



THE ALPINIST PODCAST

SEASON 22

We love hearing about hard sends—the jams, the smears, the sweat that goes into reaching the tops of routes. But even more important are the personalities pulling it off. In this season, host Abbey Collins digs deeper into the people behind the climbs.



Climbing Isn't Everything with Andi Zischler

In the twilight of her career, Andi Zischler is still climbing. She's one of the best rock climbers in the world, but she's also a mother, a wife, and a coach. She's a woman who's climbing in the twilight of her career, and she's still climbing. She's a woman who's climbing in the twilight of her career, and she's still climbing.



After Hours with Jonathan Winstanley, Peter Hume, and David Phillips

This year, Jonathan Winstanley, Peter Hume, and David Phillips are climbing. They're climbing in the twilight of their career, and they're still climbing. They're climbing in the twilight of their career, and they're still climbing.



The Best Climber in the World with Rich Armstrong

Rich Armstrong is one of the best climbers in the world. He's climbing in the twilight of his career, and he's still climbing. He's climbing in the twilight of his career, and he's still climbing.

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FULL VALUE

Jill Wheatley | Illustrations by Andreas Schmidt

Ascending Beyond Sight

Bavaria, Germany, September 2014

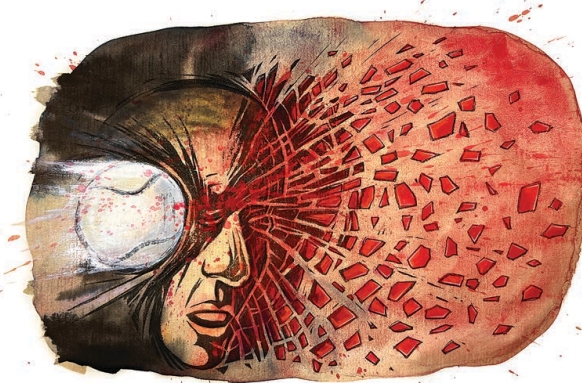
MY RIGHT TEMPLE WAS STRUCK with a force that felt like it came directly from an aluminum baseball bat, rather than the ball that had been hit in my direction at ninety kilometers per hour from thirty meters away. At impact, life began moving in slow motion. Within a blink of an eye, without time for conscious reasoning, I knew the injury was extreme. As if from the eye of an eagle soaring above the field where I sat, injured, I witnessed my life change immeasurably in a split second.

THAT MORNING HAD BEGUN like any other. Daylight hours were fading fast while autumn's amber graced the German countryside as September settled in. Eyes open in the night's silence, I glanced at my watch and then stepped out of bed a little after four, long before the sunrise and minutes before my first alarm sounded. (I would always set multiple alarms at odd minutes, though they were rarely necessary.)

It was years before climbing entered my life, but I'd always been an athlete. I sipped on hot coffee while layering up in Lycra for a seventy-five-kilometer training ride around Lake Starnberg, Bavaria's second-largest body of water. Back home, I put my bike away and packed myself breakfast and lunch before driving the twenty-five minutes through winding countryside to the international school where I taught sports, exercise and health science and coached cross-country.

The overcast grey sky suggested a light rain jacket might be prudent for my first lesson of the day. Brighter than the weather outside were the eager eyes of my tenth-grade students, gleaming with excitement as they took in the stack of baseball bats. We quickly reviewed key skills from previous lessons before I demonstrated technique and randomly split the twenty teens into three skill development stations where they would practice with gloves, balls and bats.

Within minutes of the students splitting off into groups, I was cradling my head. I sat



leaning on my left side, resisting the temptation to get horizontal on the damp grass. Like a kaleidoscope, the scene in front of me changed often and nonsensically: Melinda, a teaching colleague, running toward me with her long brown hair blowing in the autumn air, each movement stretched out, almost ethereal; green scrubs and the stubble of a dark beard, too close for comfort, intersecting the beams of surgical ceiling lights; me in the fetal position sandwiched between a car's door, passenger seat and floor while feeling like saturated laundry being tossed in a tumble dryer. Somewhere amid the chaos an ER team was content with my condition. Satisfied that I knew my name and where I was, they gave the green light for our school athletic director, Andy, and Melinda to drive me home. I used my hands to try to cushion my cranium as I longed for the rumbling to stop.

