



CLIMB BACK FROM CANCER

INTRODUCTION

“If we’re persistent enough, we can do the dreams.”

– Alan Hobson

On May 23, 1997, during my third expedition to Mount Everest, I finally stood on the top of the world. It was a pretty magnificent moment. I could see for what seemed like a hundred miles in all directions. It was a brilliant, blue-sky day. There was not a breath of wind. As I looked out over the world from my rarefied perch at 29,035 feet, I could actually see the horizon bending in my peripheral vision. Above me, I knew the atmosphere ultimately gave way to outer space and the limitless universe beyond. I felt simultaneously triumphant and infinitesimally small.

It took me thirty-nine years to see my childhood dream come true. It was a glorious and powerful fifteen minutes. “If we’re persistent enough,” I radioed down to base camp from the highest physical point on the planet, my voice cracking with emotion, “we can do the dreams.” Tears of joy froze to my face.

After Everest I was at peace, if only temporarily. On a physical level at least, I no longer had to prove anything to anyone, especially myself. It was liberating. For a year, my goal was to not have a goal. All my life, whether as a

student, gymnast, writer, journalist, speaker or adventurer, I had been a human *doing*. Now I wanted to be a human *being* – and just *be* from moment to moment.

This approach worked for a few months, but as I gradually recovered physically, psychologically and emotionally from the intense Everest experience, my ambition began to return. So did the same question over and over again from others: “So... what’s next? How are you going to top Everest?” I quickly tired of hearing it and even began to resent it. To me, the question somehow reduced Everest to a thirty-second sound bite on the evening news, an achievement that was significant only if it was swiftly followed by something perceived as greater – perhaps a trip into outer space? But after that, then what – Mars, Jupiter or Pluto? At some point, the discussion became inane.

I have never really resolved the conflict between doing and being in my life. Much of the world does not seem to acknowledge people for just *being* anymore – except, of course, if they are being loving, as Mother Teresa was; compassionate, as the Dalai Lama is; or generous, as Bill Gates has been (after *doing* the incredible by building a global business empire). If we are *being* of service to others, that is a great thing, but the world mostly seems to recognize things we *do* – in my case, adventuring, writing books and making speeches. So, reaching the top of Everest created a peculiar personal dilemma for me. If I was no longer climbing the world’s highest peak, what was I doing?

Someone once said: “If we are what we do, then when we don’t do, we aren’t.” Thus, the very act of stepping to the top of the world sent me to the bottom of a self-identity crisis that seemed almost as deep as the mountain was high.

Three years after Everest, on August 10, 2000, I finally got the answer to the question “What’s next?” and ultimately some insight into who I am as a human *being*. On that day, any illusions I might have had about my own immortality evaporated with three simple words: “You have cancer.” That is when, at the age of forty-two, I was stripped of my previous identity. It was then that I started up a mountain higher, harder and more frightening than any I have ever climbed. That is when I learned I might have less than a year to live.

None of us knows how long we are going to live. As much as we would like to control how long we live, we cannot, because ultimately (and here is a big one), we are not in control. However, *how* we live is far more important than how long we live and that *is* something within our control.

My climb back from cancer was arduous and sometimes terrifying. Surprisingly, it was some of the life lessons I had learned on Everest and through other experiences that were so valuable to me in the climb. I have therefore included some of these lessons, excerpts from my previous books, in this book. We do not have to go to Everest to apply them.

The climbing plan on my medical mountain included around-the-clock, high dose chemotherapy and an adult blood stem cell transplant – one of the most radical and risky medical procedures known. If I had faced this kind of a challenge on my own, I would never have survived. Fortunately, I had “Sherpas” with me.

The Sherpas are the mountain people of Nepal. They are neither porters nor guides. They have evolved into the strongest high altitude climbers in the world – bar none. More Sherpas have been to the summit of Everest than any other nationality or cultural group. Because they are born and live at 13,000 feet and above, they have a 13,000-foot acclimatization advantage over those of us who live at sea level or thereabouts. They are colossally strong, capable of carrying loads of up to one hundred and fifty pounds (about the weight of the average household refrigerator) at elevations as extreme as 22,000 feet and incredibly, sometimes higher.

But it is not their physical strength that makes them so special. It is their spiritual strength. They refer to Everest as “Chomolungma,” the Tibetan word that means “Mother Goddess of the World.” As devout Buddhists, the Sherpas are meek, gentle and humble. They never complain. There are only two things fierce about them – their courage and their loyalty. There have been numerous instances in which Sherpas have lost their fingers and toes to frostbite trying to rescue Westerners in the Himalayas. Many have even lost their lives. They believe that when you set foot in the world’s tallest mountain range, you have entered their home and, therefore, your safety is one hundred percent their

responsibility. In general, the Sherpas have received little credit for the thousands of Everest expeditions in which they have participated.

