

1. THE MOUNTAIN

Why Climb?

This book began at 19,500 feet, dangling on the side of a rocket-shaped mountain I was told could not be climbed, fifty-eight days into an ascent I thought would take fifteen. I was sitting, exhausted, in the door of an unstable hanging tent pinned by one anchor to the sheer wall, my feet swinging out over two thousand feet of thin air. My shredded hands were bleeding through layers of protective tape, and my lips and ears had been scalded and blistered by the unfiltered sun. I watched the haunted faces of my teammates, swinging on ropes to chip ice to melt for water, looking to gauge what reserves they might have left. After months in this killing altitude, our strength was decimated, the food and fuel we came with was almost gone, and we were the last climbers still alive in the most deadly season in Karakoram history.

Surrounded by clouds, curling in tendrils around peak after endless peak to the darkened horizon, with drifting flakes of snow a reminder that the Himalayan winter had arrived, I felt compelled to think about the mountains that had led me to this far point. They had been improbable mountains, even impossible, some had thought—not pyramid mountains but parabolic, their sheared-off faces thousands of feet high, steep beyond vertical and seeming to defy ascent using only hands and feet. I began to study why,

against all odds, I had succeeded on those mountains. And why, on this mountain, I was so close to failing.

I had crossed half the world, trekked through the most precipitous terrain on earth, fought my way up a vertical mile of mountain, and had only 350 feet that remained to be climbed to reach this mountain's summit. But I did not know if what remained could be climbed. All the decisions we make on an expedition affect the outcome, and I pondered if there was something I could have done differently to make this outcome less uncertain. Did I make the right choices yesterday? Ten days earlier? Ten years ago? What, I wondered, leads to success? What, in fact, is the definition of success? How can the balance between success and failure teeter as precariously as the hanging tent I was perched on?

If I could finally distill the lessons that each mountain had taught me, I would have a guidebook to bring with me for all mountains. That guidebook wouldn't be a compendium of answers, but a set of strategies to help find answers in unknown terrain. It would identify the hazards and obstacles in any ascent, and discover ways to navigate through those obstacles. It would list the essentials you need to carry in your backpack when venturing into the frontier, and, just as important, what you essentially need to leave behind.

As the Himalayan night closed in with its cold and hostile embrace, I thought about strategies that would help me tomorrow, and would still be helping me twenty years from tomorrow. After that night I continued to think, to distill, to test and revise, to construct a strategic framework for success when you are facing the unknown, and this book is the end result. The last question I might have asked myself that dark and frigid night was: "Why was I here?" But that answer I already knew.

I was here because I heard that it was the highest freestanding spire and potentially most challenging free climb in the world—a dagger of golden granite rising 20,500 feet into the frozen sky of the Karakoram Himalayas. On the west side lay Pakistan and the border of Afghanistan. To the southeast stretched India, Nepal, and

Tibet, and directly east China staggered with mountains unnamed and unclimbed. The daunting east face of Trango Tower was ominously steep and sheer, with thin cracks and tiny ledges barely discernible along its rising face. The Himalayan experts, those who had been on Everest and nearby K2, doubted it could be climbed using only hands and feet, and at first I had no reason to question their disbelief.

The obstacles seemed overwhelming. At altitudes above eighteen thousand feet, you begin to die from oxygen deprivation, which inhibits the rebuilding of muscle. Even walking becomes difficult in such rarefied air, and gymnastic climbing is much more like a sprint. The thin atmosphere transmits searing heat in daylight, and numbing cold in shadow and darkness. Uncontrollable rock and ice fall are a constant menace in this environment, avalanches sweep down without warning, and the fierce Himalayan storms are frequently deadly.

The rock itself on Trango was a beautiful Karakoram granite, the climbing features perfect and beckoning, but the sustained difficulty made it the most technically challenging mountain I could find in any range on any continent. Unlike other better-known and often-climbed Himalayan peaks, it had no long snow ridges and sloping ascents, but rocketed up three thousand straight feet, like three Empire State Buildings stacked on top of each other, three hundred stories and no elevator.

So when the Polish climber Voytek Kurtyka first showed me a picture of the east face of Trango Tower and said I should go to climb it, I just laughed. But he was serious. It's not that he thought I *could* climb it; he didn't. But he thought this mountain represented the future of climbing, and I was the person best poised to begin the journey into that future. I had climbed the four most difficult big walls in North America, each of which could have been the goal of a lifetime.* I had won the American Alpine Club's prestigious Underhill Award for climbing achievement, and was

*The climbs are described in Paul Piana's *Big Walls: Breakthroughs on the Free Climbing Frontier* (Sierra Club, 1997).

recognized as one of the best rock climbers in the world. In theory I could have been content to rest on my laurels.

Why should I travel halfway around the world, pulling a team and tons of gear with me, to attempt an ascent of a mountain so obviously impossible to climb? What could I gain from it? How could I risk so much when I didn't really have to? But the idea of Trango Tower stayed in my mind, a knife blade of stone whose edge I could almost feel, and I began to think of it not so much as impossible, but as ultimate, the most difficult challenge I could undertake. And that was reason enough to try.

Trango Tower was more than just a mountain. It represented who I could become. Aspiration is one of the qualities that most defines us: who we want to be, where we want to go. Our real greatness lies in this desire to move higher, to step beyond where we are. It is both an individual impulse and the motivation behind a great team, whether that team is a partnership, a company, or a nation. We are always in the process of becoming—setting goals, defining values, delineating landmarks where we would like to arrive.

