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Risk and Huntington

What is it that drew him to this mountain?

Michael Levy



MY PAL QUINTON AND I LOOK UP AT THE WEST FACE OF MOUNT Huntington, in the central Alaska Range, the objective we've been hoping to climb for months, but it's nowhere to be seen: the granite wall is now obscured by a dark cloud of snow barreling toward us. A deep rumbling grows as it nears, the front advancing like so many billowing sheets. In the precious few seconds since Quinton and I had looked up and first seen the avalanche until now—as it's nearly upon us—I might have thought of family and friends. I might have turned to Quinton, given him a sorrowful, glad-it's-with-you-pal look of resignation and faced death head on. But that didn't happen.

Instead, now, I turn to Quinton with a timid smile. In what I imagine must be a small, tinny voice, I utter the most ignoble last words I could have written for myself: What do I do?

Quinton has thrown himself down against the slope, arms covering his head, braced for impact. I grab the plastic orange sled stuck in the snow to my left and, unthinking, shelter our open bag of gear, and leave myself unprotected.

And then there's just white.

If I could have dilated those few seconds between seeing the avalanche above me on Huntington and becoming engulfed in its belly, stretched those slivers on the clock out into meaningful minutes, the question I might have decided to ask instead is: How did I get here? How did I get to the point in my life that seeking the summit of Mount Huntington seemed like a good idea? Not in an overly broad, George Mallory-esque¹ way, but in a more personal sense: What drove me to this mountain? And, most important, was it worth it?

IN HIS *ALPINIST* ESSAY "LETTER TO MY SON," LEGENDARY CLIMBER-WRITER Michael Kennedy, addressing his only child, Hayden Kennedy, writes, "Do you remember when [Mom] told me that if I ever taught you to ice-climb,

¹ George Leigh Mallory was the Mount Everest climber who told a reporter in 1923 that he wanted to climb it "Because it's there," perhaps the most cryptic and frequently quoted reason mountaineers go. Mallory and Andrew Irvine died on the mountain the next year. Mallory's body was found in 1999.

The West Face Couloir route on Mount Huntington begins on the snow field and follows a thin band of ice. ALASDAIR TURNER

she'd kill me? She figured that ice climbing was the gateway drug to alpinism. Fortunately, you learned it on your own." Hayden, who went on to become one of the most lauded alpinists of his generation, took his own life in 2017 following the death of his girlfriend, Inge Perkins—in an avalanche while they were backcountry skiing. That sport shares much with alpinism: the same terrain, often the same tools for the approach (skis, skins, ice axes, avalanche beacons, crampons, etc.). Practitioners of one are often just as adept at the other. For someone like Hayden, backcountry skiing was just one aspect of his mountain prowess.

What is it about alpinism—something so indiscriminately dangerous that mothers and fathers who know what it entails explicitly hope their children never discover it—that draws some of us to it?

For me, the answer meshes perfectly with Michael Kennedy's description of ice climbing as a drug. But if it's a drug, it stands to reason that it must be a crutch or self-medication, something used to address an underlying problem—be it pain, illness, or some nebulous state of distress. For me it's depression.

I discovered climbing in earnest in 2012 while living in Boston. Once or twice each week I'd climb at the MetroRock Gym in Newburyport. I had



The approach to the West Face of Mount Huntington changes every year, as the Tokositna Glacier shifts and teetering seracs collapse. Skis are critical to save time. QUINTON BURROWS

just graduated from college and was in the midst of a major depressive episode. Moving over stone helped me cope with my demons better than any pharmaceutical cocktail or professional psychoanalysis had thus far. Climbing became the closest thing I had to a natural antidepressant.

Soon I discovered outdoor climbing, and from there I was off to the races. Climbing propped me up. I wasn't after pure adrenaline—that provided the highest highs, sure—but everything else that came with climbing and the trappings of a climbing life: the focus, the distractions, the community, the purpose it provided.

It was an addiction. I soon needed more to get my fix. I progressed through the disciplines of the sport as though reenacting the sport's history in reverse. I moved from bouldering in the gym to sport climbing outside to hard traditional climbing to big-wall climbing and, finally—like Hayden Kennedy—to steep mountain faces.

Long, scary routes requiring alpine climbing carried high consequences. The feeling of toeing the line, yet remaining in control, excited me.

