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The Fall
How a near-fatal climbing accident forced me to rethink ministry--and the rest of my life.
Nathan Conrad as told to Matt Woodley
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It looked like another perfect day for ice climbing—sunny, 25 degrees, with a light snow and a calm breeze. On Monday our party of four climbers had already climbed some smaller cliffs. After a year off from climbing, we needed to start on these easier, more familiar routes. Now on Tuesday, February 8, 2011, as we looked over the dozen or so climbs in the area, we decided to try something more challenging—like "Dracula," a well-known route that's part of Frankenstein Cliffs in Crawford Notch, New Hampshire.

Although Dracula is ranked 1.5 to 2 grades beyond any climb I'd ever led, I was excited to stretch my skills. I've always enjoyed ice climbing. I relish the sport's personal challenge and physical demands, but I also appreciate the teamwork and camaraderie. So on Tuesday, as I went with three other experienced climbers to the base of Dracula, I felt ready to lead. Another friend would climb as the "second," a team member who follows the leader and cleans up the pieces of gear left on the ice.

Many people assume that climbing is risky and reckless. Veteran climber Jon Krakauer admits that the sport is "wrapped in tales of audacity and danger"—and sometimes for good reason. But climbers also know they can drastically minimize the risks by working out before the climb and then by using safety techniques while on the climb. As I started to climb Dracula, I felt comfortable with both my conditioning and my climbing abilities.

But about two-thirds of the way up the 110-foot wall, the climb started to unravel. By this point I had already placed two pieces of protection into the ice. These "ice screws" serve as safety anchors that catch a climber if he falls. I considered placing a third ice screw, but I decided to push myself a little more and climb a little higher. Somewhere during this push fatigue caught up with me. About 30-35 feet above my last screw, I could feel my muscles beginning to fail. It suddenly hit me that I might not be able to finish the climb—or even have the strength to put in another screw for protection.

My arms and legs started to shake. Fear swept over me as I thought, I am going to fall! In desperation, I set my axes as deep as I could, kicked my boots into the ice, and called out for a rescue from one of my climbing partners. He grabbed a carabiner (a metal loop) and tossed it up to me. Now I just needed to hook into the rope—to prevent a fall.

But my body wouldn't cooperate. On my first attempt, I didn't grab enough of my own rope to clip the rescue line. As I tried the move again, suddenly everything gave out. My footholds blew out, the axes popped off, and I felt myself plunging. I plummeted 70 feet, crashing into an angled ice shelf and bouncing away from the ice. Then the rope went taut and swung me back to the cliff.

Amazingly, I was conscious, and as I dangled from my rope, my initial fear was that I might fall farther. Desperately I tried to grab my climbing axes (which are normally on leashes attached to my wrists) so I could stop another fall. I knew my body was injured, but I didn't know how badly. I didn't feel much except shock that I had fallen that far. I'd lost my footing before, but I'd never experienced a fall. I kept thinking, I can't believe that I just fell. I can't believe that happened to me.

After the fall, one of my climbing friends said, "That was the scariest thing I've ever seen in my life." But immediately after the fall, they sprang into action. One gently but firmly told me, "Nate, we got you. You're secure. We're going to let you down now." When I heard those words, I finally stopped...
struggling and let them take charge.

As I was lowered to the base of Dracula, in demonstration of God's grace, two strangers were standing there, and one of them identified himself as an ER doctor. He examined me and said, "You're going to be okay, but we need to get you to a hospital." But the nearest vehicle was a mile and a half away.

So after the doctor examined me, we glissaded (slid) down the snowy approach, and with my climbing buddies alongside, I slowly trudged the mile and a half to the van. As we drove to the nearest hospital, my fears increased. Blood was coming out of a wound in my forehead, and my nose was bleeding. I started to lose vision in one eye.

But we made it to the hospital and after three days of treatment and observation the doctors released me. Overall, mine were fairly minor injuries: a fractured fibula, a fractured pinkie, along with cranial and orbital fractures behind my eye.

"Fallout" from the fall

But the physical damage wasn't the worst part of the fall. It would take much longer to recover from the spiritual, relational, and emotional impact of what happened over the next few months.

One of my climbing buddies had recorded our last three annual trips. So this climb—with all my climbing mistakes—had also been recorded on video. After the accident, he did some interviews with the ER doctor and a climbing guide, shaped it into a 14-minute video, and then decided to share the video on Vimeo (an amateur videographer site).

None of us anticipated the attention the video would get. All around the country, other climbers viewed, shared, dissected, and even ridiculed my climbing mistakes. I quickly became the poster child for how not to climb on ice.

Will Gadd, America's foremost authority on climbing, watched the video and posted it to his blog, offering a helpful but brutally honest critique of my climb. In a series of two lengthy posts (one of them titled "How Not to Suck"), Gadd told the climbing community that I had "absolutely no business being on lead on ice." He called my footwork "terrible" and he was amazed I hadn't fallen earlier. Gadd concluded his first post by telling his readers that I should say to myself, "Only through incredible luck did I not completely f—myself up for the rest of my life; I need to rethink my approach to ice climbing."

