom, the others who had been standing still in the storm with lighter shoes on began to succumb to the cold. Though we had just packed up camp, they decided to go back, and erecting tents once again, spend one more night. I felt bad for EW that he had to go back and make it eight days at this island in the sky. Meanwhile, the three of us fought our way down the slick rock and frozen ropes carrying extra weight, which pulled us this way and that, but at least it was snowing sideways.

This is when it happened. After a long day descending in these poor conditions with Brad and Chris, I was tired and relieved to be at a lower camp. Detached from the fixed lines, I was making my way across the slabs of boulders moving perhaps a bit less cautiously, excited by the prospect of a good night's sleep and a warm meal. Here I was, just steps away from my tent, when one of the boulders overturned beneath me, sending me into a fall down the steep rock face. Miraculously, after the 150-foot fall, no bones were broken or major injuries sustained. With the help of my team, including Pemba Sherpa, I made it back up to camp. It was during the night that my breathing became labored, and with the careful attention of Dr. Gipe, I was brought to the realization that my life was in danger and that I needed to descend immediately. Still tired from the day before, and now with high altitude pulmonary edema, this would not be easy.

High altitude pulmonary edema (HAPE) is a condition where fluid accumulates in small air sacks in the lungs, known as alveoli. The blood is able to seep out from the capillaries and into the lungs themselves, causing a person to drown in their own body fluid. The only cure is rapid descent and supplemental oxygen, and if left untreated, it is fatal. This should not be confused with HAFE, another altitude disorder from which everyone on my team was

suffering, myself included. Though never fatal, HAFE can sneak up on unsuspecting people and is usually noticed first by those near the victim with a keen sense of smell, and not the victim himself. High Altitude Flatulent Expulsion is caused by the decrease of pressure on the transverse colon resulting in expansion of gasses and their immediate and often untimely release.

A helicopter rescue at this particular camp would not be an option due to the rugged terrain, altitude, and inclement weather. A descent of the very slab on which I had fallen would be my only way down. I began shoving my sleeping bag into the stuff sack, but this task proved to be too difficult and I knew I could not get down quickly with a heavy load. Gipe said, "Take only what you need, leave the rest here, and we'll take care of it." So I left the tent, and started to rappel down the long, steep slab of granite alone.

This wasn't a time to panic, and thankfully the words of Philippians 4:7 were in my heart: "And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." Perhaps the strangest thing through all of this as I faced my mortality was that the words of that verse sank in and I was not afraid. I felt lifted up. Fear is what I naturally should have felt after death had now knocked at the door twice in two days. I could attempt to explain it away and say that it was my focus on the solution and what needed to be done instead of panicking on behalf of the problem. Really, I think that through prayerful intervention God gave me His Holy Spirit as a comfort. In those two days, He was beside me lending His peace.

I would descend 30 feet at a time, stopping to catch my breath, sometimes barely having enough strength, as I would get light-headed holding the rope tight below my belay device. I would pray, "Please Lord, give me the strength to get down, don't let me pass out here on the face." After what seemed like hours, I was finally down to the boulder field and traversed slowly through this half-mile section of rock that had been so difficult on the way up for EW to come through. Thinking of this, I could now relate a little bit more to his situation. Just after the boulder field, Gipe caught up to me, with bottled oxygen that we'd had stashed at one of the higher tents. Immediately I felt better as the pulse oximeter showed my O<sub>2</sub> saturation to now be 62. Together we walked down the remaining 2,500 feet to Base Camp at 15,000 feet.

By now the news had reached home via the Internet, and I knew for sure my family was not taking this well at all. It was the one time when I wished communications were down so they wouldn't know what just happened. The good part was that I knew they were praying for me. I crawled into my tent and tried to sleep. However, whenever I laid down the fluid in my lungs would begin to choke me and I needed to sit up. The fun thing about this was that as I would hack and spit up, I was discovering a variety of new colors that

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I had never seen before. It would have made Walt Disney proud.

The rest of the team began their second attempt at a descent from Camp Two, to rejoin Chris and Brad at Camp One. They added the supplies of Camp One, including my gear, to their already heavy loads to complete the descent into Base Camp, finishing in a snowstorm late that same evening. After what proved to be a 12-1/2 hour day, we celebrated the fact we were all off the mountain together with dinner and a few beers. I abstained, going back to my tent, but could not sleep. I was sure my condition was improving, but in actuality, it was not.

Early the next morning, after a night awake reading the Psalms and hacking, Gipe assessed my condition and determined that the best thing for me would be to be placed in the Gamow Bag and be evacuated by helicopter. This hurt my pride as I was hoping to be able to stay with the team and hike out in style. A Gamow Bag is a 15-pound polyurethane chamber sealed closed by a zipper, invented by Colorado astrophysicist Igor Gamow. Only slightly larger than a sleeping bag when fully inflated, the bag creates an environment for the affected person that is pressurized and simulates a lower altitude, thereby reducing the swelling and leaking in the sufferer's capillaries, thus offsetting the symptoms of HAPE. It is a person on the outside who inflates the bag using a foot pump to a pressure of one atmosphere above the ambient air pressure (about 2–4 psi).