As I wrote in my previous book, *From Everest to Enlightenment*:

I believe we are all Sherpas carrying loads of one sort or another. And we find ourselves struggling up our own mountains – whether they are professional, personal, marital, emotional, interpersonal, parental, medical or financial. At times, some of us cannot seem to find the strength to bear our burdens. The path we're on seems brutally steep and unrelenting. Sometimes [as TV anchorman Howard Beale in the 1976 movie classic, Network, said], "We just can't take it any more." We sit exhausted and disillusioned by the side of the trail and hope that somehow the crushing weight on our shoulders will magically be lifted or at least lightened. Our hearts are heavy, as are our souls.

Whatever path we have chosen in life, climb we must, for to do otherwise is to relinquish our own self-respect and give in to our frailties and fear.

On my medical mountain, I had the benefit of many "Sherpa caregivers." They did not come from Nepal, but they had the same attributes as their Eastern equivalents. They were incredibly strong-willed, courageous and loyal. Their contributions were absolutely vital and largely unrecognized.

I believe that the presence of Sherpa caregivers in the life of a cancer patient substantially increases that patient's odds of survival, or at the very least, the quality of life for the time left. These Sherpas do not only carry physical loads. They help carry the emotional, social, financial, logistical and parental burdens cancer treatment inevitably creates. Yet most of the attention and care goes to the patient. Because of this, the weight Sherpa caregivers must carry is often heavier than that of the patient. It is the patient who is facing the prospect of potential death, but it is the caregivers who, in addition to managing their own lives and fears, must help manage the patient's as well.

In the Himalayas, this is called “carrying a double load.” It means that instead of shouldering a fifty-pound pack – a substantial weight even at sea level, a Nepalese Sherpa must carry a hundred pounds or more. Sherpa caregivers must also shoulder their burdens in a life-threatening situation. While the patient is struggling to climb back, the Sherpa caregivers are shoulder-to-shoulder with them, carrying two metaphorical sleeping bags, two tents, two stoves, and twice the food, fuel and oxygen along the terrifying exposed ridges and across the hazardous avalanche slopes. Theirs is a very heavy pack and their path is treacherous.

In my climb back, I was truly blessed with the presence of many Sherpa caregivers – individuals who saw my plight, tied into my rope and climbed with me. One such Sherpa was my then fiancée, Cecilia. Two years after my diagnosis, I knew her and she knew me more intimately than some couples who have been married for fifty years. My story is her story. In fact, it is our story because as you will see, I would not be alive were it not for Cecilia.

The ultimate goal of a Sherpa is to pass into the next life having made the lives of as many others around them as rich as possible. The virtue to which they most aspire is not financial wealth, material possessions, position, power or fame. It is compassion for all living things

– From Everest to Enlightenment

You may not have a Cecilia Sherpa or a background in high altitude mountaineering. There may be no known medical “cure” for your disease, or the prognosis may be bleak. Regardless of the circumstances, if we are to survive a medical mountain as challenging as cancer, or at least live out the rest of the time we have left with as much quality of life as possible, we must seek out Sherpa caregivers immediately. They can be doctors, nurses, personal care assistants, associates, friends or family members – in fact, anyone with whom we come in contact. We must have the courage to ask them to share our load because in a hospital or hospice, just as in the Himalayas,

there is strength in numbers.

Dr. Greg Ogilvie, Director of the Animal Cancer Center at the Colorado State University College of Veterinary Medicine in Fort Collins, Colorado, wrote: “Cancer represents the summit of the lack of hope.” Regardless of how we see it, if we believe life-threatening illness is a death sentence, we are dead. But if we think of it as a “life sentence” call to action, there is hope.

This is the story of our climb back from cancer. As any cancer patient knows, that climb does not have a summit. It will never end until our lives do. Either the presence of cancer or the fear of it will always be with us. We do not just heal and get better after cancer like healing after a broken bone. We heal and then, if we are lucky, we get on with our lives as best we can for whatever time we have, in whatever way we can, with whatever faculties we have. The prospect of a relapse or metastasis never goes away. It is always there, sometimes as a distant anxiety, sometimes as a big black thunderhead parked directly overhead.

For every mountain we climb in life, another appears before us more daunting than the one before. So come with us now as we climb this “Inner Everest.” It is a world of hostile weather, thin air and an elusive summit. Yet this book is not about *doing* anything except rising to a challenge. It is about *being* – being tested, being tenacious and being triumphant. Our dream is to give you or someone you know the most powerful climbing tool of all – hope.

