



# CLIMBING BLIND

Charles Schroeder  
Talks to Mountain Climber  
Erik Weihenmayer

**O**N MAY 25, 2001, ERIK WEIHENMAYER became the first blind man in history to reach the summit of Mt. Everest. Born with retinoscyses, a degenerative eye disorder that progressively unraveled his retinas, Erik went blind by age thirteen. This disability, however, did not stop him from becoming a world class athlete and he is soon to become one of the youngest individuals to climb all of the Seven Summits—the highest peaks on all seven continents. Erik and Charles Schroeder (a mountaineer in his own right) recently sat down and discussed setting high expectations, working with others, and what it takes to be a leader.

**CHARLES SCHROEDER:** Erik, for someone so young, you have led a remarkable life. Who have been the most influential people in your life?

**ERIC WEIHENMAYER:** For role models, lot of people have to look to professional basketball players or sports figures. I haven't really had to look far beyond my own family. My dad is a remarkable person who is different in some ways from other people I have met; when he believes in something, he just kind of goes for it at a hundred miles an hour. He is very bullheaded, and I have probably inherited that kind of stubbornness.

I think a role model is somebody who really makes you a better person. I have climbed with people who have made me a better climber, and a better person, and a stronger person, because of watching them—watching how strong they are. And I have actually climbed with some disabled folks. I went to Moab, in Jordan, and climbed a four or five hundred foot rock face called Fisher Tower. The route was called Ancient Art, and I climbed it with Mark Wellman, who is paraplegic, and Hugh Herr, who is a double leg amputee below the knee, and we did the first fully disabled rock climb. We formed the first fully disabled rock climbing team in history and climbed this route. It was amazing. I got to carry Mark to the face. He has created this remarkable pioneering system that allows paraplegics to climb. Before that, no paraplegics knew how to climb. Hugh is a pioneer too. He is an engineering student at MIT, and after he lost his legs in his accident he developed these prosthetic legs with rubber feet. He has a special pair for when he climbs faces so he can stand on a ledge the width of a dime with these little rubber feet. He also has a pair that are more vertical; he can use them to climb cracks. So he is actually a better climber now than he was before he lost his legs. People like this just totally push into the unknown, and that is inspiring.

**SCHROEDER:** In your book *Touch the Top of the World*, you mention the important role that your mother and father played in your development and in creating this incredible drive that you have. What were the most important turning points in your life, and why were they transformational?

**WEIHENMAYER:** When I first went blind, my parents were really pushing me to accept blindness, use a cane, learn Braille, and so on. I wasn't really ready to do that, because I think the human brain is very stubborn, and I couldn't identify myself as a blind person. I still saw myself as a sighted person. I wanted to be a sighted person. All the people I knew were sighted, and I didn't want to give that up. I couldn't make the leap between who I was as a sighted person and who I now was as a blind person, and so I pretty much fought everything.

There were a couple of transitional moments, I guess, when I look back that enabled me to accept blindness for what it was. One of the first was when I was walking down a dock one day and I wasn't using my cane; I took a step, and I was sort of almost seeing two docks. I was going through a period where I could barely see out of one eye, but I was seeing double, and I took a step and did a flip in the air and landed on my back on the deck of a boat. I just thought, *Erik, it doesn't matter what you think or what you feel; if you don't start using your cane, if you don't start accepting yourself as a blind person, you are going to kill yourself.* So in a sense—I know this sounds harsh, but we change because we are forced to—because we are tired of bashing our heads against the wall, or we are tired of tumbling down stairs. It is sort of a primitive way of changing, and hopefully you don't have to go through too much pain before you change, but there is sometimes a little pain and suffering involved in the process.

