



## AAC Publications

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### Visions

Looking Back, Looking Ahead

**CLIMBING HAS BEEN the hub of my life, with spokes of interest radiating in all directions, like a magnetic field.** Asked by the editor to write a short piece for this journal regarding the future of climbing, I foolishly accepted. I was honored and humbled, and thought it would be an opportunity to voice some ideas that have been gestating for some time. These days I'm experiencing energy at the DNA level, at the energy/mass/energy/mass vortex. One moment I'm in my entropic physical reality and the next I'm in a timeless space of boundless awareness. My thinking has become very nonlinear. One thought connects to a hundred, which in turn explode exponentially. It's difficult to communicate in this state, where time has no meaning. But deadlines are real in corporeal existence.

It's so great to still be alive with this beautiful planet and to look back over 60 years of the evolution of ascent. All those years ago, climbing in America was truly a fringe activity. My father, Ralph, introduced each of his eight kids to climbing. Dad was a nature lover, lover of different cultures, navy pilot, war hero, lawyer, rancher, hiker, climber, skier, and friend of the high and low. Born into a Mormon family, he was an early convert to atheism and science. He was also something of an animal whisperer. At various times and in various combinations we kept a three-legged bobcat, many dogs, skunks, squirrels, rats, cats, foxes, wolves, a badger, horses, mountain lions, a caiman that grew to four feet, an eight-foot boa constrictor, rattlesnakes for milking, a snapping turtle, and Bruno the black bear, who weighed about 500 pounds.

I was six in 1957 when Dad took Mike, who is five years older than me, Greg, 18 months older, and me on a 40-mile drive south from our home in Ogden, Utah, to Pete's Rock on Salt Lake City's east bench. Harold Goodro was there with several other Wasatch Mountain Club people, bouldering and doing short top-rope climbs. Harold was an accomplished mountaineer and a first-rate rock climber. (In 1949, in mountain boots, he led a climb in Big Cottonwood Canyon now rated 5.10c.) That day we three young brothers were encouraged to attempt any boulder problem we wanted or dared to, even the high ones. We were never told, "That one's too hard, you're too young." Dad and Harold gave us the freedom to judge for ourselves, guided by a natural fear of falling and only pushing harder and higher at our own individual tempos, motivated by curiosity and joy in stretching our bodies and minds in intimate discovery of the rock. More succinctly, we learned how much fun climbing could be. Maybe these early experiences helped the Lowe brothers avoid serious injuries during the six decades since then.

In August 1958, dad took us up the Exum Ridge of the Grand Teton. It was a perfect introduction to real mountains. Back home, we joined the local climbing club, Steinfells, took part in practice belay sessions, classes in first aid and mountain rescue, and advanced free and aid climbing seminars with leading climbers such as Royal Robbins, Chuck Pratt, Layton Kor, and Yvon Chouinard. Of all of them, Chouinard had the biggest impact on me.

Out of a pure love of adventure and a thirst to drink our fill of the climbers' Kool-Aid, we became knowledgeable in the history, traditions, styles, techniques, and tools of ascent. In the winter of 1963, three new titles appeared on dad's bookshelf, and each strongly impacted and informed my life from that time forward. Heinrich Harrer's classic *The White Spider* sparked my climber's imagination. *The Agony and the Ecstasy*, Irving Stone's evocatively characterized biographical novel of Michelangelo, drew me into a world of inspired talent, dedication, hard work, emotional surrender

and sacrifice, required to produce the greatest art. The third book, lighter reading and more thrilling to my young emotions, was Toni Sailer's account of his road to sweeping the gold medals in the alpine ski events at the 1956 Winter Olympics in Cortina, Italy. That summer, Greg and I either bouldered or climbed on 72 consecutive days of our school vacation. I was hooked for life.

When Royal Robbins led the first climb of the Salathé Wall on El Capitan, it brought my attention to the differing qualities inherent in sieging a climb with fixed ropes versus lightweight alpine style. Our inclination leaned strongly toward Royal's view: Alpine style was much better. The very next fall, when Robbins, Chouinard, Chuck Pratt, and Tom Frost climbed El Cap's North America Wall, and we later read about their nine-day adventure in Summit magazine, our minds burst open with possibilities.

By the mid- to late '60s, Mike was guiding for Exum in the Tetons and making first winter climbs there with a small cast of Salt Lake City climbers, including my cousin George Lowe. At that time, although I was happy and doing well in ski racing, along with free climbing new routes up to 5.11 and making first ascents of grade V walls, I started to question my priorities. I loved the dance of arcing through race gates, knees sucking up the bumps, but I didn't really enjoy competing with others or the too frequent displays of ego, whether triumphant or quashed.