We are all climbers because we have this innate desire to rise, to improve our lives, to succeed at our endeavors. The real question is how do we achieve that rise and increase the odds of our success? To answer that question for myself, I had to develop a strategy of movement, a framework for making choices that could answer the question “What should my next step be in order to increase my level of success?” I realized that if you take the element of luck out of the equation of success, and in most cases luck plays a minuscule role, then success becomes a matter of making correct decisions. The right choice moves us forward, and the wrong choice sets us back. (Even hard work, which we often consider an essential component of success, is a decision to work hard.) But how do we know what the correct decisions are?

In a simplified example, you come to a crossroad that requires you to choose the left or right fork. Which way do you turn? Your answer depends entirely on your intended destination. Where is it you want to go? Using the information you have, you choose the

fork that is most likely to lead to your destination. If your destination is vague (“I want to go far . . .”), it is much harder to make the correct decisions because you can’t begin to guess which turns lead there. If every decision you make is based on a well-defined destination, you are much more likely to arrive where you want to go.

But destination presupposes a direction. Before we can decide where to go, we need to know why we are going, what we expect to gain from arriving there, and how that arrival will further our continued ascent. I have found that successfully climbing one mountain does not automatically translate to success on the next mountain, or to success in the larger life. It can, in fact, have the opposite effect and be detrimental to future success when we choose the wrong mountain, start out for the wrong reasons, or climb in a way that injures our ability to keep climbing. Every destination has to be placed in a larger context—we are not climbing to a solitary mountain top, but using each mountain as a step up a directed lifelong ascent of enduring success.

So “the next step” toward success is determined by the destination, and destination is determined by direction. While everybody has a different definition of what constitutes success, when you boil it down, success is gaining that which you find valuable. To achieve that gain, you first have to discover what it is that gives you value, which provides direction. Then you choose a destination that will move you in that direction. The destination you have chosen ultimately provides you with the answer of what the next step should be.

In mountain climbing, we refer to the organized effort to reach a defined destination as an expedition. That destination is the summit of the mountain, which might be a dollar amount if you are in sales, a finished book if you are a writer, a time or distance if you are a runner, a well-adjusted and capable child if you are a parent. A challenge of any kind can be thought of as a mountain, when your mission is to successfully complete the endeavor, or overcome a specific problem, and you have a defined destination in mind. Our lives are preoccupied with expeditions of varying difficulty, duration, and reward, and we often juggle many expeditions at

once—careers, family, demands of all kinds, each of which requires a conscious strategy to fully succeed on the climb. Expeditions become our primary means of ascent because they provide a destination and demand a strategy to reach that destination, and in the climb we gain what we seek.

Thus my strategy of movement evolved into a *Trinity of Ascent*, made up of the *Climber*—an entity, including any person, company, or group working toward a shared purpose, whose desire is to ascend; the *Expedition*—an organized effort to reach a defined destination; and the *Lifelong Ascent*—a continuum of success that helps you choose mountains by clarifying direction and ensuring each mountain contributes to your further ascent. The primary purpose of the Trinity of Ascent is to increase the gradient of your success by precluding drift, to prevent your life raft from floating aimlessly on the whim of wind and current, to give yourself a compass and a paddle.

To succeed on an expedition, you must think from the summit back, because all decisions are based on the destination. To succeed on your Lifelong Ascent, you must also think from the summit back. If we agree that success is based on making the correct decisions, and that correct decisions are based on arriving at a destination, then we do need an extended destination to be successful in life. I have come to think of that destination as our *Ultimate Potential*, the farthest point of gain on the line of our Lifelong Ascent. It cannot be precisely defined, because that would be self-limiting, but it gives us a theoretical destination to move toward, which elevates our choices and correspondingly our level of success.

Understand that since all your actions affect your future, the future should determine what those actions will be. To gain success, you need a solid framework for making decisions, and this strategy doesn't apply only to an individual person, but to any group endeavor that seeks enduring success. A business without a goal based on its Ultimate Potential must look to the past to decide how far it can go. A team without agreement on a summit works against itself rather than toward a common purpose.

Most of this book is about how to succeed on an expedition by employing conscious strategies to make the correct decisions that allow you to reach a defined destination—lessons I have distilled from the mountains that can be applied to any kind of mountain we set out to climb. But this chapter looks at how to choose mountains that fit on your Lifelong Ascent and move you farthest toward your Ultimate Potential.

1. You are a product of your mountains.

Each mountain you climb will change you, and the more challenging the mountain, the more you have to gain from the ascent. Your mountains include not only those you have climbed, but the mountains that others have climbed whose lessons you internalize; and the mountains you dream about climbing, which make you better before you ever set foot on them, and inspire you even if you never set foot on them.

“All our dreams begin in youth,” wrote Heinrich Harrer in *Seven Years in Tibet*, to explain his passion for climbing mountains and exploring strange lands. I found the same passion in my own youth, and it continues to steer my direction and choices. We are all aware of the compass we carry that naturally points toward what we value, giving us at least a sense of direction, but how do we refine that direction to get the most return on our investment? It often seems like direction is a matter of circumstance, dependent on the people and events that have shaped our course along the way. Because outside forces can so powerfully affect us, it is helpful to examine the past to understand what has bumped us on and off course.

When I look back carefully at my own life, I realize much of what I believe and value was influenced at an early age. My father, Bob Skinner, and his five brothers started a wilderness school for youth in the mountains of western Wyoming in 1956, two years

before I was born. They taught survival skills, like how to build a shelter in the wilderness when you had none, or a log raft without nails, to navigate wild rivers. But more than anything they taught self-reliance—how to recognize what needed to be done and find a way to do it.

