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Erik Weihenmayer

Named one of Time magazine's 'Best of Sports' and selected as one of 25 most courageous Athletes, Eric offers tools and tips that serve the network marketer as effectively as the climber!

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Erik, I was so amazed to read your story in your book, *Touch the Top of the World*, about climbing Mount Everest. There are so many things I could touch on but what I'd like to do is step back and let you give us a glimpse of Erik along with your background.

Cool! I've been climbing for almost 20 years. I've been able to climb Mount Everest; I've been able to climb the seven summits, the tallest peak in every continent. I've been able to climb some beautiful vertical rock and ice faces around the world.

I've also been able to take part in some fun adventures. It's called 'Adventure Racing' which is multi-sport races where you bike, you kayak, you raft, you run, you cave, you orienteer and you climb. I was able to complete the 'Primal Quest' which is called the biggest, toughest Adventure Race in the world. It was 460 miles, 60,000 feet elevation game with no time-outs in nine days. That was very exciting.

I've been able to live a good life of adventure. I have a beautiful family. My wife and I have a daughter, Emma, who is six years old and we're in the process of adopting a little boy from Nepal. So I have a very complete life!

That's great! And for any of the readers who don't know you, I want to point out that while all of these achievements are amazing for anyone, you have done it with a little bit of an adversity. When you were a young boy you ended up losing your eyesight.

Oh, yes, I forgot to mention that! I went blind when I was 13 years old from a rare eye disease called retinoschisis. And sure, blindness has been frustrating. It's been a huge adversity in a lot of ways but it has also, in a sense, given me the chance to become a pioneer. I've been able to find new and innovative ways of blasting through barriers while finding a way to live a full and active life.

> ***There's a real blurry line between the things we can't do and the things we can, so being blind, in a strange way, has given me a chance to figure out what's possible.***

You were inspired by someone else faced with adversity. Can you tell us about that?

Sure, and even before I saw that person in Canada on TV, I was no different from anyone else. I'm still not so different from anyone else, I'm not some kind of special person who is an uber-intellectual or athlete, I'm pretty much just like everybody else. When I went blind, I totally denied it.

I fought it tooth and nail. You know, your brain is such a powerful force, it can tell you to do something or it can stubbornly tell you not to do something. It can convince you of anything you want to believe. I wanted to believe that I could see. So I walked around pretending I could see. I would say, "I know I can't see like I used to but maybe it's just the lights in my eyes or maybe I didn't eat a complete breakfast or maybe I'm just over-tired". I kept making up excuses and refusing to believe I was going blind.

I remember one day when I could just see a little bit out of one eye and I was walking down a dock and I wasn't using my cane and I walked off, did a flip in the air, and I landed on my back on the deck of a boat. I climbed back up onto the dock and I thought I have two very clear choices in front of me. One path had this blindness, this adversity, and it would crush me, absolutely crush me! The other path I could see was that I could turn into this storm and I could face the facts, as brutal and desperate as they might appear, I could become the ultimate pragmatist and figure out a way to climb out!

In a way, adversity is like that. It would just as soon crush you as it would let you through its gauntlet.

> ***So you have to figure out how to turn into that storm, how to move forward through adversity and flourish in that environment.***

So for me it didn't matter how much I dreaded blindness or feared it or wished it away. I needed to face it head on and walk into it's very midst.

So, when I saw Terry Fox, and at that time I could just see a little bit out of one eye, I was watching a show on TV called 'That's Incredible!" and I saw this amazing guy. He was running across Canada and he had lost a leg to cancer. This was before the new double-flex prosthetic feet that allow people to run. I remember he was just hobbling by the end of the day because he had such bad blisters on his stump. And yet the look on

his face was an absolute contradiction. He looked exhausted yet at the same time, his eyes were exalted.

I didn't know how to describe it but I thought to myself that there's something inside of us that gives us the ability to feed on frustration, failure and setbacks. I could only think of it as a light. And that those things could be used as fuel. The greater the challenge, the brighter that light burned. And that light has the ability to make us more focused, more driven and more creative.

> ***You know, adversity can sometimes allow us to transcend our limitations and give us a lot of purpose and power that we might not have ever had.***

Terry symbolized for me what I later began to understand and call an alchemist. He was the type of guy who could take all the lead that life piled on top of him and figure out a way to transform it into gold! An alchemist doesn't avoid or circumvent the elements of the earth. They know how to take that storm of adversity that swirls around us and they figure out how to harness its energy and to use that power to propel themselves into greatness. Even at thirteen, when I was going blind and watching Terry Fox, I had this inkling that there had to be a way to take hard things and use them to make yourself better and stronger.