After that, I wanted to find things I was good at, and for a while I did mischievous things. I learned I could light a firecracker by myself and blow up the mailbox of the mean kids down the street. I learned I could do things like that, and then I actually found something a bit more constructive, which was wrestling. I remember the first day of practice, all the freshmen would wrestle the captain, and all these scrawny little freshmen would just get dragged out and pinned in five seconds, seven seconds, nine seconds. When I got dragged out there, I got tossed all around the mat, but I held out for twenty seconds. I remember thinking, *I'm having a little trouble breathing, my face hurts, I've been pounded into the mat, and I stink at wrestling. But I stink at*

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*least ten seconds better than all those other freshmen in the line, and they can see.* I thought that was sort of a small victory. I didn't see it as a failure, I saw it as a success. I think in the beginning, when you are first moving in a certain direction, you have got to look for those little tiny victories. If you don't pay attention, you are going to see it as a failure.

**SCHROEDER:** Picking up on what you just said, I found a number of insights from your book very interesting. But I was particularly struck by comments you made about various false assumptions concerning blindness—for example, that sight meant power.

**WEIHENMAYER:** Well, I think 's just natural human instinct to think that what you have is the best—and that sight is powerful. We get so much information from sight. If you think about it, 90 percent of the information that you get is through your eyes. So when people go blind, or if a sighted person imagines going blind, they imagine helplessness. They think . . . I have had people say to me, “I would kill myself if I went blind,” or “I wouldn't even know what to do—I would be so afraid.” That is true at first, but your sight is only one sense out of five, and blindness is not a helpless state. You can feel a bit helpless at first, but you get through that and you actually learn to use your ears and your sense of smell, and maybe it even brings out a bit of ingenuity that is already in your character.

You can find alternative ways to do the things you want to do. I have heard somebody call it lateral thinking, which is kind of cool. So that's what happened when I started rock climbing. My first time climbing, I was sixteen. I went with the Carroll Center for the Blind, a rehab organization for blind people. It was also the first time they had ever taken blind kids rock climbing, and the instructor didn't really even know how we were going to climb. He just said, “Try to use your hands and your feet as your eyes.” And I did. I climbed up this route, and I started thinking to myself afterward, Well, if I can use my hands and my feet as eyes to climb this rock, maybe there are other things I can do if I just think about the world in a different way.

So I started using my cane, and I started learning how to use a computer with a voice synthesizer, and learning Braille. All these things are simply alternative systems. I'm not reading with my eyes; I'm reading with my fingers. I'm typing on a computer, and I'm listening to what the keys are saying. So I realized that sight isn't power, and blindness isn't helplessness. Being blind just forces you to do things differently, and that's OK. Sometimes it's OK to replicate the way a sighted person does something, and sometimes you have to completely abandon what the sighted world does and how they do it, and just kind of engineer your own system from the ground up. I find that pretty exciting.

**SCHROEDER:** In your book, I came across this remark: “People's perceptions of our limitations are more damaging than the limitations themselves.” How have you been able to overcome stereotypes, and other false assumptions about what you could do?

**WEIHENMAYER:** Well, it is a hard one because in a sense people's stereotypes really do affect your life, but you don't want to get hung up in being a person who is sort of a stereotype buster, because doing that can get old. It becomes shallow. So you have to have balance. I do the things I do not to forge ahead and prove that blind people can do this or that, not to shatter stereotypes, but because I love it. Yet I think you have to be careful when you are doing things; you pay attention to why you are

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A former middle school teacher, **Erik Weihenmayer** has contributed to *Outside* magazine and is the author of *Touch the Top of the World: A Blind Man's Journey to Climb Farther Than the Eye Can See* (Dutton Press, 2001). Erik is a powerful public speaker and travels the country sharing his inspirational stories and remarkable insight.

**Charles C. Schroeder** is vice chancellor for student affairs at the University of Missouri–Columbia (schroederc@missouri.edu). An avid rock climber and mountaineer, he recently joined a South American expedition whose goal it was to climb the three highest peaks in Ecuador.

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doing them. I climb mountains at least because I love it. Because I have a passion for it. It's the reason you paint a picture: because you have joy in what you are doing. That joy has to come first—it is selfish—and that's OK. But as a side benefit, I think the things I do really take people's expectations and perceptions of what is possible and what is not, and shatter them into a million pieces. When people are forced to rebuild their perceptions, they live their lives with more opportunity and with few barriers placed before them. That has got to be a good thing. I think that's what this Everest climb did.

