

Wynne Leon (00:00)

What do you do when you realize the goal you were aiming for is no longer within reach? Welcome to the Life of Try, the podcast where we explore what happens when we step towards the hard thing, the uncertain thing, the thing we are not sure we can do, and try anyway. I'm Wynne Leon, and today we're talking about one of the tender truths of trying.

Sometimes you give everything you have and you still know you're not gonna make the summit. But that does not mean the climb was wasted. It means the climb has something to teach us. So take a breath, settle in, and let's begin.

There are moments when life gives us the truth before we're ready to hear it. Not a polite truth, not a tidy truth, but the kind of truth that arrives with the wind in your face, weight on your back, and snow up to your thighs.

I was reminded of one of those moments recently. It happened on Mount Whitney in the winter of two thousand and five. Mount Whitney rises to fourteen thousand five hundred and five feet, the highest mountain in the lower forty eight states. And even though it sits in Southern California, let me tell you, winter on that mountain is no beach vacation.

The road in was buried in snow, so we had to start a thousand feet lower than planned. And after our first day of climbing, we made it to a camp about eight thousand five hundred feet. The next day our goal was to reach twelve thousand feet. And on that second day I was in the very back of the line. We weren't roped up because there weren't any technical challenges on that day of climbing. But that doesn't mean it was easy.

We were wearing snowshoes and still sinking in up to our thighs. Probably helped along by the fifty five pound packs on our back. And somewhere around ten thousand feet, I fell over.

the way that I remember it. I was lying there in the snow, balanced on that giant pack like a turtle flipped onto its shell. The wind was whipping down the mountain. My ear throbbed, a cold was coming on, and I was hungry.

Because the night before one of my fellow climbers had asked whether I'd read the ingredients on my meat snacks. I had not. So I turned the bag over, and there it was. First ingredient, pigs' hearts. And suddenly those snacks did not look like fuel anymore. They looked like a decision I deeply regretted. So there I was, cold, tired, hungry, hurting, and stuck in the snow. And in that moment I knew.

I was not going to make the summit. Maybe you know that feeling too. Maybe your mountain has never been covered in snow. Maybe your mountain is a house that cannot get clean before the great guests arrive. Maybe it's a deadline you cannot meet. Maybe it is a relationship you cannot repair. Maybe it's a dream that was beautiful when you began, but now feels too heavy to carry.

We all have those moments when we are metaphorically lying on our backs in the snow, staring at the sky, realizing that the load is too heavy, the conditions are not right, and the fuel is gone. But here's what I want to say to you today: from one trier to another, not making the summit is not the same as wasting the climb. Not reaching the goal is not the same as being a failure.

Sometimes the try teaches exactly what we could never have learned from success.

So here are three lessons I've learned about what to do when you know that you're not gonna make the try. Number one, when you know you're not gonna make it, take a moment. Unless there is immediate danger, urgency is not always truth. Sometimes urgency is just fear wearing a megaphone.

Poet Mark Nepo writes that unless someone is bleeding or cannot breathe, a sense of urgency is a terrible illusion. And he reminds us that the doorway to our next step of growth is always behind the urgency of now. That is powerful. Because when we are panicking, we miss the doorway. We miss the hand reaching towards us. We miss the alternate route. We miss the chance to breathe long enough to hear wisdom speaking underneath the noise.

So take the moment. Sit in the snow if you have to. Take the walk. Put down the pack. Let reality arrive without shame. Because acceptance is not quitting. Acceptance is getting honest enough to take the next right step. Number two, when you know you're not going to make it, take the learning and leave the shame. This one is a growth area for me. Maybe you too.

Because many of us do not cut ourselves much slack when we fall short. We talk to ourselves in a way that we would never talk to someone we love. But self-criticism does not make us braver. It does not make us wiser. It does not make the climb lighter. Researcher and professor Dr. Kristen Neff teaches

that self-compassion is a stronger motivator than harsh self-judgment. Because it gives us the safety we need to learn, adjust, and keep going. So when you fall, do not throw your whole story into the snow with you. Ask, what can I learn here?

What do I need next time? What support would help? And what would I say to a friend standing in this exact place? Take the learning, leave the shame. Shame is too heavy for the next climb. Number three, when you know you're not going to make it, widen the picture.

I recently finished Melissa Arnot Reid's incredible memoir, *Enough*. Melissa is a mountain guide and wilderness EMT who has summited Mount Everest six times. She was also the first American woman to summit Everest without supplemental oxygen and survive the

descent. In her story, she uses a phrase I cannot stop thinking about. Failure cloaked in success.

On earlier attempts, she reached the summit, but not the way she'd hoped because she used supplemental oxygens. Because of the weather, timing, and other conditions dictated it. The mountain gave her success by one measure, and failure by another. Isn't that life? Sometimes everyone else sees the summit photo, but only we know the private goal we had to release along the way.

That's why we have to widen the picture. The outcome matters, yes. But so does the courage, so does the honesty, so does the willingness to be helped, so does the decision to try again with a wiser heart. On Mount Whitney. I did not make the summit.

I accepted a hand up from one of the guides and trudged up to camp at twelve thousand feet. I sat by while others did the work to set up camp, even though part of me was dying inside 'cause I was not doing my share. That night a powerful storm came in, and the next day we all had to hike out. Storm or no storm. I know this. I would not have made the summit on that trip.

But I did make it out. I did learn and I did keep climbing in other ways. And it has taken me 20 years to recognize that climb as a gift. Not because I conquered the mountain, but because the mountain taught me something success might have hidden from me. It taught me to pack better snacks, for one thing. But more than that, it taught me this. Sometimes you try and you're not gonna make it, and that's okay. Because the point of the Life of Try is not

That every try ends in the summit. The point is that every honest try can make us stronger, softer, wiser, and more alive. So if you are in the snow today, if you are tired, if the pack is heavy, if the goal has changed, if you can feel the truth rising in your chest, take a breath. You're allowed to pause. You're allowed to learn. You're allowed to accept health.

And you're allowed to keep becoming the kind of person who tries. Thanks for climbing with me. And before we go, if this episode spoke to the part of you that is learning how to keep going when the path changes, I want to recommend another conversation that might meet you right there too.

The episode called Near Death Experience with Jesus is a powerful conversation with Liza Anderson about faith, healing, recovery, and what can happen when life brings us to the edge and then somehow opens a new way forward. If today's episode reminded you that not every climb goes the way we planned, Liza's story is a beautiful command companion for remembering that grace can still meet us in the hardest places.

I hope you will listen, share it with someone who needs encouragement, and keep choosing the brave, honest work of trying. I'm Wynne Leon and this is the Life of Try. Thanks for trying with me.