

Your Summit Awaits with Jamie Clarke

MAKE YOUR DREAMS YOUR GOAL

My name is Jamie Clarke. My childhood dream was to be a mountain climber.

I've spent most of my life either preparing for or climbing mountains. And I have had the great fortune to climb the tallest mountain in the world, Mount Everest.

Little did I know that my greatest reward would not be reaching the peak, but the lessons I learned on the way. Because the mountain climber's true measure of success is not about reaching the top, but the journey it took to get there.

CARE ENOUGH TO CONFRONT

My dream to be a mountain climber; I jumped at my first chance to join a Canadian group with plans to summit Mount Everest. Took some effort, but I was able to convince the leaders to take me on as the Base Camp Manager. I told them I'd do anything: I'd manage equipment, I'd brew coffee, I'd dig latrines—the grunt work.

Though I would not be given a chance to climb for the summit, I was happy just being part of a group going to Mount Everest. The team spent eight hard weeks on the mountain battling snow storms, altitude sickness, a few people were hurt, nobody was killed. In the end, no one reached the summit.

Once home, we knew we had to go back. But before, we had to sit down and figure out what went wrong. We made lists of things we need to improve upon which included changes to our climbing route, time of year. And one very important thing:

Next time, bring more toilet paper. Yeah, toilet paper. We actually ran out of TP...

Some of the Tibetan food didn't agree with us. The salt tea was particularly problematic. I'll spare you the gruesome details, but know the drink caused a violent reaction with our digestive systems. In short, we used more toilet paper over the first two weeks than we anticipated for the whole expedition.

When we first realized we were running out of TP, everybody had a positive attitude. But soon things turned ugly.

And we're out of toilet paper. So we fought about that. We focused on toilet paper like it was some kind of big deal. Inconvenient, sure, but it's just toilet paper. But the real problem was we weren't being honest. We weren't being honest with ourselves or the situation.

There were problems we wouldn't even talk about: Avalanches. Frostbite. Failure. Death. Troublesome too was the realization that maybe our ambition was unmatched by our ability. It was hard to accept that friendships were being damaged. Not being honest, we fought about toilet paper as a way to avoid the more uncomfortable, more important issues. And in the end, nothing was resolved.

Arguing about these infractions is what we do because facing real problems head on is much harder. Life demands that we care enough to confront; to share and hear the brutal truth. Too often we're more willing to live with the dull ache of discontent, than we are to endure the acute pain of a confrontation.

Because of this, our expedition lost its best chance to reach the summit.

Sometimes we avoid real issues by fighting over toilet paper. We can't waste time and energy on toilet paper. We have to accept that confrontations will occur and when they do....we have to find the courage to address them head on.

FOLLOW YOUR PASSION WITHOUT OBSESSION

And so for the second time, armed with this bit of wisdom and, of course, more toilet paper, we return to Mount Everest. Or Chomolungma, as the locals call it. After two months of effort we find ourselves in position for our summit bid. Any expedition may have twelve or more members; it's not uncommon that only one or two would go for the summit. But those who do can count on the teammates to be in position to support them.

Two climbers, John and Dennis were selected to go for the summit. The summit push and return on Everest takes 24 or more hours. Leaving their tent at midnight, John and Dennis climbed for six hours in the darkness. Then the Himalayas exploded into the dawn of a new day. Dennis begins to feel the effects of the altitude. Pulmonary edema. Fluid pooling in his lungs. He can't continue. So he climbs down to top camp.

John continues on alone for nine more hours. He sits in behind a rock, and gets some shelter from the wind and blowing snow. To rest, warm up, think things through. Can see barley anything.

The clouds and blowing snow have obscured his view. But finally the clouds part the summit reveals itself. It's a city block away! Reaches into his pocket, pulls out his camera, takes a picture of the top of the world. With less than an hour of climbing he will be there!

But it's already three o'clock in the afternoon. It'll be dark by six. John'll be more than ten hours on the descent. What to do? Continue up? Turn around? What would you do?

You know you're not coming back next weekend. You certainly don't want to go down.

You've got the fever...summit fever. When enough is just no longer enough. You're intoxicated with the possibilities. Worried about the consequences. Confused. Clouding your perspective, your desire to reach the summit. Your desire? No, this is passion. But has this passion bled into obsession?

We're all susceptible. Winning at all costs. The ends justifying the means. Another late night at work. Another weekend at the office. Perspective lost. Passion? Passion will get you to the top, but obsession. Obsession will get you killed. And we need to know the difference.

KEEP YOUR PROMISES THROUGH YOUR ACTIONS

John reaches into his pocket, pulls out his radio, and calls down with his decision.

"Okay John, how do you feel?"

"Yeah Dennis, I feel, I feel fatigued. Disappointed. Relieved, I guess. I can't go up anymore without jeopardizing my life. I've accepted that I don't have it in me, not this time. Not with this sequence that took place to make it to the top. Over."

