
SHARON WOOD

Rising

You experience God when you're extended a long way out beyond yourself and still trying to lift up from your fears. Get caught on a rock and of course you want to howl like a dog. Surmount that terror and you rise to a higher fear. That may be our simple purpose on earth. To rise to higher and higher levels of fear.

Norman Mailer

In the summer of 1985 my partner, Carlos Buhler and I climbed a difficult, untried route on Cerro Huascarán, the highest mountain in Peru. Early on in the climb my shoulder was broken by a falling rock. We could have turned around but we didn't. Instead we chose to climb another six days to the top, the hard way.

This story begins in the pre-dawn light, on the third day of our climb. Caught, on the side of a massive vertical ice and rock-strewn face, 18,000ft feet above sea level, in the middle of nowhere, I want to howl like a dog. We are so committed that I am jolted into being fully extended and alive, where the only option is to start moving.

It often seems miraculous to me, that we can put ourselves into such unnatural places as this, places we don't belong and shouldn't be. What is natural, yet so deeply buried in millennia of domestication, is our instinct to fight our way through danger and fear and in doing so, discover strengths that astound us and leave us wanting for more.

My legs dangle over the edge of our small icy ledge chiseled out of the mountainside. I peer down over my boot tops at the steep ground we have climbed up and imagine the path of my fall, should I take one. I guess, in a disconnected way, where I would hit, bounce and slide before I finally came to a stop on the glacier three thousand feet below.

All climbers do this, I'm sure. There is a fragile denial of this possibility, a tacit agreement to not challenge it. My mind, in its undisciplined moments of respite, wanders toward the morbid. As though channel surfing on television, I'm drawn to the images that most stir my senses.

It is comfortable to consider this now because I won't fall. I am trussed and tethered firmly to the anchors we pounded in the night before. We trust they will hold our body weight and a few thousand pounds more. Save for an earthquake or an act of God, our stance is bombproof. Nothing is going anywhere. But, in my waiting, I consider this possibility too. After all, earthquakes frequent this area. In the early 1970s a large piece of this mountain calved off and obliterated a town miles below. There is way too much time to ponder and entertain the worst.

This climb is all business and a serious one at that. We eat for fuel, rest to recharge, and look only for information to aid our progress. The object in these kinds of climbs is to impose upon ourselves a challenge that is just a little beyond our reach. The goal is to test and extend that reach. On this climb we are moving too slowly. We never seem to be as far along as we want to be. At yesterday's end we were racing the dying light to find shelter for the night. Our headlamps cut through darkness as we chipped and dug out a ledge big enough to spend the night.

We have spent the last few dark hours sharing a ledge that is no bigger than a small narrow coffee table, sitting up, cocooned in our sleeping bags, fully dressed, our lower bodies crammed into our packs for extra warmth and support to give our feet something to push against. It's bitterly uncomfortable and the only way to relieve this is by shifting from butt cheek to butt cheek. The discomfort is constant and more intense in the night, when we have the time to entertain it.

All I care about is the grey light growing at the edges of the horizon. With the coming of the light the other senses can kick in and distract me, draw me out of the darkness. Fear grows best in the dark. At night's end it has had the longest stretch to run its course. I can't see what it is I fear; therefore it grows ever larger and more menacing. This is when the resolve to be here is at its weakest. What releases the tension is the day's new light. Moving on promises relief.

My right shoulder is stiff from our night's wait. Painkillers – and denial that anything more than bruising has resulted from the blow to my shoulder the day before – tempers the pain. I want to take more drugs but I have to wait. The drugs take a long time to kick in and a long time to leave. Too many drugs deaden my senses, too little causes the pain to distract me from my climbing. Thank God the light is coming.

In the darkness my thoughts race and veer down paths of worry, fear and chance. The severity and consequences of my injury amplify the doubts I have about the climb. Like most climbers, I start monitoring my body, looking for symptoms of something malevolent.

My head hurts, that hangover kind of headache where every movement increases the painful throbbing. The stress of my injury, so it seems, has reversed the acclimatization I have gained from living between 12,000ft and 20,000ft for the last couple of months. The headaches grow stronger, my resting heart rate has increased, and I am coughing more. The fear that I have high-altitude sickness nags away. Give me light, movement and something I can see to rise to. Let this new day begin.

The pain seems worse. I tell myself: 'Pain is just information, not an obstacle nor a reason to stop.' It has to be. It has to be, because my injury is the only hurdle that lies between success and failure. Failure is not an option. Rescue is not an option. No one even knows where we are. By deciding to continue up yesterday we passed the point of no return. The only way out

now is up and over. Besides, we will probably top out tomorrow and then be off the mountain the following day.

