

Susanne Mueller Zantop

TWENTY-FOUR EPISODES ABOUT ASPIRATION

A story about climbing 8000er peaks,
in life and in business



If you wonder why you didn't reach a certain peak, you will find that your self is the heaviest item in your backpack.

Susanne Mueller Zantop

TWENTY-FOUR EPISODES ABOUT ASPIRATION

A story about climbing 8000er peaks,
in life and in business

#basecamp2boardroom



Dedication

For M.





Independently published
Copyright © 2023 by Susanne Mueller Zantop
All rights reserved
Library of Congress Control Number
ISBN: 979-8-39912459-9
ceo-positions.com, #boardroom2basecamp

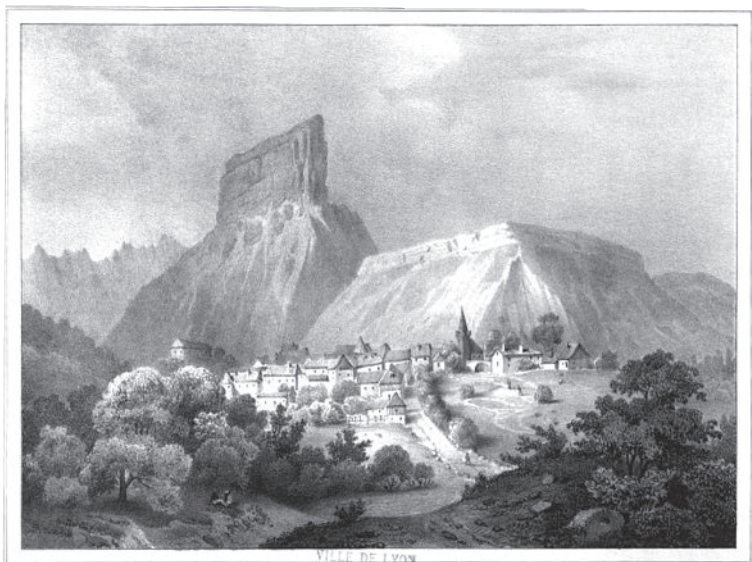
Design and Cover Design: Patrizia Zanola, Zurich/Switzerland
Pictures: Susanne Mueller Zantop unless otherwise credited
Editor: Tristan Head, Hailey, ID, U.S.
Final Editor: Claudia Steinberg, New York, NY, U.S.
Printed by: Merkur Druck AG, Langenthal/Switzerland
Binding: Buchbinderei An der Reuss AG, Luzern/Switzerland
Typeface: DIN Next
Paper: Artic Volume White, 130 g/m², 300 g/m²

Contents

01	The gods are still there	13
02	Forget purpose	16
03	Pattern or practice	20
04	Being mortal	24
05	You can sleep when you're dead	26
06	Not much of a Silky Road	28
07	Not a walk in the park	32
08	Giving myself to it	38
09	"This is not a race!" Really?	44
10	Happiness	50
11	A lesson in female solidarity	54
12	No camp fever? Not so far.	60
13	Use your ice axe, Bill!	64
14	It's too hot in Camp 1	66
15	Skiing down naked?	70
16	That crazy moment	78
17	The turnaround	84
18	Job to be done	88
19	Talking to my dead mother	94
20	Scream at stones	98
21	Like in the movies	102
22	Skardu	106
23	Older and crazier	110
24	Life after Gasherbrum	112
	Afterword	114
	Epilogue	115
	The author	118
	Sources and more	120

Transformation happens in the valley.

David Brooks, "The Second Mountain"



View of Mount Aiguille seen from Clelles, France

© Wikimedia Commons

01 The gods are still there

When French king Charles VIII ordered Antoine de Ville to climb Mount Aguille (2087m) in 1492, mountaineers considered the steep walls of the towering colossus's unscalable. The 42-year-old was asked to seek the gods watching over the summit. At that time, people living in mountainous landscapes had no need to climb the peaks they looked at. Mountains symbolized a daunting mystery. The early mountaineers saw themselves as messengers who brought back transcendent knowledge as a gift for their people.

