

On March 5th, 2006 I was involved in my only climbing mishap in relatively short but active climbing career. In 6 years and hundreds of days spent outdoors on the rock and ice, in places like Katadhin, Joshua Tree, Wallface, Seneca, the Rockies, the Gunks, and Catskills, if nothing else there's always been criticism that I've been overly cautious. I honestly never thought I'd be involved in an incident so potentially fatal.

The following were some of my thoughts while convalescing at home on March 6th, 2006. The accident and the outcome still fresh on my mind, I was wired and I knew I'd have many questions to answer from many people. I tried my best to explain why I climb and why the controlled risk of alpinism is, to me, a worthwhile risk, despite the inherent consequences.

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Accidents happen, in the mountains or on your way to work there is always a chance you can die. Often there is nothing within your limited control to change the events that impact your lives. I can't say that I would want to die anywhere just yet, and I don't believe in the consolatory, "died doing what he loved," but I do believe it's better to live life and take a few chances than to live in a protective bubble, risk nothing, and really not live at all. As Teddy Roosevelt put it, "Let us run the risk of wearing out, rather than rusting out." It's better to enjoy and pursue your passions than to sit at home and think about what you could be doing, or worse, could have done.

Most non climbers don't understand the

joy you get from using your own power, knowledge and skills to climb a technical route in the mountains, sometimes in less than ideal conditions. The difference between technical mountaineering –alpinism- and hiking or even cragging is the level of skill and an ability to adapt to changing conditions. Complete freedom limited only by your own skill and desire. When it rains at the crag you go home, when the sun gets low it's time to head down. The mountains have different rules, rules of complete freedom dotted with dire consequences. In alpinism you use every climbing and wilderness travel skill you know at various times, perhaps even on a single climb, and generally your mistakes and unwillingness to adapt are unforgiven. Things go wrong, and you need to be able to fix them while adapting and remaining self reliant. If nothing else it gives you a sense of being in control of the uncontrollable.

Sunday was one of the most spectacular days in the mountains I have ever had. I had good company and a competent partner. This was my second winter ascent of the Trap Dike and the weather conditions could not have been more perfect. Deep blue skies and perfect temps.

The word was that the Dike was perhaps climbable but that judgment was needed. There was a lot of snowfall over the last week and sustained 70 mile winds for a good deal of time. That loaded the leeward gullies with snow. The Trap Dike was heavily loaded with snow blowing off Mt. Colden. *Eventually that snow would prove to be one of the things that had to go right for me to ever climb again.*

What most people who haven't taken any avalanche training don't realize is that the layers of snow are not cohesive for many reasons. Crystal size and shape, and temperature are two of the biggest factors. Until they bond the layers can shear and create an avalanche at any point. If you cross country or backcountry ski, and (kick) wax your skis for grip, then the principle of snow bonding is very intuitive. The wrong kick wax either slides or creates a mess of slush on your skis. The right wax bonds the ski to the snow, creating a perfect grip that allows you to kick and glide, rather than slip and slide.

After talking with Don Mellor -a man who's been up the Trap Dike as he put it "a few times"- we decided we'd have a look in preparations for Fred's outing the following weekend. We would proceed as high as it looked safe and make decisions as conditions dictated.

The snow was amazingly compact. As we climbed steadily, it became evident that the snow seemed almost ideal. One or two kicks for a bomber step. The surface snow conditions, however, does not preclude a slab a few feet down from cleaving and creating a serious avalanche. There is always the possibility on questionable snow that human triggered avalanches can occur. Nevertheless, it seemed quite safe with no tell tale signs of fissures or fractures on the surface.

We climbed quickly up the gully and past the ice buldges. Above the buldge there were some nice looking ice flows off to the right side of the dike which is essentially a 1000ft narrowing gully ranging from 150 to 50 feet wide. At around the point we decided to exit the

Dike the climbs to the slabs were ranging from 2+ ramps to solid 4's. Despite having two full racks sitting in our cars, we'd only taken 3 screws: We hadn't intended on actually ice climbing. What we had was enough to safely lead a technical NEI 3-4 40 foot section but not more without it becoming runout.

The exit climb to the slabs was about 25m with 15m of actual ice climbing. The ice was solid, if not a little brittle, but it made for good screw placements.

Because of the short 30m rope, a bomber belay was tough for Fred to find. A full length rope would have allowed for more options but would have also limited communication, which would prove important later on. Fred improvised a very solid alpine type belay using some small trees and his axes. Fred cautioned me that falling was not a good option as the anchors were safe, although not ideal. That's good because I don't fall (well not often ☺). I decided that he should haul both packs rather than just his. Initially, I wanted the practice of climbing with a near 20lb pack but I figured it was just 20lbs more on the anchors. I always treat any climb as a do not fall since you never know what the anchor looks like. Beyond that I just don't like to fall for many reasons, chiefly because it's bad style, and falling is giving up your control of the situation, I like to give up control even less so in the mountains.