Back in my loft I felt agitated and stirred slowly, restlessly, in search of comfort and ease on my lumpy mattress centered on a wooden frame. Rustic walls and windows loomed above—cattle and corn, sheep and shovels mingled in the barn below. The throbbing in my head intensified; with every pulse I heard calls from within to toughen up, echoed by

This is not right. Deep within, I housed a sense of certainty there was more to this “black eye” than color and closure. But who was I to question medical experts?

The following evening, a friend flew in from the UK to accompany me in competing at the World Duathlon Championships in Zofingen, Switzerland. Instead, Chris brought me back to the emergency room. This time, an MRI showed my brain bleeding and swelling, cocooned in a fractured skull. The misdiagnosis and the avalanche of other problems triggered by the traumatic brain injury (TBI) led me to death's doorstep.

Time felt as if it were standing still. In reality, it took about ten days for doctors to get the swelling under control and for the bleeding to cease. A few days later, I slowly started moving, but movement was unnatural, unfamiliar and unstable. Reality started to sink in. My arms extended like the wings of an airplane as I walked and my forward momentum wavered. With my right hand in constant contact with a wall, each slow, shuffled step necessitated a break, a deep breath and deeper self-talk. The hammering in my head horrifically intensified with any attempt to satiate my craving for movement. I fought to mask my feelings, my



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fears. I began to fear labels, loss, stereotypes and stigma; my morale plummeted. As I settled into darkness, and with shame in my scars, the only hope I had—to not wake to see another day—grew stronger.

My days were filled with different therapies targeting motor function, coordination, balance, sensation and depth perception. Each therapist had their own guaranteed fix that turned out to be anything but. It was an infuriating pattern that felt like what I now recognize as a series of false summits.

Tübingen, Germany, February 2015

AFTER SIX MONTHS OF medical care in a trauma hospital, doctors moved me to an eye specialist in Tübingen. There, my providers determined that the complexity of the trauma to my brain had left me with vision coming solely from my lower left eye. Essentially, paralysis of my right eye threw my body and my world off-balance. My “black eye” would never reopen. I would spend the rest of my life with limited eyesight.

Each eye has an optic nerve, a one-way connection responsible for carrying signals from the world to the brain. My right one was destroyed. Suddenly I was forced into a new way of seeing the world. With my left eye now naturally focused on the ground, I learned I needed to make an exaggerated vertical movement with my head to see above the horizon. Looking someone in the eye took physical effort. With what felt like the weight of the world on my head, I endured months where conversing and trying to understand where my life was headed inevitably buried me further.

At the same time, my brain was trying to heal without nourishment. From the time I’d lain listless in the loft, I’d experienced a severe loss of appetite, which resulted in life-threatening complications. Plummeting to less than half my healthy body weight, I was diagnosed with Avoidant Restrictive Food Intake Disorder (ARFID), which is oftentimes, as in my case, associated with trauma.

The physical, cognitive and emotional nuances of my brain injury were further complicated by language barriers and insurance bureaucracy, all of which led to a phone call to my brother back in Canada; I was days from death. Ryan was granted power of attorney when I was deemed incapable of sound intellectual decision-making. With a baby less than a month old at home, Ryan flew to Germany to accompany me back to Canada to a treatment

center near his home in southern Ontario. I put him through hell, begging him to leave me to heal in his basement while I was trying to take my own life. There was no light.

Soon my need for specialized medical care led me to Colorado. I was fitted with a gastrojejun tube, which became my lifeline as I refused medication. Depleted and withering, I imagined a life without vision, appetite, autonomy, a sense of self, confidence, trust, independence, flexible thinking, patience, relationships, European residency, a German working visa, an apartment, a car and a driver’s license. I didn’t see anything worth fighting for.

I felt alone and lost despite consistently being in the care of others. After five months of intense medical intervention, I started to gain independence. In the final months of 2016, I was placed in a partial hospitalization program to ease my transition to living on my own. Once my weight was restored and I was showing signs of cognitive improvement, the doctors discharged me from the final treatment center in Denver. But as I cast off alone for the first time in twenty-six months, there were no signs, no direction and no one to lead me along life’s trail with a disability. Desolate, I relied on my internal compass to guide me in search of solace, serenity and a sense of purpose amid mountains.