Sacred mountains still live with us. The six sacred mountains on earth not intended for summiting are: Sinai and Zion in the Middle East; Olympus in Greece; Kailash in Tibet; Tai Shan in China; Fuji in Japan; the San Francisco Peaks in Arizona. This is in stark contrast to the idea of breaking altitude records. Mount Everest can also be considered a sacred mountain, as it was for me. The gods are still there for those who make the effort to seek them out. Individualization, international travel, and technological development gradually triggered a commercial development that made the mountains accessible to amateurs and therefore less "sacred". In 1786, Mont Blanc was climbed, quickly followed by legendary peaks such as the Matterhorn, Eiger, Chimborazo, Elbrus, Aconcagua, Kilimanjaro and – Mount Everest in 1953.

If in the beginning of mountaineering, it was first ascents of single peaks, today's summit series are in fashion like the Seven Summits: all 8000ers, all 7000ers, with or without oxygen. Helga Hengge, the first German woman on Everest, continues to climb sacred mountains, following her intuition. After having successfully climbed the Seven Summits Helga explained:

“It is the stories of the people and their mountains that inspire and fascinate me, the deep reverence they have for nature and the divine within it. And then, when I look up for a while with the eyes of those who live at the foot of the mountain, I feel the divine power, the awe and respect, also in me.”

The “death zone” above 8000 m, exerts an incredible fascination. It is an existentially shattering experience to the core. It is what a human being can do to visit “the other side” and return alive. Maurice Herzog, first ascender of Annapurna, reflects:

“... an enormous gulf was between me and the world. This was a different universe – withered, desert, lifeless; a fantastic universe where the presence of man was not foreseen, perhaps not desired. We were braving an interdict, overstepping a boundary, and yet we had no fear as we continued upward.”

While the early mountaineers were climbing as a service to God and therefore seeking the support of otherworldly authority, the modern idea of self and self-realization leads mountaineers to challenge themselves and each other, sometimes forgetting about the sublime and the miraculous “gulf” which Herzog describes.

More recently, speed has become an important differentiator. Climbing all fourteen 8000ers in six months with oxygen (Nims Purja) or without oxygen (Kristin Harila’s project) is the next step in a society that celebrates hyper competition.

Everyone has the choice to either follow a list or to seek and discover the sacred. The problem with lists is you can’t win. In the end, one’s performance is quickly overtaken by the next record holder. The problem revolves around the fact that every list creates a new list.

02 Forget purpose

Much of the spring of 2022 I spent asking myself questions, worrying about money, health, fitness, and ambition. The sorrows I could suppress during daytime revealed themselves in the nights. The year before I had made the commitment to join the 2022 expedition to Gasherbrum II, 8036 m high, a beautiful mountain located in a remote corner of Pakistan. This could be my third 8000er mountain.

Hoping they would discourage me from going, I turned towards my partner and Victor Saunders, beloved author and mountaineering guide for advice. "I have doubts! What do you think I should do?" I shouted. They said that only I could make the decision. I knew that waiting for 2023 would have been a much better idea. However, I decided to go in 2022 and not wait another year.

This commitment initiated a ruminating process that gave life to further doubts: Was it the right mountain? Was it the right team? Who would fill in for me at work? Who would be mad at me for disappearing into the unknown? Who would feel betrayed or left alone? Who would think I'm risking too much and that I should stop going in the first place? Would someone tell me that my best days are behind me?

How do you define "right" anyway?

Having a plan is far from being an indicator that the goal is "right". I have made infinite bold and ambitious plans in my life. Planning is always simple. Planning comes easy to me. Planning is just a spreadsheet: Train my body. Write a doctoral dissertation. Move to another place. Live abroad. The plans were just a scaffolding for small steps. But I couldn't make them happen. As if I was realizing someone else's ideas and not my own. Or like lying in bed, simply unable to get up. I'd visualize the steps to success: push the sheet aside, get out of bed right foot first, put on my blue sweatpants, make coffee,

put on my blue running shoes, go for a run. I don't. I stay in bed without putting on my blue running shoes and go for a run, without making coffee, without putting on the sweatpants, not getting out of bed right foot first, not pushing the sheets aside.

