

Transformation of an Adventure Runner

One Runner's Journey From the Farm to Mount Everest, Through Joyful and Scary Places in His Heart and Soul.

BY MARSHALL ULRICH

It felt like 120-volt shocks probing my legs with every step. I couldn't do it. I had to stop.

I was at the top of Towne's Pass in Death Valley National Park. I had already run 352 miles across the 125-degree desert floor and had summited Mount Whitney once. But I still had 232 miles and another summit of Mount Whitney to go. People surrounded me, giving me advice. But I was in a fog. I was in my own world, with memories of past races floating through the haze. I couldn't do it. I had to stop this madness.

It was July 2001. I was attempting to complete the Badwater Quad—running 146 miles across Death Valley from Badwater, California, elevation 282 feet below sea level, to the 14,494-foot summit of Mount Whitney, then returning to Badwater, and then doing it all again for a total of four crossings and 584 miles with a total elevation change of 96,000 feet. I was over half done, but I was suffering from severe tendinitis in both shins.

I could not do it. I *had* to quit.

But at that moment, something happened. And it was rooted far in my past.

SIMPLE BEGINNINGS

I sat in a small room, glued to the black and white television. I was entranced, watching a group of men struggling to climb a huge mountain. Their fingers and toes were black from severe frostbite, and the wind was blowing, creating a noise that was unyielding, eerie, and violent. They were just trying to survive, trying to get down off that damn mountain.

I hit the off switch, and as the tube dimmed, I thought, "Someday I want to climb mountains." I was only 5 years old. I started asking questions and learned that Mount Everest was the tallest mountain in the world. I decided then and there that one day I would climb Everest.

The next year, 1957, we moved from town out to a dairy farm in Kersey, Colorado, and my whole world changed.

A Farm Boy From Kersey, Colorado

The smell of fresh-cut hay was sweet, but it also meant that there was work to be done.

After cutting, we had to turn the hay into windrows with a hay rake driven by the drive shaft at the rear of the 1948 8N Ford tractor. You had to respect that drive shaft and keep away from it, unless you wanted to lose a leg—like the neighbor down the road—or worse. There were serious consequences to getting too close to moving tractor parts.

I was only 10 and had to use the full weight of my 55-pound body to push down the clutch pedal on the tractor to rake the hay. My older brother, all of 11, and I found such challenges a wondrous thing. Working at an early age was just how it was on the farm.

The summer I was 12, I graduated to baling and stacking dried hay. To do this, my brother and I would ride a hay sled behind the baler, both pulled by a 1956 Ford 660 tractor. The baler would push 80-pound bales—Dad said “the 60-pound bales aren’t worth messin’ with”—onto the sled, where we had to stack them so as to “tie them in” into stacks of 12 bales each. When a stack was complete, we would sink a steel shank bar (which was really just an old truck axle ground to a point) into the center of the sled to push the 960-pound stack off the sled. Sometimes we would bale for 10 hours or more, putting up almost 2,400 bales in one day. We would work through the heat of the day under the intense Colorado sun, learning tricks of the trade as we went. For example, we learned to hang the canvas water bag from the radiator cap on the front of the tractor. The airflow around the bag, through the radiator grill, had an evaporative effect and kept the water cool. This spot up front also kept the water bag clean, since all the hay leaves and dirt would follow behind the tractor, just covering *us* from head to toe with debris.

That summer my brother and I put up four cuttings of hay, and for that, Dad bought both of us three-speed Montgomery Ward bicycles. It was great to have something with two pedals, since my old bike had only one. I had made do with that one-pedaled bike for five years, pushing down with the arch of my foot on



Marshall Ulrich

▲ Ford 8N tractor Marshall used on the farm to rake hay in the late 1950s.