Speaking pessimistically in the positive sense; this device could save my life, but fortunately, no one had yet used it. I would be stuck in this small space for a few hours and was sure thankful for the fact I am claustrophobic. My fondest memory of these hours is peering out through the clear plastic window of the chamber and seeing my teammates reading the user's manual. With my altimeter watch on, I could see now that we had this life-saving device working, and that it was as if I was descending thousands of feet. In all but the most severe cases, symptoms will clear up in a couple of hours inside the chamber. After two hours, mine were not resolving.

As I lay helpless inside listening to my walkman, I could hear over my music the loud shouts via the radio in Nepalese between Kami Tenzing, our climbing Sirdar, and the company that operates the rescue helicopters. The shouting match lasted for half an hour, and was terminated when the helicopter pilot agreed to fly into our Base Camp in spite of the storms, which were still lingering in the area. I had a hard time believing that I really needed a helicopter rescue and thought that I could hike out the 20-plus miles to Lukla for a flight to Kathmandu. I kept these thoughts to myself, as I knew I must be somewhat delirious and probably did not hold the best judgment, therefore leaving this decision to Pasquale and Gipe.

Strange as it may seem in the midst of all of this, I felt deep inside that

everything was going to be fine. I can attribute this to a good team that worked tirelessly and was concerned for me, but more so, to the fact that people at home were praying for me. My family and my church were praying, and God was granting me the benefit of their requests. First Thessalonians 5:17 says, “Pray continually.” Should it really take this to get me to do so?

The next year, when I saw Kami in Colorado, he shook his head and looked at me in disbelief, remembering how the events transpired after this. He could not believe even a year later how I was retrieved and flown from the mountain. It was the second miracle of the trip for me. As the helicopter entered Base Camp, the still unsettled sky cleared, giving the pilot a narrow window of opportunity to land in what was otherwise poor conditions. With the help of my teammates, the Gamow bag was unzipped and I ran to the helicopter with only a few of my things and Cynthia, our Base Camp assistant manager; she was going to look after me in Kathmandu. As we flew away, the sky again closed up over camp. In the mountains, a clearing like this is often referred to as a sucker hole. It means you are a sucker if you chase the summit with only a hole in the clouds to ascend into.

As we made the three-hour flight to Kathmandu, I would look out at the giant peaks, and even back down at the trail we had come in on, with a feeling of shame. “Loser! Lame! Letdown! How could you do that?!” were things I would shout to myself inside my head. I could not help but feel that I had been a burden and had let the team down, as well as letting down my friend Erik. I was disappointed in myself, for needing to be a strong climber, I fell. I could understand if blind Erik had fallen, though if it were due to a fault of mine I would never have been able to live it down. But me; how could I fall? I was really beating myself up; I let me “have it good!”

I checked in to the Hotel Marshyangdi and promptly went to the hospital for x-rays, which showed there was still fluid in my lungs. By now, my O<sub>2</sub> saturation had gone up to 89 but the hospital still wanted to keep me overnight for observation. I hyperventilated before the nurse came in for the next measurement to give her a false reading so that she would let me go. Ninety percent is the cutoff; if your O<sub>2</sub> sat drops below this, you are required to stay in the hospital until it gets higher. I really did not want to stay in the hospital since our hotel had hot showers, there was pizza to be eaten, and sleep to be had. Besides, I had just spent a lot of time on the mountain living just fine with an O<sub>2</sub> sat in the 80s, so this was nothing.

**April 19, Day 34** — Upon arrival back home, I was certain this was the end of my high-altitude climbing career, and if not, certainly the last time I would climb with this team since I felt like such a failure. It was nice to have had the chance, but now it was all over. To be honest, I felt somewhat relieved.

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### *Deadpoint Reflections*

*Nobody trips over mountains. It is the small pebble that causes you to stumble. Pass all the pebbles in your path and you will find you have crossed the mountain.* — Unknown

*The mountaintop is not meant to teach us anything, it is meant to make us something.*<sup>3</sup> — Oswald Chambers



**Crux:** Success. Three of my most notable successes in the mountains have come from climbs in which I did not reach the summit. I believe all too often in our culture, standing on top of that proverbial mountain is what defines success more than anything else. We define success by winning, earning, status, achievements, possessions, by having well-behaved children who get good grades, by how we look, and even by being well known or well liked. An accurate measure of success is to look at results based upon the goals we set for ourselves. I pride myself on being a safe climber, and safety is my primary goal on any climb, superseding summits, and not influenced by financial investment or reward.

May of 2007, on a climb of the Maroon Bells with my blind friend Erik, we spent hours driving, then riding a fully loaded tandem bike with a trailer carrying all of our climbing gear to then sleep at the trailhead, hiking miles in to the peak in darkness, and then climbing to 13,500 feet. There we were greeted by funky May weather just shy of the summit. Erik was driven and wanted to continue to push on toward the summit. I wanted it too, but looking through the saddle of the Bell Cord Couloir, I could see the squall coming and he could not. I would need to make a decision and he would have to live with it, not really being able to provide much input. I knew the rugged terrain above would slow us down and though it was still early in the morning, turning around at this moment was the right choice. I could discern that Erik was disappointed and frustrated, questioning my decision. I was disappointed too, and really had no guarantee that this weather wouldn't just blow over. We headed down the steep, snowy trench, and just as we removed our crampons at the bottom of the slope, a loud, thunderous boom filled the air as a crack of light flashed around us. Hail and rain began to fall, and we hustled to get down below the tree line. High on the ridge of this peak, bolts like these are often fatal. We made the right decision, we got down safely, and it was a success as defined by my goal of being safe. We don't always get what we set out for on the first attempt. That is one thing about success — unless we set our sights very low, it does not come easily. One year later we made the

summit of this peak by the same route and were able to experience the beauty of this climb again. I think the summit was even sweeter due to the fact that it did not come easily.