**SCHROEDER:** Expectations have played an important role in your life, and they certainly play an important role in performance for most people. You have taught school. Is there any advice you can give educators about the role of expectations in fostering student learning and student success?

**WEIHENMAYER:** Well, high expectations are everything. To have high expectations for somebody, and to help kids become problem solvers—to help them become lifelong learners, help them become leaders—I think that's the key. People get so hung up on what kids are learning rather than on building traits that enable kids to be successful.

**SCHROEDER:** What are some of those traits in your mind?

**WEIHENMAYER:** Well, being a lifelong learner. That means learning to teach yourself and being interested in learning throughout your whole life. It also means understanding that failure is part of any kind of success; failure is just part of the game.

I would see kids in my classroom go out and play baseball, and they would strike out, and they would say, "I'm a terrible baseball player." It would drive me crazy, because I think you have no idea whether you're a good baseball player or not; you just tried it a few times. I took some blind kids rock climbing. I have done that lots and lots of times, and I had a kid one time who was a good wrestler who wanted to try rock climbing. I gave him some easy routes, and at the end of the day I gave

him a harder route and he didn't get to the top. He came down and he said, "Well, I guess I'll just stick to wrestling." It drove me crazy. I said, "Of course you're not going to get to the top; half of the time *I* don't get to the top. Failure is just a part of life, and the next time maybe you'll get it."

The other thing I like is to help teach kids to find the direction when they are going through activities. I try not to be "the teacher"; I try not to be the person who is the engine of the car and steering it too. Instead, I like it to be a team process: all of us learning and moving together as a class. I think life is an ongoing, never-ending process of just reaching out into the darkness, when you don't know exactly what you are going to find. People need to get used to that feeling—that uncomfortable feeling.

**SCHROEDER:** Let's shift our focus to a topic that we both certainly enjoy: high-altitude mountaineering. This kind of climbing, as you and I know, stresses the body and the mind in some incredible ways. What were the greatest challenges you faced on Everest and other major peaks, and how did you address them? How did you maintain optimism in the face of adversity?

**WEIHENMAYER:** There are hundreds of challenges. The worry of how you are going to perform at high altitude with little oxygen, whether you will get pulmonary or cerebral edema, or whether you will be too slow, or get too cold, or be able to climb the long distances, or your oxygen bottle will hold up, or you'll fall into a crevasse, or you'll beat an avalanche . . . the list goes on and on. But for me, being blind, one of the biggest challenges was whether I would be able to get through the terrain quickly enough. That was specific to blindness. So I am always sort of creating these systems. When I hike I use two long trekking poles, and I lean on them and scan them in front of me in a certain way that enables me to know the terrain in front of me. So I guess I'm not always focusing on the challenges, I'm focusing on solutions.

There were some very discouraging days on the mountain. One was my first trip through the Khumbu ice fall—which is right out of base camp, a two thou-

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sand foot section of jumping up ice boulders that range from the size of a baseball to the size of a skyscraper. They are all just piled up on top of each other. It's as if somebody took a glacier and exploded an atom bomb in the middle of it. It is just totally chaotic. You are jumping from boulder to boulder, and there are huge dropoffs and huge crevasses everywhere—there are actually some crevasses so wide that you have to cross them by walking over ladders. The first time I made it through the Khumbu ice fall, I was so disappointed with myself because I took a long time. Most of the experts on Everest thought I would never make it anyway.

There are some famous climbers who said, "You're going to have to take more risks than sighted climbers take to get to the top." There were climbers who said I would be a liability, that I would slow my team down, that they would have to be watching my every step. There is a climber who said—he was making a joke, but it wasn't very funny—he said he was going to climb behind us on summit day and take a picture of the blind guy's dead body to send back to the newspapers.

It took ten hours to get through the ice fall the first day. I kept hearing these voices of doubt. I was thinking, *Wow, just hearing these voices in my mind, this reminds me of the Odyssey.* When Odysseus is traveling around the world, he goes by the island of the sirens, and the sirens are these beautiful maidens who call out to the ships and try to lure the sailors to their island with their beautiful singing. The singing is absolutely irresistible. But when the sailors give in and go to the island, the maidens gobble them up and they're never seen again. You see, the maidens are monsters, really. That's the way I see these voices. You know, when you are doing something big, you're always going to get these little voices of doubt, which tell you you're out of your league, but you just have to accept them, and at the same time realize that they are the sirens and you can't give into them.