After both packs were hauled, I tied in and the ice was very solid. My feet felt great but my tools seemed to not get that sweet "thunk" stick that climbers appreciate. I noticed Fred was having the same problem on lead before me. I was hoping to hook his placements but he is

a few inches taller than me and that puts my heels too high, making my footwork go out of balance. I cleaned the first screw, damn, I forgot how long a 22cm is when cleaning. The next was just a 17cm and I had my cleaning rhythm back. Once you develop your own system it's like riding a bike. Unfortunately, Fred was keeping the rope a little too tight and it was under my arm pulling up and levering out my bomber tool placement during the second screw removal. I called up to give me some slack. I wasn't going to fall unless the rope pulled me off, so a tight rope was not a necessity, and it makes me uncomfortable anyway. Since my other tool was dangling while I removed the screws, at that moment being pulled off was a possibility if my planted tool got dislodged. It was ironic that my primary protection –my ice axe– was being compromised by my secondary point –the rope.

When I got to Fred, I looked at the belay and it wasn't something I'd want to take a 30ft whipper off of, but it was solid, more solid than I'd expected from the description. The axes as an independent backup were rock solid themselves; definitely a solid and safe alpine belay for the purposes of the moment.

Now we were up on the exposed slabs in ideal winter conditions with very little wind. The surface of the slab was either hard consolidated neve or ice up about a 30-45*ish fall line. Totally perfect and what I love most. Long exposed snow climbs, unencumbered by ropes and gear; just rapid rhythmic climbing. I sorted my gear at the belay, marveled how good the snow was for plunge self belays and step kicking, and took off for

higher ground with a big smile on my face.

We stopped and holstered one of our two ice tools each. The terrain at this point was too icy in spots for the dagger technique and not steep enough for the need for two tools. We'd only be slowed down by the second tool. I noticed plunging was intermittent, sometimes impossible, and it was getting icier as well. The snow was now iced over or just ice.

Continuing to climb quickly we reached the summit of the technical portion of our day in the mountains. No more than 50 vertical feet of snow was between us and the trees.

I hadn't had many photos of me that day. We only had my camera and me being the shutterbug of most trips, I usually don't hand over the camera much. Despite 6 years of climbing, I have very few photos of myself climbing anywhere, even roadside cragging at my local areas. So Fred asked if I wanted a photo of myself. I was eager to get one and we thought that the ice slabs would be a good spot for a posed "action" photo. In retrospect there was nothing unsafe about the ice slabs themselves. We climbed up them moments before, and we've descended stuff like that all the time. The difference was the exposed long runout with a fall into the Dike or Avalanche Lake. When I walked down a few feet something said to me "not a good idea". I disregarded it. It's just a few feet of low angle ice, quit whimpering. Remember, that little voice sounds off all the time in the mountains, and you have to make a choice as to the rationale of that voice.

On the ice slope, I was perfectly safe but as Fred was going to take my photo, a gust of wind came, blowing his mitten off the slope. I honestly don't remember him telling me to grab it. I suppose had he said "Don't grab that, let it go", I might have stopped, heeded my own indecisiveness and let the glove go, but for both of us it was instinct and reflex action. Again, one part of me said let it go, the other part said get it. It was too rapid to make a conscious decision with just a fraction of a second to decide. I always tell people I climb with if you drop something let it go. Never lunge for a piece of equipment and risk your safety. It turns out that it's do as I say, and not as I do. No more than 5 seconds of complacency and a reflexive action can quickly turn a beautiful day of flawless climbing into a catastrophic nightmare.

So removing one of my 3 points of contact from the ice to grab the mitten I now was anchored to the mountain only by my crampons. As I reached for the mitten, I broke contact with my sharpened crampon points on the ice. No points of protection on ice on a 30-45* ice slope. My axe was outstretched with the base spike holding the mitt. It's not hard to guess that I realized in a split second the "gravity" of the mistake. In that second I began to drop at about 27mph to the ground, however far that might be, we were nearly 2000ft above the lake, and that was THE ground.

In the mountains your last resort in an unroped fall is self arrest. It is a last resort because while it works in controlled conditions on good snow, or when a fall is expected on a glacier or otherwise, it only works a small percentage of the time in real mountain

conditions in moments of intense speed. I often use them to stop glissades and felt comfortable in it's use. Felt is the key word. I realize how unrealistic it is to self arrest at that rate of speed on that steepness of slope considering the hard surface conditions and patches of ice.

