

Surviving the Cringe Moments

I have persisted in outdoor adventures because that's when I feel most alive. It's about running in the last hour of the day in the cold twilight of Eldorado Canyon under a moon rising over the Bastille buttress. It's the immediate joy when I strap on the backcountry skis and head up the path for a few turns or the feel of smooth, familiar stone in a finger crack. Following clear heuristics with intention and preparation easily allows these endeavors¹. Most of the thousands of trips or outings over the years have been uneventful, but every now and then, my ego has helped to create cringe moments. Here are vignettes of mishaps, fellowship, and beauty along with heuristics for easy survival.

“It doesn't interest me how **old** you are.
I want to know if you will risk looking like a fool for love,
for your dream, for the adventure of being alive.”²



Figure 1: A Serendipitous Adventure: Aronow on Kwang De Nup, 6035m, Nepal, 1984, First Ascent with John Ball

1. Full-Tilt on Mount Mendel

On a sweltering evening in Los Angeles in mid-August, 1988, I got a call about ice climbing in the Evolution Range of the High Sierra Nevada. The partner was several years older and much more experienced, so it sounded great. The proposition began to look gloomy as we hiked in on Saturday in the rain. We slept under a large boulder and got up early to clear skies. In spite of my serious apprehension about the weather, we climbed into the Mendel Couloir, up a broad slope that angled over to a narrow gully.

After several pitches, we arrived at the base of the gully. It was my lead, but suddenly I didn't want to go up. My intuition was screaming full-tilt. We didn't have enough gear to descend by rappelling, so I suggested to my friend that we ascend the loose rock to the right of the gully. Undaunted, he set out on another lead up the ice gully. The belay anchor was very poor, so I asked

¹ Wikipedia describes heuristics as “a method to help to solve a problem, commonly informal. It is particularly used for a method that often rapidly leads to a solution that is usually reasonably close to the best possible answer.”

² *The Invitation*, Oriah Mountain Dreamer, Harper-Collins, 1999.

my partner to put in an ice screw as soon as he was under way. About ten feet above the screw, we heard a loud crack like a bowler hitting a perfect strike. I looked up to see several boulders bouncing down the gully.

I ducked as best I could out of the way and waited for several minutes. When the rock fall was finally done, I ventured a look at my climbing partner. He was hanging motionless from the straps on his tools. Finally, I heard a low moaning. I talked him through climbing up to a small ledge. By the time I came up behind him, it was pouring rain and hail. Pulling on my raincoat, I got his poncho over him as we waited for the weather to clear. He had a broken helmet and a mild concussion along with incipient hypothermia.

The lead boulder had been the size of a small refrigerator. My partner had jumped out of the way of this first boulder at the last moment and planted his tools and crampons. A rock the size of a soccer ball then bounced off his helmet and his calf. The injury to the calf would take the longest time to heal although I was much more concerned about his broken helmet at the time. I led the rest of the pitches up the couloir in the dusk and we bivouacked on the summit. We scrambled down the next morning and drove back to LA after a quick stop at an emergency room in Bishop.

Had I fully listened to my intuition, we wouldn't have begun climbing that morning. Was it our dream simply to experience beauty in the mountains or to force a climb in spite of the weather? This was a turning point for me in terms of acting on my intuition.

2. Tempest on Flagstaff



Figure 2: Hang Gliding over Aspen, 1992

In *Deep Survival*³, Gonzales describes how our decisions in adventures are almost always heavily weighted by emotional, not rational, criteria. If we have a series of good or pleasurable experiences, (like skiing yet again down a sweet, local hill) these weigh heavily in future decisions. Here's a story about the powerful duo of emotional memories and ego.

³ *Deep Survival: who lives, who dies and why: true stories of miraculous endurance and sudden death*, Laurence Gonzales, W. W. Norton & Co., 2005.