So I was discouraged, but I kept remembering this beautiful Tibetan quote, that the nature of the mind is like water. If you do not disturb it, it becomes clear. I thought a lot about that. It didn't make sense to me at first. But what I thought about was that when you take a look at any big project—any kind of big visionary project, like climbing Mt. Everest—and you think about

all you need to do to stay safe and be successful, all the fear and all the doubt, all the struggle that is ahead, it has a tendency to really sap the will out of you and discourage you. But what I knew I had to do was let go of my expectations, make my mind still, and focus like water, and understand that no matter how big a mountain it is, you climb it step by step, moment by moment. You focus on each of those steps—each of those moments, and that's how you get to the top. I figured, no matter how high I got up the mountain, I would just celebrate, I would be proud. It really took the pressure off me, and that's how I combated those feelings of doubt. In a way, I just didn't think about it. I just forced myself to think about what is immediately ahead, the next step.

**SCHROEDER:** I found that too, when I was climbing in Ecuador; so much of the effort became not focusing on how far I was from the top, but focusing literally on each step, one after the other.

**WEIHENMAYER:** You might think it's boring, but it isn't. It is exciting when you look at it as a whole.

**SCHROEDER:** Many people view those who climb Everest as a kind of reckless thrill seeker. They people don't think about how miserable climbing can be; they don't think about the suffering, the endurance, the tenacity, the sacrifices that are all part of the experience. So in light of all the hardships you encountered—not only on Everest, but on other major peak ascents—why do you do this? What is your philosophy of climbing, and does it relate to your philosophy of life?

**WEIHENMAYER:** Well, first of all, I'll say I don't see myself as some kind of blind Evel Knievel, or somebody who takes huge risks. If you're just taking crazy risks, maybe one out of ten times you'll get through it and be lucky, and I think that's definitely not a philosophy to live life by. As a blind person, I didn't see going up Mt. Everest as a death wish; I saw it as a calculated risk. But people don't realize . . . I mean, the experts who said I didn't have a chance, they were judging me on the basis of knowing one thing about me, and that was being blind. They didn't see the insight, all the experience, and all the talent and skills I've accumulated over the last sixteen

years. You know, setting up an anchor and building a snow wall and setting up a tent and cooking a meal on a stove and fixing a line and actually leading a climb . . . they didn't see any of that, so I guess I don't see it as all that risky. The way I see it, if you've earned the right to be there and you have the talent to be there, it doesn't matter whether you can see or not.

Why do I do it? Well, when I go into a city, even though I know it has taken such tremendous work to build a city, to build skyscrapers, I don't get inspired. But when I'm in the mountains, I feel inspired. When I'm around these amazing mountains and the pristine snow and when I feel the wind and the sun and I'm with my friends, it makes me feel connected to the earth. It doesn't make me feel I'm the most important thing in the world; it doesn't make me feel separate. It makes me feel I'm a part—I'm a small part, but I am still a part nevertheless. It's weird, because people talk about "conquering a mountain," and that's just ridiculous. You don't conquer a mountain. I mean, you sneak to the top and you stand there for a second, and then you sneak out of there, and you hope the mountain doesn't crush you. It's a humble feeling—I think as human beings we have lost humility. When I'm at the top of a mountain, I feel fragile. And I like that feeling. It makes me feel there is a god.

Climbing mountains is a beautiful thing externally, but it is also very mental. It is very internal. Helen Keller said the greatest things in the world are not seen or touched; they are felt with the heart. I totally agree with that. So much of our experience is inside of ourselves . . . and climbing a mountain and standing on top of one, a lot of it is just how you feel. It is a feeling that your life has meaning, that you can proactively create the life you want for yourself. I think a lot of it is about that. At the same time, it's about teamwork. You are around really special people that you rely on and communicate with, and you really trust each other; you have linked your faith together, and it is an amazing sense of trust and community that I don't feel very often in other parts of life.