John continues to work his way down the mountain taking long breaks and getting cold. Not just fingers and toes cold, but stomach cold, gut cold.

We shout at him over the radio to keep moving. But he just sits there. Snow drifting around his legs. He's numb from the cold. Tired from the weeks of effort. He's not responding to us. He's falling asleep. We have got to get someone else on the phone who means something to him.

With the satellite phone we place a call half a world away. Back home, it's the middle of the. John's wife picks up. The ring wakes up his daughters, they jump on the line. They're nine and eleven years old, excited to talk to their dad. The voices of the girls stir their father into action, reminding him of a promise he'd made, promise not to die on Mount Everest.

The girls talked their dad down the mountain.

That was a thirty-two thousand dollar phone bill. I remember thinking to myself “we should have called collect!” It took two years to pay that bill, but it was worth every penny because the girls got their dad back.

With John safely down and recovering, our expedition is over. The weather was getting bad, supplies were dwindling, and nerves were shot.

We got home; we met up with John at the airport. He was there with his girls beaming at his side. It was love that got him down from the mountain. John's girls trusted that their dad would keep his promise. And he did. In our lives, what matters is not the promises we make, but the promises we keep.

FACE YOUR FEARS, FOCUS ON WHAT'S IMPORTANT

As I boy, I'd made a promise in my mother's kitchen. A promise as an adult, I intended to keep. And so, we went back to stand upon the summit of Everest.

Three years later, and for the third time, we return to base camp—a group of Canadian and American climbers. Along with our Sherpa teammates, we establish four camps on the mountain. The top camp sits at 8000 meters, 26,000 thousand feet. But the first challenge in climbing Mount Everest: The Khumbu Icefall.

The icefall is the result of a glacier falling bit by bit down a 2000 foot cliff. The entire mass moves about three feet each day. All the while it busts apart, cracks up creating cliffs of ice and deep crevasses. Through this dangerous labyrinth we must navigate in order to access the upper mountain and the summit itself. With repeated thaws and freezes, the entire place is as unstable as it is unpredictable. Some of these crevasses - three hundred feet deep. To get across the larger ones we rope together ten-foot lengths of aluminum ladder to build a bridge of sorts. Under our weight, the ladders bend and bob as you look down to place each foot.

Standing on that ladder I began to understand what it was we were trying to conquer. For years I thought it was rock and snow, wind and gravity. How wrong I was. A climber's biggest challenge is fear. Fear in the icefall of falling, injury. Fears of the unknown, change. Fears of failure, ridicule of others. But fear isn't only the nemesis of a climber. It can be an organization's as well. People are often too fearful to make a decision, to take a step, and that kills progress.

How do we conquer these fears or at least control them? Well, it's quite simple. It's not easy, but it is simple. Managing fear is about focus.

Where in your life do you put yours? On the rungs of the ladder? Or the crevasses below?

How do you get across? It's about focus. Focusing on what's important: the relationships we build, the work we do, the people we care about, the skills we cultivate.

We can't dwell on the crevasses in our route. If we dwell on them, we go nowhere. Stuck. Instead, focus on the rungs. Take a step. Another will follow. Trust in what's important. And in that moment, fear's shackles released. Take another step. Momentum gained. Fear managed, maybe even conquered.

And know this: On the other side of fear...freedom. Freedom to live the life of our design. Focus on the rungs.

THANK THOSE WHO HELP YOU TO THE TOP

Finally the weather breaks. We're in position for a summit push. We're welcomed by a full moon reflecting the sun's light. No need for headlamps. We pound up the mountain ahead of schedule. Carefully we climb along a knife ridge until in the distance we can see a small patch of snow that is the top of the world.

Ten feet short of the summit, I stop and wave my Sherpa friend, Lakhpa, through. Wanted him to go first as a gesture of

thanks for all the years of friendship and support. Without Lhakpa and his Sherpa teammates, these expeditions would be half as meaningful and frankly, twice as dangerous.

I'm reminded that whenever we climb, whatever we climb, we never climb alone. It's important, when we get to the top, to look back and appreciate all the others who made it possible to get there and give thanks.

Lhakpa offered rice from the Dalai Lama on the summit, flapped his Nepali flag in the wind. Moments later, he calls out: "Jamie, come, come."

I kick my crampons in and stand on the summit of Everest. My childhood dream had finally come true. I wanted to take it all in. Never to be forgotten. And in that moment, I realized for the first time in my life there was no more up. No more struggle. And when those two constant companions finally parted, all that lingered was peace. It was, no conquer, no fists pumping in the air. Just peace. I spread my arms out and looked out above all else and gave thanks.

LOOK TO THE FUTURE, YOUR SUMMIT AWAITS

My hope for you is that you go forward in the work that you do and the life that you live knowing that your summit, however distant, or veiled by cloud, is ready to welcome you. I wish you the courage and the passion to keep climbing.

Your summit awaits—go to it!