Europe, Spring 2017

JADED FROM BEING IN the control of others, ashamed of the way paralysis had changed my face, broken by the physical impact of restoring my weight and unwilling to accept the loss of autonomy, I chose to explore alone with Mother Nature while the earth made one rotation around the sun. Sheltering from the staring eyes of society, I chose trails amid thirteen massifs on five continents. I planned mainly around the seasons, dodging snow and monsoon rains. With no depth perception, I anticipated that navigating roots and rocks would be challenging enough without the addition of seasonal elements.

From spring to summer and through autumn, I transitioned with the seasons. I traveled through Europe, following paths through the French and Slovenian Alps and the Italian Dolomites. I visited the foothills of Ladakh in northern India and discovered light on my trail into the Nepal Himalaya before winter. I grew fitter and more grateful, but I still hadn’t accepted my new reality.



Nepal, Autumn 2017

IN A SURREAL SERIES of serendipitous situations, ten months after I was released from the last treatment center, I raced my first ever ultramarathon, the Annapurna 100. A year earlier, in a concrete jungle, I was still limited to thirty-minute walks a few times per week, accompanied by a therapist and his canine companion. Now, surrounded by a slew of eager athletes, I ran through the dark on uneven ground covered in rocks and roots, convincing myself that if I could stay on my feet until dawn, the rest of the day would be manageable. Though I had not properly trained, I had moved through hundreds of kilometers and tens of thousands of meters of elevation gain in recent months, so I wasn’t worried about the long day ahead. I finished third in the race, and with a smile as grand as the mountains that embraced me, I stood on the podium certain I was not finished with Nepal.

My debut performance in the Himalayan trail running scene caught the attention of the race director. I was invited to be part of the Manaslu Mountain Trail Race, which gave me the opportunity to run 140 kilometers around the world’s eighth-highest mountain. The magnitude of Manaslu and its neighbors provided

perspective. The scale of the peaks had a way of making my physical limitations, my fear of judgment and of being enough, feel minuscule. I did not change my entire travel blueprint, yet I knew I needed to return to the Himalaya.

But first, I traveled more of the world—from Australia and New Zealand to Argentina and Peru, then back to Colorado to thank my medical team. I made friends and shared trails in Moab, Utah, and Flagstaff, Arizona, ahead of spending a summer between Switzerland and France. After one year, hundreds of trails and thousands of vertical kilometers, I still felt lost when it came to navigating my life’s direction, so I followed my intuition and my fascination with altitude back to South Asia.

Fastpacking throughout Langtang, Annapurna and Khumbu, I was warmly welcomed into the homes of Nepali friends. Those days were filled with tin roofs, wood-burning stoves, no running water or sanitation and the happiest people. The farther away from civilization I explored, the deeper I connected to myself.

As I hovered around teahouse fires, exchanging stories and curiosity over copious cups of sweet tea, I often shared space with local climbers. We sometimes lost each other in translation before finding each other in

laughter. Conversations rooted in adventure and aspirations became as common as the dhal bhat we ate each evening as the sun set—a prelude to the excitement of a new day. The Himalaya were a catalyst: a stimulus to new life.

One night, beneath a massive moonlit sky, the stars felt within reach as frigid air whistled through the rustic window frames of the teahouse where I lay cocooned in musty floral blankets. I physically drifted into rest while my spirit awakened. With altitude came clarity: in the air, the sky and my mind. I was eager to learn what my body was capable of when I moved it closer to the sun.

THE FOLLOWING YEAR, I established a home in Kathmandu. My apartment quickly became a hub, a gathering place for friends after sharing belays and belly laughs at Astrek, the neighborhood climbing wall. We shared meals, movies, project ideas, proposals and plans. Nestled away from the chaos of the city, my garden became a classroom for lessons in ropework, knots, anchors and abseiling. Boots, belay devices, helmets, harnesses, carabiners, crampons and climbing ropes gradually enhanced my fastpacking setup and the simplicities of mountain running.



The climbing gym was common ground for the local trail running and mountaineering communities. Embraced by both, I felt my sense of confidence grow as I put in the time and commitment to develop skills in the city that would transfer to the high Himalaya. I enthusiastically accepted an invitation from Dawa, a local athlete I had first met at an aid station in the Annapurna 100, to help his family in their teahouse in Pangboche during the busy autumn season. Through such an authentic initiation into Sherpa culture at the base of the Matterhorn of the Himalaya, Ama Dablam (6814m), I would begin to shift to see what I had gained, rather than lost, in the wake of my TBI.