Wow, Erik. You touch on so many things here. One of the things I really appreciate about you is that you offer so many 'teachable' moments.

I was a teacher. I taught 5th graders for six years and love teaching. So I do think of myself in some ways as a teacher. Now I'm kind of moving on, writing books and climbing and so I guess I'm teaching in other ways.

You know sometimes people will ask me if blindness gives me hidden advantages and I think that's the wrong way of looking at it. Traditionally, blindness is considered a weakness, a deficit, but I've found that the best

way to flourish in life is to take difficult things and figure out a way to flourish; maybe not *despite* those things but *because* of them.

Those things actually give you a unique opportunity to propel yourself into areas of innovation, of growth, that you might never have reached in any other way. Those difficult things are not an obstacle, in a strange way they're actually a pathway to who you really are becoming.

And everyone experiences some of that. Nobody gets a free pass, do they?
No, but in the book we wrote recently, *The Adversity Advantage*, the first chapter may be the most important one and it's about the idea of taking it on. Unfortunately, I think most people *don't* take it on. They get trapped in what I would describe as a suspended animation where they're never really seeing the adversity in their lives with their eyes wide open. They seem to be just hoping it will maybe go away or that it will change on it's own or they'll get really lucky.

I'd love to hear you share more about your new book. Your co-author, Paul Stoltz, talks about the adversity quotient and he names three groups of people, quitters, campers and climbers.
Paul invented what he calls AQ and what he's found through his theory and research was that people's success didn't depend on their IQ, it depends on their AQ, there ability to flourish in the face of adversity.

So it all comes back with that as a central theme. When you're moving forward towards a goal, or you're trying to succeed in a business like network marketing, you're going to face dozens of adversities a day. Some people quit in the face of that. Most people are stopped in their tracks and try to circumvent the adversity. They do whatever they can to avoid them so they don't have to deal with them. And then they can't so they're just stagnating.

Then there are a few people who make a commitment to harness the adversity and actually begin

to use those adversities to do better than they may have otherwise done.

It's a fairly small group of people that will actually use them rather than stagnate.

What I'm hearing you say is something that goes beyond merely acknowledging the adversity, but in fact, you're suggesting really looking at the adversity, embrace it and let it propel you forward.
Exactly! And I don't think anyone has really gone so far as to suggest that in a book. We're actually saying that adversity makes you better! It's not just one of those nuisances that you can deal with.

When you're able to square off with the adversity, with those challenges that you face, with the most complex problems we face with those gaps in human potential, that's where you drive yourself forward, where you drive society forward and you elevate yourself and others in the process.

There are so many great things that were spawned by adversity. Many of history's greatest achievements were spawned by adversity. And yet we wondered if this concept was going to be a hard sell because who wants to take on more adversity in their life? And yet we benefit so much when we refuse to deny its existence in our lives and instead use it to elevate ourselves and our societies.

Steven Covey wrote the forward and says, "Between stimulus and response there is a space. And in that space is the freedom to choose our response. And in those responses lies our growth to our happiness." You've really addressed some key things in your book and I'm wondering if we could cover them at least briefly?
Yes, we tried to break it down into steps because being inspired by someone like Terry Fox isn't quite enough. You need some tools. I came down on the experiential side of things and Paul came to it through science.

One of the saddest things for me is seeing people so inspired, so eager to succeed and make an impact, and yet they don't have or don't see the tools to do it. Because they don't have them they get trapped and keep falling victim to the same adversities over and over again. It's crushing to me.

One of the things I appreciate about your book is that you've combined the 'why' you're doing business with what to do.
I call that 'why' your vision.

> ***Your vision is sort of your internal compass that tells you where you're going and why it's important.***

Without that internal compass telling you where you're going to be, what kind of person you're being, you're going to run for the hills at the first sign of adversity. You have to have that sense of 'why' embedded and without it you have no compass. Without it you'll get lost. It's foundational.

So talk to us about Summit 1 – 'Take it on' from your book The Adversity Advantage.

There we talk about an adversity continuum. Most people try to survive adversity. They try to cope with it but there is an even higher part or level of the continuum which is harnessing adversity.

When you're just surviving it or coping with it, it's like you're a swimmer who is treading water but still sinking. You have to actually move beyond that level and figure out a way to turn into that storm of adversity and commit to harnessing it.