It doesn't interest me who you know or how you came to be here.
I want to know if you will stand in the center of the fire with me
and not shrink back.²

On an August day in 1994, I was having breakfast at Lucille's in Boulder (a local cliché) with my girlfriend and an old friend of hers. ("Dan" was in town for some business.). Full of myself, I described my plans to go hang gliding that morning off of the front side of Flagstaff hill. I explained that the reason that I was the only local pilot on this beautiful site was because the launch consisted of three quick, steps down a shallow ramp which then dropped away on the side of an enormous boulder. You needed to launch directly into a morning thermal rolling gently up the hill.

My girlfriend dropped me off and drove to the meadow in Chautauqua City Park below to await my flight. My intention that morning was to impress Dan instead of the usual, simple enjoyment of a soaring flight. This was in spite of the fact that Dan was *off somewhere else in town!*

Ordinarily, the committing run into space involved a ten-twenty-minute wait for all of the carefully-placed pieces of flagging to blow directly at me. On this day, the thermal cycles were erratic, blowing strongly to one side or the other, and I waited two hours for a suitable thermal cycle. After launch, I was immediately pitched into a tempest. Before I even kicked into the boot of the harness, the glider pointed straight at the boulders below and then at the sky. I aborted my soaring plans and flew out over the lower cliffs at high speed and over to the meadow. I set up my standard approach, circling over a cottonwood tree until I was just thirty feet above it and then flew straight in on a slightly uphill grassy, stony path.

I was standing up with hands on the down-tubes on final approach when a very strong thermal carried my glider up to the top of a local sledding hill. I managed to turn away from the approaching trees and found myself flying at great speed down-wind, down-hill, spit out of the sinking air around the thermal, in ground-effect (a cushion of air that extends glide just above the ground). I was far too close to the ground to attempt a turn but unable to bleed off the speed before I surely crashed into the cars in the rapidly approaching parking lot.

A split second, after I wondered how I was going to get out of this one, I suddenly dove the glider directly into the ground. Had I not been wearing thick glasses, the stones would have blinded me. Instead, the glasses merely broke my nose, and I lay dazed on the upside-down glider, blood pouring out of my mouth from having bit through my tongue. This was to be the last flight for me after thirteen years and perhaps eight hundred flying hours.

Like most, this aviation accident was due to pilot error. I later learned they'd closed a nearby regional airport due to a highly unusual wind shear. Failure to recognize changing conditions in a familiar place is a salient characteristic of many kinds of accidents.

A few weeks prior to the accident, my girlfriend had a nightmare in which I died in the hang gliding crash at Chautauqua. Just after the dream, with great effort, she willed a full-survival ending. I have no recollection of her telling me of this dream before the crash. However, when the powerful thermal picked me up on final approach, that nightmare flashed full into her vision. After an initial sinking heart, she immediately began, again, to visualize full-survival. Everything, including our

adventures, begins with intent. I was indeed fortunate to have a companion who set forth the intent of full survival.

3. Bringing it Together: Easy Survival in the Cayes

In the spring of 2002, I planned a new kind of trip with a few buddies to Belize. The intention was for quiet adventure. For a week with each friend, we paddled a two-person Klepper sea kayak south from caye to caye—between the outer barrier reef to the east and the shore, twenty miles to the west. Staring at old marine charts before we left, I worried about tearing the bottom of the kayak on coral or capsizing in heavy seas. I bought a marine radio, an extensive repair kit and extra flotation so that the kayak would not sink if the bottom did rip. I sewed on a deck line all the way around the boat to grab. We practiced getting back into the boat in deep water. We wore lifejackets. We carried extra bags of water so that we could follow a rule of not going out in stormy weather. We snorkeled every day, and had a great time.

