



DEATH ON EVEREST—OUR DIRTY
LITTLE SECRET (AND HOW IT COULD
NEVER HAPPEN TO ME)

It could never happen to me. That's what you think. If I truly believed I was going to die climbing, I wouldn't go. When Mr. Liggett fell to his death, I had to do a lot of soul searching.

Up until that point, the closest I'd come to death on the mountain was when we were digging around for our gear cache at 19,400 feet on Aconcagua in 1995. I thought I'd found what we were looking for, but when I pulled back the tarp, I found a human hand. I could see the outline of a body under the snow. Then I noticed the ring finger on the hand that was exposed—the dead climber was wearing a wedding band. It was an extremely sobering moment.

As a mountaineer, you accept risk. You feel you can manage it. You try not to go in avalanche areas. You go

in the Icefall early when it's safer. And if you're not feeling up to it, maybe you rest for another day. You always feel as though it could never happen to you. For most pilots who meet misfortune, it happens before they take off. It's the same in the mountains. It comes down to bad decision-making. Obviously, I accept a reasonable amount of risk with some of the things I do. Everyone has different levels of risk management. There are days when people climb with a lenticular cloud hanging over the mountain and you go, "Oh, my gosh, I would never do that." You think, "I'm smarter, tougher, better. Whatever." That's true and false. The bottom line is, it can happen to you. You can do everything right and still die. You have to think about death and the possibility that it might occur. But you can't dwell on it.

If a big hanging serac falls on your head in the morning, even if it's early in the morning and you're walking lightly, well, I guess your number is up. When Mr. Liggett fell I found myself asking, "Is this fair to Maggie?" I was looking at fresh blood and the reality that a party of five went up, but only four came back down alive. That was a human being, not a statistic you read on a page and dismiss.

Does the death of a climber, albeit a stranger, stop you? Obviously, it doesn't. We're selfish. But this was supposed to be fun. Even though you get your butt kicked occasionally, overall it's a joyful experience. But this cast a grim cloud over the expedition for days. It made us realize, "Yeah, it could happen to me." Then, after a little time, you collect yourself. You decide, "OK, either I'm going to go home and quit this silliness or I'm going to double my concerns and attention to safety and learn from this." That's how we took it. After a couple days of self-doubt, I reinsulated myself that it couldn't

happen to me.

I went on.

Here's our dirty little secret—If no one ever died on Everest, it would not be as big a deal to climb it. If there weren't a high degree of risk involved, there would not be as high a degree of reward.

Almost anything you do that's high risk, has a high reward. And there's a fine line between success and failure. If you're an entrepreneur, the difference between doing great and not paying your bills is pretty slim. It's the same way with flying. They say that when shooting an instrument approach in the clouds, your brain is seven times more amped than a brain surgeon who is operating. But if you screw up and slam into cumulus granite, people think, "The fool." If you land without incident, people say, "Wow, what a good pilot." Same thing with climbing. People always asked, "Did you make it?" No one said, "Did you have a good time? Did you get along well? Was everyone in harmony?" It's "Did you make the summit?" The summit is invariably the measure of your success. So, obviously, we all failed quite a bit—or at least it was perceived that we failed.

You did have to accept a level of risk and understand that death could happen to you, while at the same time believing it couldn't happen to you. You appreciate life so much more once you realize how precious and precarious it is. That's one of the things you get out of climbing. You realize it could be taken away. A lot of climbing is down time. But when you are doing something, you are super dialed in. You're consumed with it.

There's a little bit of that man vs. self and man vs. nature when you climb a big mountain. I'm not sure a lot

of mountaineers would say it, but putting yourself in a dangerous place excites people and they know it. Nobody goes to see a tightrope walker one foot off the ground. They want to see someone on the wire high off the ground. Maybe the thickness of the rope is the same, but it's cooler when they're higher. Why? Threat of death, I guess.

If Jon Krakauer, who is a great writer, had gone and climbed Mount Everest and nothing bad had happened, he would have written a good book. But how many millions would he have sold? When the disaster of 1996 struck Everest, the world's attention was riveted on it. *Into Thin Air* became a gigantic bestseller. Same thing with David Breashears' IMAX film. Without the tragedy it would have been an absolutely epic case of film making, but fewer people would have gone to see it. It's awful to say, but those are the facts.

Even so, while death is a part of Everest, it is not the ultimate reason why we climb it. We don't have a death wish. If I'd taken the big bivouac nap up there, then some people would have said quietly that I was a selfish jerk. Others would have said, "He died doing what he loved." That's the great write-off. You don't want to die doing what you love. You want to love what you're doing and die an old man.

When I returned to Base Camp, I called Maggie at home. In my journal on May 1, I wrote:

I was afraid she had heard of the tragedy and was freaking. I got her at work and she sounded great. She had heard about the high winds from an Internet dispatch, but not the death. As much as I tried I couldn't suppress my cough. She sounded concerned and also pointed out that it was now May 1. Her unspoken message to me was, "let's

get this over with and carry on with our lives together.” The message is clear, especially in light of the tragedy.

On the one hand we’re really well acclimatized and we’ll be ready to go after five or six days of rest. On the other hand, is it really worth it? I’m not sure, but I’m going to be extra careful and I’ll turn around if it doesn’t feel right.