That's the hardest part because a lot of adversities are sort of like bad weather but not bad enough to actually do something about it. Paul actually talks about cloud seeding. You know where you have to actually see that adversity for what it is. Taking it and concentrating it, seeing it and looking at it for what it actually is.

That's actually a big premise of the book. There is one chapter called, Gauge you core, and it has to do with what happens when most people face the adversity. The biggest adversity for me was when I face the Ice Fall on Mount Everest. The Ice Fall is a blind person's worst nightmare. It's like a jumbled up field of ice of baseball to skyscraper size that are all piled on top of each other. Every step can kill you. You're jumping from boulder to boulder, they're shifting under your feet, there are steep dropoffs on both sides and when you face that kind of adversity your brain pushes the panic button. You're overwhelmed by the enormity of the situation and you just want to run. I call it 'hearing the sirens' from the Odyssey when Odysseus and his crew pass the islands of the sirens and they hear the maidens calling out to them. They jump off the ship and swim to the island only to discover the maidens are monsters.

Again, you hear those sirens, that's the analogy I use and for sure I heard them. I hear them all the time in the mountains. I think, "What are you doing here?!? You are so far out of your league!" You try your best to break down what you want to do, to look at it in an analytical way, but all you do is come back to all the hard work and fear and danger. You hear the sirens.

So you have to find a way to break it down; to really analyze it.

And that's a cool chapter because I used it on Everest. You ask yourself a few questions. How much control do I have in this situation? You discover you actually have a lot more control over the adversity than you originally think.

Are you committed to owning it, are you committed to owning the situation, not making excuses but actually owning it. How much reach does the adversity have? Meaning, how big is it. A lot of times it's not really that big when we take an honest look. We just have to really look and see how big the reach is. And then the endurance piece which really asks, how long is it going to last. A lot of times we think it's going to last forever but really, if you analyze it we can figure out that maybe there are so details to look at there.

That's what I did to analyze the situation to get through the Ice Fall; because otherwise my mind was just screaming at me and wanting to run.

In one of the other chapters we talk about summoning your strength. There is a theory afoot right now; it's a good theory, about using your strengths and kind of letting go of your weaknesses. That's a terrific thing because a lot of people have strength that they should use but in a way that theory can be misinterpreted.

In a way that can be almost dangerous because how do you know what your strengths are unless you go through the pain and struggle and failure that help you figure out what your strengths are?

Just thinking you can find your innate strengths, plug them in and out pops your destiny is a dangerous idea. That theory has it kind of backwards.

What you do is figure out what you want to do and what's important to you through that sense of 'why', through your vision. Then you figure out what strengths you need to achieve that. Some of those strengths you might have and some of them you might need to grow. And you grow them. You usually grow them through adversity.

You fail your way to success?
Sure! We call them adversity strengths.

Not only do you discover them through adversity but… you need to use them in adverse situations.

You need to use them when it hurts the most. For instance, one of my teammates on Everest, Eric Alexander, is a really generous guy. Generosity is a real strength of his. The best example I ever saw of this was when we were coming down from the Everest summit. We were about 100 feet down from the summit and one of our teammates, Mike O'Donnell had just crushed. He laid down on his back and I knelt down by him and said, "Look, Mike, we're a team and we have to go down. What does it matter that you didn't make the last 100 feet. We did it. You've got to get up right now and go with us, it's not worth it."

And he said, "Well, I just think I need a little bit of water and I think I can make it." And Eric Alexander reached into his pack and grabbed his bottle. He had about a third of a quart left. He handed Mike that water bottle and Mike swigged that whole thing, he got up and he reached the summit. That was, to me, the best sense of adversity because Eric gave when he had nothing to give.

So that idea of finding your strength; if you were just going to take your innate strengths and plug them into to find your destiny, then where is the

fun in life? Where would blind climbers be? Where would a Van Gogh be? If people were content to just use what they thought their strengths were the world would lose something.

Where would the six blind Tibetan teenagers be? Would you talk to us about them?

Oh yes. In their culture, in Tibet, blind people are seen as having evil spirits inside of them. It's believed they must have done something bad in a past life to deserve it. They are pariahs, people throw rocks at them.

