

Does My Story Matter?

Everyone has at least one story that matters

By Andrée Iffrig

“And climbing provided a sense of community as well. To become a climber was to join a self-contained, rabidly idealistic society, largely unnoticed and surprisingly uncorrupted by the world at large.”

Jon Krakauer, *Into Thin Air*, 1997, p. 23.

On May 16, 2006, the day after mountaineer David Sharp died on Mt. Everest, I met with a client in his Calgary offices. Frank is a manager with an oil and gas transmission company. He is also an ardent mountaineer and cross-country skier. David Sharp’s story was headline news that morning because while succumbing to high altitude sickness at Everest, he was passed by at least 40 trekkers en route to the summit. No one stopped to bring him back down the mountain.

As we took our seats for a pre-arranged meeting, I asked Frank what he would have done in circumstances like those faced the previous day by the Everest climbers. Would he have stopped to assist Sharp, maybe even turning back to get him to safety, or would Frank have continued on to the summit? Frank’s perspective was important to me. The actions of the mountaineering community at Mt. Everest were weighing heavily on my mind.

Frank paused before answering. Then he told me two stories.

Frank has led a variety of expeditions, including trips to Mount Robinson, Canada’s highest peak. A handful of attempts at Robinson were foiled by bad weather or illness. Other mountaineering teams braved the weather, but as the leader for his expeditions, Frank didn’t want to put other people’s lives at risk so that he could summit.

On one of these occasions while preparing for the final push to the summit, Frank turned the team back when one of the group began to exhibit signs of severe altitude sickness. It’s a life-threatening illness that requires immediate medical attention and descent to lower altitudes. That same day, another expedition on the same mountain also had a sick member in tow. That team elected to leave their teammate behind for the time it would take them to reach the summit. When they returned 90 minutes later, he was dead.

Having shared these stories, Frank was silent for a while. Almost as an afterthought, he added: “It’s about the journey, not the destination.”

Unwittingly, Frank had just convinced me of his courage, compassion and integrity. A friend of mine says that integrity means that you are the same on the inside as the outside. Frank exemplifies this inner/outer continuity. He is the kind of manager most employees would love to work for. Whenever I doubt leadership’s capacity for integrity, I will remember this story.

Frank isn’t given to blowing his own horn, and he would be amazed if someone told him he is a born storyteller and leader. Yet Frank’s words that morning in May 2006 continue to inspire me, reminding me that how we choose to live together in community is vital to our wellbeing and sense of self. “*Turning back from the summit*” is Frank’s story, and it mattered to me.

Andrée Iffrig is the author of *Find Your Voice at Work – The Power of Storytelling in the Workplace*. Visit www.find-your-voice.ca to learn more.