The other climb I consider a success is Amadablam; a success because it knit our team together and showed the team's character, communication skills, selflessness, and lack of greed for the summit.

Finally, on a climb of Kilimanjaro, I saw four blind students make the summit while I remained behind at high camp with two others who had become ill. Success for me was doing the thing that was best for everyone else and stuffing my pride, which wanted to say I was responsible for their summit. The truth is that they were the ones who carried out each step courageously.



**Hold:** We must understand that life is a process that God uses to refine and reshape us. We should set goals and be willing to adjust them as life comes at us, and as God reveals the chart for our course. We need to seek and live by success as God would see it, and as more than an accumulation of trophies meant to impress others. God gives us ambition and puts desires in our hearts, and success is not letting the pursuit of those things rule our lives.

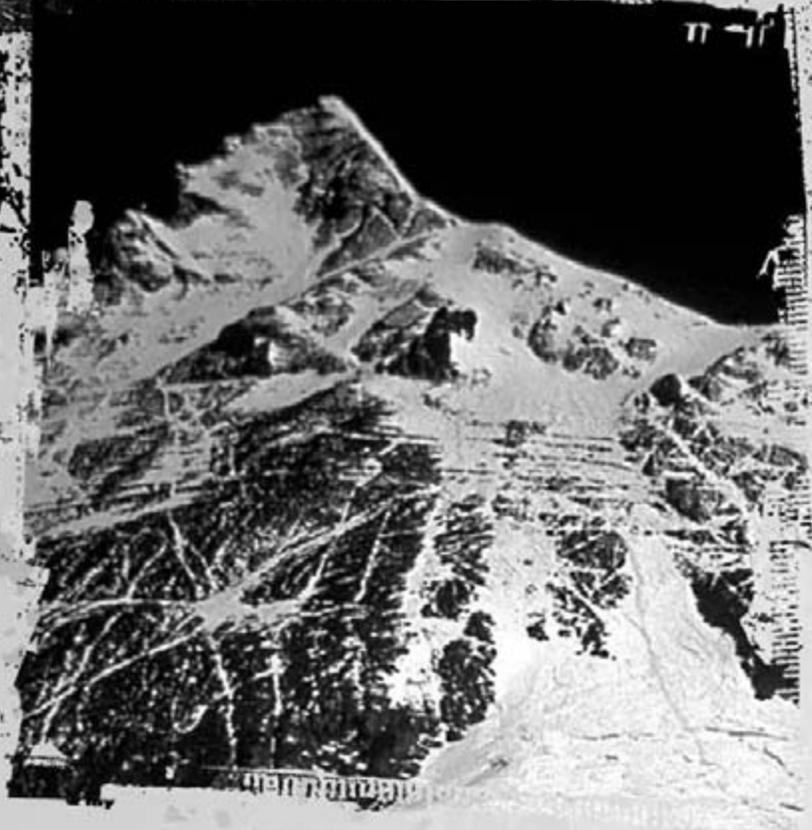


**Anchor:** This is what we can hook, clip, and tie ourselves onto, being confident in its security. What would biblically defined and exemplified success look like? What makes a person a successful Christian? “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these” (Mark 12:30–31). Biblical success shows nothing of being perfect; rather it is the humble acceptance of God's grace in admission of sin and failure. That is step one. Step two is living a life of obedience out of love, revealing an effort to emulate godly character. It is a process of relationship, striving, and refining.

#### Endnotes

1. Historically attributed to Ernest Hemingway; research also shows the source might possibly be “Blood Sport” by Ken Purdy, which originally appeared in the July 27, 1957, edition of the *Saturday Evening Post*.
2. “Tenacious E,” *Outside* magazine (December 2001), quoting Eric Weihenmayer, *Touch the Top of the World* (New York: Dutton, 2001), afterword.
3. Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest* (New York: Dodd & Mead Co., Inc. 1935), October 1.

# Into the Gray



## Mount Everest



# 2

**ELEVATION:** 29,035 feet

**HOW LONG TO CLIMB:** Seven to ten weeks

**HOW MANY IN THE TEAM:** My team had 23 which included 10 Sherpas

**RATING:** AD; YDS AI 2

**BEST TO CLIMB DURING:** April to May (before the monsoon season) or October to November

**ALSO KNOWN AS:** Chomolangma or Qomolangma means “Saint mother” in Tibetan and Sagarmāthā means “Holy mother” or “Saint mother”

## Notes:

The tallest of 14 mountains around the globe referred to as “eight thousanders” because they are taller than 8,000 meters tall.