There is a beautiful German lady; her name is Sabriye Tenberken, who opened a school for the blind in Lhasa, Tibet. Just getting through the bureaucratic red tape to get her school open was a huge challenge because there is so much superstition. After she couldn't get into the Peace Corps she applied for the German equivalent of the Peace Corps and they said, "We don't send blind people overseas. That's a liability." That statement fired her up so much that she funded her own way to Tibet and rode horseback through villages. She found blind children 3 and 4 years old who hadn't even been taught to walk! She found this was her calling. So, actually being turned down by that German equivalent of the Peace Corps was the best thing that ever happened to her.

It made her into the ultimate pioneer. She fought tons of bureaucracy, tons of superstition and founded a school for the blind. Only a couple of kids were there in the beginning and now she trains over 100 kids a year. Now these kids who were once pariahs are now some of the best educated kids in Tibet. They speak and learn Braille in three different languages, they learn computers, they walk freely through the streets of Lhasa, which is a crazy city with no traffic lights and people are starting to treat them differently.

We thought it would be cool to go over there and contribute to Sabriye's work so we took six of her most highly motivated kids, trained them and then took them on a month long climbing expedition. Ultimately, after a month of pushing up trails and cold weather, all six of those kids stood at 21.5,000 feet on the north side of Everest. For me that was awesome because kids that were tied to beds in dark rooms and were shunned,

now stood at the highest point of any other blind kids in history! I think that's an example of using strength in a non-traditional way.

Erik, talk to us about Summit Four in your book, Pioneer Possibilities.
That's one of my favorite chapters because I think, when you want to be innovative, or you want to flourish in your life through a sense of innovation, you're going to run into a lot of adversity. And the reverse is true, running into adversity opens up opportunities be innovative.

For myself, the easiest way to describe this is when I learned how to ice climb. I had learned to become a pretty good rock climber and then I wanted to learn ice climbing and people said, "Erik, you know it's impossible! It's not like rock. You have these giant, heavy metal tools in your hands and you can't swing them indiscriminately at the face. You're going to knock down a huge chunk of ice the size of a refrigerator and it will come down and crush you."

Through that, I had to figure out, through trial and error, a way to do ice climbing. So I found that I could tap my tools against the face and I could feel through the tips of the tools and I could hear the pitch and feel the vibration through the ice. It's a whole new way of ice climbing. So many people thought you had to see to climb but

> ***I've found that when you have the courage to reach beyond convention you come away with the understanding that there are a lot of ways to climb a mountain.***

There is not just one way.

A lot of times great things begin with that little empty feeling in your gut that says you could do more. You strive to see that there has got to be a way forward. Like when I first got the invitation to go rock climbing. I ran

my hand up the wall of my room and thought, who would be crazy enough to go rock climbing? And then I signed up.

But in a way, you have to be careful as a pioneer, not to be motivated by the negativity. I mean you can take that concept too far, to be solely motivated by the negativity of others because then you're not really moving forward with your own sense of a vision. Instead you're moving forward in a reactionary way to how others see you if you just react to them telling you something is impossible. To me that's a trap.

I believe that when you're talking about being a pioneer, you're also *not* talking about being reckless, correct?

Correct! We're not talking about that at all. In fact, one of the things we talk about in this chapter is the ability to create systems. Systems that are portable and can be carried forward and applied to other people. That's the idea of the ice climbing system that I use.

When I do big projects in the mountains I'm constantly pioneering all these kinds of systems that will make things safer, more efficient, and more productive in combinations where there's a difference between success and failure. I approach things very methodically in an effort to keep myself safe in the mountains. I do not see myself as a crazy, reckless blind guy… like a blind Evil Knievel taking risks and hoping to live through it.

I can see the value of that applying to network marketing; where it doesn't serve to be reckless in choosing or approaching your business. Instead it serves to follow the pioneers who have created the systems that delivered success.

Oh sure. And it all entails a sense of preparation. You can read a book and you can prepare. You can read manuals, you can go to conferences, but sometimes you have to take that information, come back and re-engineer it for you. Sometimes you have to actually rebuild them. And that's where adventure lies. You have to make them yours.

It's through a sense of preparation that you do that. It's not simply a matter of throwing your fate to the wind.

This leads right into Summit Five, which is Pack Light and Pack Right. How does that tie in?

Well, it's something I've had to consider often when going into the mountains because you pack your backpack with everything you want and everything you need. You often find you go to pick it up and you can't even lift it. It's too heavy. So you pull everything out again and you repack it and you have to figure out what you can do without. You have to pare it down to something manageable.