After making the fourth ascent of the North America Wall (with Don Peterson in 1970), I gave up the regimented path of ski racing to follow my climbing passions on the untouched walls of Zion, the Wind Rivers, the Black Canyon, Sawtooths, Sierra Nevada, and the mountain ranges of Western Canada. In the Canadian Rockies, in 1970, my cousin George introduced me to my first climb with an Eiger-like north face as we made the first complete ascent of Mt. Temple's 4,500-foot-high north ridge. I was transported back to the emotions I'd felt while reading *The White Spider*.

So began a period of a few years during which, each winter, I learned how to deal with deep cold, heavy snow, and avalanche hazard, instructing Colorado Outward Bound courses for fun while saving enough money for seven months of low-budget adventure. Walls in Yosemite and Zion toned us technically and physically in spring. The North Cascades, Tetons, Wyoming, Nevada, and Colorado mountains kept us busy in June and July, then it was north to the Bugaboos and Canadian Rockies for big alpine climbs in late summer, more Colorado free climbing and Zion big walls in September—and a lot of cragging in our spare time. Eventually I made my way to other ranges: to the Mont Blanc massif in Europe, the Cordillera Blanca in Peru, and to the Karakoram and Himalaya.

Inspired by miserable experiences while hiking, skiing, and climbing with heavy loads in external-frame packs, Greg designed and sewed the first sophisticated internal-frame pack. Soon, quite often, Mike and I would join Greg in our family's basement hobby room, which was a de facto prototype and production facility for what would become Lowe Alpine Systems. Greg developed the constant-angle curve for passive and spring-loaded camming devices, the first rigid-floor, single-point hanging tent, and then came tubular ice protection, ice tools with changeable picks and adzes, single-wall tents, and more. Our heads were full of endless ideas for equipment, dreams of impossible climbs, and the gear that would be required to climb them in alpine style.

Since then, almost every "impossible" vision has materialized. It's humbling and gratifying to be part of all that, and it's hard to imagine what the next 60 years will bring in climbing. But I hope it will reflect the following considerations.

Planet Earth is our host. We depend on her for everything we have. And climbers are increasingly recognizing their responsibility to the planet as primary consumers and users of vertical landscapes. As climbers we gain a unique and valuable perspective from above and outside of civilization. I hope this will engender greater activism among all climbing tribes: acting locally and banding together regionally and nationally for activism based on soft love, respect, wonder, gratitude, celebration of others, humility, and humor.

Not only is our well-being tied to the condition of the planet, we as individuals also learn the most about ourselves by adapting ourselves to its challenges—through intimate acquaintance with all of its natural laws and forces, both known and yet to be discovered; all of its colors, textures, sights, sounds, smells and tastes; all of its miraculous plants and creatures; and the fantastic pulsating, vibratory balance of the whole entirety. This planet is perfectly designed as a classroom for humans. The dimensions and living architecture of the mountains, polar ice caps, rivers, oceans, jungles, and forests are perfect for extracting every last ounce of effort and creativity from those who approach them alone or in a small group, with fair means, lightly equipped. Add too much technology, too many people, or constrained thinking, however, and true adventure is soon beaten into submission. As outdoor adventurers, we live our lives loving ease and yet searching for difficulty. The rhythm of that contrast is the heartbeat of our being.

Finally, I would say this: You can live a life based in fear, and you'll get more of what you're afraid of, or you can base your life in love, and anything is possible. As a young mountain guide in the 1970s, I observed some clients on glaciers hesitating at the moment they began to make a long step across a crevasse; they would look down and begin to fall in. I learned in those moments to give a strong tug on the rope to help them across. I call it the crevasse theory: If you look into the crevasse as you try to step over it, you're likely to plunge in. But if you focus on where you want to go, there is no problem. As Carlos Castaneda has written, you must follow the "path with a heart." Put another way: Place your confidence in your dreams, not in your nightmares.

**About the Author:** Born in 1950, Jeff Lowe lives in Colorado. The 2014 film **Jeff Lowe's Metanoia** ([jeffloweclimber.com](http://jeffloweclimber.com)) tells the story of his influential climbs and progressive neurological illness. The 2017 AAJ is dedicated to Lowe in recognition of his vision, courage, and determination.

## Images



Ralph Lowe belaying sons Mike, Greg, and Jeff on an early climb. "We were never told, 'That one's too hard, you're too young.' Dad gave us the freedom to judge for ourselves."



Lowe in 1994 on the ground-breaking Octopussy (WI6 M8) in East Vail, Colorado, a climb that sparked a worldwide revolution in mixed climbing.



Jeff Lowe in March 2017, at work on this essay, late at night at home in Colorado.

Article Details

Author	Jeff Lowe
Publication	AAJ
Volume	59
Issue	91
Page	72
Copyright Date	2017
Article Type	Feature article