Something is wrong. I feel like weighing three hundred pounds. I visualize another reality. Nothing happens. After a while, my body feels like two hundred and ninety pounds. At two hundred and fifty, I get up, and start shuffling around. I clean the apartment until it's too late to go for a run. I promise myself to run in the evening. I don't run at all.

If I have chosen the right goal, I even get out of bed when I weigh two hundred and ninety pounds. I do what needs to be done and gain energy. I feel better and closer to reality. I'm afraid that Gasherbrum II is not the right destination; this year, it will not be my sacred place and I know it. Hence the doubts and the inner resistance I try to overcome.

All this has been said by many people. But no one explains how to find the right mountain. The one. The one where my ambition meets my soul, where my life's longing for love is infinite, where my deeper knowledge grows inexhaustibly toward wisdom. The mountain hidden deep in my heart. The place of darkness, of pumping deep red blood, of wonder and awe, of admiration for the life force given to me, of gratitude for being blessed to go out there and do things, to have a choice at all.

You look at what's calling you, and at first glance it scares you to death. That's your goal and my goal, the Holy Terror. That's what we're supposed to do. It is so damn easy in the plush chairs of the office to speak about purpose. Tossing around ideas and coming to some fancy conclusion – it comes so very cheap.



The mountain hidden deep in my heart.
The place of darkness, of pumping deep
red blood, of wonder and awe, of admira-
tion for the life force given to me, of
gratitude for being blessed to go out there
and do things, to have a choice at all.



First rays of sun in South Gasherbrum glacier around 6 AM

03 Pattern or practice

The dangerous moments look like the beautiful picture: the walk is easy, the road paved, the sky dark blue. 30 minutes later, a violent thunderstorm rages. But a Swiss Post bus takes me safely to the nearest train station, no problem in this country.

In reality, I'll soon be in a place where paved roads come to an end and even Jeeps can't travel. Along an endless river fed by one of the largest and longest glaciers in the world that covers nearly 1300 square kilometers, I will initially spend between seven to ten days on Pakistan's Baltoro Glacier with a small group of comrades. In many ways I pretend to know how to climb an 8000er peak (in 2016 it was Cho Oyu at 8202 m and in 2018 Everest at 8848 m).

What I can say already now: this attitude is just like the blue sky in the picture – menacing. I am tempted to leave hand warmers at home, telling myself that this expedition will only go up to a height of 8036 m, that it will be warmer than past excursions. I give off an air of cool confidence by not following the rituals of earlier times: I don't check my blood pressure, I don't review my living will and don't evaluate my expedition insurance. How tempting to think that this tour will be easier than the previous ones; thus requiring less training.

Do I know this? Of course not. When I founded my last startup, I thought it would be a piece of cake, easy. However, it took less than a year to go from boom to disaster, and it ended as the most difficult startup project ever.

Darren Rhodes, an acclaimed yoga teacher, introduced me to a phrase that he had coined: "pattern or practice". The idea is that we quickly convert any yoga pose, business task, or mountain climb into a pattern. The brain saves energy as we "mindlessly" follow the pattern. According to Rhodes, this approach is not fruitful: the pattern is not the goal. Patterns narrow our view



Above Bad Ragaz, Switzerland

because we don't focus on aspects beyond the pattern so our world becomes less interesting. I go running in the forest and return dissatisfied, bored, and with aching feet.

