

# Every Man for Himself?

DAVID BREASHEARS



OVER THE PAST SEVERAL YEARS we have witnessed an unprecedented number of climbers and expeditions active on the highest peaks of the world. Through no fault of their own or because of errors of judgement, these climbers are increasingly being confronted with extreme situations in which they must make difficult decisions. These decisions can determine whether they and their companions will survive.

Often these decisions are admirable and selfless. Sometimes they are self-serving and regrettable. Commonly they lie somewhere in between. Recent events have focused attention on extreme or difficult situations that highlight the moral geography of mountaineering. For example, when a climber's companion becomes weak and unable to continue, with the summit within reach after weeks of hard work and sacrifice, should the climber continue alone to the top, or descend with his faltering companion? Or, as the leader of a large expedition, does one divert the resources and energy of the team in an effort to rescue an injured member of a different expedition on a nearby peak, thereby sacrificing a team's chance for success? At what point does one decide to abandon a stricken companion in an effort to save his or her life?

Each situation in mountaineering presents a different and entirely subjective experience with a unique dynamic (weather, terrain, snow conditions, altitude, and so on) that influences the decision-making of each individual. Many times, when faced with a crucial decision, the climber is exhausted, dehydrated and suffering from the debilitating effects of high altitude. One can become concerned exclusively with one's own survival while neglecting or forgetting the welfare of one's partner. More darkly, driven by an overwhelming desire to reach the summit, one might simply ignore or trivialize the condition of a fatigued companion in order to justify continuing onwards.

This raises important moral questions for climbers seeking the great summits. Does our passion for achievement, adventure and success sometimes overshadow our commitment to the welfare of our fellow climbers? And what are the moral obligations and responsibilities of climbers to one another in uncommon and extreme circumstances?

Certainly, the final answer to these questions is that the welfare of our companions must always be paramount. But in a society that readily rewards success, yet casts a shadow on perceived failure, there will rarely be any

glamour or glory for those who return unsuccessful because they chose to assist stricken companions. Therein lies the problem.

If climbers are to make conscionable decisions in difficult situations, whether at Base Camp or in the chaos of a Himalayan storm, they must be imbued with basic moral values that enable them to make decisions with good judgement. We rarely climb alone. Therefore, we must accept the risk of having to forsake a summit for the sake of another person; it is simply too self-serving to do otherwise. That declaration may seem contradictory regarding an activity in which the element of risk is one of its most compelling aspects. But even the intentionally violent and deadly activity of war has produced profoundly compassionate and selfless acts. A life is a vibrant and vital thing. A summit is only a summit. It cannot give life or replace fingers or toes lost in its pursuit.

Mountaineering is, of course, fraught with risk, particularly in the high mountains. Rockfall, icefall, avalanche and storm take lives suddenly. But those are the objective dangers we accept when climbing. The risk of jeopardizing one's life because of the poor decisions of an over-zealous or incompetent companion is a subjective one, one we should never accept.

One of the hallmarks of mountaineering is that it is both character-building and character-revealing. Under conditions of prolonged physical and, more importantly, psychological one's moral fiber and true character emerge. It is exactly this element of mountaineering—the opportunity to test one's physical and psychological limits and resources—that makes an ascent so satisfying. It also gives point to our introspection as we examine the substrata (for example, fear, self-doubt, fatigue and the desire to succeed) of the decisions we make. We don't always make the best decisions. Who hasn't felt dismay, on occasion, at his companions' or his own actions? Yet the fact that we do make errors in judgement emphasizes the need for mountaineers to examine not only the romantic nature of their sport, but also its grimmer realities.

Despite different tactics, languages, nationalities, objectives and abilities, mountaineers share a common bond. Chief among them are a deep love and respect for the mountains, the excitement of a new challenge, and the freedom of spirit and comradeship. Because we share these bonds in common, we are all companions and tacitly agree to certain basic rules of behavior. One of those rules is that we are bound to offer every reasonable assistance, regardless of circumstances, to a beleaguered companion. In the mountains, companionship and humanity come before self-gratification.

Moral issues are always complex. Just the same, their consideration is vital if we wish to maintain mountaineering's respected traditions. It is crucial to the spirit of mountaineering that we always act with concern for those who climb with us.