They also taught the fundamentals of climbing mountains. My dad pioneered climbing routes in Yosemite, and British Columbia's Bella Coola Range in the 1950s, while working as a survival instructor for the Air Force. In the mountains, my dad always carried an old army-style backpack that would have killed a modern backpacker—an eighty-pound load slung on a short frame with narrow leather straps over the shoulders and no waist belt, called the "Mountain Mule." I was five or six when I first slid into the harness and tried to stand up. Talk about aspiration!

Every summer my dad or his brother Courtney would lead a month-long expedition to walk the spine of the Wind River Mountains and climb Wyoming's highest, Gannett Peak. I was eleven years old when I first climbed it in a grueling fourteen-hour ascent. While no one that young had ever climbed Gannett, my dad simply assumed I could complete the ascent, and because of his assumption, I could.

While my dad was herculean and pragmatic, Courtney, six years his junior, was a boundless dreamer, and eccentric enough to capture my imagination. Not only did Courtney dream in a way that often didn't adhere to logic or limitations, he had the ability to sell the dreams and make others believe. Pie-in-the-sky ambitions could come true, I found out, and I learned from Courtney to ask, "Why not?"

These two helped shape my youth, one by teaching skill and discipline, and the other the adventure of great dreams, and they illustrate how important heroes can be. We are always seeking the heroic in people, and the more we look for and believe in heroism, that ideal of greatness, the more we are likely to find it. Because we are all in a position to be guides as well as seekers, it is important for us to be mentors to someone else: a nod instead of a frown, the time spent teaching a skill, a hand held out to some-

one—all can make the difference in a life. We gain most not by reaching our destination, but by bringing others with us on the climb.

While people can affect the course of our lives, experiences are also critical in shaping who we become. The more mountains we climb, the more we learn how to climb successfully. Every challenge, even if it is unpleasant or unwelcome, has something to give us, and rising success is a matter of recognizing the value to be extracted from each climb. What doesn't kill you makes you stronger, they say, or, more accurately, what doesn't kill you has the potential to make you stronger, and after many hazardous undertakings, "I lived to tell about it" is one of my favorite expressions.

The mountains that influence your direction can also include ones that others have climbed, when you learn about them and internalize the inspirations they offer. For example, because my uncle Courtney spent five years in Antarctica with an American research team in the 1960s, I devoured every saga of polar exploration I could find as a kid, like Captain Robert Scott's grueling race to the South Pole. He was beaten there by the Norwegian Roald Amundsen and died of exhaustion on the way back, pinned down by a blizzard only eleven miles from his next supply depot.

And the story of Ernest Shackleton and his mates, whose ship, the *Endurance*, was caught in pack ice and slowly crushed. They were set adrift on floating pack ice that split beneath their feet and lived off seals and the supplies they had salvaged, drifting for six months toward the islands off Patagonia with no chance to be saved by anything but their own tenacity and ingenuity—one of the most gripping adventure tales you could ever read.

But the most horrific story that stayed in my mind was that of Australian Douglas Mawson, who went exploring the inland coast of Antarctica southwest of Australia in 1912. He left his camp at Cape Denison with three dogsleds and two companions. Six weeks and 320 miles out, one companion who was driving the sled with their tent, and all but a week's worth of food, broke through a

snow bridge over a crevasse the others had just crossed and disappeared, dogs and all, into the icy abyss.

During Mawson's desperate return voyage, the remaining dogs collapsed one by one and were cooked and eaten as they died. One sled was abandoned, and soon there were no dogs left to pull the second. After three weeks of toil with little food, Mawson's other companion died. Left alone to drag his sled over wind-honed ridges of ice, Mawson began to crawl on his hands and knees. He fell repeatedly into crevasses that split the glacier into shards, saved only by the rope connected to his stubborn sled. After ninety days' absence, Mawson stood unsteadily on the edge of the polar plateau overlooking his camp, only to watch the relief ship that had come to pick him up sail out of the harbor without him.

These were the most grueling experiences I could imagine, and they went a long way toward helping me understand what people are capable of enduring. That insight would serve me in the future, for one of my uncle Courtney's dreams was to stand on top of Gannett Peak on New Year's Day in the first winter ascent of the 13,804-foot mountain. While Gannett is not the highest peak in the Rockies, it is the most alpine in nature, with five glaciers sliding down its sides, and a remote and difficult approach.

Courtney convinced seven of us that his dream could be accomplished, and just after Christmas in 1978, we set off on skis to plow twenty miles into the wilderness dragging hundred-pound sleds. I was nineteen years old and had just finished my third semester of college at the University of Wyoming studying business and finance.

We had actually attempted the climb the year before, but an endless blizzard and minus-fifty-five-degree cold drove us back before we reached the mountain. It was an extreme goal, we all knew, but the magic of a winter Gannett ascent was that it condensed all the elements of a major expedition—the logistics, moving large loads through difficult terrain, a strenuous climb, and a long retreat—into the short frame of ten to twelve days.

To climb Gannett from the western approach involved ascending a steep, thousand-foot-high notch in the dividing rampart,

called Bonney Pass, descending that thousand feet to cross a mile-long stretch of crevasse-filled glacier, then climbing up rock and ice two thousand feet to the long snow slope of Gannett's summit. That was the climb I knew in summer.

Winter altered everything. It took us four days to break a trail through twenty miles of deep December snow where lakes were now just levels of white, rocks were mounds of white, and trees were lumps of white. We set our camp on the flank of Bonney Pass where we were out of the avalanche zone, we hoped. Four tents were anchored into the powder, and we dug a snow cave five feet under for our kitchen.