**SCHROEDER:** Erik, that's a great lead-in to my next question. It seems that in the world of climbing the heroes traditionally have been highly competitive, individualists, free soloists, the visionaries who tackle sometimes the most unforgiving route with the least equipment. One of the things that amazed me about your Everest expedition is that nineteen members of your team reached the summit, and this was a record in and of itself. How did your team accomplish such a remarkable feat, and what were the group dynamics like? How did you and your team develop trust and belief in one another?

**WEIHENMAYER:** Well, first of all most of us were friends already. When Pasquale Scaturro (our team leader) and I formed this team, we knew the greatest resource we had to get us to the top would be the team that we gathered. So, we wanted to pick not only world-class climbers but friends—people who weren't afraid to link their fates inextricably to each other. Pascarelli and I had seen teams on mountains around the world that were sort of a loose confederation of individuals who were a team on paper but they really weren't one. They were just doing the same thing at the same time, and that's not a team. As I said, it is people who trust and rely on each other and don't build barriers around themselves, and their egos don't get in the way of the team's vision.

That's the kind of people we picked . . . amazing people, great friends. It showed the whole time on Everest. It was what gave me the courage to go when I was at Dingboche, resting before our summit bid—Dingboche is a village at 14,000 feet that you rest at before you actually head back to base camp and then up to the summit. We heard that Babu Chiri, one of the most famous sherpas, had fallen into a crevasse and died. It floored me. I realized it doesn't matter how strong you are. If you blink for just a second, if you let your guard down, the mountain will take you. I just realized that I was putting my faith in myself, but also in my team—to watch each other, to be really watching out for each other.

The experts who said I didn't have a chance, they were judging me on the basis of knowing one thing about me: being blind. They didn't see the insight, all the experience, and all the talent and skills.

Everyone has an occasional bad day on a mountain, and everyone has weaknesses, but when you come together as a team, when you combine your strengths and talents and insights, you become a very strong entity, and sometimes you are strong enough to climb a mountain. That is what our team was.

There are so many examples of how this team was really amazing. First of all, these were guys who believed in the validity of what we were doing. All their friends were saying “You are going to take that blind guy up there?” and they still stuck with me. When I was slow through the ice fall that first time, teammates would get to camp one and they would come back down, an hour and a half below camp one, and meet me at the top of the Khumbu ice fall with hot drinks and candy bars, and we would sit up there. They got to camp, and instead of crawling into their tent and taking a nap, they would come back to the edge of the Khumbu ice fall to wait for me. That was when I was slow in the beginning.

People just kept doing that kind of thing for each other. Maybe one of the most remarkable things that happened was when we got to the South Col, which is Camp Four, the high camp. I arrived at about two o’clock; a lot of my teammates had gotten there earlier and were all working to set up the tents in the wind. The South Col is tremendously windy, and it took them six or seven hours to set up all the tents; by the time we all crawled into the tents, we were exhausted as a team. Typically, you just try to get four hours of sleep and then leave for the summit that night, but as a team we got tired and dehydrated. The people who got there the earliest were the most tired, so it was the strongest members of the team who were the most tired. If we had left that night, I don’t know what would have happened. Maybe one or two people might have made it, if we were lucky. It might have been dangerous for some.

But we decided we were going to wait for twenty-four hours and leave the next night. We knew that by waiting we were running the risk of the weather window dying on us. But we weighed our priorities, and we wanted to stick together as a team; we wanted to give everybody who had a chance, a chance to make it. We wanted to stick together, and we knew there was strength

in numbers. We had started this thing together, and we wanted to give everybody a chance to end it together. That is what happened. It was the best decision in the world because everybody was strong, and nineteen out of twenty-one people made it. That is unheard of.

**SCHROEDER:** It is an absolutely remarkable achievement. I’m sure the mountains have taught you a lot of lessons, as they have me. What are some of the most important things you have learned about leadership and teamwork from all this high-altitude mountaineering, rock climbing, and the other things you do?