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*“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”*

— Jeremiah 29:11

*I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation. The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation and go to the grave with the song still in them.<sup>1</sup>*

— Henry David Thoreau

Re-entering the states was not a fun time. It was nice to have the comforts of home and of loved ones, but this was overshadowed by all the questions and concerns people had and then the doubts that I too began to have. People would ask why I wasn't roped, and what if I died, and what about this and what about that; all these questions making me feel like an utter failure. It was really bad when a person who had spent time on Ama Dablam would say, “I know the place you are talking about, that would stink to fall there. How exactly did you fall there?”

I would reply with, “Yes it did, and I am still trying to figure it out.” In fact, after giving a presentation in Crested Butte, a man approached me with some photographs of a helicopter rescue on Ama Dablam. He said, “Here, you can have these. I think they are of you.” He had been at Base Camp during the rescue. He added, “I didn't think they would be able to land a chopper considering the weather; you got lucky.” No luck about it, I was blessed.

This mountain gets climbed with some regularity and I know my skills are greater than what this incident would surely communicate, but this is hard to convince people of, especially Mom. Most would not be overly quick to judge me, especially my team, which I would later find out. On this climb of Ama Dablam, I had placed my trust in the Lord and I knew that I would need to seek His help for strength, guidance, wisdom, and patience. I had been taken care of well, and in the fall did not cast any blame on God. During the entire event of the past spring, I never felt overwhelmed by fear but was soothed by the confidence of knowing that, dead or alive, I would be taken care of.

It is amazing what peace and assurance there is in knowing, not assuming or believing or guessing, but actually knowing that my fate was and is

in God's hands. I would realize this again over the next eight months as I recovered from what had now turned into pneumonia. The fluid in my lungs from HAPE had caused greater problems because of a virus that I had as well, thus causing the pneumonia. Visiting a doctor here in the states for a second opinion I thought was a good idea, and sought out a specialist in Boulder to see how I might best recover. During these months I was able to climb, ride, ski, and stay active, but not at all near the level for which I had hoped. Each time I would try to push myself, I would only get frustrated by the meager pace I could keep or the short distance I could cover.

I did take some time off to rest and recover, but couldn't keep that up for long without becoming restless. At this point I didn't think I would be going to Everest, so it didn't really matter what I did or if I trained, I just wanted to feel better. On one particular bike ride here in my home of Vail, I was heading up over Vail pass pushing hard, but not like I once could. Upon reaching the point where the real ride begins, I was forced to pull over due to a sudden inability to breathe. I got off my bike and it was all I could do to keep from falling over and passing out. Ten minutes later my heart rate had dropped, my vision cleared, and I could breathe again. I knew I had better give it some more time before trying again. I was done, off the Everest team, and inside I really thought this would be the case. I needed to work but wasn't willing to settle into a desk job as I still wanted to be outside and pursue something active which would help me to stay in reasonable shape.

I got a job as a ski instructor at Beaver Creek, working primarily with people who had disabilities since I had experience as a guide for blind skiers from years past. This would provide me with a free ski pass and give me a chance to be outdoors, enjoying people that indeed had challenges in their lives that most of us never have to face.

That winter at Christmas time, I met a boy of 14 who had severe MS. I was asked to ski with him because it could very well be his last day to ever ski. His disease was in such late stages that he could barely hold his own head up, and he could not ski under his own power or even balance without help. We would transfer him from his wheelchair to his monoski, a bucket like seat attached to a single ski beneath which it can be held upright by a guide, or used with outriggers on the arms, if the skier has the strength. We were off.

My job wasn't to teach him to ski better or to even entertain him, but to give him a feeling of freedom that everyone needs to feel at some point in their lives. I spent the day skiing with him, and when I heard him laugh and saw him smile from his monoski, which I was guiding and keeping upright, I knew this day really mattered to him. When we had finished the day, greeted by his family who showed their tremendous support, it was apparent that he knew, and that they were aware, that he had just lived a dream.

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Climbing Everest had been a dream of mine since I was a little kid. I had heard the stories, seen the pictures, read the books, and wondered if some day I would have what it takes to do that. It was the place of legend, not a real place, and I was afraid to dream a dream as big as that mountain. When I was in elementary school, my dad came home one day with three very large prints he had won at a golf tournament. Each large silver frame was filled with a print that had a title and a pencil sketch below of a climber dressed in the garb of the Hillary era. He hung these prints on the wall, not realizing I would see them and dream of being like them. The first print said “PRE-PARE,” and showed two men stuffing their backpacks with gear and going over their oxygen systems, while the mountain loomed in the background. The second print proclaimed “ASCEND!” The two figures were swinging an axe into the ice, roped together, their fates dependent on each other. Engulfed in a storm, the peak was no longer visible. They were now entrenched in battle, the climb of their lives. So many of us long for a battle like this in our lives and never seem to find it by pushing papers. Instead, we find it in TV, or the heroes of the silver screen as a form of escape. These are the people living the adventure and fighting the very battle I wished I could fight, for this battle would demand everything from me. Choosing not to face it, I instead looked longingly at the picture of the climbers who were proving that they were man enough to defeat whatever the enemy is or was.