Our climbing window of opportunity was limited by both time and supplies. If the weather was clear at four in the morning, we would set out with a minimum of survival gear, traveling fast and light to make a dash for the mountaintop. In summer it was feasible to cross Bonney Pass, climb Gannett, and come back in the same long day. We thought fast-sliding skis would also make it feasible in winter. So when morning arrived clear and a balmy thirty below under dim starlight, we fixed headlamps over our ski hats and parka hoods, and climbed madly up the steep slope of Bonney Pass. We crested that summit at dawn, skied wildly down the other side, and coasted out onto the glacier only to be stopped dead by chest-deep powder.

We took turns breaking trail through the wallowy snow, moving fifty feet at a time, struggling to press on in our dash that had slowed to a crawl. It took us all day to cross the mile-long bowl of glacier, and when we reached the base of Gannett Peak, it was growing dark again. We had no tents or sleeping bags, only the warm clothes we were wearing, a stove to melt snow for water, and three days of emergency rations. I remembered from summer a large crevasse in the glacier near the mountain's base, and we broke into it from above, crawled onto an ice shelf, lit candles for warmth, and settled in for the night.

The day hadn't gone exactly according to plan, but there was nothing to worry about yet. We wouldn't freeze, we wouldn't starve, and in the morning we would be in position to climb the

peak and return along the trail we had already broken. But in the morning it was snowing, and we had to decide whether to go up or go back. Since we had come so far, we decided to go up.

It was another day of floundering through deep snow, struggling upward inches at a time. It began snowing harder, and the long summit ridge in the dim afternoon light seemed to stretch for miles. The visibility was so poor that I passed the summit and nearly stepped off the edge before we realized we were there. We had completed the first winter ascent of Gannett Peak, and after a few minutes celebrating on the summit, we started back in an all-out blizzard.

It was dark again when we reached our bivouac in the crevasse. We crawled in for another cold night while the wind whirled snow above our ice cavern. We cursed the fact that these were some of the shortest days of the year, and the longest nights. In the morning the blizzard raged harder than ever, with visibility down to a few feet. Our choices were gone; we had to get out, back across the pass to our sleeping bags, tents, food, and fuel. We started across the glacier, keeping within arm's length of each other to avoid becoming lost in the spinning snow.

The trail we had broken two days earlier had been erased by blowing snow, and we struggled to make a new one down into the glacier's bowl and back up the other side. We could not see through the blizzard the mountain skyline that marked the obvious gap of Bonney Pass, only a faint suggestion of three possible routes. Courtney and I debated which was the correct one. Three passes lead out of the bowl, each into different watersheds, and choosing the wrong one could be fatal. I thought back to the summer landscape, trying to remember the shape and details of terrain now buried.

The coach Bear Bryant once said, "If you make a mistake, make it at full speed." I picked what I believed to be the correct route, and we started up it because indecision wasn't an option. The daylight was fading, and it was pitch-black when we realized I had made the wrong choice. We started to dig snow caves into the

side of the slope, desperate for some kind of shelter, but we hit rock two and a half feet down and the holes kept caving in. Finally we dug simple trenches, placed ropes and shovels in the bottom as insulation from the rock, laid ourselves down two to a hole, pulled our packs over the top of us, and Courtney buried us there. We could not turn over or move more than a few inches, and in the dark silence, they seemed more like snow graves than snow caves.

I might have begun to worry then. Our stove was out of fuel, and we were down to sucking chunks of ice for hydration. This was our third night out without sleeping bags. Our emergency food would be gone tomorrow. The blizzard showed no signs of giving up, and Courtney was out in it, marching stiffly back and forth in the cold and whirling snow, so someone might be there to dig us up in the morning, if there was anything left to dig. I might have been a little worried then, but because of Shackleton, and because of Mawson, I thought not about how bad it was, but how much worse it *could* be.

At least, I thought, lying in my snow grave through the long night. At least the ice beneath me wouldn't split in the night and dump me into cold ocean. At least I didn't have to eat boiled dog paws. At least I wasn't crawling a hundred miles on my hands and knees. At least the ship wouldn't leave without me while I watched it go. So I waited for morning, and it came with small puffing sounds around me. Courtney was out with the long, thin wand of an avalanche probe, systematically sticking it into the snow where he thought he might find bodies, all trace of last night's burial party erased. I could hear the probe sucking in and out of the snow, and then it poked me in the ribs.

I can't say that was the end of our epic, but I can say I lived to tell about it. We fought our way back to a camp that was obliterated under seven feet of new snow, and I won't tell about a certain scream-raising episode where I mistakenly added beef bouillon to the pot of sweet tea I handed up by a pole from the kitchen cave, now twelve feet under. But my point is the point from which we measure extremes. If your insight, whether gained from your own

experience or garnered from someone else's, has been pushed to the frontier, you may be a long way off the ground, but you are not at the end of your rope.

That winter ascent of Gannett Peak pushed my margin of tolerance for snow and cold out to a point I have never again reached. Even at the time, I sensed it was a worthy investment into my future capacity. The experience has helped me during other difficult situations by giving me perspective, and it has helped my teammates. When they see me shrug at conditions they think are extreme, it pushes their own boundaries out to redefine the frontier. Any team, be it business or sport or academic, can benefit from this kind of insight gained at the margin, because it is a glimpse at how far you can really go. Someone on the team should always be out scouting the frontiers, pushing the boundaries, and coming back to adjust the team's scale and show the way to go on.

The important things you have gained from past experience can help you decide what to pursue in the future. It is that core sense of what you have valued that helps to clarify your direction and refine your compass setting. But don't forget that while you are a product of the mountains you have climbed in the past, and the mountains you are climbing now, most important you are a product of the mountains you dream about climbing in the future.