◀ Marshall (center, back) with his family on their dairy farm in Kersey, Colorado, in 1959.

the downstroke and pulling up with the instep on the upstroke. I didn't care, since improvising on the farm was what it was all about. I would laugh as I rode, thinking my one-pedaled bike was like the flywheel on the baler that pushed bales onto the sled at a constant speed. But now, with the new bike, I not only had two pedals but *three speeds*. That was just *the best!* Or as Mom would say, "better than sliced bread."

Our sister, "old" at 16, found her own challenges helping Mom with chores: separating milk, tending chickens, making soap, doing laundry, cleaning, and tending the garden that yielded all kinds of vegetables to be canned. And, of course, cooking. Mom had grown up with 12 brothers and sisters, who all worked the beet fields in eastern Colorado, and had learned to cook for and take care of them. She may have been isolated on the farm, but her meals were from around the world, and out of this world! After we did an honest day's labor on the farm, her meals were really something to look forward to, and every night the feast would ensue. Sometimes I felt like I could eat and eat forever and never fill up. Then it was off to the outhouse for the boys. We did have indoor plumbing, but that was reserved for Mom and Sis, as they had needs of their own.

Time passed, and life was simple, but good. As we roared down the road in our 1956 Plymouth to ball practice and the grocery store, we didn't much care that it was old and spewed smoke. Didn't all cars do that? We did notice that Mom seemed to care when the car would quit and she would have to flag someone down to help her get it running again. But at least it looked good, since we waxed it last week. Isn't that what mattered?

Back then, when people would ask me who I was I told them, "I'm just a farm boy from Kersey, Colorado."

Your Local Used-Cow Dealer

I met the love of my life, Jean, in high school. After graduating in 1969 with a GPA of two-point-something, I went to a junior college, since no four-year college would look at anyone with grades as bad as mine. That stepping-stone—and active duty in the Air National Guard for one year—led me to true higher education at the University of Northern Colorado. Jean and I continued to date throughout college, and we were married in 1974, the day after college graduation. The following day we moved to Fort Morgan, Colorado, to start a business and our life together. Nothing would stand in our way, or so we thought.

My plan was to convert an old packinghouse into a byproducts plant. What I didn't know was that the zoning had changed and I could not run the facility as a byproducts plant without a special-use permit—and that would take time: three years, to be exact. So for three years, I spent an average of 10 hours a day picking up dead critters (cattle, hogs, and sheep) all over northeastern Colorado and driving them to a byproducts plant operated by my dad in Greeley, Colorado. I would haul hides back to Fort Morgan, where I spent an average of two hours a night salting hides and cleaning up. Salting the hides involved throwing each 80-pound hide on a stack, shoveling on salt, throwing on another hide, shoveling on salt, and so on until I finished all 60 to 80 hides each night.

My 12-hour days, seven days a week, left little time for Jean, but she was busy too: going to law school at the University of Denver. She would stay in Denver during the week and then drive the 80 miles home for weekend visits. By salting hides at 50 cents apiece every night, I was able to put Jean through law school. It was good, honest work, and it kept me in great shape.

After much legal bargaining, in 1977 the county granted the plant a special-use permit, and I hit the ground running in my own byproducts business. In 1978, Jean graduated from law school, and we were blessed with the birth of our daughter, Elaine.

At that time, when people would ask me who I was, I told them, “I'm a husband, a father, and your local used-cow dealer.”

Terrified Runner

Nothing *would* stand in our way now! It was 1979, and we were only 28 years old. I had my own business, Jean was practicing law, and we had a beautiful little girl. Then, something happened.

Jean was diagnosed with cancer.

My calculated, planned-out, no-stopping, always-move-ahead, nothing-will-stand-in-my-way life began to unravel. My blood pressure skyrocketed as Jean suffered and started fading away, so I started running. I started with 10K races, then graduated to marathons, but I could never quite muster the speed I thought

► Marshall's daughter, Elaine, with her mom, Jean, who passed away when Elaine was only 3 years old.

I should be capable of (PR 2:56). Since I wasn't fast enough to win, I must not be a worthy person, or so my confused soul thought at the time.