The third print stated boldly: “TRIUMPH!” A climber stands alone next to the flag, obviously on the summit of a great mountain. Eyes wide open and breathing hard, I would snap out of the dream that had me standing there in the cold and wind holding that flag. It had taken a team effort to get there, but each person had to make it on the strength of his own legs. The battle had been won. Thinking of these prints and of the battles that many of my students faced, and the one that EW would be facing, I couldn’t let the dream die. The feeling of hope and possibility would awaken inside again. I would share this desire with my closest friends.

Throughout the winter I would meet with a good friend of mine to shoot the breeze, pray, and climb. His name was Joseph Chonko, and these times would be great times of encouragement for me. He had a gift of making others feel important, loved, and more capable than we really were. The funny thing is he would believe his own misconception of others, so much so that others would start to believe them, too. He would tell our friends that I could climb 5.11c rock in my plastic boots and was a real “hardman.”

In climbing, the term *hardman* refers to one who could eat rocks and poop sand, one that won’t get rattled easily, and is always ready to take a challenge head on. If I wasn’t careful, I just might start to believe him myself. I know all too well that the only time I will free climb 5.11c in my boots is

in my dreams. It was his enthusiasm and faith in me that got us both up a number of climbs because his passion was infectious. Other times we might make the trip all the way to the crags and get so involved in conversation it would never matter if we didn't even climb, and sometimes we wouldn't.

Our friendship became very close, and Joseph became my biggest supporter. He would tell me that I had to go to Everest, or at least try. "I'll be your porter," he'd say, "yeah, your own personal Sherpa. Shoot, I would do anything to have a chance to go to the Himalayas even if it just meant schlepping gear for you." Only one and a half years before I had taken him on his first ice climb up the snake couloir on 14,000-foot Mt. Sneffles, where we had hid from lightning all morning and made the summit later in the day, putting a crowning moment of glory on his birthday event. We would later climb a number of peaks, towers, and icefalls together, building a great friendship.

It wasn't climbing this friendship was built on, but rather a deep faith in God, and it was through climbing that the two of us could easily connect with each other, but more importantly, connect to God. Joseph was indeed very human with his long, brown ponytail, tattered flannel shirts, and torn jeans, which would hang low over his faded brown army boots. However, in spite of his outward appearance, he was godlier than almost anyone I had ever met, and had a deep, earnest desire to seek truth in everything. He sought God and knowledge of God daily. He read the Bible and most impressively, took it to heart and practiced what he preached.

The great thing about Joseph was that you would never know he was preaching by his words, only by his actions. Passing by the skate park one day he saw a local kid without a helmet. He had obviously taken the time to get to know this kid before and was concerned since the kid wasn't yet much of a skater. He chatted with this ten-year-old boy and then said, "Come on down with me and lets go find you a good helmet." In my mind I was thinking, *Come on, man, we've got other stuff to do*, but this was important to him and he took some time out of his day to help this little kid. He was like this every day with everyone. Motives always pure, never second guessing, just doing what he could to serve another.

Besides climbing, studying the Bible, helping others, and skating, Joseph's passion was snowboarding, and for a guy who came from Pennsylvania and didn't really know what a mountain was, he became good very fast. In fact, it wasn't long before he was doing inverted aerials off cornices and becoming bored with the inbound terrain that Vail had to offer. He went looking to the out of bounds terrain to quench his thirst for adventure.

I think this is part of the reason I liked Joseph so much. Not much for conventional thinking, he was always looking for answers to tough questions

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and wouldn't accept a textbook answer. He had to find out for himself, and in any number of ways. He was really a non-conformist, not the kind that would non-conform together with other non-conformists, but a guy that had his own sense of style and being, who didn't care about what others or the culture might have to say about it.

My friend didn't own a car, here in the mountains, for the first five years I knew him, and the great thing about him was that he never made this someone else's burden. He was always eager to catch a bus or a ride to somehow ease the trouble of his friends. When he finally did save enough pennies to buy a vehicle (believe me he did, he knew every dollar by name and knew its destination and purpose as well), I was beside myself, if not a bit sad thinking that the old Joseph had gone. It seemed somehow, in my mind, to spell the end of the free-spirited, independent Joseph I knew and loved. This was odd because for most people, especially we Americans, the automobile does exactly the opposite. We can't wait to get our first set of wheels because it will mean freedom, exploration, and independence, with the promise of a more convenient life. Joseph had all these things without a car. He was happy living in this manner in the midst of the Vail Valley, a very wealthy community, and that was perhaps the most impressive thing of all about him. He was not influenced by *things*, and was able to ignore the pressures of a very materialistic place.

It was a way that I wished I could live; to let go of all the material things that tie us down and focus on the things that matter, such as community, neighbors, friends, and passion for the things and places you love, therefore creating those deeper relationships and not just deeper pockets or deeper garages. As much as I admired him for this quality, I was also driven crazy by it. When it came time to buy a necessary piece of climbing gear, he wouldn't just go to the nearest shop and get something that would suffice. No, he would have to weigh each piece by each brand, study the dimensions, capacities, weights, and then write a new algorithm to figure out which one he should buy, factoring in which place would have it for the lowest price, and coinciding with the maturation of the funds inside his piggy bank, so that he could afford to buy the perfect piece. Each purchase was exactly calculated to be the purchase of a lifetime based on need, and not lust fueled by marketers or instant gratification. Perhaps this is why his methods drove me nuts, because I was, and still am, less able to do this, and often fall victim to a slick scheme.