Aspiration is like a star shining over your Lifelong Ascent, pulling you upward like a beacon. It gives you a solid compass setting to move toward, a landmark in the distance to measure back from, a monument not to who you are, but to who you could someday be. We are better climbers today because our ultimate mountain is out there pulling us to try harder, learn more, and reach farther. A dream that is great beyond our abilities, a mountain that is harder than we imagine possible, can make us great in our aspiration to achieve it.

2. *True success means more than standing on the summit.*

We climb the mountain not to stand on top, but to gain from the ascent. Choose your mountains according to what you desire to gain, and how that gain will contribute to your further ascent. True success is not defined simply by how far you go, but how much farther what you have gained will allow you to go.

“Everyone has an Everest inside,” my uncle Courtney says. “It may not be a mountain peak, or a raging river, or a deep ocean, but we all have our ultimate challenges. It is reaching beyond our grasp, striving to go farther than we ever thought we could, that makes life worthwhile.” Courtney’s “Everest” really was Everest. That was his goal of a lifetime, and in 1988 he and my dad set off to climb it. My dad was fifty-eight, Courtney fifty-two, and between them and my older brother Orion, who joined the expedition, they had climbed the highest peaks in North America, South America, and Central America. On Everest, they chose the difficult Northeast Ridge route of Mallory and Irvine, crossing China and Tibet to get there.

They used no porters, deciding instead to give young American climbers a chance at Himalayan experience, even though all would have to haul loads, which made the ascent much more difficult. They wanted more than anything to *climb* the mountain, because that is what they had trained for, and that is what they dreamed about doing. They aspired to become the best mountain climbers they could be, and Everest represented the most challenging goal to move them toward that end.

Many difficulties conspired against them. They didn’t have money or renown to ease their passage. They would receive no external rewards for success, and sacrificed much to make their dream a reality. Travel delays led to a late arrival at the base of

Everest, and sixty-two days later, after three summit attempts, tornado-force winds destroyed their upper camps, and descending winter weather forced them off the mountain without reaching the summit.* It became one of the greatest adventures in their lives, and the experience has enhanced their ability to meet other difficult challenges.

Were they successful? By the definition that equates success with standing on the summit, they were not. If that were the only criteria, they could have chosen an easier mountain, or an easier route up the mountain, or had Sherpas all but carry them to the top. But none of those options would have gained them what they were seeking, which was maximum improvement in their ability to climb.

When you are considering the question of direction and destination, understand that to gain true success, the expeditions you undertake should be chosen according to what you seek to gain, and what will move you further on your Lifelong Ascent toward your Ultimate Potential. Each goal is like a building block that raises the structure higher, and the more substantial and solid each block is, the higher you can build.

Still, there is a seemingly infinite number of expeditions and mountains to choose from, so how do you decide which of them to set forth on, and why? Your Compass, which is an essential tool to carry in the Personal Backpack you always travel with, can point you toward mountains that align themselves with the direction you want to go and can help you filter out those that don't. You should refer to your compass whenever you feel like you might be drifting off course, and if you are forced off course by obstacles in your path, you can use the compass to find your way back.

Your filter will naturally reduce the number of opportunities that fit on your compass-indicated line of ascent, but don't be content with those that are left. The mountains you see at the moment

*The "Cowboys on Everest" expedition was chronicled by Sue Cobb in *The Edge of Everest* (Stackpole, 1989).

are not all the mountains that are out there—you need to actively seek opportunities on the far horizon, not simply wait for opportunities to come to you. Once you have increased the number of potential mountains that match your line of ascent, you can analyze each to see which will take you farthest toward where you want to go.

Also understand that the “seemingly infinite number” of choices can be severely limited by outside forces, one of which is letting others define success for you. Success is often externally defined by traditional currencies: money, fame, prestige, applause. But these “hallmarks of success” are frequently by-products of true success, of doing something very well, and to pursue the reward while trying to bypass the solid foundation of enduring success often results in a bad ending, as illustrated by the number of bankrupt companies in the news.

If you allow your success to be defined solely by a consensus of merit, your choice of mountains will be limited to only those others recognize and find valuable. You will be the thousandth to be carried up the easy route on Everest, rather than the first to climb some unnamed spire in outer Mongolia that will truly further your Lifelong Ascent. You will be applauded more for climbing Everest, but applause can be one of the greatest saboteurs of aspiration. To gain applause, you only have to stand a little higher than your fellows. You are given a sense of arrival, bringing your climbing to a standstill, while your Lifelong Ascent is still asking for departures. And if all you seek is accolades, how will you go on if the applause dies down?

Our choices and aspirations can also be limited by resigning ourselves to a lack of opportunity. We might feel we’ve been funneled down a single track by circumstances and the walls are now too high to climb out, or we don’t believe we can marshal the resources to change direction, or we don’t ever seem to be in the right place at the right time, as if life were a lottery and success a matter of receiving the lucky number. But opportunity is not simply a matter of luck, good or bad. As the scientist Louis Pasteur noted, “In the field of observation, chance favors only the prepared

mind.” You might need to be in the right place at the right time, but if you are not standing at the threshold when the door opens, you cannot pass through. You can prepare for opportunity the way you prepare for any kind of expedition. If your climbing gear is packed, and you are constantly scanning the horizon for the kind of mountain you want to climb, you will be ready when opportunity knocks your door down.

Aspiration—who you want to become—is one of the greatest motivational forces you have to tap in to. You want to actively expand the pool of opportunities that reflect your aspiration, as well as consciously break down the barriers that conspire to limit those aspirations. You then have a choice of mountains that all move you in the direction of what you seek to gain, and you can select among them for which will move you furthest. When you begin that selection process, remember that success doesn’t come from standing on the summit, but in rising to meet the summit, and if you choose an unchallenging summit, you will not rise far to reach it.

