



Back to Everest

*“Failure is the opportunity to begin again
more intelligently.*

— Henry Ford

2:35 a.m., May 23, 1997 – I don’t know what’s happening to me. I can’t seem to keep up. Amid the wild gusts of wind and spindrift snow, by the eerie light of the moon I see Jamie and the Sherpas disappearing from sight. For a second, they ghost into view. Then...a moment later...they vanish.

What’s going on? Where did they go? Did they fall?

Why can’t I get enough air?

I feel like I’m suffocating. Every breath is a battle. I look at my altimeter. It reads 27,600 feet. Camp 4 is a long way below me. If I fall here, I’m history. I’ll slide all the way into the South Col and maybe 4,000 feet down the Lhotse Face too. Everest, in all its massiveness, will consume me like a crumb.

If I could just get to the ridge. If I could somehow just get there. Maybe we’d stand a chance. Are we off route? Why can’t I keep up?

A second later, I get my answer. A powerful gust of wind hits me like a battering ram. With it comes yet another swirling cloud of spindrift snow. It hammers straight into my hood, goes around several times and goes straight down my back. I become an instant icicle.

I start to shiver uncontrollably.

“K-K-Kami,” I say to the Sherpa I am with as my teeth start to chatter. “We need to go down.”

He acts like he doesn’t hear me.

Seconds pass. I feel the cold penetrating to my core. It stabs like a driven nail. I am succumbing to hypothermia, a potentially lethal condition in which the body’s inner temperature drops. If it falls by just a few degrees, the victim very soon becomes incapable of moving. Death can come soon after.

I begin to panic. I know what will happen to me if we don’t get out of this fast. I will freeze to death – my worst nightmare, cold, afraid and freezing near the summit of Everest. What a way to go. So close, and yet so far.

“No damn way!” I tell myself. “I’m not going to die here. No damn way. Not here, not anywhere – not if I can still do something about it.”

“Kami,” I say again, this time yelling at him through the howling wind. “Kami! We need to go down *now!*”

He doesn’t hear me. He doesn’t even respond.

I feel alone and very, very afraid.

* * *

*“Technique and ability alone do not get you to the top —
it is the willpower that is the most important.
This willpower you cannot buy with money or be
given by others — it rises from your heart.”*

— JUNKO TABEL, of Japan,
after becoming the first woman
to climb Everest, in 1975

Almost as soon as the snow had melted from our crampons after saving John McIsaac’s life during the 1994 Emergo Mount Everest Expedition, and as we had after our first “unsuccessful” expedition to the mountain in 1991, Jamie and I began to orchestrate our return to Everest for Round Three. When John had come within just 162 vertical meters of the top before succumbing to the effects of high-altitude sickness and eventually having to be rescued, we couldn’t just walk away

from our dream. Our expedition had come within a couple of city blocks of our goal. Jamie and I both knew neither of us would rest until we had either closed the gap, or come to the realization that neither one of us ever would. One way or the other, we wanted to know the answer to Everest's ultimate question: Could we do it?

"I am sick at heart," Dr. Chevalley wrote in his diary as he thought about our second failure; and we all felt much the same. But mixed with our sadness, I think, was also a certain quiet pride, for we knew that in the conditions we had faced no men could have done more than we did. If Everest was still my dream, it was only a bad one."

— TENZING NORGAY,
Man of Everest

As human beings, we are conditioned from an early age to believe that failure is bad. It is not only to be feared, we are taught. It is to be avoided at all cost. We are punished for failing – by being benched, held back a year, scolded, fired, ignored, ostracized, shunned or just plain rejected. No one enjoys it.

In the eyes of the world to which we returned after our '94 expedition, a trip that had seen us raise close to a half a million dollars, move five tons of gear and six North American climbers half way around the world, to the top of the world and back again safely, we had failed because we had failed to reach the summit. In our view, however, we had not failed. We had saved John's life and that had been a huge victory. It had taken us a grueling 33 hours and pushed every member of the rescue team further than they had ever been pushed before. Most importantly, we had certainly not failed to learn from our experience. We now knew, or more importantly, we believed we now knew, how to get safely to and from the top of Everest.