Joseph could see from a mile away when a woman was no good for him, and/or no good at all, and unless it had to do with his interests directly, he would keep his mouth shut. I was the opposite, being unable to tell when to stay clear and then opening my mouth in the affairs of others when it was not really my business. Even when your motives are good and "wounds from a friend can be trusted" (Proverbs 27:6) are the words you cling to, sometimes

it is better to hold the tongue, which can do far more damage than a closed fist. Though he was younger than me, there was much to learn from my wise friend, and though he never knew, I did learn a lot from this very gentle, yet rugged and tough guy.

I learned about his passion for the Lord most of all, and was always encouraged by his insights, and the depth of the personal relationship he had with Jesus. His tenacity in study was stronger than that in climbing. And as I saw it was futile to spend days figuring out a boulder problem that got one a mere ten feet off the ground, he saw something else in it; in the same way, when it came to rereading a seemingly empty Scripture verse, he saw something else in it. There were always answers in Joseph's world but they were never easy to come by. Sometimes I still struggle with finding these answers and use the very tenacity that he possessed in an attempt to put it all together.

On the evening of January 29, 2000, I received a phone call from a rather distraught roommate of Joseph's, and mutual friend to us both, named Jeff Cerovich. Jeff called me as he had been calling all of Joseph's friends that evening, asking if he was with us or if he had been by, because Jeff had received a call from the ski shop where Joseph was working at the time. The manager had called their home looking for Joseph, since he was now a couple of hours late for work. I told Jeff I hadn't seen him all day and had no idea where he was, remarking on how unusual it was for him to miss a day of work, or to be even more than a few minutes late.

The times I had climbed with Joseph, when we would race back to get to work on time, he would always stop to call and say he would be late, and he never forgot a shift. It worried me a little, and I thought he must have just grossly underestimated the time of a back country trip and had no way to contact anyone. Then Jeff said he was last seen with some friends riding Vail Mountain and made mention of going home by way of the East Vail chutes. With this comment, my pulse began to race and my mouth dried out. Apparently, this had become Joseph's new way of commuting home from a day of boarding on the mountain to avoid the bus ride. He never told me he was doing this, knowing that I would scold him for going against his better judgment and knowledge of back country protocol, which is to say that you never descend alone. Joseph would go to the mountain by bus, board all day, descend the chutes to his home in East Vail, where he could then eat and go to work catching the bus just outside his door.

If indeed Joseph truly had descended the chutes by himself and had not since returned home or even to work, I knew that he was most likely in trouble. Jeff called the sheriff to alert them of the situation, and to ask if there was any information or sign of him otherwise. The sheriff's office said no, but that they would be able to commence search and rescue operations the following day

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sometime. Having spent five years on the Vail Ski Patrol I knew this out-of-bounds terrain fairly well, and also knew that if he was having a problem it would not look good for him as night was now well upon him and the temperatures would be dropping to single digits, if not below zero that night. Jeff and I rallied with two other friends, Amon Schwanger and Brian Taylor, in an attempt to survey some of the chutes that night.

With almost a foot of fresh snow and complete darkness, there was not a lot we could do from below other than hope. I held on to this hope that Joseph had injured a leg with a break or a couple of torn ligaments and was having to crawl out on his own, or perhaps he was buried in an avalanche, yet still able to breath. I kept thinking only of the scenarios that would lead to the possibility of him being alive. When a thought contrary to that would creep into my mind, I was quick to snuff it out; after all, it was still likely that he was not even out there. Jeff and Amon threw on their snowshoes and headed up on one of the chutes as far as they could with their headlamps beaming into the snow and darkness, all the while yelling and listening for a reply, faint as it might be.

Brian and I got in my truck and headed for some of the other chutes, doing the same thing, but to no avail. Our search at night with such a huge amount of land to cover would be in vain. It was hard to sleep, thinking that we should be out doing something, but there was nothing more we could do at that time. As time passed, we all became much more serious and determined about the search, knowing for sure that something was wrong and that there would now be no other explanation, save for him waiting out the night for a rescue the next day. Before the sun rose, I called a couple of my old ski patrol friends to see if they would be willing to go in to work early to help me search. They made a few calls to the director, and as the sun came up we were heading down the interstate looking for signs of an avalanche while others were on their way in, gassing up snowmobiles for us to take up the mountain.

Ski patrolman and friend, J. P. McInerny, and I saw no evidence of any slide activity anywhere in the chutes, which led me to believe that Joseph must have only hurt himself and was hunkered down somewhere waiting out the night. We came back to the lower patrol room where we met a few other patrollers and Tim Panza, another friend of Joseph's, who knew better than anyone where he would have gone and what possible routes he may have taken, since these two boarded a lot together. Well before the lifts began to run, Tim and I were being towed behind a snowmobile, up to the top of Outer Mongolia Bowl on Vail Mountain by way of Mill Creek Road and Mushroom Bowl for fast access and the possibility that he had struggled to find his way down to this road, as it serves as an out for many backcountry skiers and boarders.