Near the end of the trip, we stopped on a very small caye at a camp that caters to fisherman from all over the world. None were there on our arrival, and we accepted an invitation from the proprietor to set our tent on a platform in the trees. After sharing a great dinner, the proprietor invited us to visit another tiny island in the cayes to the south that the fishing company owned. In the morning, we set a compass course for a larger, intermediate island that was over the horizon. Indeed, in two hours, the palm trees of the larger island came into view, and two hours later, we were standing on this intermediate island. Late in the afternoon, we arrived on that tiny, deserted island and enjoyed the remote solitude. It was a remarkable silence that final night in the cayes. Survival and beauty were easy. This story was like most benign adventures: it felt good and things worked easily.



Figure 3: Bill Krause Ready to Paddle another Section

4. Surrendering to the Fall

“The realm of consciousness is much vaster than thought can grasp. When you no longer believe everything you think, you step out of thought and see clearly that the thinker is not who you are.”⁴

⁴ *Stillness Speaks*, Eckhart Tolle, Namaste Publishing and New World Library, 2003.

At the end of 2004, I went to Ouray with a long-time climbing partner. We began on an ice climb with three tiers. I put in an ice screw on top of the first tier. Twelve feet higher, I resisted the urge to put in another screw before moving up onto the second tier.

Unexpectedly, my right axe slipped in the icy slush on the step, and the left axe also came out. Surrendering to the inevitable, I fell backwards and found myself spinning in space. I looked up to see the left axe caught on a very small lip of ice on the rim of the step. I was hanging from a new leash I had put on the left axe just before the climb. My shoulder screamed in pain. I threw the other axe into good ice and proceeded. I was extraordinarily grateful I hadn't fallen to the bottom of the climb. I remember accepting the fall (and its consequences) as it commenced. Perhaps surrendering to the fall (and the present moment) freed up my sub-conscious to allow me to scrape the left axe on the ice where it caught.

5. Length of the Fall

In the spring of 2011, I couldn't wait to get out on another 5.11a classic in Eldorado Canyon. I had been out on a similar type of route a month before and was ready for another, although in the intervening month, I'd skied more than climbed. A partner and I headed up Superslab, a beautiful route we'd climbed three years earlier with a tricky section on the fourth (last) pitch. I lead up, clipped a bolt, and put a few small cams into poor placements into placements that I'd recalled being better three years earlier.

Still based on my recollection, I climbed a little higher. Now on shaky footholds, I fumbled while placing a small nut into a small crack around a corner. The belay was annoyingly tight. Suddenly, my foot slipped, and I plunged off. When the poor cam placements ripped out, I rotated upside-down and headed for my partner belaying on a small ledge. I stopped with my helmet a few feet above the ledge. One of the cams on my rack had struck my partner's left arm, and for a short while, he thought he'd broken the arm that *wasn't* holding the rope. While we rappelled off the route, my partner perseverated that we just weren't ready for that route so early in the season.

In the subsequent conversations I had with friends, I realized I hadn't actually calculated how far I could fall while putting in a nut into the small crack. A description for the route in a recent guidebook confirmed that the rock had crumbled in the area where I had the poor cam placements. My partner was right: I was unready for a run-out on 5.11a (with consequences) that early in the season. I had survived because of the annoyingly tight belay.

6. Heuristics for Easy Survival

Set your intent. Learn your outdoor craft well from other people, from books, from practice, from love of what you're doing. Allow this passion, knowledge and experience to develop into wisdom. When you actually go out to climb that remote wall in the mountains, set the intent, and then surrender it. As your proficiency develops, your goals (and possibly your intent) will change. Compensate by updating the following critical items.

As you practice, commit to clear *personal* rules for equipment, weather and conditions. They're usually obvious: Pro-actively retreat in the face of likely bad weather when climbing in the

mountains. Use double ropes on longer climbs to make it easier to retreat. Place protection in the ice before topping out on a slushy step.

Your life and your outdoor adventures should complement each other. Hopefully, your job and your relationships easily allow your climbing, skiing, etc., while the passions from these pursuits fill the other pieces of your life.

Be pro-active about equipment and preparation. Replace and update worn equipment like that ice axe leash. A hang gliding helmet with facial protection is worth every penny.