Two years later, Jean had passed away, and I was left alone with our 3-year-old daughter. At 5 feet 9 and only 138 pounds, I was a shell of a man in every way, trying to run and put the past behind me. I was terrified that I would be the next to die. I was terrified of being hurt again.

At that time, when people would ask *how* I was, I lied and I told them I was OK. Honestly, I was a confused, terrified young father, running to survive.



Marshall Ulrich

ULTRARUNNER, ADVENTURE RACER

To avoid dealing with my grief and facing my fears and to prove to the world that I was in control—hiding my mixed emotions, even from myself—I cranked up my running. I swore to myself that, in order not to be hurt again, I would invest only in myself and become an island unto myself, never having to depend on anyone, always capable of doing anything and everything myself. Thereby, I theorized, I would insulate myself from the pain and suffering life had handed me.

My motto became “as far as I can, as fast as I can.” And so I ran, and ran, and ran some more. Trouble was, I didn't know what I was running from or running to. I knew only that running was familiar to me. It was something I could control.

Ultrarunner

I felt the pain of running my first ultra in 1986 (the Rocky Mountain 50-mile race in Wyoming), but it allowed me to hide from the pain in my heart and soul. Two years later I entered and won my first 100-mile effort by running 121 miles in a 24-hour race. I did that 24-hour to prove to myself that participating in the upcoming Western States 100 would not be a waste of my time and effort. I envisioned how difficult Western States would be by reading accounts of the knockdown, drag-out experiences of those who had tried and failed—and those who had succeeded. Especially those who had won the belt buckle for finishing under 24 hours. If only I could do that! It seemed like a lofty goal but worth a shot.

Standing at the starting line in the cold, frigid, wee hours that June morning in 1988, at the tender age of 37, I had my doubts. But, believing that I was capable

of doing anything and everything myself, I set out and finished in well under 23 hours. I had earned that coveted silver belt buckle and had energy to spare—enough energy to compete seven weeks later in the Leadville Trail 100, where I finished well under the 25-hour big-buckle limit . . . and something happened.

I started to believe that I had a talent for long distances and, apparently, an ability to recover quickly. After all, since I was a boy, I had worked all day on the farm, or as a young man, I had worked into the night salting hides. To me, ultrarunning really wasn't very different from an honest day's labor. You just had to maintain your body and keep moving. To me, this type of activity seems more true to our historical, hunter-gatherer ancestors than sitting on the couch drinking beer and watching a game. *Certainly* running is a much more instinctive behavior! So part of me still can't quite understand what the big to-do is all about when people are astonished at accomplishments of endurance athletes.

With my apparent talent and ability, I thought I could make a name for myself going "as far as I can, as fast as I can." I knew Tom Green had done the Grand Slam in 1986: completing the four U.S. trail 100-mile races that existed at that time

(Old Dominion, Western States, Leadville, and Wasatch). Then in 1988, Wendall Robison and Dennis Hagele did all five existing trail 100-mile races (the original four, plus Angeles Crest), upping the ante. In 1989, there was also the Vermont 100, bringing the total number of trail 100-mile races up to six. Why not do them all in the same season? Well, in part because the average time between the races was about three weeks. Ultrarunners in the United States



Marshall Ulrich

◀ Marshall at Western States in 1988, his first trail-100 race.

thought there wouldn't be enough time to recover, thus making completing all six a formidable accomplishment (later dubbed the "Last Great Race"). I wasn't the only crazy one out there, as ultrarunner Gordon Hardman had the same idea, so we both set out to run all six trail 100-mile races in the summer of 1989.

Gordon and I both completed Old Dominion and Western States, and I was able to finish in fourth and 30th place, respectively—not too bad overall. So I decided not only to run all six but to run them to the best of my ability without regard to recovering for the next race. There were times during the races when I would think, *I'm just out here, puttin' up hay, like when I was kid*, and I just had to find the fastest, most-efficient way to get it done. I was able to finish Vermont (second), Leadville (seventh), Wasatch (10th) and Angeles Crest (sixth). I had a sense of pride, completing the Last Great Race—just as I had a sense of pride when I put up the hay. Gordon also finished all six, with a higher total combined time. We had done it!

