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Climbing Mountains: An Interview with Erik Weihenmayer



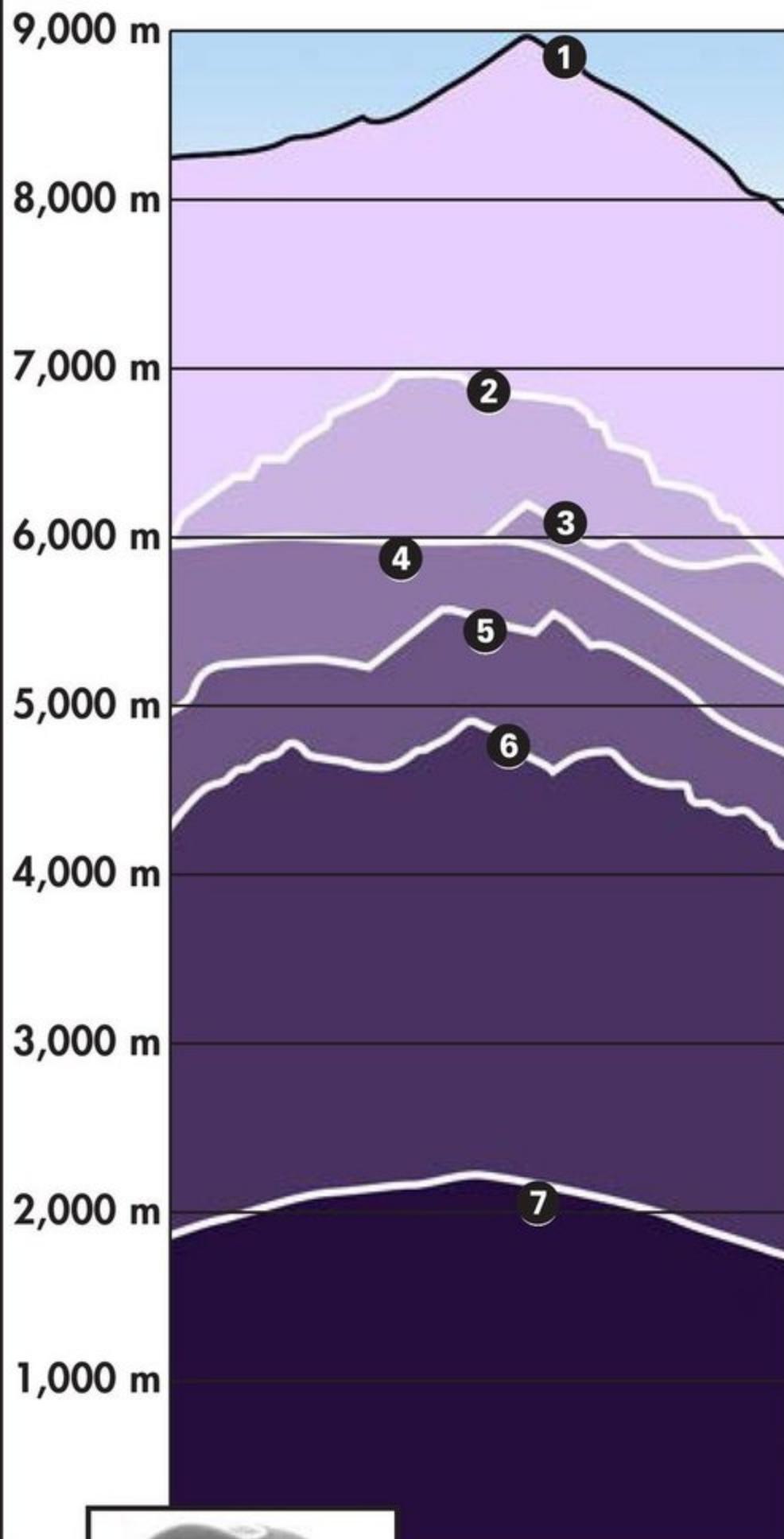
Written by Kathie Lester

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Erik's Seven Summits (from highest to lowest)



Erik Weihenmayer, 36 years old, has climbed the Seven Summits, the highest peaks on each of the seven continents. He was born with a genetic condition that caused him to lose his sight by age 13. Erik was interviewed the day before leaving for Tibet, where he was to lead six blind Tibetan teenagers up a 23,100-foot mountain. You can read about this climb at www.touchthetop.com.