Once I began to fall I heard Fred yell "Block, Block" which meant arrest. I was already searching for my axe, a short, bent shaft, reverse curve technical tool unlike the ideal self arrest mountain axes which are longer and provide better leverage both in the pick curve and the length of the shaft. However, I've used both to self arrest and it's more difficult with the technical ice tool, although in good conditions it's possible to adequately self arrest a fall with either style axe. The problem was the surface and the rapid rate of my descent. For self arrest to work best it needs to be done early before you gain tremendous speed. The issue was that I was already at full speed within seconds or less. The other issue was I was flying; yes, flying, I was airborne as much as on the mountain side while rapidly descending down the mountain. On my first attempt I couldn't get both hands on the axe. My second attempt, a few seconds later, I was inverted on my side but I had apparently gained control of the axe. I tried to roll onto the pick but it didn't bite into anything. Ideally the pick would shift my momentum upward and spin me to a foot first position and eventually stop me as I rolled my shoulder and transferred my weight onto the pick. That's the way it works in practice –most times, but that's why you don't practice on exposed slabs without safe run outs. Arresting on ice is perhaps impossible. Less so if you touch down only intermittently.

After the final arrest attempt I pretty much went into “Oh shit” mode. Honestly, there was no chance I was getting out of this with my skills. Since the moment I lost control, I did what I was supposed to do and it failed. There was nothing more to attempt. I inverted so I couldn’t even try something that could be deadly or crippling in itself, kicking into the slope at a high rate of speed with my crampons. At that speed on ice an attempt to do that would have meant a minimum of shattered legs and possibly airborne inversion. At this point it was left to the mountain gods to decide if I lived or died. I wasn’t really scared I was going to die, but I was terrified I was going to end up on some pile of boulders maimed and alive enough to lay there and suffer for a long while.

I had no idea where I was after that final arrest attempt. It all took less than 15 seconds to fall the 600 linear feet, about 300 vertical feet, approximately a 50% grade including the ice pitch. Once I made the final arrest attempt, the mix of sky and snow was gone. No more inverting blue and white flashes. I guess I shut my eyes, or maybe my helmet got in my face? I don’t know, but all sense of limited orientation was gone. I knew the possibilities, including falling off the long edge of the slab towards the lake and into the thick spruce trees, and I knew the possibility I could land closer to our origins on the NEI 3+ ice climb at the top of the Dike, or I could land anywhere in between. The thought of tearing through spruces was scary, the branches don’t break, if you’ve ever clipped one while hiking or fell into a snow covered spruce trap then you know they feel like sharpened spikes. I would literally be shredded and impaled as I tore through the spruces.

Oddly my life didn’t flash before my eyes. I do remember clearly thinking. “why would such a great day end like this?” Then I just wanted the uncertainty to end. I didn’t like being out of control and whatever happened I wanted it to happen. I just hoped it would happen quickly. Suddenly I felt myself squeeze through a funnel and I the next thing I knew I was truly free falling for the first time.

Whoosh, I hit ground. I didn’t move, I couldn’t breathe. My only movements were to unbuckle my pack belt which seemed to constrict my flow of air, assuming I could still breathe at all. A few seconds later I could breathe again. The wind was knocked out of me but I was able to breathe just fine. I still didn’t move. I wasn’t in severe pain, oddly almost no pain at all. I was alive but what did I break? My neck, no, I could use my hands, I just unbuckled my pack. My head didn’t have that feeling of drowning when you take a hard head hit. My ears didn’t ring, my nose wasn’t salty, and my eyes didn’t water. All things I remember from when I’ve hit my head hard. After a little bit, I felt my helmet and it was intact. I started wiggling my toes but I still didn’t move my lower body. I could feel my toes moving in my climbing boots. I touched my legs and could feel them. Just staring up that the blue sky and half moon over head, I felt it was impossible I could be both alive and seemingly uninjured. I laid there for a few more minutes. Then I called out to Fred that I was OK. “DON’T RUSH DOWN, I’M OK” , “FRED TAKE YOUR TIME”.. I saw much snow and ice falling down from the slab close to me so I knew he was descending. He didn’t hear me for a few

minutes but the last thing I wanted was to see him flying down beside me. If I was dead there was nothing for him to immediately do, if I was fine there was nothing for him to do, and if I was something in between we'd need one of us healthy to extract ourselves or summon help

I finally got the courage to get up, to assess myself. I unbuckled the chest strap and rolled out of my pack. I knew you cannot defy all the laws of logic, gravity and physiology and walk away like nothing happened. I thought about the book, *Eiger Dreams*, and the fellow who fell several hundred vertical feet off the north face into one of the deepest snows the base of the Eiger ever had. He got up, left all his gear and walked away. Walked away from climbing apparently forever. Was I that lucky? YES.