The first step was to forgive ourselves for coming up short. If we failed to do that, we knew, we would never be able to return to Everest. Without this forgiveness, our "failure" would remain so – at least in the eyes of those around us. I found great

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solace in knowing that if John had decided to continue climbing from his high point rather than descending as he had, he would likely have made it to the top, but he would most certainly have perished on the descent. Would that have made our expedition a success? I didn't think so. Sometimes, we have such a skewed view of "success," especially in contrast with what the Sherpas believe. Compassion counts in our culture, but not, it would seem, as much as the goal.

Forgiveness can be difficult to achieve — especially self-forgiveness. To re-program an ingrained response than has been with us since birth can be very, very difficult. But when forgiveness is combined with proper analysis of our mistakes and we change our behavior based on what we have learned, the results can be amazing. Thus, there is success in failure, but only if we know how and where to find it.

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The end of the 1994 Emergo Mount Everest Expedition was a sad time for me. As with every major expedition, I went through a type of post-partum depression. For the second time, we had not achieved our goal of making it to the top. Once again, a part of the dream was dead. I experienced depression, emptiness, a sense of deep loss, and an inability to focus.

"We had given all we had, and it was not enough. We turned without speaking. We descended without speaking. Down the long ridge, past the high camp, along the ridge again, along the snow slope. Slowly – slowly. Down – down – down."

—TENZING NORGAY,
Man of Everest,

on reaching 28,250 feet [only 778 vertical feet from the top]
with Raymond Lambert during the Swiss Expedition, spring 1952

The way I cope with this depression is to be with the pain and emptiness for a period, usually two or three difficult months. During this time, I usually find myself asking if there is something wrong with me. Where did I go wrong? What could I have done better? What could we have done better?

On Everest, it is such an effort just to breathe, let alone

take a step, that the mountain kicks our butt every time we face her. I like to think of her as the ultimate extractor. She extracts from us in all ways — physically, financially, mentally, emotionally and spiritually. One of my mentors, the late Bill March, who was the leader of the first Canadian expedition to Everest in 1982, once said that climbing Everest is like growing old very fast — you don't eat well, you don't sleep well and you don't feel well. Yes, the mountain can fill us up and enrich us with her energy and our experiences, but mostly, she empties us. She drains us of our resolve and saps us of our motivation. She is like the swift hand of God when we misbehave. She puts us in our place — at the bottom of Nature's order, not at the top of the food chain as we erroneously believe.

Key to my adjustment in 1994 was my girlfriend at the time, whom I will call "Julie" to protect her privacy. I had met Julie through one of our expedition suppliers a few months before leaving for the mountain. She proved to be an invaluable emotional support during and after the expedition. When I came off Everest, she floored me by asking me to move in with her.

I loved Julie very deeply. Like most women with whom I have had relationships, I was passionately committed to her. I loved her energy and grace. She had a wonderfully gentle way about her, a captivating laugh and a warm smile. She worked as a freelance clothing designer, but her passion was the art of high fashion embroidery common in the designer boutiques and fashion show runways of Paris and New York. Although we moved in diametrically opposite worlds, I in the adventure world and she in the fashion world, we shared a common love for creativity — I through my writing and expedition-making and she through her design. She was a stunningly beautiful woman physically, but that is not why I loved her. I loved her poise.

It was so reassuring to come home to Julie. After months in a cold tent, her apartment was both a sanctuary and a place of solitude. She was also nurturing. She took care of me. We all need tender loving care and I am no exception — especially after an expedition. I rebuilt myself with her.

Over time, my strength returned, and I began to more seriously anchor myself in the next goal. This is part of the reason why Everest has been so important to me. It has been such a difficult goal, such a massive undertaking, that it has virtually consumed me for the better part of the last 10 years.

The winding down of the Emergo Mount Everest Expedition in the summer of 1994 was like the winding down of The Climb for Hope Expedition in the fall and winter of 1991 and 1992. There were outstanding obligations to sponsors and suppliers – banners to return, photos to be processed and speaking engagements to be made. And always, there was that explaining – explaining what had happened, why we hadn't made it to the summit, and how, thank goodness, we had all come back alive. It was that telling and re-telling, however, that I now see was so important to the future of Jamie and me on Everest. It galvanized a depth of motivation and commitment in us that is difficult to describe. It became our foundation for the future.

After a few months of telling our story, we became more determined than ever to see our Everest dream through. Our passion and focus bordered on obsession, but thankfully, never became it. Passion, as Jamie has said, is powerful. Obsession is destructive.