I tell myself this climb is just a practice joust. Thinking this way diminishes the gravity of our present situation. Everest looms, and not just the ordinary route, but the West Ridge, complicated, technical and demanding. I have to be ready. Climbing a new route on Huascarán is essential to earning my place on the team. There was no one I needed to prove this to more than myself. Only Huascarán can resolve my doubts.

My monomaniacal climbing partner also fuels my resolve to go on. Carlos is a tortured man, plagued by the idea of failure and low self-worth. He defines himself as a climber, a good one when he succeeds and a bad one when he fails. He is as good or as bad as he climbs. He is also my partner in life, and I fear having to live with the same man I climb with through the aftermath of an unsuccessful climbing season, a season of approaches.

But the fear of failure serves me well. Negative reinforcement is my greatest motivator. I fear the aftermath of failure even more than the consequences of going on. Every experience, epic, setback and conquest is an investment in getting better. Better is always possible. Pain and suffering are necessary precursors to the realization of my potential. I thrive by this tenet. I eat it for breakfast, lunch and dinner. Maybe I am borderline monomaniacal myself. I am as good or as bad as I climb.

But the most important thing of all is this question: When I'm on Everest next year and I'm in trouble, in a place I shouldn't be, will I be able to rise and meet the challenge or will I shrink back and succumb to fear? This climb is the test. My performance is the answer. In the two months Carlos and I were climbing in the Cordillera Blanca we had yet to complete a climb together. Each climb we had approached was out of condition, due to dangerous conditions and weather. We could write a guidebook on how to get to climbs where the only thing missing would be the rest of the route to the top of the mountain.

Just last week we reached the crescendo of the season's failures. Our objective had been the steep and intimidating South-west Face of Chacaraju. Following a few days of preparation and heavy load-carrying up to the base of the climb we settled in, prepared to begin the face the next morning. Then it snowed that night and next morning a heavy blanket of new snow clung to the face putting another route out of condition.

I was privately relieved. Thousands of feet above us, rimming the summit ridge like gargoyles menacing the face, cornices the size of small houses teetered on the brink of collapse, waiting. One tap of an axe, a hint of a tremor, a little more weight could cut it all loose to crash down, sweeping anything off the face in its path. Anywhere else in the world, you would not dare climb beneath the fall line of these things. There was little history of climbers being killed by cornice fall but I reasoned there was little climbing history, period. And while luck is often a factor in the climbing recipe,

I didn't want to rely on it until I had to. Good judgement strikes me as more reliable.

Aside from the detail, things just didn't feel right, even though not feeling right can be easily misread for fear. I was dreading the argument, my grappling for the words to articulate and justify this intangible sixth sense. The steadily falling snow made the decision easy. Turning around cost us time and the effort to get up there but even worse was the disruption to our momentum, the erosion of our confidence, even depression. I am left believing I am the obstacle, the one at fault for my reluctance and fear. The 'fraidy cat. Nothing is done on Carlos' part to tell me any different. If I weren't comfortable then we wouldn't do it. It was never him that called it.

It was on our retreat from Chacaraju that I first noticed the East Face of Huascarán, the face we are now on. Sitting atop our packs on a hillside we mused over the possibilities of meddling with that nasty-looking face. The entire side of the mountain was unclimbed. It was an obvious challenge, easy to access but not to climb. Carlos had considered it in the past but deemed it too unsafe. Others had written it off as a 'death route'. The bottom of the face was pockmarked black with rock fall. The north-east exposure was most vulnerable to the heat of the sun, turning the whole face into an active missile range.

I, the 'fraidy cat, was becoming more compelled by the minute to climb it. The appeal of outwitting the danger with good strategy was the very essence of great climbing style, to make the impossible possible, to defy the perceived odds. Or, perhaps it was because this would be our last climb, our last chance to get up anything this season, that we tried so hard to make it seem possible. Or was it because I picked it, not Carlos. I saw it and it called to me.

We determined there was a long enough portion of the day when the face fell into shade to cause the temperature to drop below freezing and keep everything stuck together. We would climb this untried face of Huascarán in the cool of the day and during the hours of sunshine we would seek shelter and sit it out. It was the following week, our spirits buoyed with this strategy, that we alighted from the minivan just below the base of Huascarán Sur.

Early on the morning of 24 July, equipped with four days' food and supplies, we wove our way through the large séracs of the glacier below the face. We had anticipated it would take us a long day to get to the base but we were there in just a few hours. Elated with this boost to our schedule we began to climb.