I loved the challenge of ultrarunning. As my list of races grew, I started to believe that the only limitations are in your mind. Not only did I do events that were out there, but I created a few new challenges, setting the goal to do something no one else had ever done, every year. Some of my firsts include:

- Badwater Solo: self-contained, unaided, solo 146 miles from Badwater to the top of Mount Whitney
- Leadville Trail 100 run/Pikes Peak Marathon combination: both events completed on the *same* weekend
- Quad Pikes Peak: 104 miles, four summits of Pikes Peak, 30,060 feet of elevation gain—completed two different times, the first time along with Scott Weber
- Death Valley Cup: Badwater Ultra 135 plus the Furnace Creek 508 (508-mile bike ride through Death Valley) in the same summer
- Leadville Triple Crown: Leadville 100-mile bike, 100-mile run, and 100-mile kayak on consecutive weekends
- Death Valley South to North Crossing: 133 miles of (then) Death Valley Monument
- Run Across Colorado: 310 miles, three-time winner and record holder

There was plenty more to come, but setting my mind on accomplishing these goals kept my blood pressure low and my mind sane (or so I thought). And when people would ask me who I was, I told them, "I'm an ultrarunner."

Adventure Racer

In November 1994, I received a phone call from Chuck Blish asking me to join a team for something called the Eco-Challenge the following summer in Utah.

I had never heard of adventure racing, so it was new and exciting to me. Chuck explained that the courses were 250 to 500 miles, covered by various means such as running, trekking, horseback riding, climbing, mountaineering, canyoneering, coasteering, swimming, mountain biking, rafting, kayaking, and canoeing. You had to navigate through the course to a series of checkpoints, staying together as a team of (at the time) five people, including at least one woman. I was intrigued and agreed to be a part of a Colorado-based team. I really had no idea what I was doing in a number of the disciplines but was able to unofficially complete the course with Mark Macy, Dr. Bob Haugh, and Lisa Smith-Batchen, founders of what would become Team Stray Dogs.

I went on to compete in all nine Eco-Challenge races—something only Adrian Crane, Tony Molina, and I have done—often with Mark and Adrian. I also competed in other adventure races, including the Raid Gauloises, Primal Quest, and Adrenaline Rush—16 expedition-length races in all, with 12 official finishes.

These races were great for me in many ways. I was able to travel to many countries, and I loved learning about the big world far, far away from that dairy farm in Kersey, Colorado. They allowed me to face my fear of heights and water; I was terrified of them both since the farm on the flat plains had not offered opportunities to learn to swim or climb. I learned how to pack light, mountain bike, climb, paddle, and fine-tune my trail-running skills. I also learned more about taking care of myself, as well as how to deal with varied terrain, the elements, and sleep deprivation. I further explored the extent of endurance: what the body can handle and do over multiple days of racing. Most important, being on a team forced me to depend on others—and learn how to be a person who can be depended upon—and not do everything by myself. I was not an island.

The team dynamics of adventure racing really helped me to realize how interdependent we humans are, whether in racing or in life. Truly we *are* all in this together. During the race, if one team member was suffering (and sometimes that was me!), the team had to take care of that person. In society, if people are suffering, we have an obligation to take care of them. If we don't help each other, there is no finish line in sight for anyone.

During this time, when people would ask, I would tell them, "I'm an ultrarunner, and companies actually sponsor me to be an adventure racer. Can you believe it?" I couldn't!

SUCCESS AND ADDICTION

Newspaper articles called me a madman for my ultrarunning feats and adventure racing. Rather than believing that the only limitations are in your mind, I learned that people in our society think too much about the limitations! People mull things over (and over, and . . .) and talk themselves out of just doing. I learned

that to succeed, all I had to do was focus on doing the event and be confident that I would succeed.