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“It was a sad disappointment for Mr. Gibson, who had tried so long and so hard to climb this mountain. Yet he made no complaints. A fellow-climber had been in trouble; he had felt himself the proper one to help him; and by doing so he missed the great chance at his goal. That is the mountain way — the mountaineer’s way.”

—TENZING NORGAY,
Man of Everest,
on the attempt on Mt. Bandar Punch, 1950

The first person we contacted when we came back from Everest in 1994 was Steve Matous, of Boulder, Colorado. We had met Steve during our 1994 trip, during which time he had been guiding paying clients on Everest's north side. Both Jamie and I were so impressed with his interpersonal ability, his affable personality, his professionalism and his attentiveness to detail that we knew we wanted him involved in our next Everest effort, not as a guide, but as a professional expedition organizer. We had learned from our 1994 trip that we couldn't be involved in the fundraising and organizing of an expedition, physical training, shipping and transportation logistics, load carrying once on Everest, media relations and team leadership, and still hope to climb the mountain. We needed to focus our energies exclusively on climbing the peak. That meant we had to find others to organize the trip, lead it, and report back to the world about it. Jamie and I hoped Steve could fulfill at least two of these key roles – as expedition organizer and leader. On our behalf, he agreed to start the application process with the government of Nepal to secure a permit to climb Everest from its southern, Nepalese side.

“I was extremely excited,” Steve remembers. “I thought, ‘Okay! This is a good project with good guys.’”

This time, we would approach Everest through the land of the Sherpas, the Khumbu valley. After two expeditions to the north side of Everest, Jamie and I had had it with the Tibetan side. In 1991, we'd gone to Everest because we'd been part of an expedition organized largely by Dr. Peter Austen of Prince George, British Columbia, several hundred miles northeast of Vancouver, Canada. We'd gone back to the north side three years later, in 1994, because we then had had experience on that side of the mountain.

Our experience in Tibet had borne out one cold reality – that the routes on the north side were long, their approaches lengthy and the wind and cold there severe. We felt we needed to get up and down the peak as quickly as Everest would permit. We needed to find a route that offered the shortest

distance to our goal. The more direct, South Col route through Nepal, the one originally used by Sir Edmund Hillary and Nepalese Sherpa Tenzing Norgay during the first successful ascent of the mountain in 1953, offered what we believed would be our best chance. It was about one-quarter the length of the north ridge route. That also meant it was steeper, but we saw that as an asset. We could go up and down “quickly.” After having been on two previous expeditions that hadn’t reached the top, I felt the time had come to use all our learning, all our experience and every dime we had or could raise to make one more stab at the peak. To do so, we would literally follow in the footsteps of Hillary and Tenzing.

I knew this would definitely be my last Everest expedition. At 36, I was 10 years older than Jamie and in the words of my brother, Eric, I’d been doing “the full court press” 10 years longer. I’d spent 10 years working as a full-time freelance writer for such long hours and so little pay that it had taken a toll on my motivation. I wanted to either make it to the top of Everest and come back down safely, or at least know that I had given it everything I had, short of my life. That way, I hoped, regardless of the outcome of the expedition, I would be able to come away from Everest with a sense of positive closure with the mountain. I wanted to be able to turn a page in my life, close a chapter, and get on with living the rest of my life – enjoying the second half of it under far less personally imposed pressure than I had the first half of it. The way I saw it, I didn’t want to turn 40 still pushing my way upwards trying to prove something to myself. I needed to come to terms with my past disappointments as an author and as a gymnast when I’d lost the U.S. national gymnastics championships by five one-hundredths of a point. One way or another, I wanted a victory — and I was willing to do almost anything to get it.

To achieve this goal, I first had to improve my friendship with myself. I hoped, naively, that Everest would help. My relationship with Julie took me only part way to the base of my real mountain – the struggle for self-acceptance, and ever-

elusive personal peace that comes from fulfillment — in whatever form. I had to forgive myself for what I perceived as my past failures. That, it would turn out, would be an order taller than Everest.

