

To Boldly Go!

Not long ago, well known mountaineer Ueli Steck died in the mountains of Nepal. Ueli was a man who was specifically known for pushing the edge of what is known to be humanly possible in speed mountaineering. Among his most notable achievements was his speed ascent record for the north face of The Eiger in just 2 hours 47 minutes. He understood that the level of risk where death is possible is one that is required for what he was passionate about. Certainly each and every time but the last, it was worth it. We will never know if the last time was worth it for Ueli but I would guess it was.

As our discoveries in Jewel Cave have taken us miles farther into the cave, Ueli's death has got me thinking about what we do. I am lucky that the activity I have found myself most passionate about has had few world class athletes interested in pushing the limits. The limits therefore are not so high and a moderately strong athlete such as myself can enjoy the edge of the known world without being in world class shape. Yes, it's hard work – but it isn't on the level of what Ueli Steck did. Still, they share some similarities which have helped me understand why I do what I do. True exploration takes you to a place where you connect with something higher and greater than yourself. There are certain moments on the edge of the cave (or on the "edge" of whatever it is you are doing) when a question is asked of you: "Are you going to go for it?" Saying yes in these moments has resulted in some of the greatest moments of my life. I've also said no in those moments and don't regret it. It is a spiritual fine tuning of our ability to answer this question that develops when we put ourselves in a situation where the question gets asked frequently.

On a recent four day camp in Jewel Cave, Adam Weaver, Nate Hughes and I had the opportunity to tune in and make just such a decision. On the western edge of the cave, while surveying in virgin cave passage, we discovered a great white dome, about twenty feet tall. The walls were wide, smooth and coated in gypsum dust and the floor had gypsum snow up to three inches deep! It was so beautiful – and at the top, it appeared that the cave passage continued. Upon first seeing it, Adam commented that we would not be getting up there that day. But I began to look at it. I thought I'd at least give it a shot. I started by trying to body stem but it was much too wide. I didn't make it very far. But I had somehow made something click for Adam, and he said he thought he could get his feet where my hands were by trying it a different way. Adam employed the "Dan Austin" method of climbing by facing backwards and began climbing higher, higher, higher, until he was suddenly just one move (the widest stem move) from the top. I could hardly believe it! I started to say "Go for it Adam! Go for it!" He inched his head higher, higher, higher, until he could barely see over the lip. Everyone held their breath. Adam was still for a few seconds in this position, then broke the silence. "It goes!" he spouted as he began to rapidly down climb. It was okay that he came down, though, because at that point, I had seen enough to believe that I could do it now. I also employed the "Dan Austin" method and got to where Adam was. Utilizing this method, I ended up with the passage floor we were trying to climb to behind me at the crux wide stem move. I had reached where Adam had just been a moment before. I stemmed out as wide as I could, took a breath and listened for the question. I answered an enthusiastic "Yes!" as I made the final move and scooted my butt backwards onto the passage floor behind me. We had done it! I rigged up a webbing handline for the others to come up while sitting on the edge contemplating the beauty of that moment. This passage only led on to a couple hundred feet of cave before ending in a small hole with air. Though it ended, we all agreed it was the most memorable moment of the entire four day cave trip. We named the climb "To Boldly Go."

I'd like to encourage you all to boldly go, whatever it is you are doing! When the question is asked, be ready to answer, either yes or no. Put yourselves in situations where you must make these decisions, and make them deliberately, even if you are frequently making the decision not to go for it. By doing this, you are fine tuning your decision making skills so that one day, you will answer yes when it counts!