Khumbu Region, Nepal, 2019

I HAD A UNIQUE opportunity to set off on a different peak for my first climb above 6000 meters. I left from Dawa's home, following a traditional Buddhist puja and salt tea with his family. Imja Tse (6189m) appears as an island surrounded by a sea of ice, reflected in its nickname, Island Peak. Marked by unparalleled panoramic views of Everest, Lhotse and Makalu, and featuring minimal technical climbing, my introduction to ascending through thin air was as pristine as the peaks that surrounded me. I was motivated to learn more, and to take on more challenges. Within a handful of days, Dawa and I climbed neighboring Lobuche (6119m). I was building my base.

Like Grand Central Station, my home in Kathmandu became just a quick stop: wash, dry, replenish and move on. *Bistari, bistari* (slowly, slowly) my experience and confidence grew amid rolling foothills and precipitous peaks, in varied technical terrain, topography and conditions, and with diverse companions. In time, I ventured to Ama Dablam.

With no sense of purpose after my recovery, I had chosen the mountains out of existential frustration. Years later, standing on Ama Dablam's summit, I felt like the mountain had chosen me; when I learned that my dad had passed away back in northern Ontario, it felt as if the peak cradled me. While its exquisite features and exposed ridges tested my depth perception, I found myself amid a paradox of hurt and joy. I felt closer to my dad than ever. Standing on the summit, I felt like I'd planted a seed of purpose. I was a beacon shining light on the power of possibility and perspective.

As I developed a bank of experience climbing and skiing high-altitude peaks, I chose to explore what my body was capable of in a type of death zone different from the one trauma had landed me in years earlier. Manaslu (8163m) stood in my backyard.

The name Manaslu is derived from the Sanskrit word *manasa*, which means "soul." Manaslu has weathered thousands of years of storms and quakes, yet the mountain's soul does not live in the past. It has changed over time, and so have I. The peak is strong and present. As I walked away from the colors and crowds of Kathmandu and into Manaslu's shadows, trekking through its foothills, I aimed to become one with the mountain, to embody its strength and resilience.

West-Central Nepal, Autumn 2021

AFTER STRENGTH TRAINING, RUNNING, jumping and climbing through the pandemic lockdown, I arrived at Manaslu Base Camp feeling strong yet disappointed. We had spent more than a week trekking in, rarely seeing signs of life beyond the teahouse stops each evening, yet we arrived at a metropolis of more than 200 tents. It was far from the serenity I longed for. As we acclimatized, yo-yoing to higher camps to get acquainted with thinner air, the solace of our climbing was frequently interrupted by the sounds of helicopters chauffeuring international clients. Moving higher on the mountain, I found myself turning inward.

The mountains of my mind, the way I've come to see my inner struggles, had become increasingly more settled as I spent time in remote places, but now they stirred as climbers filled in the seats in the Base Camp dining tent. Cameras, comparison, complaints and digital connectivity were testing my equanimity. Still, my intrinsic goal kept me quietly focused.

I climbed with two Nepali friends, and our higher camp tent became akin to my place in the city; our local friends who worked as guides gathered inside for coffee, Pringles and noodles once they'd gotten their clients settled. They affectionately called me *Didi* (sister), and I felt like I belonged.

I felt strong and unchallenged as I approached Camp IV (7400m). A smirk appeared on my face as I realized what it was that my traumatic brain injury had set me up for: anything. Through all I had overcome, I had gained physical and mental strength. Still, despite all this power, I managed to disappoint myself. Prior to leaving Base Camp, we had not thoroughly discussed using supplementary oxygen. It was assumed that I would use it from Camp IV, and, considering my lack of experience above 8000 meters, I had not thought otherwise. But given my energy levels, I became set on sleeping and continuing to climb without it. Following a rather heated conversation with one of my climbing partners in our tent, I decided to respect that such decisions shouldn't be made on the periphery of the death zone, and I agreed to use the oxygen. With every kick of my crampons, I was internally kicking myself, certain I could have climbed without the support of the cylinder on my back.