The sky was clear and beautiful that morning, and the snow that had fallen the day before was still pristine, due to the fact it was bitter cold and extremely still. The sky was full of sundogs, crystalizations in the air that act as small prisms, diffracting light through the cold. It made this somewhat surreal as we made a game plan and awaited final approval from the sheriff for the ski patrol to descend out of the ski area boundary for the purposes of rescue. (I knew from prior experience that mountain rescue was not the group I wanted to trust in this effort, due to the bureaucracy it entails in order to get them out searching. If anyone is to have a chance of surviving an avalanche, minutes are all they have and Joseph had used his.)

Tim and I would not wait, and began to search out all of the tracks of different parties that had descended the previous day. We would see a party of three heading off in one direction and eliminate it by seeing that it had been three skiers, and then another set of two going together. Knowing that Joseph was alone, we kept searching for more tracks, knowing if we did not find his, the patrol was right behind us, and once they obtained permission could follow any of the tracks. Then we saw something certain — a single snowboard track headed into the woods toward two possible descents.

Tim and I followed this until it became a footprint in the snow, where he had removed his snowboard and began walking. At his point, Tim was certain it was Joseph, as he knew this was something Joseph would often do while others would choose to struggle, pushing or pulling themselves along in some other tiresome fashion. When Tim spoke with such certainty, I began to realize what this rescue attempt might end up looking like, and began to lose my composure. We broke over the edge into the steeper terrain still trying to follow this track, which now seemed to be two.

Just as we were making our decision as to which one to follow, the ski patrol came over the radio and said the sheriff had given them permission to help us but only in certain areas: the water tank and Marvin's chutes. This made the decision easy for Tim and me, as we immediately headed down a chute just west of the water tank following one of the two tracks. Minutes later we again heard a voice over the radio, "I see something like a snowboard sticking out of the snow, and we are halfway down the water tank chute."

Thoughts raced through my head as I tried to ski on Jeff's old skis, which I had borrowed. *It is just his board, don't panic, he is fine, it must have gotten stuck or broken and he had to leave it.* And then I heard the next call: "We found him." It became all I could do to breathe, let alone ski at this point, as I must have fallen six times trying to get down to where J. P. and Rick Walters were standing.

As we had all been trained, those already there started digging immediately and had Joseph uncovered by the time Tim and I arrived. Tim stayed

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high on the side of the gully, unable to make himself slide in closer to see if it was his friend. I felt woozy, as if I had not eaten for days, my stomach was weak, and my mind wanted nothing to do with getting a closer look. Without seeing, I would wonder if it was truly him, and even after knowing it was and that he was dead, I would probably not be able to grasp it and adequately process or accept his dying for some time to come.

Pale and weak, I slid down into the hole where he lay, head facing downhill, feet in the air with his board still attached. The moment I saw his blue jacket and red helmet, I knew it was him. I reached down, my face now streaming with tears, and grabbed hold of my friend, knowing it would be the last time. His body was hard and frozen and so lifeless, that I couldn't believe that this shell was all he was; and I knew it wasn't. My tears were now turning to hot needles that poked into my face and numbered in the thousands. I again knelt down beside my friend and whispered a prayer of thanks for him and for his life and that I knew he was now in a better place with the one true living God:

*This is the place of a soul departed. . . . This is the place where my friend met God face to face. . . . Eternity's clock now started. Taken up in His hand. . . . To a better place. . . . Taken up in his hand, to the land now promised.*

What surprised me as much as anything is throughout this whole experience, I never once got angry at God for taking Joseph at such a young age. Here was a man who was living so right, cared so much for others, and had so much to offer and live for, yet though I did not understand his dying so young, I was not angry that my best friend's life had been taken. Perhaps my anger toward God would not be justified, knowing that Joseph took the risk and put himself in this situation. Perhaps it was just delayed and would come later.

So often, people can't look past circumstances, so they blame God for these events, as if He is some mean kid on the playground torturing ants, and we are the ants. I was angry at Joseph, however, for taking a risk he should not have taken and that he knew better than to take alone. The terrain was not so steep or extreme that he was foolish to think he could do it; it was really no steeper than a black diamond at most resorts. However, this becomes quite another matter when obstacles are more difficult to see and there is no margin for error if you are alone, fall, and get hurt. For this reason, one always travels with a buddy just in case something goes wrong.

An expert can still tumble on an easy run and should never take anything for granted. I was angry that he had taken this backcountry place for granted, and it cost him his life. He had made beautiful turns down the western flank of the chute, down into the point where it narrowed, tightening his turns but still moving with considerable speed as was made obvious by his tracks,

which abruptly ended near a group of small spruce trees. He didn't know what was on the other side of those trees. The snow had eroded away by running water of the creek, exposing a steep shelf of 50-degree rock. Joseph had plummeted through this, scraping his board on the rock and turning him upside-down into a terrain trap at the bottom of the cliff. It was a deep, twisted mess of fallen trees, snow, ice, rocks, and water, and Joseph was right in the middle of it, trapped in place by his snowboard.