Of course, you also have to define success. During this time of my life, I thought success had to come from finishing, or even better, from winning! For 13 years (1989 to 2001), I was *racing* over 1,000 miles a year and won Badwater a record four times. I had a hard time believing that *not* finishing an event might be more beneficial to my psyche, to my heart and soul. I was a slow learner but finally realized that the best lessons came from being humbled. For example, the first time I set out to do the Badwater Solo, I failed miserably, completing only seven miles. Even in completing the Solo in 1999, I was reduced to feeling like a beast of burden and learned a more profound sense of humility than I had ever experienced. (For a complete story about the Solo, see the July/August 2000 issue of *Marathon & Beyond*.)

To this day, I have to remind myself that finishing is not necessarily a success; rather, the important thing is what I learn along the way.

I would be a liar if I said that everything about my ultrarunning and adventure racing was positive. It wasn't. I realize now that I felt a need to do more (and more, and . . .), always trying to prove myself worthy: to myself, to my family, to the world—to prove that I was OK. But it didn't work. No matter how much I ran, how fast I ran, how many races I won, how many adventure races I completed, or how many firsts I was able to accomplish—it was never enough. Like



Maureen Monaghan / Team Stray Dogs

▲ Marshall, with Adrian Crane and Mark Macy (Team Stray Dogs), during the 2001 Eco-Challenge in New Zealand.

an alcoholic always looking for his next drink or a drug addict looking for his next fix, I looked for my next race or event. It fed on itself, spinning more and more out of control.

For me, ultrarunning became a compulsive/addictive behavior. The only thing that sets it aside from drinking, eating disorders, or other dysfunctional behavior was the fact that it brought a certain amount of publicity and affirmation because of the extraordinary nature of the sport. People were amazed that I and so many others were out there doing things that they perceived to be impossible. This affirmation was a double-edged sword as I used it to justify my running in my mind and to justify it to others.

I also realize now how much I was fooling myself in thinking that I was capable of doing anything and everything myself. Others had to take care of things at home when I was gone. My employees kept my business running. Friends and family crewed me at races and events. It was the work of *others* that allowed me to achieve.

I must also accept that my attempt to be an island unto myself was hurtful to others. By trying to insulate myself from the pain and suffering life had handed me, I closed out Elaine (born in 1978), as well as my son, Taylor (born in 1983); my younger daughter, Ali (born in 1990); and their mom (I had remarried in late 1982). I may have insulated myself from pain and suffering, but I certainly passed some along to them.

Something had to give in my life. And in fact, my marriage to Taylor and Ali's mom ended in 1992. But I wasn't ready to move on, so I stayed stuck: running from reality, trapped in my own misery, not dealing with the pain caused by losing Jean. By not grieving—just running—I hid my fear of dying, my fear of being hurt. I was still scared. I just hid it from everyone, including myself. My fear of dying kept me from living.

If you ask me now who I was then, I will tell you, "I was a confused human being searching for answers."

► Marshall after his team finished second in the 1995 Eco-Challenge/X-Games, New England—succeeding, but a shell of a man . . . in many ways.



Marshall Ulrich

THEN SOMETHING HAPPENED

I was at the top of Towne's Pass, 352 miles into the Badwater Quad. Voices and memories floated through the haze, through the pain. It was 2001, and I had just turned 50. I was older, but was I wiser?

I was doing the Quad as a fund-raiser for the Religious Teachers Filippini, a group of sisters who work to promote the dignity of women and children in some of the poorest countries in the world—and here at home—by providing an education to those who previously had limited opportunities and choices in their lives. More than that, the sisters also help provide the necessities of life: water, food, shelter, and clothing. (See the sidebar on page 32 for more information on the Religious Teachers Filippini.)

I had done fund-raising as part of runs before, and I had run through pain before, but this was different. Truly something struck me, an epiphany, a sudden perception of the essential nature or meaning of what I was doing, a divine intervention of sorts. I realized that the Quad had very little to do with me. It was for the starving children, for my dedicated crew, for the people who set foot in the desert with great appreciation, and for everyone who demands a better, more compassionate world to live in. (For a complete story about the Quad, see the January/February 2004 issue of *Marathon & Beyond*.)