Embracing the idea of practice instead of relying on pattern enlivens my run in the forest. It engages my natural curiosity and connects me to the experience of how my body operates. How my feet touch the ground. How I write an email. How I make a proposal to a new client. How I unload the dishwasher. How I listen to my partner. How I turn a process into an exercise. According to Zen master Shunryû Suzuki this is called a "beginner's mind." Neuroscientist Lisa Feldman Barrett elaborates on this concept: "Your brain changes its own wiring after new experiences, a process called plasticity. Microscopic parts of your neurons change gradually every day through tuning and pruning."



Back to the mountain.

My adventure will take me to Gasherbrum II or K4, the “Beautiful Mountain” just behind Concordia place, with a fantastic view of K2. If the weather cooperates, which it rarely does in this area. We are a small international team of five climbers, led by the magnificent Rolfe Oostru, a couple of Nepalese Sherpa, and their Pakistani colleagues. We are facing a 100 kilometer hike on the glacier before climbing to several camps on the mountain repeatedly until the final summit attempt. If all goes well and the weather is kind, this journey should take six weeks; we will all return happy and healthy on the first of August, the Swiss national holiday. All my fears, hopes, dreams, anxieties, worries, tears, sweat and mistakes, including wins, losses, and life lessons are contained in this lineup.



Patterns narrow our view because we don't focus on aspects beyond the pattern so our world becomes less interesting.

04 Being mortal

“At least he died doing the thing he loved most,” said the lovely girl in the picture (fourth from right) when we met at her father’s funeral.

The year before, 2018, she had accompanied us for a part of the way to successfully climbing Everest. Now this. One of us died trying his luck a second time on the north side of the mountain.

What really impresses me is seeing our smiling faces. It was one of the most unusual funerals in my life. I didn’t really know how to behave at what I learned was a quintessential Irish funeral with people singing and drinking and celebrating a beautiful life. In some ways, there are worse ways to die than doing what you love most. Think of the poor people in office jobs who die of heart attacks the day after their retirement farewell party.

This weekend I will say farewell to my father, just as a precaution – he is 97 years old. One of us could die in the next few weeks – either me on the mountain or him at home. We could both stumble, make one wrong move and just be gone. As it turns out neither of us knows where we want to be buried, but at least we can talk about these nerve-wracking topics. Our conversation gives birth to a strange, eerie emotion, which is a form of energy that can only be generated between two loving people. We can laugh and feel very much alive.

The hard part is to say it, “Farewell”. I ask him to bless me which he does. It’s intense; we manage not to cry.

New York Times best-selling author and medical doctor Atul Gawande has written two small books I highly recommend. *Being Mortal* describes today’s attitude of fighting death as if it were the ultimate enemy, the one against whom we will lose;

despite technology, machines, chemicals, and all kinds of radiation. Gawande describes his patients' deep desire to die with dignity, and it has helped me look at my own mortality more realistically.

Keeping death in mind is somehow refreshing. It can even help to make decisions at work. In his other book, *The Checklist Manifesto*, Gawande cites impressive examples of how checklists can save lives (think: airplane engine problems or critical medical procedures, even financial results announcements). I've come to understand that I need to follow an early morning checklist on each and every day of my mountain expedition. This time, I want to be even safer. It fits with my thinking about pattern or practice. I'll try practice.



Everest reunion at a funeral



My father visits my mother's grave

05 You can sleep when you're dead

The meeting point is Doha airport at 1 AM in the morning. First, I recognize Stefan from Sweden, tall, blonde, strong. At the departure gate to Islamabad, we meet Rolfe, tall, flowing curls, a broad smile – our South African leader. Together they exude confidence, a sense that victory is a sure thing, which encourages me. I look forward to spending time with them. The first messages arrive from Bill and Kim in Islamabad with tips for a restaurant and currency exchange at arrival. They take care of us, a great signal right from the beginning.

Upon arriving in Islamabad, we continue to Skardu together, and we get stuck. Only at the domestic airport do we learn that the flight to the mountains will be cancelled due to forces sent by gods who are dictating our agenda. But as more and more members of the international climbing community arrive, we decide to wait and hope.