Interviewer: Can you see at all, or is everything black?

Erik: It's your eyes that go blind, not your brain, so I imagine an outline or shades of color. If I hear someone talking, I imagine a face and a body.

Interviewer: Is it like how I picture people when I talk to them on the phone?

Erik: Exactly. It's a fuzzy outline of things that my brain fills in so I understand the shape of the world.

Interviewer: How did you feel when you lost your sight?

Erik: Like a raccoon that's been cornered—I didn't know what to do or who to turn to. I just panicked. I didn't know what would happen to me as a result of being blind, just that everything seemed harder. I didn't want to be helpless or removed from everyone else in the world. I had a lot of fears, and a lot of anger bubbled beneath the surface; but I gradually realized I had to accept it. Things end in your life, and that's the way it is. You know, some things die, some things are reborn, and you have to renew yourself. Rock climbing was one of the ways I did that.



Erik Weihenmayer, early climbing years

Interviewer: How did you get started in climbing?

Erik: The Carroll Center for the Blind (in Newton, Massachusetts, USA) had an activities program for blind kids. Blind kids can't participate in team ball sports, so when, in addition to cross-country skiing and sailing, they took us rock climbing, I knew I'd found something I could do that was really exciting.

Interviewer: How did you learn to rock climb?

Erik: At first someone gave me detailed instructions like “reach right” and “put your foot farther left,” but now I climb much more independently by feeling the cracks and pockets in the rock.

Interviewer: What does mountain climbing mean to you?

Erik: The scenery is exciting—the sounds, how the rock feels under my hands, the sun in my face, the ways the ground changes under my feet, the variations in the texture of the ice and snow. It’s exciting to challenge the environment with my team, using my skill and **endurance**, bringing uncontrollable situations under control.



Erik, right, and fellow climbers on Mt. Ama Dablam in Khumbu, near Mt. Everest



Erik wears pointed boots and uses a pole and an ice ax to climb over ice and packed snow.

Interviewer: Please describe how you know where you're going when mountain climbing.

Erik: There are different parts to mountain climbing. When I'm hiking, I follow somebody who has a bell tied to his pack. I use long trekking poles to feel the **terrain** in front of me. When I find a place I want to step, I lean on that pole and take a step, and then I scan with the other pole. It sounds slow, but it's not; I can hike as fast as anyone. When we go up nearly vertical snow in deep gullies called **coulloirs**, I kick the toes of my boots into the snow and take one step at a time, and I swing an ice ax into the snow. I'm feeling my way up slowly just like everyone else.

When I climb vertical ice—frozen walls of ice that look like waterfalls—I kick into the ice with **crampons**, which are sharp points on the toes of my boots. I stand up high on the toes of my boots and swing my ice tools into the ice, and then I hang from the ice tools and pull myself up. I don't have to see where I'm swinging. Sighted climbers look for blue ice because white ice is rotten, but I can tell if it's rotten by tapping the ice with the tools and listening to the sound and the **vibration**.



Erik climbs an ice cliff.

Interviewer: Can you take the lead climbing on a mountain?

Erik: The job of the person in the lead is to bring the rope up attached to his harness, jam pieces of metal gear into the crack, and then clip the rope to the gear to help keep everyone safe. I can lead a climb on rocks by touch when we're climbing a vertical crack or pockets.

Interviewer: But you don't lead when you're crossing areas where there are crevasses?

Erik: On very narrow snow bridges that go over crevasses, I would need to be able to see in order to line up the best route. On a big mountain, I'm usually roped to two other people, and I follow someone.

Interviewer: How do you know if narrow snow bridges are sturdy enough?

Erik: You have to test them—that's why we're roped up. If the first person breaks through, the other two people on the team throw their bodies down and jam their ice axes into the ground. That brakes the person, and he dangles from the rope until he can slide up the rope and pull himself out.

Interviewer: What is the funniest thing that ever happened to you while climbing?