At the summit, I radiated with joy and giddiness. While physically standing high in the Himalaya amid ropes, anchors and prayer

flags, mentally I celebrated with every individual who had relentlessly persisted when I was convinced my story was over. I saw a vivid collage of every nurse, nursing assistant, therapist and doctor. I also posed an audible question to my dad, asking what he thought of the view. I wished my brother, who had seen me on death's doorstep, could feel my exhilaration.

Descending from the eighth-highest point on the planet, I was part of the first team to navigate the final stage of the climb via the Rolwaling Diversion; serendipitous thoughts started to surface. My choice to climb into the death zone was a catalyst for unforeseen optimism and direction. As naturally as the air became denser, the name of my next challenge came to me: Vision 8000. I'm not sure my smile had ever been brighter as I decided I would climb all of the 8000-meter peaks. I was sure the rest of the mountains would prove more difficult, but I thrive on challenges, and I was inspired by this new one.

After drawing up a plan with my friend and expedition leader Mingma G., I focused on improving my fitness, developing skills and honing my ability to manage exposure to the harshness of the Himalaya. I climbed Himlung (7126m), notorious for both extreme winds and snowfall, within three weeks of Manaslu. But dodging Himalayan storms was easier than dodging Nepali visa policies. As such, I chose to begin fine-tuning my ice climbing skills and uphill efficiency while backcountry skiing in the Canadian Rockies.

Shadows of Everest, January 2022

MY NEPALI VISA RESET as the calendar turned to 2022. I crossed the pond home to Kathmandu and jumped directly on a prop plane to Lukla, gateway to the Everest region and notorious as the world's most dangerous airport. I planned to climb three consecutive 8000-meter peaks and spent my days training with friends on frozen waterfalls and at the Khumbu Climbing Center. I wrapped up my ice climbing season on Losar, a fourteen-pitch route across from Namche Bazaar, on Valentine's Day. Despite the occasion, there wasn't a whole lot of sweetness; we had an unplanned bivvy, as well as lessons in partnership and planning that segued seamlessly into my second expedition of Vision 8000.

Dhaulagiri (8167m) challenged my body and mind more than any other mountain experience. I witnessed gear and garbage thrown off

the mountain, while my energy plummeted alongside it—everything went downhill following the summit.

Monopolizing on the increased red blood cell count I'd built up on Dhaulagiri, and chasing a narrow weather window, I headed east for Kangchenjunga (8586m). This climb proved difficult in several ways. We took a wrong right turn at 8200 meters and saw the body of a climber who had died in an earlier accident, the impact of which was unexpectedly difficult. The world's third-highest peak was paradoxically dramatic and dreamy.

Next, with a tiny team and short timeline, I turned to Makalu (8485m), considered to be one of the more technical 8000-meter peaks. At Base Camp, I focused on hydrating, fueling and resting as we shared resources with other climbers. Our goal was to be quick: straight to Camp II, then Camp III, summit and get back to Base Camp, all within three days. Mother Nature had other ideas, thwarting our first attempt. We soon planned a second attempt and climbed alongside everyone else who had hoped to summit that season—less than ideal on narrow ridges and blind corners. The only eyesight I have comes from below the horizon of my left eye, which is like witnessing life through the hole of an ice screw; I lack the ability to perceive depth. I have adapted in ways I once thought impossible, yet if I allow the mountains of my mind to drift to what I have lost, appreciation can easily morph into frustration. Sitting on the summit, I felt a clash of disbelief, gratitude and uneasy anticipation of the technical descent. At the same time, I was disappointed in myself for allowing my harsh inner voices to shadow the fact that I was on my third 8000-meter peak in less than two months.

Hunza, Pakistan, June 2022

ONE OF THE GREATEST gifts I have found in climbing is friendship. Such bonds made the transition from Nepal to Pakistan flow like the Indus River. As friends welcomed me into their homes in Hunza, I had time to experience food, roads and rest under the watchful eye of Rakaposhi before moving toward the "Savage Mountain."

