

Mountain Vision Lessons Beyond The Summit
Chapter Excerpt

We filed out one by one into the darkness, leaving Camp IV behind. The sense of anticipation and nervousness that had been with us as we made our preparations soon melted into the hours of trudging up steep snow slopes and across rocky bulges. The wind beat down on us, but we moved efficiently, following each step with a few resting breaths. The object was to keep making progress upward through the packed snow and ice surface below, while holding on to enough strength to see the night through.

Even though our whole team was in a line moving upward, the setting was intensely isolating. The only thing I could see was the small pocket of light immediately in front of me provided by my headlamp, past that it seemed like the rest of the world had gone away. I found myself lost in my own thoughts, Erik trudging along happily behind me in some of his favorite terrain.

It was as we were packing our equipment that I first noticed a strong sensation in my chest. It was hardly noticeable at first, but as we made our final preparations and set off into the cold night, it grew stronger. It wasn't a pain, but a tingle that was welling up inside me. With my medical training, I knew the cardiovascular risks we'd taken by being at altitude so long, but I didn't feel afraid. The sensation wasn't hurting me, it felt more like it was giving me strength. Now, making our way over the ice bulge, I could feel it increasing. The farther we buried ourselves into the thick, stormy night, the better I felt.

Instead of fading down, the storm that had accompanied us since we woke seemed to be picking up strength. We could hear thunder through the roaring wind, and we weren't sure how much further we'd be able to keep going. Lightning is a very rare event on Everest, but with climbing gear and metal oxygen tanks strapped to our bodies, it wasn't something to take lightly. As the rough weather drew nearer, we kept an ongoing discussion on our radios, eventually deciding to go just a little farther and see if it would fizzle out.

Despite our worries about the weather, I found myself continuing to feel better and stronger. The sensation in my chest was driving me on, and my pace started to pick up. Chris and Erik, who were immediately behind me, urged me to forge on ahead, so I let my legs go free and started passing some of my team members. Eventually I found myself at the front of the group and decided to venture out ahead a couple dozen yards.

I recognized a rock feature that would mark our halfway point to the summit. We had agreed we should stop there to assess whether we'd be able to continue. The thunderstorm we feared was still raging in the distance, but things seemed to be going very well otherwise. Despite the fact that we'd spent an extra day at Camp IV in the death zone, we were in a groove. Everyone was moving along at a brisk pace. I stopped to look ahead. Behind the electric flashes, a small dot of light was peeking through. As I waited for the rest of the group to arrive, it grew larger and brighter, until I could make out the outline of perhaps the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. The sun was rising just over the Everest summit, casting an

inviting glow over the mountain. I spent a few awestricken minutes, taking it in before I turned to face my team. We all nodded to each other and, without a word, went on.

The feeling in my chest was like a small fire now, driving me farther ahead. My strides came quickly and easily, outpacing those of my teammates. Under the glow of the sun, I was free to wander farther ahead and remain roped in and within site. As I pushed higher, the storm that had threatened to engulf us had fallen just short. It was sitting a few dozen yards below our feet, spread out like a carpet under the ridge we were working up. The clouds were nearly perfectly flat, the lightning popping like squares on a disco floor. It was spectacular, but I wondered if my brain was suffering from oxygen deficiency. As a medical professional and someone who's seen 107 Grateful Dead shows, I know that not everything your mind conjures up under those conditions exists in the outside world. But, to my relief, my teammates were amazed at the same awesome sight. For those few minutes, we walked on the clouds.

All through the night, we'd been following a set of ropes left by a previous team who had chosen the same route. We didn't need them necessarily to find the way, but they would be critical for the descent if a storm were to move in and disorient us. At that altitude, a nice 80 mile-an-hour gust could push a climber directly off the side of the mountain and into a half-mile fall. Likewise, we could use them on the way back down from the summit. In white-out conditions, a climber could lose his orientation and step right off the side of a cliff, as one had done the previous day.

I'd reached a point, however, where the ropes stopped. We were about a quarter of a mile from the south summit, a peak just a few hundred vertical feet and a couple of hours from the actual summit. The way forward was obvious, but the ropes were buried under a couple feet of snow. A new rope had been fixed, veering off onto a different path 40 feet to the left that led through a field of rocky shale.

I had come to what I call my leadership moment. It was my chance to choose the easy way, or to sacrifice for my team. I had been feeling great, and the short detour on the left would have given me a fairly quick trip up to the south summit, with the final summit just a short journey beyond. The sun had come out and burned away the clouds, leaving us with a clear, windless morning. This would be the best chance I could ever hope for to achieve every climber's dream, reaching the top of the highest mountain. But I knew from my years of guiding Erik that the detour route would be very difficult for him. The ground was almost completely loose shale. It would be like walking on broken dish plates, taking a few steps forward not only to get ahead, but to fight the tendency to slide backward. That kind of ground was exhausting for him, and I knew he might not be able to navigate it and still have the strength to push for the summit.