Time for a story. Bill, our former paratrooper Englishman, caught a stomach bug at the Islamabad restaurant and was unable to sleep or move all night. Kim, our Finnish cross-fit athlete, doesn't feel great, either. As always, Rolfe is full of anecdotes, making sure that our spirits stay high. He tells a story about a client who recently sued a well-known mountain guide – the very person who had saved his life. Since then, no mountain guide will take that person on board any more for fear that he, too, will get sued. Game over.

“Let the helicopters fly, man!” Who would have thought that people increasingly prefer to save themselves some trouble by taking a helicopter to camps 1, 2 or even 3? People want to be heroes yet simultaneously seek a short cut to the top. Our team hears a recent story about “The Famous Couple” who announced they would climb an 8000 m peak without oxygen. However, someone took a paparazzi photo of their hidden oxygen bottles and refused to delete the pictures. People crave recognition, even if their fame is built on deceit.

Who has done what in recent years? Some prominent members of the climbing community are convening, more or less accidentally. They want to know: Why are you here in Islamabad? What is your project for 2022? Which records will you break? What kind of practices have you refined? The pros take on Broad Peak and K2 in one go. In comparison, my project seems trivial. I'm seeking a single 8000er on the normal route, nothing spectacular by today's professional standards. But I love to be with my team, these daring individuals who set out into the unknown. I feel like a witness of history.

Then, I meet a woman my age who has recently climbed Manaslu, a mountain I have only circumvented so far. To be honest, this bothers me. I have this competitive spirit in me that reacts like a Pavlovian dog to a subconscious challenge. Hmm, I think, if she can do it, so can I. Why not? It's called "mimetic desire", a term coined by René Girard that refers to acting in a specific manner merely because others do.

But wait a minute. Why am I here? We're exploring amazing Pakistan while pushing our physical limits all the while enjoying spectacular views with the opportunity to meet wonderfully crazy people. I'll be outdoors for six weeks. I'll be pushing myself. Yet I will be having fun! With a smile on his face, Rolfe swiftly shoulders his bags and casually remarks, "You can sleep a lot when you're dead. Let's go rock climbing in the meantime. This is Hollywood!" In high spirits, we embark on a 13-hour bus ride to the North.

06 Not much of a Silky Road

Day 5–6
507 m–3048 m
711 km
22 h

Welcome to Karakoram Highway – either a bumpy gravel road or a 70 km/h silky driving experience on fresh asphalt. During the 13-hour drive inland from Islamabad to Skardu our bodies appreciate the few silky parts, courtesy of the China-Pakistan Friendship Project. We pass through the northern part of Kashmir called Gilgit Baltistan, now administered by Pakistan, averaging a whopping 18 inhabitants per square kilometer. The Pakistani driver knows his trade and seems to enjoy our company. At least he asks to be included in the group photo. In the picture he looks very satisfied.

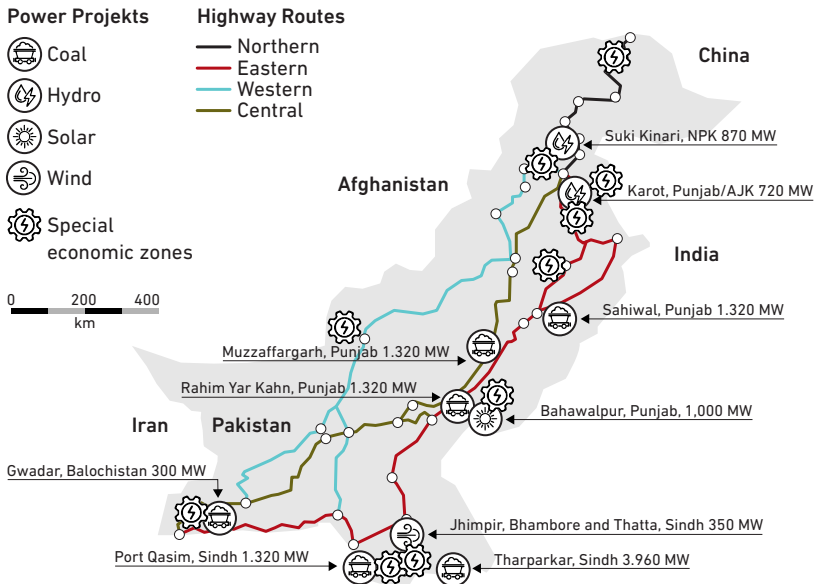
China's Belt and Road Initiative unfolds before our eyes as I manage to read aloud from Peter Frankopan's book *The New Silk Roads*. Beyond Islamabad, road signs emphasize the China Pakistan Economic Corridor project (CPEC). The celebrated friendship, which is growing Pakistan's GDP by 8% annually, is worth about \$62 billion to China today (around \$40 billion has been invested by China, according to Frankopan). Friendships are vital – India, the common enemy, is very close. At the end point of our journey, the South Gasherbrum glacier itself is guarded by three Pakistani military camps. It is precisely in this remote mountain region that China, India and Pakistan converge, and the map shows the strategic area of conflict. The Great Game continues.