Eager to begin with the face still in the shade, I burrowed my way through the bergschrund and hoisted Carlos up and through. Together we moved quickly, daggering over the next few hundred feet of 45° to 50° ice to reach a small hole marking the second bergschrund and a point of shelter. There in the cave, poking our heads in and out to look up at the face, we briefly discussed whether to spend the rest of the day and night here in safety or

hopscotch a few hundred feet more to the next point of shelter. The air was still cold, the face in shadow, quiet, with no sign of rockfall. Carlos was passive and quiet, while I was eager. The momentum gained from better than anticipated progress pulled me out and set me climbing.

I felt strong, the ice took the tips of my crampon points and tools with a satisfying sound and the feel of a knife puncturing dense Styrofoam. Relief and uncontained excitement fuelled a fast pace despite the sixty-pound pack on my back.

Racing the impending arrival of the sun, Carlos paid out the rope as I climbed the steepening ice. Moving as fast as possible I climbed the full length of the 70-metre ropes, slowing as their weight grew at the end of the pitch. Labouring under the weight of my heavy pack, I hauled the ropes with one hand as I strained for each step. Finally I reached their end and began to set the station, threading a screw into the dense ice.

As its teeth slowly bore into the ice, a sense of foreboding grew turn by turn, eclipsing the previous moment's optimism and feeling of control. My focus narrowed to the small radius I was working over. I was rushing, not panicking, channeling all I had to get the screw in quickly. If anything should cause me to fall this screw would be the only barrier between me and a fall of almost 500 feet. Only when the screw was in just enough to hook my rope over it, to anchor myself temporarily, did I first let myself register my surroundings, the change in quality of light, the feel of the warmer air, and the high-pitched whining of rocks falling past.

An abrupt heavy blow slammed me hard against the face. I heard myself grunt as all the air exploded from my lungs. Not yet registering the full impact of the assault, I thought, 'This must be what it feels like to get shot.' Frozen, like a deer in headlights, with no reference point for what had just happened, I lay still. I could hear the escalating intensity of the barrage of falling rocks and the transition from whistle to whine as they shot by me.

'Sharon! Sharon! Are you okay?' My partner's calls, the coolness of the ice seeping into my chest flattened against the face, and the return of the air to my lungs drew me back up the tunnel to awareness. A force from deep within kicked in, delaying pain and fear, impelling me to action. I yelled down to Carlos, 'I'm getting out of here as fast as I can!'

I know this place, I know enough about getting hurt and the state of shock to know that there is a finite window of time where one has the gift of extraordinary strength and presence of mind to get out of danger's way before immobilization sets in. Much internal dialogue all at once, my inner coaches all worked in perfect unison to take advantage of this window. Another part of me engaged, racing to assess range of mobility, not injury – that would come later. My brain was intact. I could use my left arm and my legs worked.

With slow, mechanical, persistent deliberation I attached myself to the screw with one hand, threaded another screw in and re-rigged the ropes for descent. Calmly, after checking and double-checking, I began lowering,

knowing Carlos must be frustrated, helpless to aid me, every passing minute feeling like an hour to him. I yelled down once more, 'Coming. Down. Now!' Making myself as small a target as possible, willing the rock missiles to part around me, I slid down the ropes to the small hole in the face that marked the ice cave where he waited safely.

Carlos popped out of the hole in the face and hauled me in. I slumped down on the snow and before relief could find its place a heavy cloak of dejection settled over us. 'Let's not talk or make any decision now.' Either one of us could have said this. Instead I silently berated myself. How could I have done something so stupid, so easily avoided? There would be no decision made until the next morning. And then, it would be all up to me. I was the injured one. I was the one that had made the bad call. At least we could lie down in the cave and be safe for the time being. Maybe with the night's passing the gravity of this near miss will have diminished and the day will dawn with nothing more than a bruise and renewed resolve.

A new day and a silent face assured us that if we were more vigilant in sticking to our original strategy we could pull this off yet. To start I went second, testing my shoulder. Throughout the day it loosened and my mobility improved. And it is at this place, the chiselled out ledge we reached on the second day, that I now sit, waiting anxiously. In the growing light I can look up the face and see ramps and passages where in the dark my imagination could only see impossible ground.

We leave our alcove of safety and climb over the next couple of days to within reach of the top of the face. By a stroke of good luck we have to wait just a few hours before a thick veil of mist shrouds the face, keeping it cool and safe for us to continue. I can do my share of leads alternating with Carlos, thank goodness. I would lead out to the full extent of the rope's length and fix an anchor point to bring Carlos up and then he would lead out the ropes to establish the next anchor, establishing the familiar cyclical rhythm of engagement and disengagement with our day.