The way ahead would be great going for him, but it would mean digging out the ropes. In the thin mountain air, the effort would be excruciating. It would mean more than an hour of work, and I'd certainly be too exhausted to go on afterward. I finally understood what that feeling in my chest was, and what it was for. I took one more look to my left and the easy path. I followed it with my eyes up the south summit, through the small ridge beyond, and up to the goal that had been a dream for so many years. Then, I took a deep breath and let it go. It was time to dig.

I was surprised to find that I wasn't bothered by my decision. I'd come to Everest to help Erik get to the top, my aspirations were secondary. I had done my job and would probably make it to the south summit. It wasn't the summit, but it was close, and I didn't need to take it any farther than that. I think it was in that moment I finally understood what leadership is all about. It's not defined by a title or a role, or how many people answer to you. It's about seeking opportunities to step up and showing your team you're willing to put their success above your own. These chances come every day, whether working on a mountain or in a cubicle, you just have to take them.

With the decision made, I started to chop into the ice and pull the ropes free. It was tedious and tiring, but also comforting to know my long trip was near an end. I knew with certainty I would not be able to continue on. My arms burned from the effort, and my lungs screamed as I drove my ice axe down again and again, freeing a few inches of rope with each blow. Finally, I neared the end of the digging as the team caught up from behind. As the first climbers came within a few yards, I broke the last block of ice, springing the rope up in a taut line to the south summit. The work was finished, and so was I. I could barely breathe, and even the sensation in my chest that had given me such a deep well of strength was exhausted.

I fell down to my knees. I looked back to my climbing partners and a huge wave of satisfaction rolled over me. One by one, they came to me as they realized what had happened, and offered their thanks. Erik had been last on the line and was the final teammate to reach me. He asked if I could go on, although he had to have known I was depleted. Looking across the ridge, I knew I couldn't make it. It was possible I'd reach the top, but I'd never have the strength to get back down. Beneath my mask, I tried to force a smile. "Tagging the summit is optional," I answered, "but going home isn't." Neither of us spoke for a moment. After everything we'd gone through together, it was finally time to reach the highest point, and I'd given it up for him.

Erik looked back to me. "Can you get down?" he asked, the pain evident in his voice. I told him I could. He seemed to be trying to undo the moment, not wanting to accept the situation. And then, my friend did the only thing he could: he thanked me, gave me a hug, and went to finish his ascent.

I sat on my knees watching Chris and Erik catch up with the rest of the group at the south summit. From there, it would be a two hour climb across a daunting ridge, followed by a short climb to the top. I couldn't believe he was actually going to do it. After all the experts and critics had told us why it would be impossible, he was going to beat this thing. I was in no hurry to make my way down, just taking in the calm and quiet of the setting. The summit pyramid seemed so close I could touch it, sitting like a jewel with the moon hanging just above it. From so near the top, I could see the deep shadow it cast over Nepal, holding miles and miles in darkness hours after daybreak. I wondered if Everest would cast a shadow in my life as well, knowing I'd made it so close to the top without succeeding.

As I pondered this, the group reached the south summit. Erik turned back one last time to wave in my direction, and then continued on. I knew he was going to reach the top, and I wanted more than anything to share that moment with him. At the risk of sounding mystical, I feel that life gives you a nudge sometimes. I've always tried to keep watch for those times

when the world seems to be speaking to me, and this was one of them. After sitting in resignation for nearly 5 minutes, some of my strength had returned. I didn't know if it was enough for me to make it, but I didn't want to spend the rest of my life wondering. With my last bit of strength, I rose to meet and followed behind.

Beyond the south summit, you follow a ridge towards the top that becomes very steep very quickly. One wrong step to the right wins you a 10,000 foot drop into Tibet, while the prize for slipping to the left is a 6,000 foot fall into Nepal. If I fell, I was convinced it was probably going to hurt pretty badly. I thought of this as I tried to settle my rubbery legs and make my way through. It only took about an hour to catch up to the rest of the group. I fell in behind Erik and Chris. If there were any questions about why I'd changed my mind, my teammates kept them to themselves. We were all too exhausted to have the conversation.

Past the ridge lay the Hillary Step, the most famous 40 feet of climbing granite in the world. When Sir Edmund and his team first scaled the mountain in 1953, the Englishman relied on aerial reconnaissance to map out routes to the top. The photos available at the time had masked the short rock face that serves as the last barrier to the summit. With no way around it, he simply powered his way over it to reach the top. The face has borne his name ever since.

I had always thought if I reached the Step, I would climb it gracefully. I wanted to approach it like a work of art, a sort of climbing ballet. In reality, by the time I arrived, my body felt beat up and ruined. Unable to muster any technique or finesse, I embarked upon the ugliest piece of climbing you've ever seen. I flopped my arms upward, like a fish on the deck of a boat, hoping my hand would find some grip. Slowly and painfully, I heaved and convulsed my way up over the granite face in grotesque exhibition. I think I even tried to use Erik's foot as a hold a couple of times. In the end it didn't matter, because 30 minutes later I was standing on top of the world with a blind man.