My eyes are glued to the scenery outside while a glimmer of the afternoon sun catches my sunglasses – only then do I notice that I'm digging my nails into the armrest of the minibus which continues to wind higher and higher on the single-lane highway. Dozens of oversized trucks and excavators litter the side of the road. We pass huge construction sites for dams, hydroelectric

plants, substations, infrastructure, including very many intimidating watchtowers which alert us to the extensive prison-like camp facilities with bunkhouses, walls, barbed wire. Someone explains that Chinese prisoners are often conscripted here as workers. In between all these facilities, a lavish Chinese house with a red pagoda roof suddenly appears, the house of the commander-in-chief?

Chinese funded infrastructure for roads and waterways funnel tons of mud-colored liquid into cities like Abbottabad (where Osama bin Laden was killed), Peshawar, Rawalpindi, Islamabad. We reach the point where the waters from the Hindu Kush, Karakoram and Himalayan glaciers intersect. I look at everything in awe. In these waters, a whale would look like a trout in our rivers.

Major Projects of China-Pakistan Economic Corridor



A live showcase of geopolitics through increasing darkness. What is the Pakistan-China friendship all about? Incredible amounts of water flow from the glaciers within the coveted Gilgit-Baltistan province. These rivers flow through hydroelectric power plants developed by the Chinese to generate massive amounts of energy. China can directly control the water supply of its friends because it not only built the infrastructure but also solely operates it. The Karakoram Highway provides the Chinese with direct strategic access to the Arabian Sea. Pakistan cannot afford to turn down these construction and financing offers.

As we turn right off the highway and approach our destination of Skardu, the road narrows once again, forcing our attention on the mountains to the left. Diagonal bands of white stone at crazy heights contain gold and precious stones. Gold miners climb up there, God knows how, and camp in the holes to try their luck. Later on, a restaurant owner will present to us an old, ratty newspaper page with gems wrapped in it, his trophies, his wealth. We live in parallel worlds on the same planet. How lucky we are to gain a tiny glimpse into each other's.

Less than 20 minutes before Skardu, more excitement awaits. The grey mountain valley along a blasting river gets much steeper. Over the last hour, our driver has skillfully dodged falling rocks from above along the road. Suddenly, a basketball sized rock crashes down at great speed directly in front of us. Instinctively, the driver stops, but it is impossible to avoid driving over part of the crushed rock.