The organizational mountain was easier to ascend. I knew where to start. Once we'd contacted Steve Matous and got him rolling on the permit application process, Jamie and I went back to my main external wellspring — Mr. Laurie Skreslet, the first Canadian to climb Everest. Laurie had summited on October 5, 1982, after four members of his expedition had died and six others had decided to leave amid gut-wrenching disappointment and highly publicized controversy. That expedition, which had been led by Bill March, had become something of a phoenix that had risen from the ashes of accusations and acrimony. Then, I had hung on every word of news that had come back to Canada on the expedition and I had been well positioned to do so too. At the time, I was working as a cub reporter at *The Ottawa Citizen*, one of the five biggest daily newspapers in Canada and the newspaper of Canada's capital.

When news came back of Laurie's summit, he became an instant hero to me. He and his teammates had overcome deaths, despondency, potential dishonor, howling winds, freezing cold, rarefied air and searing ultraviolet rays. In my books, they became elevated almost to the status of gods.

Heroes are important to all of us. Although I now regard people like Mother Teresa (unfortunately no longer with us in body) and Nelson Mandela as greater heroes than almost any on the planet because of their contribution to the world as a whole, when I was a boy, I had the usual boyhood heroes — football and hockey players. As I got older, however, I discovered a whole new breed of heroic figures. They were tougher, more determined and more driven than professional athletes. You rarely read about them in the newspapers, you almost never saw them interviewed on television, and they didn't get paid a dime.

After retiring from competitive gymnastics in 1981, I discovered “the mountaineers.” For me, they completely redefined courage, determination, and nobility. It was like you took the hockey player, put a heavy pack on his back, cut his oxygen in half, pitched his ice on a 45- to 60-degree angle and extended it to thousands of feet high. Then you turned off all the lights in the arena, removed the television cameras, the cheering fans, the salaries, and the press and replaced them with 50-mile-an-hour winds, freezing cold, and total anonymity. Finally, you added the possibility of serious injury or death.

Here was a game with *real* consequences. Here was a game that demanded the utmost in self-control, commitment, and courage. Mother Nature did not tolerate temper tantrums or the pitching of tennis racquets at referees. She didn't allow fistfights or bench-clearing brawls. If you engaged in this kind of behavior in the mountains, the result was the loss of the one thing that was keeping you alive – your own energy, whether physical or emotional.

I'd met Laurie Skreslet years earlier in the process of writing *One Step Beyond – Rediscovering the Adventure Attitude* with John Amatt, another hero of mine who was a climber on and the business manager of the 1982 Canadian Everest Expedition. The book consisted of five personality profiles of top adventure achievers. Its goal was to pinpoint what successful people had in common. In reality, it wasn't a book about adventure at all. It was a book about life, and the adventure and sometimes misadventure we are all on.

Of the five fascinating individuals I profiled in *One Step Beyond*, I probably got to know Laurie Skreslet best. He is an intense character. The first time I met him, I knew he was special. His facial muscles stood out like they had been sculpted by the wind and his tanned but weathered skin showed clear evidence of years of battling the natural elements. He spoke clearly and pointedly and when he got rolling on stories about climbing, his stare became so sharp you felt like it could stab

through you. Within minutes, his lips became taught, straight and thin — like elastic bands. His jaw set back with equal tension and the entire picture created a combined sense of intimidation and awe.

But he was anything but a fierce individual — at least not away from the mountains. At home in his living room in Calgary, Canada, he laughed easily and often. He delighted in poking fun at me for whatever he could, and he had a youthful exuberance about him I truly loved.

For me, Laurie is the quintessential mountaineer. After a few years traveling the world as a merchant seaman and at one point selling his own blood for money to keep moving, he had joined the ranks of the now-famous outdoor organization, Outward Bound. There, he had quickly distinguished himself as an instructor reliable in a crisis. He was tough, passionate, but likable. I was drawn to him not only because of what he had done, but because of who he was. I entitled my profile of him, “The Warrior Soul.” I liked his brutal honesty, his directness and his drive. He had a certain nobility about him, like the Knights of the Round Table I had worshipped as a kid. I could visualize him in the heat of battle, ice ax raised against the spindrift snow and howling wind, tilting against the mountain. He had real personal power. We became fast friends.

When Jamie and I arrived on Laurie’s doorstep that morning in the fall of 1994, it didn’t take long for Laurie to set us straight about the South Col route on Everest, the route he had climbed 12 years earlier.