Most high-profile climbers rebuff this idea—that danger is a motivation for doing certain climbs. Jeff Lowe, perhaps the best American alpinist of the 1970s and 1980s, once told me, “No climb is worth the tip of my little finger.” There is a dishonesty here, though, I think. Many of Jeff Lowe's seminal ascents—often solo, sometimes ropeless, objectively dangerous by virtually any yardstick—argue the opposite of his words. I see something similar in Alex Honnold, the boldest free soloist ever, and how he rationalizes his own dangerous climbs, differentiating between risk and consequence. The risk is low, he argues, but the consequence is high—much like flying in an airplane: If it crashes, the consequences are catastrophic, but there are very small chances of that happening. The climber fatality rate on Denali, for example, is 3 climbers out of every 1,000.² And on Half Dome in Yosemite National Park, just 31 climbers died over 85 years.³

Eventually, like Honnold, I became a free soloist. I scaled all the walls in Eldorado Canyon, Colorado, without a rope. After soloing the Bastille Crack in July 2018, I mentioned it to my mother. Her response caught me off guard.

2 Scott E. McIntosh, et al., “Mountaineering Medical Events and Trauma on Denali, 1992–2011,” *High Altitude Medicine & Biology* 13.4 (2012), pages 275–280.

3 Gregory D. Richardson and Susanne J. Spano, “Death on the Dome: Epidemiology of Recreational Deaths on Half Dome in Yosemite National Park,” *Wilderness & Environmental Medicine* 29 (2018), pages 338–342.



Looking down the Tokositna Glacier from base camp. Begguya (Mount Hunter)—the third highest mountain in the Alaska Range after Denali (Mount McKinley) and Sultana (Mount Foraker)—is the furthest mountain back in the frame, dead center.

QUINTON BURROWS

“Next time, before you do that,” she said, “think about the call your mother will get if something goes wrong.”

I understood her sentiments, echoing those of Hayden Kennedy’s mother. But I solo within my ability, I reasoned. Low risk, just like Honnold said.

THREE WEEKS BEFORE HEADING TO ALASKA, I WAS SITTING AT MY NEW nephew’s baby-naming when I got a text from Francis Sanzaro, the editor at *Rock and Ice*, where I too am an editor: “David Lama and Hansjorg Auer are missing. Maybe Jess Roskelley too.” I thought he was joking. Those guys were the best alpinists in the world. Over the next several hours, details firmed up: a cornice had collapsed on Howse Peak in the Canadian Rockies, taking Lama, Auer, and Roskelley with it—swept away by an avalanche’s billowing sheets of snow.

At the very moment I received the text, I watched my grandfather, father, and brother-in-law holding the baby of the hour, Nathan. Rabbi Sirkman was intoning a prayer called “*L’dor V’dor*,” which means “from generation to generation,” as each of the three fathers gazed with love at the newest and smallest member of the line. *We’ll do anything to keep you safe*, their eyes all said.

On the flight home from the baby-naming, I was reading *The Mountain of My Fear* (Vanguard, 1968), David Roberts's classic account of the second ascent of Mount Huntington via the first ascent of the Harvard Route, in 1965. Roberts spends the end of the book reflecting on Ed Bernd's death on the descent. He writes, "A remark Ed's dad had made when we had stopped at their house in early June stuck in my mind now. He had said, 'It's hard for you boys to understand how parents can worry about this kind of thing.' I had simply agreed—it was harder for us to understand. Now it was tragically easier."

What terrible pain must David's, Hansjorg's, and Jess's fathers and mothers have felt? How could they—how could I in three weeks time, and on the same mountain that I had just read about in Roberts's book—willingly put themselves in a situation that could lead to such anguish?

LESS THAN A MINUTE AFTER THE SNOW CLOUD ENGULFS QUINTON AND ME, IT dissipates. I shout to Quinton, "Are you alive?" His frazzled swearing is affirmation enough. The avalanche had buried us nearly to our armpits.

"Make good decisions," my dad, our virtual weatherman for the Huntington trip, had told Quinton and me via satellite message the day before the avalanche. We hadn't, I realized.