3. Choose the path of greatest gain.

Goals with the most rewards are often the most difficult to achieve. We pick challenging mountains not because they are hard, but because we have the most to gain there. We are trying to become people with the ability to accomplish remarkable things, and for maximum gain we must seek ultimate mountains.

My sport is relatively simple: you start at the bottom of a cliff and try to get to the top. When I speak to business groups, I like to illustrate this point with a photograph of a canyon wall in Mexico where I have trained in the winter. It is columnar basalt, a volcanic rock that forms evenly angular corrugations, like a wide stairway tipped on its edge. Each section of rock looks just like the next, and this uniformity makes one “summit” indistinct from all the

others. No point is really higher than the next, no cliff section obviously outstanding. But the difficulty of the climbing is not uniform, because minute variations in the rock make some routes easier and some more difficult.

I can drive to the top of this wall, and walk down a goat path to the base. I then have the choice of finding the hardest route up the wall, or an easier route, or I could walk back up the goat path. All end at the same place, which is not some inaccessible mountaintop. I could, in actuality, not even get out of the car, because I am on top already and could congratulate myself for being parked there.

But one of the motivating aspirations of my Lifelong Ascent is to be the best rock climber I can possibly be. My day's expedition to climb the wall, without reference to that aspiration, might be deemed successful if I chose either the easier route or the goat path, because I would have gotten to the top. But neither would make me a better climber, and, additionally, I would have lost the opportunity for gain toward my ultimate goal. If I simply stay in the car, not only will I not get better, I will grow worse. If any system isn't challenged, it doesn't stay the same—it atrophies. Every time I leave the ground, I am seeking nothing less than transformation, and the achievement of that goal most often lies on a path of great resistance.

Rock climbing, by any external definition, has no obvious practical value and might be considered foolish by some when risk is compared to gain. But what I value in climbing is that it asks for my best response on many fronts at once: physical strength, endurance, and flexibility; mental acuity in forethought, analysis, and problem solving; courage and tenacity of the spirit. I cannot gain an inch without applying these attributes, and I gain the most where the challenge is greatest.

When you are selecting your mountains, understand that you want to choose goals that not only move you in a direction you value, but move you maximally in that direction. With the choice of more or less challenging mountains, you must consider which will gain you the most success on your Lifelong Ascent.

We often base our choices on immediate gratification, what pleases or eases us at the moment. Without a more visionary framework to make choices, the moment is our only reference point. But those choices often affect us negatively in the future, sometimes catastrophically—businesses that collapse in the long term because they sought to inflate their stock prices in the short term, people who sacrifice their health in the end by choosing what made life more pleasant in the meantime. But even the threat of future consequences is not enough to change the way we make choices.

We need to move our reference point away from the moment and project it out toward our Ultimate Potential. When you make a choice, you don't want to ask, "Will the future catch up to me?" but "Can I catch up to the future?" The value of recognizing your Lifelong Ascent is that it makes you believe in the future—not a future of consequences, but a future of opportunity; not trying to avoid a negative, but to move toward a positive. When you envision who you could become, the light of that vision illuminates the path ahead and makes difficult choices easier because you can see where you could go.

To become remarkable people, we must see the extraordinary in ourselves and pursue the paths that lead us furthest toward our potential. Consistently striving to become more successful by choosing challenging mountains and climbing each to the summit leads to a Habit of Ascent. That is one in the list of essentials I have come to consider important to carry in your Personal Backpack. When ascent is a habit—a natural response to meeting challenge with an upward spirit—it is much easier to continue climbing. Obstacles are then mere detours, not dead ends; challenge is answered, not evaded.

I am grateful to my dad for teaching me a habit of ascent from the beginning, because habits learned early are the most enduring. While I spent the summers of my youth climbing and teaching survival, my winters were dedicated to skiing. My dad was an Olympic contender in downhill racing and became a ski instructor

and racing coach so my older brother, younger sister, and I would have the same opportunity. He was insistent that every turn we made coming down the slope be a conscious attempt at improvement, and he stood there and watched, and analyzed, and demonstrated, and watched again, diligent and omnipresent, until the idea of continual improvement through disciplined practice became ingrained in all of us, and his actual presence was no longer needed.

And while the goal of the moment was to be better at each turn, the aspiration was the Olympic ideal of becoming best in the world, and it was from that summit back that we measured ourselves every day. When I went off to college, my passion turned from skiing to rock climbing, but what I gained from competitive skiing was a hunger for the pursuit of excellence, and the habit of striving to achieve success, which I could apply to any field of endeavor.

A habit of ascent is one of the keys to unlocking the door to opportunities. When you pursue rewarding mountains to their summits, each accomplishment becomes a foundation block that raises your belief in yourself. When you believe in your potential to become equal to a challenge, you expand the pool of options to choose from. You don't automatically say, "I can't do that because I've never done it," but instead "I've never done that but I *have* done all these other things, and success in one endeavor can be applied toward any endeavor." A habit of ascent also increases your skill, knowledge, and ability, which widens the playing field because you have more resources to pursue opportunities when they appear.

So when you ask which is the better path to take on this day, consider what you stand to gain from each alternative. To decide what you should do today, you must know where you want to go tomorrow, and where you would like to arrive a year from tomorrow. The step beyond where you are is fueled by the intent to take that step, and intent is generated by recognizing value in the ascent: reaching higher ground is always preceded by a passion for seeking higher ground.

4. *First the dream.*

Who you are is not nearly as important as who you aspire to become. It is critical for the dream to come first, before you are daunted by the analysis of what it will take to achieve your end, before you decide whether it can be done, because the dream itself has so much power to pull you beyond where you think you can go. Do not limit your future by basing it on the past, projecting what you *can* do based on what you *have done*. Your goal is to be not just better than you were, but as good as you can ultimately become.