I could not have completed the Quad had I set out to do it only for myself. I learned—the hard way—that achieving something *only* for yourself is not necessarily a success. All of the ultrarunning firsts, all of the records, all of the adventure races were insignificant. I realized that stepping outside of yourself and doing for others is the true essence of life. I have found a new purpose for life, a purpose outside of myself. Only this has elevated my quality of existence and has saved me.

I had felt a sense of belonging before, but this was different. I began to connect with the needs of others around me. For the first time in a long time, I started to participate in life, not run away from it. I could not exist as an island unto myself but needed other people! I was not just a shell of a man but was living and working to help others who are less fortunate and don't have the opportunities that I had to grow up on a farm and ride that hay sled.

Mountaineer

While I learned a lot during the Quad, I still felt like I was searching for answers. The dream of the 5-year-old boy came back to me: the dream to climb Everest. I was 50 years old, and I still wanted to be there on that mountain, struggling through the storm. I wanted to know how those mountaineers felt, to feel what drove them. Climbing mountains would also help me face my fear of high altitude, a fear I obtained during the 2000 Raid Gauloises in Tibet and Nepal when I suffered severe altitude sickness mountain biking at 17,000 feet. I wanted to answer the question: is it possible for me to get to the top?

The Religious Teachers Filippini is an order of sisters whose motto, established by their founder, Saint Lucy Filippini, is to “Go and Teach.” They believe that the way to empower women and children is through education. The sisters’s schools and programs are supported only through donations and grants, which are distributed to mission sites and schools in 10 countries: Albania, Brazil, England, Eritrea, Ethiopia, India, Ireland, Italy, Switzerland, and the United States. One hundred percent of donations go directly to the mission work administered by 900 sisters in this small order. For more information on Marshall’s fund-raising efforts for the sisters, go to www.marshallulrich.com.

While I had climbing and mountaineering skills from adventure racing, I couldn’t just rush off to Everest. I had to get experience, and Denali seemed like a good place to start. It was high, over 20,000 feet, and cold. In June 2002, I was able to reach the summit of the highest peak in North America. Happily, I handled the altitude well, giving me confidence to climb Aconcagua in February 2003. At almost 23,000 feet, Aconcagua is the highest peak in South America and the Western Hemisphere. In July 2003, I climbed Kilimanjaro, the highest peak in Africa, as a honeymoon trip with my wife, Heather, who has been my main source of support in recent years. What a surprise—wink, wink—all three were part of the Seven Summits, the highest peak on each of the seven continents. I was off to a pretty good mountaineering start in the course of just over a year. So I made plans to climb Mount Elbrus, the highest peak in Europe, in June 2004. But then, something happened.

I was surfing the Net one beautiful March afternoon in 2004 and came across the site “Everest 10000.” What’s this, I wondered? As I sat at my computer, I read about the Russian Adventure Team, led by Alex Abramov, and its Everest expedition, and realized the site name came from the price: only \$10,000 U.S. dollars to climb Everest. I contacted Alex immediately. “Hello, Alex, you don’t know me, but my name is Marshall Ulrich from the United States. I see that you have an expedition to the north side of Everest that is leaving in early April and that the cost is cheap. I’m anxious to climb with you Russians; do you have a spot open?” and went on to tell him about my background and climbing experience. Alex replied, “One spot open, sure—you send money right away.” And so I did, and the rest, as they say, is history. Four weeks later I was sitting in base camp (BC) in Tibet at 17,160 feet with the Russians, attempting to summit the highest mountain in the world!

