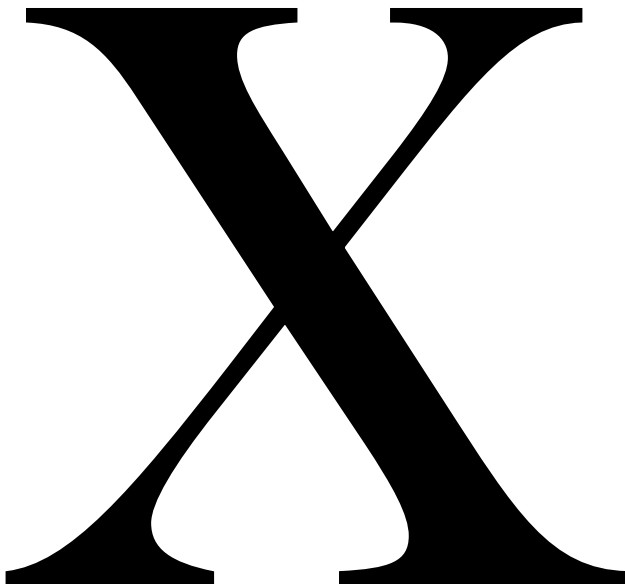



“don’t fool yourself into believing that the odds could never catch up with you.”



x-factor

Can experience and careful planning prevent every disaster?
Not in your life.

 In the finger-numbing morning shadow of Maine’s highest peak, we started up the Pamola Cliffs, a slab of fractured, lichen-covered granite rising for several hundred feet to Katahdin’s famous Knife Edge ridge. Below us, Chimney Pond glistened in the bright, clear-sky light. The five of us, all around 30 years old, joked and laughed in anticipation of a fun day on an easy rock climb.

We climbed as two rope teams, with one friend, Bill, and me leading. Belaying and chattering below us were my girlfriend Penny; my longtime friend Rick, with whom I started climbing four years earlier; and Rick’s girlfriend, Diane. We were on a route recommended

by a ranger because another party was on the route we had intended to climb, and we didn’t want to risk them accidentally knocking stones down onto us. On the second pitch, 150 feet above our companions, Bill and I tried to build belay anchors. But every time I attempted to

place gear in a crack, the rock around it broke off.

“Bill, how’s that rock just above you?” I asked.

Bill reached up and tapped the cliff as if knocking lightly on a door, a routine test to see whether it sounded solid or hollow. With an incongruously soft scraping sound, a block of granite bigger than a large suitcase slid past him.

We both yelled, “Rock! Rock! Rock!”

The block smashed apart into a cloudburst of stone, plummeting toward our friends. I thought it would kill them all. The three flattened themselves against the cliff, trying to shrink as the rain of granite washed over them.

Then it had passed. Penny and Diane looked up, miraculously unscathed, giving me hope that Rick, who’d been struck by a piece of the rock, would be fine, too. In the brief ensuing silence, I watched him for movement, sure I would hear his steady voice announcing he was OK. But it was Penny’s voice I heard, shouting upward, “Blood is gushing from his head!” Rick hung upside-down on his rope, motionless. Our attempts to resuscitate him—pumping his chest and breathing into his mouth—proved futile.

The outdoors changed for me that day, and it has never been the same since. I’ve replayed the events leading up to Rick’s death a thousand times in my mind, looking for black-and-white evidence of where we went wrong. There isn’t any.

Mountains crumble. Loose rock on a cliff is like the sudden thunderstorm hitting a peak or the rattler you didn’t see. We accept these hazards when we venture outdoors.

And so I’m left with a hard lesson: It’s impossible to eliminate *all* risk in the outdoors. Rocks slide. Trees fall. Bears behave unpredictably. Rare? Extremely. But don’t fool yourself into believing that the odds could never catch up with you. The wilderness is not a theme park—nothing is a certainty, which is precisely why we go there in the first place.

Almost 20 years have somehow trickled past since Rick died. I’ve made my share of preventable mistakes and learned from them. I’ve witnessed accidents no one could predict. And still, I climb, backcountry ski, and hike through wilderness, often with my kids, who are now 13 and 10. Our adventures in the wild are some of the happiest times we share. But I don’t pretend that the world is perfectly safe, whether in the wilderness or the frontcountry. Cars skid on icy roads. Cancer strikes. Rocks break loose.

That’s why I told my kids about what happened to Rick. Not long ago, sitting at a campsite in the mountains, as the first stars emerged, I told them a story about death, but mostly, truths about life.

Northwest Editor Michael Lanza is the author of Before They’re Gone—A Family’s Year-Long Quest to Explore America’s Most Endangered National Parks.



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