If you were asked to project a challenging mountain on the line of your Lifelong Ascent, a mountain you had every reason to climb because you would gain from it things that you value, what would that mountain look like? How big would it be? How difficult and sustained the climbing? How long would you have it take to climb this mountain? A week? A year? Twenty years? Would you measure your endurance before you chose the size? Would you take into account your skill before you assigned the difficulty?

If you and I were like most people, we would add ourselves up to see what we were capable of, consider how much we were willing to commit, how many resources we had to contribute, design our mountain to accommodate those factors, then take off 5 percent to improve our chances of success. It might be an imposing mountain—lofty, admirable, even award-winning. It would certainly be climbable, because we envisioned it that way.

But if we placed our self-designed mountain next to a truly ultimate mountain, one we couldn't see the top of because it stretched into the clouds, one whose uncertainties could not be planned for, where the route was unknown and the rewards uncountable, the

two would not be at all comparable. Instead of 5 percent below, our real ultimate mountain might be 500 percent beyond what we know we can do. Is it also climbable?

I ask the question to point to the difference between a goal and a dream. A dream is a mountain larger than we know we can climb. While goals are the mind's answer to destination, dreams answer to the heart, that belief that imagination can take us to wondrous places. Goals ask for action; dreams provide direction. Trango Tower was a dream for me, because I did not know if it could be climbed. That motivated me toward the goal of becoming good enough so I could climb it. A mountain half the size would make me only half the climber, for a dream that is close to your present capacity will not draw you nearly as far as one that has not been limited by what you know you can do.

As Thoreau pointed out, "If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put foundations under them." Whenever you can, you should base your goals on dreams, because the feel of a goal tied to a dream is entirely different from a goal without a dream—you are pulled instead of pushed. A dream is the motivational force that makes your destination worth going to. Even if the goal at hand is not your actual dream, if it moves you toward a dream on the horizon beyond, it can share the same lift.

The factors that limit your aspirations can also limit your dreams. Your past can be a limiting factor if you allow it to be. The past can be a real danger to the expansiveness of dreams because we so often look at where we have come from before we allow ourselves to imagine where we might go: "That is what I have done, therefore this is what I can do." When we gauge our future potential based solely on past accomplishments, we always choose a mountain smaller than we could actually climb.

The weight of the past can sometimes pin us in place—it took so much to get this far on the ascent that we cannot imagine climbing higher. Past failures, past effort, setbacks, disappointments—when we can't leave that weight behind, it is too much to carry on. If the past weighs you down, empty it out of your backpack and

make a fresh start. The reason that youth can dream so big is because it has so little past to hold it back.

In the present, a sense of arrival can limit dreaming. We win awards, and that suggests we must have accomplished all our dreams. We get rewards and assume we are already on top. Why go any higher when you are already a dizzying ways up? Because where you are is not where you can go.

I was asked by a very successful company to speak on this subject, because the CEO was concerned that his employees were too complacent. This company was the best in the world at what they did, and they had no close competition. Why, everybody asked, should they attempt to climb a bigger mountain, with all its risk and difficulty, when one the same size as last year's mountain was obviously climbable, and they would still be best in the world? "Why isn't a little better than others good enough?" they wanted to know. Better than others, I reminded them, is *not* as good as you can ultimately become. In freeing yourself from comparison with others, you are no longer tethered to their limits.

Even the future can put limits on dreaming when you don't believe in it—if you think the hand you've been dealt is the only one you have to play with, if you don't encourage yourself to reshuffle the deck, if you are convinced there isn't enough time left to win at the game. To continue to aspire you must find the direction that will gain you what you value, and dream about great mountains that could take you there. It doesn't matter whether others find value in your dream, or how many different dreams you pursue through life. But it is essential that the dream comes first, because it represents not what is likely, or even probable, but what might be possible.

5. Assume the sensational; pursue the impossible.

When a mountain is known to be climbable, the summit will be crowded and the route there overrun. To be a first ascensionist, you must think beyond known

summits. Because the unimaginable dreams of only last week become today's level of assumption, the platform of pursuit must be continually raised to leap beyond the present. If something is said to be impossible, that might be reason enough to try.

My mind-set for dreaming is to work continually on the frontier, to be a first ascensionist. If any piece of rock has been climbed anywhere, I have no drive to climb it myself because it has been shown to be achievable. If someone else has done it, I can eventually do it also, for the questions have already been answered. But on the frontier, the answers aren't known, and we often don't even know the questions. That is where the greatest gains are made, by launching into the unknown.

I didn't start on such a high ledge, but have reached this point by continually raising the platform of my pursuit. Aspiration has to be an evolution, because goals, once reached, must be recalibrated to continue your Lifelong Ascent. Aspiration often begins with admiration—wanting to emulate someone who is better than we are, and striving to become as good.

When I first started getting serious about rock climbing, at college in 1977, it was a sport still on the fringes, cultlike in its small circle of practitioners, infinite in its potential. There was no money attached, no structured hierarchy or referees. People pursued climbing as another skill of the outdoors, or simply because they loved to leave the ground, for there were no external rewards save a certain notoriety for seeming to taunt death from unhealthy elevations.

Because the sport was relatively new and formative, its leaders—those on the frontier of their time—were especially mythical, and the routes they put up on vertical stone were legends to be dreamed about, far too great for mere mortals. And in this arena I felt very much a mortal. At the University of Wyoming I was lucky to meet a fellow rock climber who was light-years ahead of me in knowledge and technique, for my skills were keyed to the 1950s era of my father's first ascents.