In heavy snows, I had experienced skiers dying inboundly by falling over in the same way and then being unable to right themselves before friends or passersby could reach them for help. Their skis or snowboard acting as an anchor forcing them into the snow, which behaves like quicksand having no base from which to push against. In this way, a person can suffocate in a matter of minutes.

I'd like to think that Joseph died quickly and painlessly, without a terrible struggle, fighting the snow and fighting for breath. When Joseph was uncovered, there was a thin layer of ice near his face indicating that he had been breathing for some period of time while stuck in the snow. This is called an ice mask and forms as a result of condensation on the snow from a person's breath. It is possible for a short time to pull air from within the snow itself, but if a person is unable to increase the size of this air pocket in front of them it will soon freeze over from warm, moist respirations and create an ice barrier to the porous snow holding the air needed for survival. It was our assumption that Joseph died from suffocation. The coroner would later give us more information and other possibilities.

I spent a few minutes with Joseph in the five-foot deep hole, crying, staring in disbelief, praying, and trying to make sense out of this, as it had all happened so fast. The patrollers loaded him into the toboggan as Tim and I made our way slowly to the bottom of the chute to the awaiting Eagle County Sheriff search and rescue vehicle. At the bottom, we waited for the team carrying Joseph to arrive and load him in the truck for transport. It was one of the hardest days of my life, and I was, and am still, thankful that I live in a community where I am blessed with a lot of friends who support one another in many great and heroic ways. . . like my former co-workers and friends on the ski patrol, and the others who were below at the house in East Vail where Joseph lived.

Sharing the news with his family, whom I had never met, was something I certainly was not comfortable doing, especially since they had been phoned the night before that we were concerned and were organizing a search effort. I knew, like me, their hopes were also high that their son was just stuck somewhere and in need of assistance. It was Roger Anderson, a friend and elder of the church, who made this call and was able to speak calmly and

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lovingly to the family, sharing with them this news of their tragic loss. A group of us would travel to Pennsylvania for his funeral, and shortly after his family would come to Colorado for a mountaintop memorial service on Vail Mountain. I will never forget the sound of Joseph's mother crying as he was laid in the ground that cold February day. Placed in a grave only a mile from the house where he grew up, it could be seen from the pasture high above a hill where their horses grazed.

"Why do we do this?!" came shouts in my mind. "Why do we take these unnecessary risks for the sake of fun, or a thrill?" Now I was asking the very questions my family had been asking me after I had taken my fall just months before. It began making sense that these things are not worth it when they cause so much suffering to our loved ones. I was determined not to do the same thing. Joseph and I had discussions on this exact thing, and how selfish it could all be. I remember him saying if he were to die, he would much rather go doing what he loved, than waiting till he was old and fat, dying of heart disease or worse, or to live in fear, never having lived life to its fullest or daring to take risks in pursuit of a dream. What good is it to dream, to live, if never to be challenged or face our fears and take a risk? This is not to say that everyone should run off to battle or take up extreme sports. This idea is also true in our relationships and faith in God. It involves risk to go beyond the ordinary and that is exactly how Joseph lived. Risk is less about our faith than it is God's faithfulness.

### *Deadpoint Reflections*

*For great is your love, reaching to the heavens; your faithfulness reaches to the skies (Psalm 57:10).*

*Whatever you can do, or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has genius, power, and magic in it.<sup>2</sup>*  
— W. H. Murray



**Crux:** Loss. One of the few guarantees we have in life is that it will end. Where and when, we do not know, but death in this life is certain. The crux is coming to peace with this inevitable and unavoidable conclusion for ourselves and for those we love. Losing a friend or a family member for most of us will present some of the hardest and most emotional times of our lives. The more sudden and unexpectedly a life comes to an end, often the more difficult it is to accept, and the younger and healthier the person, the greater the question of why. As we age, we come to expect the certainty of uncertainties as our bodies begin to break down, making us more susceptible to illness and injury. But regardless of our age, one question

stands out for us all: What happens when the light goes out?



**Hold:** Hope. Gradually, like a wound that heals, peace will set in, life will go on, and the acceptance of another's passing will be like the wound that leaves a scar. The grieving process must take place or the wound will be like a picked scab and never heal. The memories will remain as the scar is evidence to, but the pain will fade away. We can believe whatever we like about death and whether or not there is life after it, but true peace does not come from what I believe, it comes from God. I know God has a plan and that plan gives me hope in the midst of death's grip when it unjustly and inexplicably grasps people like my friend's ten-month-old baby, or another person falling asleep at the wheel and crossing the median to claim the sweet young life of a local nurse. I like to think that God is populating heaven with babies, toddlers, children, and people of all ages, so that it has some variety that makes it perfect, like He says it will be. I don't quite know exactly how that will look, but I have hope in His plan and that is what I hold on to.



**Anchor:** "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). If we cannot take God at His word and anchor ourselves in this hope, then our faith is in vain. As Thoreau said, "Most men lead lives of quiet desperation because they never truly live." It would seem that to live life fully is a choice, as is living your life for what is eternal.

#### Endnotes

1. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (Boston, MA: Ticknor and Fields, 1854), chapter 2.
2. W.H. Murray, *The Scottish Himalayan Expedition* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, Ltd., 1951).