In much the same way Ed Bernd's death made it tragically easier for David Roberts to understand a parent's loss of a child, my own close call on Huntington brought everything home: David Lama, Jess Roskelley, and Hansjorg Auer's deaths; my parents' concerns; the importance of coming home. Perhaps I should have realized such things sooner, but there is no simple algebra for such things: Sometimes it's hard to see the line until you cross it.

I pictured my own parents getting a phone call like the one Claudia and Renzi Lama took after David Lama's death on Howse. I imagined them sitting Shiva for seven days, neighbors bringing fruit platters and plastic wrap-covered dinners for them to reheat. On a visit to Poland, later in 2018, I talked with Claudia and Renzi. "I think he knew very well that risk was always there. But life is a risk. Your whole life is a risk. You can get hit by a car on the street and get taken away," Claudia told me. She added, "Life is not always glad, it doesn't always follow a straight line. David knew very well what he did. He knew death was possible." Would my parents have handled my death on Huntington with such graceful acceptance? Would they have performed the Honnold-esque mental gymnastics necessary to understand my reasons for climbing it? Or would they begrudge me for it, even while they mourned?

What do I do? Implicit in those words was a fear not for myself, but for my mother; my father; the nephew I haven't gotten to know yet; my own unborn daughter or son.

What do I do? In retrospect these feel like some of the more profound words I've ever spoken, despite no one—not even Quinton—having heard them. These words speak to a basic conundrum I cannot reason my way out of. Climbing is an integral part of my identity. Pushing myself in the mountains, getting their good tidings, and finding that fine line without breaching it—I rely on all of it. It is how I keep myself present, and how I make myself whole for the others in my life that I care about. It is, perhaps, what keeps me from a spiraling darkness the likes of which Hayden Kennedy was unable to find his way out of.

But the obvious contradiction here is that dangerous, high-risk climbing also seems the thing most likely to kill me, like any addiction. Austin Howell, a talented free soloist who died last July while climbing without a rope in North Carolina, expressed similar feelings: "Free soloing isn't a death wish, it's a life wish," he once wrote. "It's the single best therapy I've ever found for calming my tumultuous mind. The control that I've developed on the wall transfers into my daily life. This is important, because I'm not the guy who 'beat depression.' I don't get to be that guy. I've got to manage this for my entire life." I remember reading those words, recognizing them in my own actions, and yet still dismissing them as mildly deranged.



The author at the beginning of the most technical climbing on the West Face Couloir on Mount Huntington. He and his partner made it about halfway up the mountain on their final attempt of the expedition. QUINTON BURROWS

I hear the dissonance in these ideas, as others surely do in their own vexing conundrums: The push and pull between satisfying one's own selfish needs and fulfilling the needs required of us from others can take any number of forms. Like Austin Howell, I harbor no death wish: I want to watch my nephew grow up and to visit my aging parents in the new apartment over the railroad tracks where they plan to spend the rest of their days. I have no desire to burden anyone with my own premature death in remote high peaks or on small cliffs closer to home.

So once more: What do I do? Or rather, what do any of us do when faced with an existential problem we see no clear solution to?

I have no answer. As best as I can figure, we do our best to keep swimming upward—whether against a deepening avalanche of snow around our armpits, heartbreak, suffocating sadness, the loss of a child, or whatever form the dark clouds take—and keep gasping, hoping for that fresh breath, the next day. Maybe next time we simply choose not to do that climb, not to go on that trip at all.

QUINTON AND I TOOK STOCK THERE AT THE BASE OF MOUNT HUNTINGTON. We reburied our cache of gear, and skied down through the icefall back to base camp, where we lay silently in our sleeping bags, eyes open. Our bright orange tent pitched in the middle of the Tokositna Glacier was the only speck of color for miles around.

Two days later, when our alarms roused us at 4 A.M., we layered up, brewed coffee, and walked out into a minus 20-degree morning. We snapped into our skis under the steely light of Alaska's never-setting summer sun, and started skinning back up once again toward the west face of Mount Huntington, to try to climb it.

MICHAEL LEVY is the senior associate editor at *Rock and Ice*, *Ascent*, and *Gym Climber* magazines. He did not make it to the summit of Huntington during the trip in this story, but hopes to return to the Alaska Range to try again one day. He also serves as *Appalachia's* assistant Alpina editor.