Develop routines and stick to them. Always give your hang glider the same pre-flight check before flying it off the side of a hill. Always put on your climbing harness and tie into the rope in the same way.

Check the conditions. Is there a possible wind shear? Is the water in the river running especially high? What are the avalanche conditions in the area?

Calculate and re-calculate consequences. Is that a ground-fall at the second piece of protection?

Especially if this is a sweet, familiar adventure, evaluate your emotional memories in the light of the current conditions. Decisions about survival always involve our emotional memories. In a recent class on avalanche safety, a good amount of the class time was spent watching films of skiers getting caught in avalanches. The whole idea behind this kind of preparation is to create emotional memories that can balance our own experiences (see *Figure 4*) and those experiences seen in Warren Miller ski movies.⁵

Make a plan and a back-up plan based on the conditions before you leave. This makes it easy to choose a safer alternative when the desire for a goal is strong but the conditions aren't right.

Before you decide to leave, check your state of mind and your intent. Choose again if you're going flying in bad weather because you think it will make you a bigger person. If you want to regain your focus by climbing, choose something easy. It's especially easy to inflate one's ego when strangers offer questions and complements about an inherently-dangerous sport.

Surrender your outing to the day. Greet the families and hikers and other climbers on the trail. Allow the climb up the wall to unfold as you envisioned it. If you lose the route in the middle, allow a new route to appear or the original route to re-appear. It's okay to bail. Open your eyes wide to see the swifts diving across the soaring arête, the bats coming out at nightfall, and the amazing flow of the trail under moonlight.

⁵ An online video, "a dozen more turns," was one of several effectively used in the avalanche class:
<http://www.revver.com/video/310519/a-dozen-more-turns/>



Figure 4: Turns on 'O Boy', Red Mountain Pass, Colorado, December, 2007

7. Seeing Beauty and Life

In an appendix to *Deep Survival*, Gonzales offers several rules for emergencies such as focusing on what is happening right now, staying calm, staying rational, appreciating small triumphs and acting decisively. He also mentions feeling gratitude for life, singing, loving poetry, seeing the beauty, seeing life, surrendering your fears (e.g., of dying), doing what is necessary, and persisting.

Seeing beauty is an excellent practice both in the usual light of our outdoor adventures and within the (illusions of) darkness. Beauty usually makes me smile and sometimes cry. Tom Paxton describes a beautiful, implied intention in this song⁶:

“On the road from Srebrenica, I saw a woman with two babies and one broken arm.
She could only carry one, and one would have to stay behind to quickly die.”

The chorus describes a place “where there’s no one left alive to count the dead.” The song finishes:

“On the Road from Srebrenica, trudged an old man who was bent and stooped and frail . . .
He seemed to have no spirit until he passed the ditch and heard the baby cry.
Then he picked the baby up and in the swirling smoke and flames, he moved along.”

⁶ *On the Road to Srebrenica*, from the *Live for the Record* album, Tom Paxton, Sugar Hill Records, Inc., 1996.

Wayne Dyer describes intention as “a process of connecting with your natural self and letting go of total ego identification.” He explains the stages for completing an intention: discipline, wisdom, love, and surrender. Dyer goes on to the aspects of intention: creativity, kindness, love, beauty, expansiveness, abundance, and receptivity.⁷ These are also the feminine aspects of adventure, and when we’re awake and connected to life, they complement and temper the masculine exuberance to push into the unknown.

8. Conclusion

As beginners, we are often simply enthusiastic about something new and cool. If we accept a progression, we learn the technical skills. With these skills, we can experience the freedom of soaring up over a launch in the mountains or climbing high, vertical walls. Such contrasts usually include smaller margins of safety than in our ordinary lives. When we decide to add intention and heuristics, we gain discipline, wisdom, passion, and surrender. In the end, we have been happy fools and lived our dreams in bright, clear colors.

⁷ *The Power of Intention*, Dr. Wayne W. Dyer, Hay House, Inc., 2004.