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The Opinion Pages

The Pleasure and Pain of the Climbing Life

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As a runt kid in a college town in Pennsylvania, I dreamed of grand adventures. Hidden treasures, human flight and sports, of course. I was going to be a football star. But in 10th grade, I weighed 85 pounds. The coaches refused to issue me equipment, breaking my heart but surely saving my life. Weight-class sports suited me better. I started boxing. My ethos was: train hard, never quit. It was enough to carry me to a collegiate national boxing title in 1990 (by then at 132 pounds). Then I moved to Montana for graduate school.

One day, one of my students mentioned that he was into climbing and was planning an ice-climbing trip. *Ice climbing*? Wanna go? he asked. A week later, on a column of frozen water overlooking a river near a run-down logging town, I found the answer to the poet Mary Oliver's question: *Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?*

I was going to climb.

With that, my priorities became clear. I tossed away my graduate degree, radically simplified my life and threw myself into the mountains. In the vernacular of climbing, I became a dirt bag. I lived in dingy apartments and shacks and worked a series of part-time jobs. The next 20 years took me to some of the most magnificent and difficult alpine terrain in the world. I made first ascents in

Pakistan, Peru, Patagonia and Alaska, and although my tolerance for risk may have been higher than some might think was prudent, none of my climbs seemed crazy to me.

That's because my partners and I were meticulous about the details and honest about our abilities. You have to be, when your every action carries consequence. Those remote mountains inspire you, but they scare you, too. You take a deep breath and walk toward them, their stone and ice towering above as you try to quiet your swirling doubts. In those moments, I loved it. I hated it. I swore this was the last time. Then I would step off the ground and embrace the unknown, working with my fear in a world of indescribable beauty.

Sometimes I can't believe it was me. On my first trip to Pakistan, in 2004, my friend Josh Wharton and I had our eyes on an unclimbed route on Great Trango Tower. From base to summit it rose for 7,400 vertical feet of technical rock climbing. Between us we carried a 28-pound backpack, two ropes, a rack of gear and a preternatural belief that bordered on magical. We completed our climb in four and a half days — the final two without water. On our last night, anchored to the rock in our sleeping bags, we watched the sun set over serrated ridgelines and an ocean of snow-capped mountains. Beneath us, over a mile of air dropped to the glacier. I loved feeling so small.

In February 2010, at age 41, I was in Montana, climbing better than ever. I'd been road tripping from my cabin in Colorado, after having come out of a very rough patch: My fiancée had nearly died of a rare brain disease, and during the month that I lived by her hospital bed, one of my best friends was killed in a climbing accident. Now, with the help of loved ones and the single thing that has always brought me joy — climbing — I was regaining my life. Friends and I were making plans: local routes on rock and ice, Alaska in the spring, Pakistan in the summer.

I had gone out for a day of ice climbing. On our warm-up route, I led and a friend belayed. I secured the rope at the top, then paused, taking in my surroundings in a moment of gratitude after the hellish previous months. The rope felt tight, but I didn't confirm it with my partner below. Stupidly, I leaned back — and fell. I dropped only 10 feet before the rope stretched taut and caught me. But

as I fell, my extended leg hit a ledge and my crampon bit into the ice as my body continued downward.

The next thing I knew, my lower leg was flopping to the side. Six surgeries followed in 13 months. I worked hard at rehab, and as soon as I was able, I returned to some of my old alpine haunts — Chamonix, Pakistan, Alaska, Patagonia. But I found myself increasingly distracted by pain, more scared, less confident than before. Inside my ankle, the remaining cartilage was rapidly disintegrating. Soon the bones were grinding together. With each trip, I felt like I'd aged a decade. Trying to be optimistic, I figured that even if alpine climbing was over for me, I could find satisfaction on gym walls and roadside cliffs.

Doctors eventually fused my ankle, which removed the gnawing and grinding that had left me in a haze of pain. Like the aging boxer who can't let go, I began to dream again. But it didn't last long. As a child, I had fractured a vertebra playing backyard football. Over the decades, it had slowly degenerated. Now spinal nerve pain was ramping up, pulsing and insidious. On good days I could still climb, so I'd hobble to nearby crags. On bad days, thunderbolts rolled from my spine and down my legs, and I would curl into a ball, disengaged from the world. It seemed like forever since I had known the person whose heart sang in the mountains.

By the time I got an M.R.I. this summer, I could barely walk for more than a few minutes. To straighten my body long enough to get the scan, doctors had to knock me out with general anesthesia. I never harbored the illusion that I would stay young forever. But surrender, I was finding, was harder than any climb.

At the end of August I lay on an operating table, an IV in my arm. That morning, I had turned in a round of edits for a book I was helping a friend write. It was part of my attempt to reinvent myself, I suppose. Still, I wanted my old life back, even just a little bit of it, to carry me forward. As the nurses prepared to put me to sleep, I felt pensive and hopeful. When I awoke, the news was encouraging. "It was truly awful in there," my neurosurgeon said of my spine. But awaiting me, he said, was "a new life."

I was determined to recover. But to do what? My feelings were complicated by the recent disappearance of my friend Kyle Dempster and his climbing partner Scott Adamson. Kyle and I had climbed together in the Karakoram Mountains of

Pakistan, where I had never felt more alive. In those same mountains, they were last spotted high up on the hauntingly spectacular north face of Ogre II when a storm hit. No trace of them has been found.

Was I still willing to accept the risks I once took? Did I still have the drive?

My birthday arrived two weeks after my surgery. I celebrated alone with a hike. I began walking at dusk, when the last flickering light cast soft hues upon the golden leaves of autumn. Soon I noticed my smile, one that seemed to have left me an eternity ago. The moon was nearly full, guiding me without my headlamp. After an hour, I reached an alpine lake at 10,000 feet in a glacier-carved gorge, surrounded by walls, spires and memories. How long had it been since I could walk even half this far?

Between the shadows and the stars, I gently scrambled to a rock outcropping. I stood and breathed slowly, staring into the distance. Along the margins of my consciousness, like a pulse I couldn't control, the question still danced: What would I do with my precious new life? I sat down and listened to the rippling water and the invisible wind. The answer seemed to drift just out of reach.

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