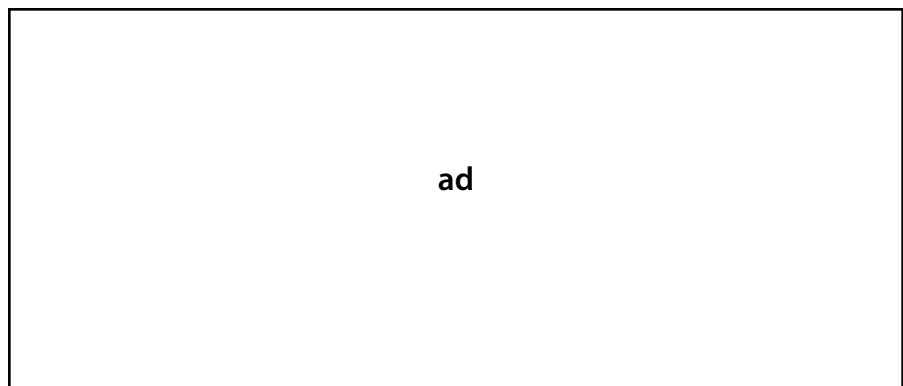
During the six weeks it took me to climb Everest, doubt was ever present in my mind. I doubted myself, whether I could make it to the top or not. Because of the altitude, I had trouble sleeping. Sleeping only two hours a night confined

in a tent for six weeks can wear you down mentally, especially when you have to wait out a storm. And physically, well, that's another story. I was trained as an ultrarunner, believing that more is better, providing you give yourself time to recover. Once again, I learned the hard way that my beliefs are not always correct, or correct in all situations. At altitudes above 20,000 feet (advanced base camp, or ABC, is at 21,450 feet) you do *not* recover! Every ounce of energy you spend on the mountain *stays* on the mountain, and your body continues to deteriorate. Above 26,000 feet, your body is literally dying from lack of oxygen, thus the term "death zone." So I had to learn to do less and to descend to the lowest altitude possible at every opportunity in an attempt to recover. During the acclimation process, I lost 15 pounds from my 5-foot-9-inch, 162-pound frame and covered over 100 miles between BC and ABC alone.

The altitude, the lack of sleep, the tent-caused claustrophobia, the continuing deterioration of my body, and the waiting and waiting on weather all fueled my self-doubt. At times, I was reduced to tears. But finally, on the morning of May 25, 2004, I was ready for my summit push.

It was 2:30 A.M. when David D'Angelo, whom I had invited to be my climbing partner to the summit; Sherpa Pemba Tenzing; and I started out from the highest camp in the world at 27,390 feet. The temperature was hovering around 10 degrees below zero with a 30-mile-per-hour wind. The three of us, two Italians, and their Sherpa were the only ones who set out that day from the north side. No one from the south side even left their tents, as the wind was howling there, too. But after weeks on the mountain and a lifetime of dreaming, I knew we had only this one day, this one shot, at the top, and we took it.

As we headed out into the dark, blowing night, I thought back to when I was sitting on the top of Towne's Pass in Death Valley and that moment of divine intervention that allowed me to succeed. I realized that nothing had changed. Everest was simply 29,000 feet higher and 130 degrees colder. I just had to move forward for the right reasons.





▲ Climbing Mount Everest in 2004 took a lot out of Marshall.

We passed six bodies of fellow climbers who had died just days before. One, a 27-year-old Bulgarian whom I had shared a meal and conversation with at BC, was still clipped to the rope above the ladder at the second step. Another climber had seen him make it to the summit, so he had been on his way down, and it appeared that he had sat down to rest and collect his thoughts before descending the ladder . . . but never got up. It was shocking to see but surprisingly unemotional (at the time) as I accepted the reality that I could suffer the same fate. As I clipped around him, I paused, said a short prayer, and kept climbing.

We climbed for seven hours with no break in the weather. Then, as we approached the third step, miraculously, it cleared. We could see the summit pyramid. I turned to Pemba and said, “We’re going to make it, aren’t we?” to which he nodded and said, “Yes.”