The K2 Base Camp trekking route winds its way along the brilliant Braldu Valley before mounting the Baltoro Glacier to Concordia. Serrated and steep, towering cliffs mark each side of the trail under the striking granite spires

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I dodged snowstorms and raging rockfall, climbed tight chimneys through crowds and over crevasses. In less than a week's time, I proudly stood atop K2 and Broad Peak, a feat that was still nowhere near the challenge of what I'd dealt with in the wake of my TBI.

of the Trango Towers. With shifting ice and open crevasses, and without my depth perception, travel on the glacier was never mundane.

Throughout the month of July, K2 (8611m) and Broad Peak (8051m) battled for my attention. There were record numbers of climbers in Pakistan and I felt the 8000-meter climbing scene growing around me. Despite the lack of connectivity, Mingma was diligent about checking weather reports and considering different possibilities for our climbs. Because of the way the weather played out, I danced between Broad Peak and K2, spending a couple of rotations on each before everything came together later in the month. I dodged snowstorms and raging rockfall, climbed tight chimneys through crowds and over crevasses. In less than a week's time, I proudly stood atop K2 and Broad Peak, a feat that was still nowhere near the challenge of what I'd dealt with in the wake of my TBI.

By the time I was packing up for a sunrise departure from Base Camp, I was stuffing more than gear into my duffel. With a mix of emotions stirring between elation and disgust, I set off toward Concordia alone. I needed to unpack all that had happened, but I was exhausted. That, and the anticipation of Nanga Parbat—with its reputation for a high fatality rate, challenging terrain, extreme winds and storms—delayed the digestion.

Gilgit-Baltistan, Pakistan, August 2022

NANGA PARBAT (8125M) TRANSLATES FROM Sanskrit as "Naked Mountain" because of the lack of snow on its south face. I looked forward to its seclusion away from crowds and, since I would be climbing in the offseason, anyone at all.

Moving into the Diamer District, our small team, just a handful of us, had the trail to Base Camp all to ourselves. We arrived in an open meadow shared with grazing cows in the sweltering heat. Pakistan had just suffered one of its worst monsoons ever recorded, making for unseasonably heavy snowfall in the mountains. From Base Camp, we watched avalanches hurtle downward to the roar of sky-borne thunder. Rocks rained down between Camp II and the foot of the glacier on our intended route. Mingma made an easy choice: change the route.

After more than two weeks spent changing routes and waiting for clear weather windows, three avalanches hit our chosen line, and we lost all the gear that had been dropped at two of our camps. After weighing possibilities, refusing to risk the life of our team, we called off our expedition. I walked away with a feeling similar to what Michael Gardner described in his *Alpinist* 77 essay, "Worth the Weight?": a duality of emotions between what the mountains give and what they take.

Nepal, February 2023

I SPENT THE OFFSEASON back in the Rockies climbing ice, quietly building strength. In February I returned to Nepal, where, on an expedition to Annapurna I (8091m), I began to feel a shift in the mountains of my mind.

The serenity I had found in the mountains became increasingly scarce with each 8000-meter expedition, and that was particularly evident when I arrived at Annapurna Base Camp. Returning to camp from a solo hike on the first day, I felt disgust as I heard speakers blaring excessive beats as if we were at a tailgate party. My head throbbed to the bass of the music and

my throat felt dry. With a thermos of scalding hot water mixed with lemon, ginger and honey, I methodically sorted, classified and calculated gear and rations in my attempt to recalibrate. I rested my body while seeking solitude in my tent, anxiously waiting to find out what the group's climbing plan was.

As my own team made our way higher up the mountain, a storm moved in quickly. We couldn't safely stick to our summit plan, so we retreated from Camp II to Base Camp. I was on the first flight to a hospital the next morning. The dry throat I'd been experiencing was more than adjusting to the thinning air, more than a head cold or dehydration. It was its own combination of bronchitis, sinusitis and pneumonia. The trio of diagnoses would have been debilitating in the best of times, never mind trying to fight an infection at altitude while the body simply fights to stay alive.

After a week, my internal storm slowly settled. I was given the green light to leave the hospital and rest at home. In between naps, my sole focus was consuming copious amounts of calories. The storm that had been lingering over the Annapurnas was relentless, but it moved on at the same time I received clearance to climb again after undergoing blood and lung tests at the hospital. The result was that I merged precisely into the same expedition timeline as others who had been waiting out the storm in hotels, clubs and cafes.