I looked at the hole I created. It was not that deep. Perhaps 2-3 feet deep, but it was consolidated and I landed on my pack. I think between the snow cushion and my pack I survived without any neck or back injuries. The pack and helmet certainly protected my neck from whiplash as they buffered any whiplash.

Fred got down to the vertical ice flow about 10-15 minutes later. By the time he saw me, I had assessed my injuries. Surprisingly I had no major puncture wounds from all the sharp metal thrashing around.. My pants took some crampon abuse but there was very little blood under the Gore-Tex. Scrapes or minor stab wounds perhaps? Since there was so little blood I elected to leave that area alone. The worst visible and bloodiest cut was a flapper on my finger probably from trying to dig the axe into ice during the one good self arrest

attempt I had. Later, I noticed the blood blister indicating the forces applied to the axe in my self arrest attempt. I opened up the first aid kit and wrapped the flapper in rolled gauze and secured it with a Band-Aid. It quickly saturated the white gauze with blood while it clotted but I'd need to be able to use my hands to tie knots and set up belays so this was of primary importance. By the time Fred set up a rappel over the ice wall I was packed and ready to go. The look on his face when he saw me walking around as he prepared to rappel was both priceless and welcomed.

"Your walking!" "Yes I'm fine, well almost fine." Ironically, before we climbed up we both noted that this was a good place to fall since the base of the climb has such deep snow.

Once he was down I let him know I was fine. We didn't know what the chest pain I was feeling was. Internal injuries? Just a bruise? Muscle tears from the violence of trying to self arrest? My left knee was messed up. Pain hadn't set in but I knew it wasn't right from the moment I rolled out of my pack. To make things worse, my left crampon was mangled. The front bail completely destroyed and unusable. That's a pretty good indicator of the severity and proportion of the knee damage of that same leg. The lack of crampons and the injury to my knee would make descent a more challenging proposition. Fred also broke an axe. The good news was that there were really only two short technical sections below us.

We got organized, assessed the situation and began a descent. Immediately while trying to plunge step I knew the knee was going to make descent complicated.

I tried traversing the slope and that was also very tentative. Since I couldn't trust my left knee on what would normally be very safe territory to down climb or glissade unroped, the need for belayed descent became an issue that slowed us down.

I think Fred was pretty worried if I was thinking clearly and at times he became stressed with the setups. He just witnessed the improbable and I think he was still in shock. First seeing me fall, then seeing I was alive. Without a doubt that was a roller coaster of emotion. Honestly, I felt fine emotionally. It wouldn't be for a few hours that the gravity that I could have died set in. I was still elated to be alive and appreciative to be able to get myself out with a minimum of help. We double checked everything and I reassured him the setup was ok a few times. After that he seemed better. Perhaps seeing that I was fully cognitive and calm took some stress off of him.

For the most part everything went smoothly, efficiently, and was very safe. We set up all the anchors in the dark via headlamp. Both of us were comfortable in the dark so this wasn't nearly the hindrance that craggers might have endured. I've always felt it was good to practice in the dark because you never know when a situation might arise that necessitates calmness in the darkness.

The adrenaline was wearing off, my injuries were beginning to stiffen, and I was getting cold and tired at the anchors. I rested my left knee in the snow to ice it down while waiting at the anchors for Fred to arrive. Finally I said, "this is it I'll down climb the rest of the way unbelayed." We set up one more because

we couldn't see very far below in the darkness. When I got to the end of the rope I untied and down climbed the rest. I needed to move and we were actually only a few hundred linear feet from the base.

It felt good to move unencumbered by the ropes and fixed belays, and to generate body heat after spending quite a bit of time in the spindrift and wind that was picking up on descent. It wasn't cold, as a matter of fact, I don't have any idea how cold it was, I'd guess about 15°F, but I was only wearing damp mittens, thin helmet hat, base layers and a gore-tex shell. Descents like that are tough. You don't generate enough body heat while down climbing to offset the time spent at the belays while setting up the fixed anchors, allowing you to get cold, and think too much about things. I had extra dry layers in my pack but for me it's always a fine line between hot and comfortable.