“If I had one piece of advice to give both of you about that route,” he said as his brow furrowed and his stare took on its characteristic intensity, “...it would be to go through the Icefall only two times — once on your way to the summit and once on your way down.”

Jamie and I looked at each other like we’d been presented with one of the tablets of the Ten Commandments. If we had had any misconceptions about the South Col being the “regular” route up Everest, they instantly evaporated. The sober

reality of Everest once again spoke to us — this time literally from the mouth of one of the mountain's disciples.

The Icefall, or Khumbu Icefall as it is known, is a hideous cataract of moving ice that descends to the base of Everest. It is a glacier that is squeezed between Everest and its sister peak, Mount Nuptse. In its journey slowly downwards under the force of gravity, it tumbles 2,000 feet over a rock ledge and in the process splits into ice blocks the size of apartment buildings. Crevasses can be more than 15 stories deep and 50 feet wide. The whole terrifying mess moves up to three feet a day. It is a cemetery in the snow, a slow-moving avalanche of ice. In 1982, it had consumed four members of Laurie's expedition — one whose body has yet to be recovered. Three of the four had been Sherpas.

Jamie and I left our meeting with Laurie somewhat subdued. Before we departed, however, my hero left us with a few final words of wisdom:

“We could not have done what we did in '82 without the Sherpas,” he said emphatically. “They respect and honor the power of the mountains. In the early days, they used to wash the blood off the newborn baby in a freezing-cold mountain stream. If it survived, great. If it didn't, it wouldn't have survived anyway.

“The Sherpas teach us to leave our arrogance at home and show respect for the mountains that are more powerful than we'll ever be. In a sense, they are the mountains. There's something undying about them. There's a sense of history of time that goes far beyond ours.”

Laurie went on to tell the story of Sungdare Sherpa, who had climbed to the summit with him. One day in the Icefall, he explained, rather than make two trips through the danger, Sungdare had carried two packs at once — a back-breaking load of close to 100 pounds at 19,000 feet!

“He didn't draw any particular attention to it,” Laurie remembered. “It was just his way of being safer.”

All this seemed to reaffirm our plan to have Steve assemble

the strongest Sherpa team we could. But what Laurie said next did not affirm anything in me. It shook me.

“Before you leave for Everest,” he said as he looked me straight in the eye, “make sure your emotional house is in order. You don’t need to have any more weight in your back pack than you’ll already be carrying.”

Perhaps he knew something about Julie or another I did not yet know.

Jamie and I had hoped the south side of the mountain through Nepal would be more forgiving than its northern equivalent. Obviously, we were wrong. The Icefall was clearly a major threat. Even with the strongest Sherpas in the world to help carry loads through it, it was obviously a place we should avoid – if we could.

When we got back to our office, Jamie and I quickly pulled out a topographical map of the Everest region. Were there peaks in the vicinity that could afford us the opportunity to acclimatize and train for Everest without having to actually set foot in the Icefall before we were ready for our summit attempt? Sadly, the answer was no. In a telephone call to Steve Matous later that day, that fact was reinforced.

No, if we were going to climb Everest from Nepal, we were going to have to make many trips through the Icefall — like playing many rounds of Russian roulette. Laurie’s words came back to me over and over again in the months that followed. Much as I tried to put them from my mind, they haunted me. Would we too become corpses in the Khumbu?

*“It was a thing not of the eye or body,
but of the mind — a cloud of fear.”*

— TENZING NORGAY,
Man of Everest,
on deaths during an expedition
to Mt. Nanga Parbat

In climbing, and in life, we are often faced with fears like this, fears of the unknown. How we manage them, however, is our choice. I believe that on the other side of fear is freedom.

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The key to unlocking the door to that freedom is courage. Nine times out of 10, the disasters we imagine never occur. Yet we expend huge amounts of time and energy worrying about them.

So there we were — we didn't even have a permit to climb Everest and already we were afraid. Could we pull off a third trip to the mountain? Could we actually survive the Icefall? Where could we find the Sherpas who could help us? The only way to remove the doubt was to go find out.

“What I wanted was to see for myself; find out for myself. This was the dream I have had as long as I can remember. There they stood above me, the great mountains. And above them all Chomolungma — Everest. ‘No bird can fly over it,’ said the story. But what could a man do? A man with a dream?”

— TENZING NORGAY,
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