Those words ripped deep into my soul, especially since I consider myself an avid climber. But I knew Gadd was right—actually, he was even more right than he realized. After his blog post, I sent Gadd a personal email. "This isn't just about climbing," I confessed, "it's about my whole approach to life." In other words, this experience seemed to epitomize the brokenness in my own soul, my attachment to life-sucking idols like control and approval, and the unhealthy habits ingrained in my approach to leadership and ministry.

I'm discovering that the mistakes, the patterns, and even the "sins" of my climbing technique were equally evident in my approach to ministry. I don't have all the answers at this point, but the accident has forced me to ask some soul-searching questions about leadership, relationships, and my walk with Christ.

Am I admitting my limits?

When the video made the rounds in the climbing community, fellow-climbers pointed out the obvious: This guy was over his head. For some reason, I couldn't make that assessment about myself. My gut may have told me that climbing lead on Dracula exceeded my abilities, but in the thrill of doing something new and challenging, I brushed those feelings aside.

Climbers call this "getting into a pump," a massive adrenaline rush that clouds your judgment as you charge up the route. When a climber gets "super-pumped," adrenaline trumps everything else—fatigue, safety, and even common sense. So while the adrenaline flooded my brain with a sense of invincibility, my muscles started to shut down.

At that point, I should have opted to (1) stop, place an ice screw, and rest; or (2) rappel off and call it a partial climb. Instead, hyped-up on adrenaline, I kept charging up Dracula's treacherous wall of ice.

In the process I kept rationalizing my position: I feel okay; I'll rest at the next break; I've got enough in me to finish this climb; I can't stop here (or at
all) because I need to keep moving. The truth should have been obvious: I was climbing well past my protection, in a weakened condition, and ignorant of resting and safety measures. That's why more experienced climbers know that you just can't get super-pumped on a climb; the consequences of getting exhausted and overextended are too great.

Since the accident, I've started to assess how my climbing patterns repeat themselves in the rest of my life. In many ways, I've lived my whole life—including my approach to ministry—by blithely ignoring or intentionally rebelling against God-given limits. As a result, I have a simple strategy for dealing with the fatigue and pain of ministry: suck it up and keep going. And if church work gets more difficult, I just put my head down and work even harder.

Thankfully, I'm now learning that there's a healthier approach to life and ministry. In his book, The Emotionally Healthy Church, Pastor Pete Scazzero contends that "embracing our God-given limits is at the core of our calling ... as spiritual leaders"—and that's especially true in our frantic, busy, driven church cultures. "When we don't respect God's limits in our lives," Scazzero writes, "we will often find ourselves overextended, stressed and exhausted."

The accident has helped me untangle the deep roots underneath this tendency. Namely, I often resent limits because I'm driven by idols of achievement and approval. I need people to see me as the good pastor, the smooth preacher, and the tender-hearted shepherd who is available to everyone. This was what drove my 75-hour work weeks. This was what left my soul empty, my body exhausted, and my relationships frayed. Sadly, this driven approach to ministry doesn't just hurt me; it also puts others at risk. I'm beginning to see when I get into a pastoral super-pump, I can easily disconnect from God, neglect my wife and kids, and fail to be present to the people I lead in the church.

Nearly a year after the fall, I'm better at regularly asking myself some honest questions: When do I get into a leadership super-pump? Am I exceeding my God-given limits? Have I confused the zeal needed to serve God, grow a church, and start new programs with a surge of high-powered hormones? In other words, is this about God or me? Am I being led by the Holy Spirit or by my own adrenaline?

Naturally, I haven't changed overnight. I'm still identifying the idols that can drive my approach to ministry. But I'm learning that leadership also involves respecting limits. For instance, I'm accepting the fact that my body and soul can only handle so many hours of work in a typical week. I'm adjusting to the reality that my wife and kids can only thrive under a certain pace. Church members can only grow so fast. A consistent pattern of violating these limits may not always lead to an immediate and tragic fall, but why would I want to force myself or others to climb beyond God's protective limits? These limits aren't barriers to ministry; they're gifts that breathe life into ministry.

Who is speaking into my life?

After the fall, I suddenly became hungry for advice. Hearing the critiques from Will Gadd and others motivated me to connect with more experienced climbers. I read their blogs and wrote emails asking for more information. I ordered and read books. I replayed the advice from the climbing guide at the scene of my accident.

Like anything else, ice climbing has a body of knowledge and a skill base. It requires mentoring and learning, instruction and practice. For climbers, that means humbly and patiently learning about knots and ropes, rest methods, safety checks and double checks, footwork, self-arrest and self-belay methods, screw placements, route selection, and equipment inspection for overuse and damage.

It's a steep learning curve. Somebody has to teach me this stuff, while I stay humble enough to learn the skills and develop as a climber.

Fortunately, in the midst of the public ridicule, I found an unlikely climbing mentor—my initial critic, Will Gadd. After his first blog posts, he sent me a few personal emails and offered some practical advice. First, he told me to practice with top-rope climbs—a simple skill that involves tying a rope to a tree and throwing it down a cliff. It's a safe way to practice techniques without climbing past your protection. Then Gadd bluntly told me to find an experienced climber and ask him to train me, even if it cost money. In his words, "The money spent for a good day of instruction is a hell of lot cheaper than a broken leg, skull fracture, or death."