Once on the lake I was warm again. Fred thought it would be a good idea to carry my pack, and I did too, although I felt I could manage the lake just fine since it was mostly flat with the occasional deep snow drift or ice patch. Carefully avoiding the ice patches on the lake, I was far more concerned about the steeper sections of trail in the trees where my knee could go from ambulatory to not able to move with one wrong step.

Walking across the lake in the darkness was quite beautiful. There was only a half moon above but it was perfectly clear. With the headlamps off you could see the mountains and terrain with amazing clarity. You could also see it was quite windy on the summits because

of the blowing spindrift illuminated by the moon. The half moon was providing enough light to cast shadows.

When we got to the trees Fred earned the pleasure of carrying my pack after all his hard work. Not much reward for getting me down. Well it was lighter than me so it could have been worse for him, and also me. I appreciated it regardless. The trail was just as good on the way out as on the way in, with good footing over the still compact soft snow base. Being prudent in my motions I never lost my footing on the hike out.

Along the way back, perhaps at Marcy Dam, the gravity of the situation hit me. See, when I landed I was just happy to be alive and relatively unhurt. I knew all the things that could have happened but they didn't encroach on my mind. At around that point though it hit me how many things had to go right after just one little thing went wrong for me to walk out of there. Lying down on my back on the dam, looking up at the stars, and talking about what had happened, it really set in that my escape was nothing more than pure luck. Fred lightened the moment when I commented how late it was. He said, "don't forget the time zone change." Huh??? "You spent so much time in flight you must have changed time zones."

Since 7 hours had passed, we down climbed the route and hiked just under 6 miles out, I figured I could drive myself to Albany Med rather than go to Saranac Lake Hospital. The chest pain still worried me but even on a bad knee we made decent time from the lake. We stopped to rest only 2 times. The hike out convinced me that the chest was more muscular than internal injuries.

We ate and drank every ounce of food and water we had between us on the trip out and we were both incredibly thirsty most of the way. We had plenty of food but 5 quarts of water and some soup was just barely enough for an almost 14 hour adventure.

Fred drove me back to get my car and then he followed me out to I-87 just to be sure I was ok to drive. Although I was understandably tired, I was no more tired than a typical long day in the mountains, and I felt fine to drive. I actually wouldn't sleep for another 15 hours..

By 3am I was telling my tale to the ER staff at Albany Med. I knew they wouldn't believe me, the doctor actually asked me if I'd been drinking after hearing what sounded like a grand story while staring into my bloodshot eyes. It had been over 22 hours since I last slept almost all of which was spent in motion. I don't think they did believe me at first. Even the resident said outside my room, "there is no way to rapidly fall 600 feet and not be injured at all. Just the sudden deceleration alone can cause any number of injuries." X-rays were negative and I was cleared to go home.

What I learned is that no one is above stupid mistakes. You know that deep down but you don't think it's you that will ever make them. Sure you read about all these famous alpinist who escaped death a few times early in their climbing career after doing something equally stupid, but you always believe you are better than that; certainly not a better climber but at least a better decision maker. I've always prided myself in safety and sound decisions, as does Fred. It's why my wife trusts my

climbing and doesn't worry incessantly. Although things can go wrong in an instant, I've never had a serious mishap before, no one has ever been injured while climbing with me nor have I been injured myself, we've never needed rescue and we've always gotten ourselves out of every situation and off every mountain regardless of how differently things turned out than expected..

I think Fred put it best (and I think I paraphrased it further up):

“I like challenges but being very safe myself while on mountains, I would never have thought that an accident that scary, spectacular and potentially deadly, would happen to me and someone of my surrounding. It reminds us how it can become catastrophic very fast in the mountains, and how a not so difficult endeavor can transform into a nightmare.”

Fred and I discussed many things that we could have done better beyond those two seemingly harmless decisions. Ways we were unprepared if things had turned out differently. Things such as not having enough hot liquids for a victim who needed to be left while rescue could be arranged, having a second emergency rope full longer rappels, having tie loops on all clothing and equipment to secure loose articles rather than laying them on the mountain side, and getting an earlier start. All just minor things that are fresh on our minds before invincibility and overconfidence on these casual endeavors returns.

Three months later my chest has healed and most of my cuts and bruises are just memories. I sustained a 40% tear of my

ACL and I'm currently debating the surgical options of ACL reconstruction. I've been back in the mountains several times and I expect to spend many more days enjoying the freedom that comes with those mountains. I don't know exactly what draws me there; I never felt it was the call of danger or risk. Yet, I've always felt it was the one place I was completely comfortable and completely myself. When it hasn't been fun I've stopped and taken a break. It's not something I feel compelled to do but something I want to do, and in the end that's more important than any explanation, assuming there was a reason for it to be explained at all.