Paul Piana was from a small town in eastern Wyoming. I was from a small town in western Wyoming. The university was in another small town with a fine climbing area nearby of weirdly cracked and stacked bulging knobby granite. We were isolated from the larger climbing communities, places like Boulder, Colorado, and Yosemite in California, but we would read about what was happening there in the thin climbing magazines with their grainy, black-and-white photos.

And we were insulated from the rating system that was being defined on its upper edge by mythical climbers like John Gill, Jim Collins, John Bachar, and Tony Yaniro, a system that measures the difficulty of ascent from 1 to 5, with 1 representing a meadow walk, 3 approaching vertical, and 5 requiring technical skill and safety equipment. The fifth class is further divided into degrees of difficulty that increase with the decimal number. A forty-foot vertical ladder would fall just below the 5.0 rating because of the size and security of the hand- and footholds. Remove two-thirds of the rungs and that ladder might rate 5.5. The difficulty of a route is affected by the size of the holds, their distance apart, and the degree of slope. A rock-faced chimney would come in around 5.7 if the mortar was set back half an inch, but tilt that chimney out ten degrees and the difficulty could increase to 5.11. A brick wall with few gaps in the mortar, while merely straight up, might be a nearly impossible 5.14.

In 1960 the frontier of climbing was approaching 5.10 in difficulty. By the late seventies it had been pushed out to a seemingly mythical level of 5.12. There were no 5.12s in Wyoming when Paul and I started to climb together, and we had no idea how hard that really was. We would read about climbs like “Tales of Power” in Yosemite, or “Psycho Roof” outside of Boulder, and when we thought about them, we could hear harps, and angels singing. We would traverse the stone walls in our dorm’s basement, back and forth, back and forth, and hang on fingerboards at night when we should have been studying, and do pull-ups on doorframes between classes, anything to increase our strength and power in an attempt to rise toward that extreme level.

In 1979 Paul and I finally took our first road trip to Yosemite, to see what we had been dreaming about. It was like going into a cathedral, shoes off and head down. Paul still laughs at my trepidation when I began leading “Tales of Power.” I expected it to be so much harder, and I kept thinking I would come to the hard part and be stopped. We were both astonished when I completed the route. We had imagined it to be so impossibly difficult that we had trained correspondingly hard in preparation for what we had imagined, and we ended up much stronger than we had to be.

We were shocked by our success and realized that the routes we had been creating at our local area were as difficult as anything we knew about in the world at that time. It was exactly our isolation and insulation that had propelled us to the climbing frontier, because we had nothing to measure ourselves against but dreams and legends, and nobody to tell us that we couldn’t climb something harder than had ever been done. We could be visionaries purely because where we were mattered not at all, but where we might go meant everything.

The real value of aspiring to what somebody else has done is that it begins the process of aspiration. Paul and I never dreamed we could go beyond the climbs we read about; we were only trying to approach becoming equal to them. The standard was set for us, and we rose to meet it. But where, then, when you have met your heroes, do you go next?

It makes me think of two brothers near Paul’s hometown who climbed on boulders at their own local area. They were only interested in short, extremely gymnastic problems of movement, and they aspired to be like John Gill, a legendary boulderer whose book of outlandish climbing feats—captured in black-and-white photographs more powerful than video because they froze the improbable in midair—was read like a Bible, in short passages, because you simply couldn’t consume it all at once.

These brothers were also isolated, working in their own small climbing area to somehow approach the feats of Gill. Not only were they insulated from the larger world, they started to insulate themselves from each other: one became this static power master,

and the other a specialist in dynamic moves. Nobody could repeat their boulder problems, and they could not repeat each other's.

Like Paul and me, the two brothers eventually took a road trip to see what they had been dreaming about. When they succeeded on all of John Gill's boulder problems, they went home and eventually quit climbing. They had exceeded their aspirations, they had nothing more to pull them onward because suddenly they were out ahead, and they lacked a new destination to draw them farther. That is the danger in aspiring only to what someone else has already done, and why reevaluating your aspirations is essential to continued gain. Achieving your aspiration should give you courage to raise the platform to a new level, to set the standard higher even if you are out ahead. Remember that the magnetism of a mountain's pull is created by the magnitude of the dream. To accomplish great things, you must dream remarkable dreams.

If you aspire beyond what you know to be possible, how do you know if it is impossible, if you will be wasting your time chasing the end of the rainbow? In truth, the term "impossible" is applied more to things that have not been done than to things that cannot be done. Impossible is what you look for as a first ascensionist, because it clearly marks the frontier. Just setting your sights on it makes it merely improbable.

Pursuing the impossible is a creative way to expand your ability to both recognize and encounter opportunities. If your aspiration is not limited to what has already been done, your imagination is always looking for what hasn't been done. You cannot find what you do not seek, and the farsighted can always recognize more mountains on the horizon. The pathways to the impossible are rarely crowded, which leaves room for the intrepid to forge ahead. And the rewards of attempting the impossible, however you want to measure them, are the real opportunities of any unclimbed mountain.

In the 1980s Paul and I continued to find new heroes to admire, for European climbers swept in with breathtaking ability and raised the American standards by a full notch. When we reached that new platform, we again had to reevaluate, for what was above us now

was untraveled ground. We were looking at the biggest walls in North America—multiday climbs up sheer faces thousands of feet high where you didn't come back to the ground until you had reached the top. The difficulties in all aspects were enormous.

We would have to become pioneers, because there were no guidebooks to show the way. We would have to be first, and it is so much harder to break trail than to follow. What makes it easier is belief in your ability to raise yourself. While aspiration begins with admiration, and adjusts itself to achievement, in the end the only thing your aspiration can be anchored to is the pursuit of your own Ultimate Potential. The more fantastic your aspirations, the farther you will go.