Then as you go up the mountain, as you get higher and it gets more severe, you'd think you're actually adding things to your arsenal but you're not. You're actually stripping down; you're paring everything down to the bare essentials. So by the time you reach the summit of any mountain, you actually have only a jacket, a power bar and a quart of water.

As you move towards greatness, as you move towards the higher levels you're actually paring down in your life, you're not adding things.

We thought this was a great analogy to business and to life because most people pack way too many things into their lives. You know, they have 50 things they're trying to balance and because of that they're not really good at anything. They haven't had the discipline to figure out what they really can live without.

When you pare your life down to the two or three things that are really important you are able to have great agility and flexibility when adversity

strikes. It frees you from becoming crushed by the burden of too much. And it takes tremendous discipline to pare yourself down.

Please talk about the next Summit, which is Suffer Well.
Sure, and if anything is a hard sell this is it. Who wants to suffer? For me, what's neat about the book is that Paul really helped me, through his science, to understand all of it at a deeper level.

For instance, even though I had *lived* the idea of the adversity continuum, I had never thought about or analyzed how I did it. Paul helped make that clear to me in a way that could be shared. But there are things, like pioneering and suffer well, that totally came from experience rather than science.

One of the things you actually teach yourself in the mountains, beyond physical training, beyond systems training is the ability to suffer. What you do to prepare is actually put yourself in suffering situations.

My friend Jeff and I would go out before Everest and we would climb Colorado '14ers' in the winter. We'd be wading through waist deep snow and putting ourselves on these ridges with 50-60 mile per hour winds in our face. It's all about learning to suffer, with dignity.

Like when I did the Primal Quest, Jeff and I would be on a tandem bike and we'd be rounding a corner up a huge hill, and we'd been climbing for hours and Jeff would say, "When we round this corner we've got to be at the top of the mountain" and we'd round the corner and he's say, "As far as I can see it still goes up!" And we'd just both start laughing! We'd start cracking up like crazy people but we knew this was the way to deal with suffering! You laugh.

> ***People suffer and they either bring everyone down around them or they suffer nobly and they elevate people through that suffering.***

When you're doing something great or trying to do something great, you're always going to be suffering, at least there will always be an element of that.

And that really does roll into the last Summit in the book, which is Deliver Greatness Everyday.

Yes, our thinking is that facing adversity is great but how do you use it? Do you use it to elevate yourself or is it bigger than that? For me personally that contrast speaks loudly. I've led two trips to Kilimanjaro, my first trip was with my family, my Dad and my wife, and I organized the trip pretty badly. That was one of my first big mountains where I was leading the expedition. We left from about 14000 ft. to the summit which was about 19000 ft. which was an extremely long summit day.

We screwed up because we could have set up the camp at a higher elevation. That's one of the things I made a mistake about. We left from that lower camp and my family was trashed. About 500 feet below the summit my Dad and Ellie, my wife, turned back. So I made the summit with my African friend, Balthazar, but when I hit the summit I knew my whole reason for planning this trip was to reach the summit with my Dad and my wife. So instead of being excited about my summit I felt sad, like I had let people down.

I went back this last year and guided another group and I learned from my earlier mistakes. We had 25 people on the team, 6 of them blind, and everyone made the summit; even Douglas who was the first blind African to summit Kilimanjaro. He had gone blind in the 1998 U.S. Embassy bombing in Nairobi. For me this was a much better summit because I knew I had helped other people to summit.

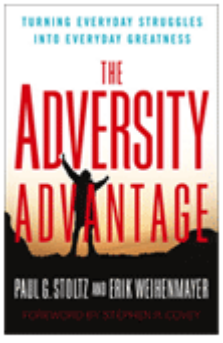
> ***So suffering and moving toward a cause for self, putting yourself on a summit, is one thing but using adversity to help others is a much higher calling.***

So this chapter is really just putting together all the other chapters with that one element added - the element of our contribution to others.

And is that how we end up delivering greatness?
Yes, I really think it is. It's that extra element of really elevating people in your life through all of these principles. It's a simple chapter in a way and yet a challenge to deliver on.

Thank you Erik! Your new book seems to me a pivotal tool to hand to a network marketer.
Thanks. I have a friend who is a paraplegic who pedaled around the world with his hand cycle. It took him about a year, he went through something like 15 countries and he arrived back in America where there was a group to meet him and he said, "The greatest word in the English language is the word 'ENCOURAGE': To give others the courage to do great things by doing great things." And really, that's where the book comes together in the end.

How do you encourage others, how do you pass it on?



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