**WEIHENMAYER:** When you’re on a mountain, you’re probably roped together, right?

**SCHROEDER:** Right.

**WEIHENMAYER:** That’s the greatest analogy of teamwork that you could have. Think about it. You are linked, you are tied together, so if one person falls, if you don’t stop him—if you don’t throw yourself down on your ice axe to arrest the fall—you are both going to fall. That is what a community is. It’s people moving together with different talents and strengths, and insights, and genders, and everything. Different goals, a little bit different motives, but with one vision. If you create that one vision between you and other team members, then you can do incredible things. I see a vision as a bit different from a goal, by the way. A goal is very linear and tangible, but a vision is sort of just how we see ourselves living our lives, or how we see ourselves serving the world. I think it is somehow deeper than a goal. It’s the way you want to live your life.

Basically, a leader is somebody who has accepted the unknown—accepted the uncomfortable feeling of the unknown. That’s all a leader is. Leaders have skill, and that’s important, but they also have courage, and they have that vision I’m talking about. But I believe more people can lead than *think* they can. When I was a teacher, I tried to teach kids to stand up in front of the class and be a leader in a certain situation. A lot of times, leadership is sort of bubbling just beneath the surface in people, and they just haven’t figured out a way to tap into it.

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I will tell you a funny story from the book. We were climbing El Capitan in Yosemite; we were climbing just the first pitch—the first 150 feet. It got dark, and we had to get down and get out, and my friend, Jeff, had lost his headlamp—or else the battery had died. Jeff is a better climber than I am, but I'm a better climber than he is in the dark. So I was the guy who had to lead us down.

I climbed down these problem boulders below him, and I would place his trembling feet in these little holes and he would be making little quivering noises. When we got to the trail, I kept us on it by checking for the packed dirt under my feet. It wasn't a big deal. It was just sort of doing what I do in the daytime. I got us out to the road. I told Jeff I would never let him live it down; to this day, I will say "Jeff, I saved your life," and he gets so mad! It's just a funny story about leadership. There are situations where everyone has the potential to be a leader; you have just got to find the situation.

Schroeder: Erik, one of your goals is to climb the seven summits—the highest mountains on the seven continents. How is that going, and how many are left to climb?

**WEIHENMAYER:** I have done five: North America, South America, Antarctica, Africa, and Asia. I'm going to go climb Mt. Elbrus this summer; it's in the Caucasus Mountains of Georgia, in Eastern Europe. We are going to try to climb the peak and ski down it, which is a whole other system of communication. Then in September we are going to climb Carstensz Pyramid, which is a beautiful two thousand foot rock climb in the middle of the rain forest, in the Free Republic of Papua, near Australia.

**SCHROEDER:** Great. That will be a world-class achievement, because very few people have ever completed all seven. Finally, Erik, after the seven summits, what's next? Any further challenges you are contemplating?

**WEIHENMAYER:** Well you get so focused on climbing, and on these goals—you know, the seven summits—so it's hard to think beyond it. I don't honestly have a good answer to that. I have played around with all sorts of thoughts. Maybe going back into the educational world. Maybe doing something with the environment, maybe writing another book. But one thing I am clear on is this: I am a husband and a dad, and I think people get so focused on their goals and their careers and so forth that they lose sight of the really good stuff. One thing I know is a major part of my life, and a major goal for me, is to be a really good dad, and to spend time and be there for my daughter. My wife is really balanced, and she teaches me some great lessons. One thing she teaches me is life isn't about of one goal after another, harder and harder and harder goals. Life is not just a succession of hard-earned things. It is about enjoyment, about love. My daughter won't know me as some famous mountain climber. She will know me for the love that I am able to give her. So, I keep in perspective that all this mountain climbing stuff is great, and I love it, but there is another aspect to life.

**SCHROEDER:** Well let's leave it there, with that last bit of wisdom, which I think is important for all of us to keep in perspective. Thanks again for being part of this. It has been a wonderful experience for me to chat with you and learn firsthand about your remarkable life. Who knows, maybe someday we'll get to climb together?

**WEIHENMAYER:** Thanks, Charles—great!

