

ENTRAPMENT?

**Please write encouraging letter to Schaeffer Cox.
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**Hebrews 13:3 reminds us to remember our
brothers in bonds.**

**With God all
things are possible
Matthew 19:26**

Mt. McKinley, "I will jump for you"

I swung my ice axe with swift precision, as if it were a tuning fork. It's sharp point bit into the ice with a reassuring thud. There was no clatter or cracking. It felt like a good solid placement. This gave me a sense of security that would last at least until I took two more steps and had to pull my axe free, and swing it again into the ice in hopes of another solid placement, a little bit higher than the last.

The ridge we were on was no wider than a windowsill. And it rose at a nearly vertical angle toward the summit. Above, below, and behind me was nothing but vast open sky. But in front of me was the knife edge ridge of this mountain I clung to. The wind rumbled around me like a blast furnace of frozen fire. But it was the raspy cadence of my labored breath that filled my ears with noise.

I looked down at my feet. The thin blue rope that connected me to my climbing partner 30 feet below me pulled on my harness as it whipped in the wind. Too much slack in the rope is dangerous. I needed to speed up. I refocused, then pulled the sharp front points of my steel crampons out of the rock hard 100-year-old snow and kicked a new step into the mountain about ten inches higher. Slowly I shifted my weight to my new Ice axe hold and my new foot placement. If either one of them gave way, I would fall into the swirling wind below me.

We were at over 20,200 feet in elevation, on the summit ridge of Mt. McKinley in Alaska. This was our best chance to reach the top of the biggest, coldest, and most windblown mountain on earth. It was do or die. For the last 6 days we had been pinned down at high camp by powerful winds that blasted us like a week long nuclear explosion. But now, after over a month straight of climbing, I could see the summit. It was right there, almost within reach. I suppressed my urge to celebrate. We weren't there yet. And we were a long long way from safety.

The dark ink-blue sky flooded out in all directions. Above me it was almost black, like a window had opened up into outer space. Then the deep cold sky became lighter as it curved down to the horizon below me in all directions. The world beneath me seemed far away and forgotten.

Having lived so close to death for so many weeks, the thought of a safe return felt more like a blissful hope than a practical reality. At this altitude in the mountains, the veil between this life and the next becomes incredibly thin. This is where you commune with your own mortality, at the top of the world. But by confronting the challenges of climbing, we expose our hidden nature, and we learn to be completely honest with ourselves. These experiences stain the soul forever. They bring new colors to the canvas of our life. They expose the trivial things, by contrasting them with the epic. And that is why the mountains draw us in, like a master waiting for the apprentice.

To my right was a 17,000 foot vertical drop to the swampy tundra covered lowlands of Denali National Park. There were no clouds this high up. They were all thousands of feet below us. It felt more like looking out an airplane window than looking off a mountain ridge. This picture would be seared into my memory for the rest of my life. To my left was a 500 foot nearly vertical drop to a small shelf of flat ground called The Football Field. I could see my tracks from several hours before when we had crossed it. I could also see some remnants of abandoned climbing gear. Perhaps a sleeping bag, an oxygen bottle, or a rope cut in half to save weight. Or it could be a frozen body, uncovered by the high winds that had scoured the mountain the week before. "There are worse ways to die," I thought to myself as I peered down at the distant specks of color, "but there is no more sacred final resting place than a mountain such as this."

In the thin air, my heart pounded away as if it was suffocating in my chest and trying desperately to get my attention. My pulse was throbbing in my ears, in my legs, and in the palms of my hands. It hurt. But it put me at ease because the pain told me that my extremities were getting blood flow, and not frozen yet. My lungs burned as they sucked in the subzero air. At this elevation, there was no longer enough oxygen to keep me alive. I was dying. My body was shutting down, one system at a time. Heart, lungs, and legs are the last to go. I just hoped I could reach the summit and get back down in time to resuscitate the rest of my body. That's the cost of admission to this cathedral in the sky; a little bit of death in the body in exchange for a little extra life in the soul.

I felt a tug on the rope. With a swift turn I looked back to check on my partner. He was preparing to unclip from our last picket. No longer would we be fastened to the mountain, only to each other. I held up the empty loop of webbing that I had slung a half-dozen pickets on when we started out that morning. My partner knew what the empty loop meant. No more pickets; no more anchors to arrest a fall.

He stood still for only a moment, then took one small symbolic step forward to signal his resolve. I lifted my ice axe and pointed toward the summit. I then peered over the edge to my right, then to my left, then back at him. He planted his ice axe and took another step, then looked up at me. It was settled then. On this last stretch to the summit, if one of us fell off one side of the ridge, the other would have to jump off the other side to counter balance the fall. If my partner fell, and I hesitated to jump, he would just yank me off the ridge with him, and we would both die. And the same would happen if I fell and he hesitated. But if he fell left, and I jumped right, the rope would saddle the ridge and we'd hang like dingle-berries off opposite sides. Then, hopefully, we could both manage to climb the rope's length back up and meet at the ridge in the middle.

I stood there looking down and back as he unclipped us from the picket. He held the rope in his hand as we made silent eye contact through the thunderous wind. Then he opened his hand and let the rope go, as if releasing a bird into flight. The rope writhed like a swimming snake connecting his harness to mine. He looked to his right at the 17,000 foot drop, then to his left at the 500 foot drop. I raised my fist, then he raised his. It was the symbol of absolute trust, absolute courage, and absolute loyalty. The silent vow we exchanged was simple: "I will jump for you." And with that we continued onward and upward.

--Schaeffer Cox