I thrive on challenges and in mountains. Upon my return to Annapurna Base Camp, any excitement of a fresh start was shadowed by my focus on the task at hand. I practice Vipassana, a form of meditation, to cultivate mindfulness and to grow my capacity for discomfort, but on this day I struggled to quiet

my mind. As I set off from Base Camp for a second attempt, my body and mind felt depleted. When it came to my TBI, I never had the opportunity to choose any of it: the injury itself, the resulting vision loss, the life-threatening complications that I overcame. However, I did have the choice to use the lessons I'd learned and the strength I'd gained to thrive amid life's climbs. I had survived twenty-six months of hard shit. This shit was up to me.

My heart raced and I coughed up pink frothy spew between short breaths; returning to Camp II felt all too familiar. As I lay my head down to rest, sandwiched between my friend Suman and the frosty tent wall, I got news that a close friend working on Everest was missing and presumed dead; disbelief drained everything left in my tank faster than I could fuel it. Tuning out the noise, I dove into my inner world where existential questions stirred: *Why am I continuing with this project? Does it still align with my values?* Before we even reached the first anchor up from the final camp, it was clear that this summit would push me deeply in body and mind. It was, by far, my toughest day in the Himalaya.

Though I reached the summit, my spirit that flows in the mountains lost its magic on Annapurna. Simply climbing for the sole purpose of ticking a box has no alignment with my internal compass. Rather than running from Annapurna to Everest with a mitt full of medication, I sat with my discomfort, and I gained clarity.

Kathmandu, Nepal, May 2023

CLIMBING MOUNTAINS IS SOMETHING I do; it is not who I am.

Without the distraction of record-chasers, racing and route traffic, my higher consciousness greeted me back in Kathmandu. Attuned to my needs, goals and truth, I let my heart and intuition take the lead. Climbing these 8000-meter peaks was not matching my vibration. Amid a scene that has grown incredibly complicated, commercialized and competitive,



I chose to walk away.

With my values prioritized, I pivoted proudly and intentionally. Honoring my personal path, I returned to Alberta, for climbing and for clarity. There, I found community and connection, no crowds, no chaos. I chose to stay.

Banff National Park, Canada, February 2024

I CERTAINLY HAVE LEARNED that life does not always go the way we anticipate.

Once upon a chilly February morning, a friend and I raced the rising sun in Banff National Park, searching for a frozen waterfall to scale. Conversation flowed between meditation and mountains, goals and gear, as we hiked. We shared leads and laughs while our focus remained as clear as the sunny skies above. Efficiency and excitement were just as high as I began to lead the fourth and final pitch.

The grade was easy, the ice was garbage. After moving efficiently for three pitches, I began to slow down. Sweat dripped from my

brow as I clipped the rope to my first ice screw and breathed a sigh of relief. My breathing calmed and I continued climbing. Higher up, I approached a bulge. I swung a tool and felt it sink into the ice with a solid *thunk*. I looked for a safe and secure spot to place another screw before the protrusion. But as I looked for a good stance over the frontpoints of my crampons, crusty grains of crumbling ice filled my field of vision. Suddenly I was weightless. Within a wink, I hit the deck. I'd broken—shattered, in fact—the only rule in ice climbing: don't fall.

There would be no misdiagnosis in the ER this time. This was not a rolled ankle. Far more than any physical pain, the dark memories of twenty-six months in hospitals flooded my mind as I crawled up toward the belay cave. The response and rescue by Parks Canada was textbook perfect. Calm and efficient, the longline helicopter evacuation would have been much more difficult had the scene been in other parts of the world. I swung through the sky, thankful.

Diligently keeping me warm and laughing until the ER team took over, the Banff paramedics maintained their proficiency, and my comfort, and kept my climbing boot intact. With a broken tibia and fibula and a shattered ankle, I ended up with twenty-nine screws, three plates and bone fragments donated from a soul I will never know. I'm slowly making my way back to climbing, and my scars reflect what humans are capable of overcoming.

IN DISTANT REFLECTION, I remember a colorful indoor bouldering wall in one of the German hospitals. It helped me adjust to my recent loss of depth perception, to work on strength and focus, and it marked the beginning of something far bigger a world away. Unbeknownst to me, sustaining a traumatic brain injury set me up with greater resilience and an ability to overcome fear.

Thankful for life lessons in perspective, I climb on. ■

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