We climbed the pyramid, traversed the upper ridge, and scrambled to the top—my lifelong dream had been fulfilled. I stood at the top of Mount Everest, the highest point in the world, and my heart was filled with gratitude.

Lessons Learned

Climbing Everest answered more of my questions. I can’t say what motivated those climbers caught in the storm that I saw on TV when I was 5. But I know what motivated me: I had dedicated the climb to raising money, once again, for the Religious Teachers Filipini. When I doubted myself during the acclimation

process, doing it to raise money for the impoverished women and children kept me going and made it meaningful. When I doubted whether we could reach the summit because of the weather, remembering what Sister Mary Beth had told me, “The children are waiting for you to get to the top of Mount Everest so that you can look around and see all of the work that has to be done!” kept me going. I realized once again that I was not alone, and never had been. I had David and Pemba and the support of the entire Russian Adventure Team. More than that, I had my wife and children doing the truly hard work of continuing their lives as I pursued my dream—always knowing that my most important goal was to come home safely to them. I had dear friends and family who supported me, who had always supported me, even when I was such a confused human being searching for answers.

The sisters, the women and children I had never even met, my wife, my kids, my supporters, they are what kept me safe on that mountain. Their love and support contributed to the divine intervention that allowed me to keep going.



▲ Marshall Ulrich has reached the top of each of the Seven Summits. Clockwise, from left: Mount Vinson (Antarctica), Mount Kosciusko (Australia), Mount Aconcagua (South America), Mount Elbrus (Europe—Russia), Mount Kilimanjaro (Africa), Denali (North America), and (center) Mount Everest (Asia).

So what do you accomplish if you summit Mount Everest? I say, “Not much, unless you learn something along the way.” I truly was overwhelmed with gratitude at the summit of Mount Everest. Gratitude for where I came from, who I am, and where I am going. Gratitude to all those people in the world who demonstrate that being an island unto myself is simply living a hollow life. Gratitude that I was blessed to be able to be in that one place, in that one moment, and open my heart to the world and heaven above.

Recently a dear friend of mine, Dave Thorpe, asked me how it was that I was able to do what I did—in ultrarunning, adventure racing, and mountaineering. Was it because I trained harder? Or was stronger? More fit? More determined? More tolerant of pain? Or maybe it was just good genes? I told him I suspected that none of those reasons were correct. I believe that we are all equal, but not the same. We each have our own very special talents and gifts. For us to not use them to benefit others is the greatest travesty. Maybe I was predestined to accomplish things like the Badwater Quad and climbing Mount Everest as a part of my search not only for myself but for my purpose. For all of us, our purpose should include stepping outside of ourselves to help others. Or as Sister Virginia in Asmara, Eritrea, would say, it is vital to “do the real work of peace and justice.”

So I have been able to come to peace in my mind and my heart. I have been able to let go of many fears and my beloved Jean. She too had a purpose while she was here with us and touched many lives. She brought our beautiful daughter into the world, a young woman who is now 27 and touching the lives of many others.

Closing Thoughts From Oz

My daughter Ali and I recently watched *The Wizard of Oz*, as we have many times in the past. Coincidentally, that movie starts in black and white, just as I had seen those climbers on that far-off mountain as a 5-year-old in Greeley, Colorado. As they struggled, so it was with Dorothy on that farmstead in Kansas. A tornado struck, and Dorothy was taken away to Oz, and the picture turns to color. My life was much the same, starting in black and white, traveling through my own struggles, with a beautiful world of color eventually opening up for me.

In the end, Dorothy returns to those humble beginnings in Kansas and realizes, “If I ever go looking for my heart’s desire again, I won’t look any further than my own backyard; because if it isn’t there, I never really lost it to begin with.”

So when people ask me who I am now, I say, “I’m just a farm boy from Kersey, Colorado, riding that hay sled, who needed to look no farther than that hay patch.” All the answers I sought were inside me, just waiting to be discovered. And how could I fail when I had the love of others and the hand of God to help and guide me? I succeed only with help from my family, friends, and divine intervention.