One point on my shoulder is pierced by pain whenever I try to reach above the level of my chest. But it is just information. I can avoid reaching. The muscles in my upper back are in spasm under my heavy pack. I can feel a knife lodged between my shoulder blades. The pain fades when I'm climbing. Better to be distracted, engrossed in finding the next hold, to be simply straining, getting closer to a goal, than to have yet more time to entertain the discomfort. Time slows when my mind and body are still, as I pay out the rope inch by slow inch to my partner as he moves up. Here, my thoughts drift easily to the pain and the impatience of getting up, getting off the climb. I will myself not to anticipate progress or early escape.

The third and final night we bivouac at the base of a 300-foot rock band rimming the top of the face. Hope and optimism prevail, diminishing the fear and symptoms of the altitude sickness I once suspected. Once we reach the East Ridge it will be over. Just one day to a well-trodden route and it will be all downhill.

But it wasn't to be just one day. The next day, hours come and go traversing the base of the rock band looking for a way through to the top. Feeling more and more disheartened as we look for a weakness through the band, we finally settle on a line through the steepest part. It is my lead up through the rock. Eager to sink my teeth into this last problem I start up. But within a few feet I have to do a manoeuvre involving the full extension of my right arm above my head and hauling up on it. This move is impossible but it takes a few moments to convince myself of it. I finally admit defeat and climb back to hand the lead over to Carlos. As I anchor myself back in to prepare to belay him I castigate myself for my inability to pull my weight. Over the course of a couple of hours, Carlos worked slowly, doggedly, winning through to the top of the band. That's his trademark: slow but sure. At the top Carlos starts hauling me up after him.

Just as I dare to anticipate progress I pull up over the top to a sight that makes my heart sink. Carlos had hoisted me inside a cornice where he was belaying me, just like the one I refused to climb under on Chacaraju. Through the hole of the wind-sculpted snow curl I view an endless, serrated knife-edge ridge capped with massive cornices stretching into the mist. This ridge is our only way off. We have not topped out; our climb has just begun. Overtaken by the encroaching darkness, disappointment and trepidation, we make our home inside the cornice for the night. Every move, every turn has to be made carefully for fear of disturbing its fragile hold on the mountain ridge and sending us careening down the West Face. Now, through this night, is where luck comes in.

I am relieved to see next morning that the ridge is shorter than I feared. We thread our way through the gauntlet of giant hanging cornices, climbing on opposite sides of the knife-edge ridge. The rockfall and my injury we could manage, minimising risk and taking control. This traverse is altogether different. We are forced to go this way, there are no options. I pray quietly to keep us from falling the 8000 feet that looms below on either side.

As we arrive at the vast summit plateau, we are engulfed in a shroud of mist, the same mist that had aided us with longer climbing days now rendering us blind to continue. We are forced to spend another night out. The only respite is that we can stretch out to sleep for the first time in five days. At 3.30am with nothing left to drink or eat it takes no time to rise and get moving. We have to get down today.

But within a short time I am too cold to continue. There is no fuel in my tank, my belly empty from lack of food, my extremities stiff and clumsy. We stop once more and share one sleeping bag to wait for light and more warmth. Now I am drifting dangerously close to the edge of losing resolve and faith. But this is Peru, I say to myself, not the Himalaya.

Light brings warmth and we start out once more. I swear silent oaths to believe in God forever more if I reach the well-trodden trough that will guide us back down the other side with relative ease. At midday we intercept some Spanish friends of Carlos who had just climbed the regular route the

day before and are camped before they descend. Coming upon the Spanish camp was like discovering an oasis in a long desert march. We get a warm welcome and plenty of food, delicious cheeses, breads and meats. I draw strength from their robust congratulatory handshakes and hugs. Discreetly we snatch bits as often as possible without looking as desperately hungry as we really are. We gorge ourselves to fuel the rest of the long slog down the mountain.

Two days later we got home. Just days before I had been immersed in the intensity of staying warm, alive and resolute. I only wished to feel safe and comfortable. One part of me wished that a climb like this could bring me satisfaction and lessen the need to rise again to the fears these extreme experiences imposed. Another part of me was already nurturing a restlessness, craved that altered state of feeling, of being purposeful, fully engaged and alive.

As though looking at scenery from a moving car, memories of Huascarán fell behind as fast as the forward view rushed in. It was business as usual. Carlos went back to training and raising money and enthusiasm for the next climb and me to guiding.

I still could not raise my arm without pain. That evening after work I went to the hospital for answers and an hour later a doctor confirmed the thin white line running through the illuminated x-ray of my shoulder was a fracture. I arrived home later that same evening to find Carlos sitting at our kitchen table absorbed in telling our story to a newspaper reporter. To the delight of both of them and – dare I admit it – even myself, news of my broken bones made the story larger and better. When he had his story, the reporter asked what was next. I felt that anticipation rising inside me again. Everest. Everest was next.

In 1986, Sharon Wood became the first North American woman to climb Everest, via the West Ridge.