Finally, Gadd offered some encouragement: "I'm stoked to help in any way I can, and never take anything you read on the internet too seriously. Chin up, learn from the valid points, but do not submit to the haters. Drink coffee in a dark basement—or whatever it takes to process all of this .... As you've noted, the question is what to do with all of this. I'm invested in this too, so let's have some fun and get better."

That was also what I needed to hear about pastoring: don't do ministry alone, find a mentor, and let others speak into your life. Find someone with
more ministry experience who can transfer pastoral skills, point out your blind spots, and offer constructive feedback. It might take time and money, but it’s better than the alternative: a ministry breakdown or a personal blowout.

So I’ve started asking questions like: Who has the right to speak into my life? Who knows my sins, weaknesses and bad habits and then has the love and courage to confront me? Do I even welcome that sort of “push back” in my relationships? I’m now learning to seek out these kinds of relationships—relationships based on fierce honesty, tender trust, and committed love. And relationships like this don’t just benefit me. I’m also learning how important it is for me to model an approachable, welcoming, God-dependent style of leadership, rather than an arrogant, invulnerable and self-sufficient style of leadership.

I’m starting to allow—and even to seek out—critiques about my patterns, my sins, and the growth areas in my ministry. At one point, during a weeklong conference that focused on spiritual renewal, a conversation with my wife and our discipler revealed a deep pool of anger within me. My anger came from my need to control and please other people. As a result, I placed enormous expectations on myself, my wife, and the church, and when I didn’t measure up, it stoked my anger.

My wife quietly but courageously described my impatience, workaholism, hardness of heart, and harsh words. I was wounding her spirit. At first I bristled with anger, but the words slowly pierced my pride and softened my hard heart. Of course it still hurts to hear the truth about my faults—whether it’s from my wife or the climbing community. But since the accident I’ve gained a new appreciation for the opportunity to grow through honest feedback.

**Will I learn from my failures?**

Lots of people in the climbing community make mistakes. Every year people fall, get hurt, and even die—sometimes because of avoidable mistakes. But thanks to the video and the internet, my mistakes had been captured and spread around the world. Rarely have people been able to watch a fall like this, and see the errors of a climber so clearly. The video is not a trailer of total incompetence, but there rarely exists in the climbing community a video of what not to do, and a lively forum to dissect and learn from the accident.

The reaction in climbing circles was quick, intense, and harsh. Comments posted included: “Total ignorance.” “SELL all your gear.” “I don't think this cat has many lives left.”

Like most leaders, I value my reputation. I want people to think that I’m competent and capable. So the more people viewed and dissected the video, the more I felt embarrassed and ashamed. One guy even posted on Will Gadd’s blog: “If I were this guy, I'd never show my face in New Hampshire again.” I agreed with him. I wanted to hide—or at least I desperately wanted to spin the story so I didn't look that bad. My fallen, insecure heart dreads the exposure that comes through failure. I want others to see my successes—not my flops.

Of course this aversion to failure can thwart courageous leadership. As Seth Godin recently said at a Leadership Summit, "If failure is not an option, then neither is success." So once again, the fall forced me to question my assumptions about spiritual leadership. How do I respond to failure? Does it make me run and hide? If not, why do I respond with fear and shame? Do I consistently identify and learn from my failures? Do those I lead view me as a model for how to fail with grace and humility? Do I respond well to others when they fail?

**Who’s the real hero here?**

For most of my ministry, I’ve believed in what I’ll call "the mythic pastor-as-ultimate-hero story." My fallen heart has often craved this version of the leadership story. It’s a story that puts me at the center. I must be the ever-competent, invincible, irrepressible, and even righteous (or semi-righteous, or at least more-righteous than most people) spiritual leader who can serve God heroically, without making mistakes—at least noticeable ones.

Once I buy into the pastor-as-ultimate-hero story I’m trapped. I remain stuck in my unhealthy patterns and sinful desires: I remain a slave to the fears of failure and disapproval. I work harder and ignore the work of the Spirit. I don’t depend on God because I want to be the hero of the story. But if God can humble me, helping me to admit my mistakes, confess my failures, and embrace my limits, then he alone receives the worship and praise for the story of my life.

When God is the hero of the story, when he is the Director, Producer, Narrator, and Star, then my failures don't imply automatic defeat because they point people to his greatness, not mine. My failures don't end the story, because ultimately the story isn’t about me.
Since the fall, I've become more open to admitting my failures. The accident exposed my resistance to have Jesus at center-stage. Stories like this, showing my failings and his grace, become a far better narrative for life and ministry.

God is the hero, not me. I don't have to top out, prove myself, work through a pump, or push past my limitations in order to prove something to myself or anyone else. We've all got opportunities to talk about God's provision. Sometimes those moments are a little more humiliating than others.

For the sake of the Kingdom, we are invited, like the disciples, to tell the story of our ignorance, stubbornness, and failings—but we can also tell the story of how God's grace triumphs over our sin. February 8, 2011 was my most recent invitation to share my weakness and his strength.

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