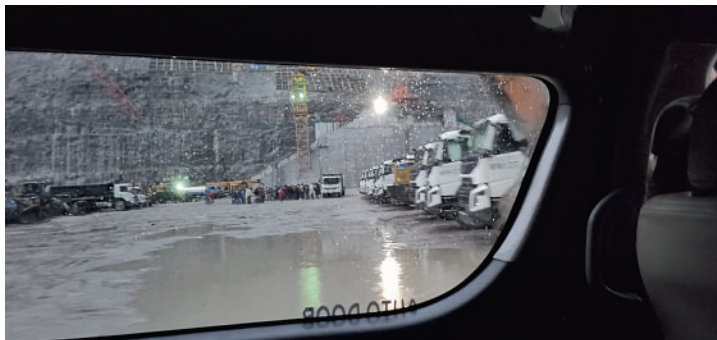
**We live in parallel worlds
on the same planet. How
lucky we are to gain a tiny
glimpse into each other's.**

Screeching metal lets the smell of gasoline escape from the underbody and immediately brings the car to a halt. Terrified that the car will be engulfed in flames, I just want to get out and yell but the equally horrifying and sober thought that more rocks could fall on us at any time speaks against it.

Had we arrived only a second earlier, the rock would have smashed the windshield and hit us. The driver continues carefully, and we hop on another bus as our car is being repaired in a nearby “workshop” on the side of the road. It doesn't seem like a big deal here – another glimpse into a parallel world.



A dam is built here



Paparazzi picture of workers' end of day

07 Not a walk in the park

Days 7–10
3048 m–4495 m
38 h

At the beginning of the trek, we are not alone. Energetic hikers march off with round bellies, gray hair and zinc sunscreen on their faces. We marvel at their new shoes, heavy camera gear and well-filled backpacks – many wearing shorts and sleeveless shirts. The middle-aged American couple: he’s carrying his belly while she wears disclain all over her face. A young woman in a polka-dotted minidress, biker boots, and an umbrella in hand, argues with her boyfriend, bluntly asking, “Why am I here?” A good question!

Trekking in the Karakoram, especially on the Baltoro Glacier, is a tough thing. Over the coming days, we literally work our butts off, briskly walking eight hours per day on average, covering roughly 20 kilometers at altitudes up to 5000 m. We continue long after the trekkers returned. And we’re not really walking, it’s actually the complete opposite. Our movements should probably be referred to as box jumps because the walks require step ups and boulder hops that demand constant attention; one mistake and search and rescue, non-existent in these parts, would be required. In our group, a gastrointestinal virus forces us to accept cramps as part of daily life as we trudge through the valley; only to take extra breaks after each meal with furtive visits to the cozy outdoor non-toilet. We all share the regret of not carrying a large supply of J&J baby wipes.

Look at the ground – no sightseeing! Concentrate! Mules are coming, step aside! Porters are coming, get out of the way! Now, follow the path to your right on the ascent to the gods. Then, descend again into the frigid glacial valley floor. Upon reaching the floor, avoid the enormous icy, cavernous mouth that awaits your mistake. All this must be repeated on the other side of the valley. Climb down to the water, but don’t slip and

fall in because that would surely result in hypothermia, if not death. Lastly, follow the mule shit if you're not sure about the trail. We must successfully negotiate each of these segments in order to ascend to the famous Concordia place. The trek to Everest basecamp is a walk in the park in comparison.

From Concordia, climbers and trekkers branch out to various basecamps; K2 basecamp (5000m) attracts the most attention, it is not that far. This summer, about four hundred people are camping here, more than ever before. Among them are some living legends of the mountains, some of the best young climbers in the world, some of the most famous Sherpa of Nepal and a large number of daredevil amateurs who do not know what they are doing, jostling on the fixed ropes; a risk for all.

Most people don't have access to the inner-circles of climbers. It's quite possible to stroll through K2 basecamp and be completely in the dark about what's really going on. The exciting stories. The dramas. The teams. The climbers. Everyone's progress. I am in the fortunate position to hear some of it and to understand why certain tents are empty, why people are standing around a rock, why most of the exciting climbing takes place at night.

I must admit that these stories are an important reason why I like to stay in the inner-circle. The stories of these people are vital. They help me see my patterns and teach me about life and death, about winning and losing. "We tell stories to make sense of the world," says neurologist and novelist Robert A. Burton.



An optimistic start in a great team



In full gear into the endlessness