Erik: About a half hour before we summited Mt. McKinley, we radioed down to the village. When we reached the top, my dad, wife, and two brothers were flying above us in a small plane. We waved our ski poles, all wearing red suits, looking identical to each other. When I asked my friend, “Do you think they’ll know I made it?” he said, “Yeah, you’re the only one waving your ski pole in the wrong direction.” He was having fun with me, showing that he loved me, not being mean.

Interviewer: What is the scariest thing that ever happened to you while climbing?

Erik: My idea of climbing is to keep it boring. I’ve fallen in crevasses when snow bridges have collapsed, and I just leapt to the other side. Once when I was on a lead climb, a piece of gear that anchors the rope to the rock popped out of the rock, causing me to fall about 25 feet and dangle at the end of my rope. One time, when I was climbing up a loose rock gully, the whole rock started sliding. I just jumped to the side, and it slid by me. Once I was hanging on some ice while an **avalanche** poured down over my head. I got pelted with ice, but I was wearing a helmet. I’ve never had what I’d call a near-death experience.



Above: On top of Everest

Inset: Everest base camp

Interviewer: Can you describe what it is like to be on top of Mount Everest?

Erik: When you get to the summit, it's done—it's over. What's exciting to me is the planning, building a team, and getting prepared the best I can. I like working out details like where to put my gloves and my food and water so I can get to them quickly. I enjoy learning skills, like tying knots, which help me waste little time or energy in the mountains. To me, all that preparation is really fun.

You stand on the summit for 20 minutes at the most. On top of a mountain, the sound changes, because there's sky above and around you, and the sound vibrations move forever. I touch the snow and can hear the wind howling. It's really cool to be at the highest point, but after the summit is the hard part. Edmund Hillary, the first man to climb Mount Everest, said it only counts if you get down. You're tired, and you don't want to trip and fall down the mountain. Ninety percent of climbing accidents happen on the way down.



Try This!

Erik talks more about sound:

*I hear ceilings and walls and things like that. Sound vibrations bounce off objects and come back at us, like a bat's **echolocation**. Everyone can do it. So you can hear how tall the ceilings are, and walls. You can test this by walking down a hallway with your eyes closed. You can tell when there's an open door because the sound changes.*



Jeff Evans, right, captains Erik's tandem bike during Primal Quest.

Interviewer: Do you do other extreme sports?

Erik: I tandem bike—on the back of course. I've done some adventure races, where you mountain bike, kayak, raft, rock climb, hike, and canoe. I did a five-day race across Greenland and then a 460-mile race through the Sierra Nevada in California on the hardest terrain you can imagine. In the Primal Quest, the toughest adventure race in the world, we were one of 42 teams to finish out of 80 teams that started.

Interviewer: Do you have a guide dog?



Erik with his first guide dog, Wizard, one of the three German shepherds Erik has had

I have to encourage her along, saying “Come on, you can do it.” Then she always makes a good decision because she’s smart. If I come out of a movie theater and say, “Find the car,” she’ll bring me right to our car when there are 100 cars in the parking lot.

Erik: Yes, I’ve had three German shepherds. My first dog, when I was 16, was Wizard; my second, Seigo—a big bear of a dog—is retired; and I’ve had my third dog, Willa, for about a year. We wanted a gentle dog this time because I have a four-year-old daughter. Willa is little and kind of timid, so sometimes



Erik with daughter, Emma, who later prompted him to get a guide dog good with toddlers



Erik writes notes about a climb using a Braille n' Speak 2000, a word processor that will read back what he has typed.

Interviewer: Tell me about your upcoming trip to Tibet.

Erik: A German lady named Sabriye Tenberken traveled to Tibet, where she found blind kids who were four years old and hadn't even learned to walk. She started a school for the blind that now teaches 39 kids who were **outcasts** six or seven years ago. People wouldn't bring them out of the house, and now they're walking with their canes through the city of Lhasa, learning **Braille** in three different languages.



Meet the six students on the team to climb Lhakpa Ri (from left to right): Tashi, Kyila, Sonam Bungso, Tenzin, Kienzen, Dachung.

Interviewer: People thought these kids were stupid just because they were blind?

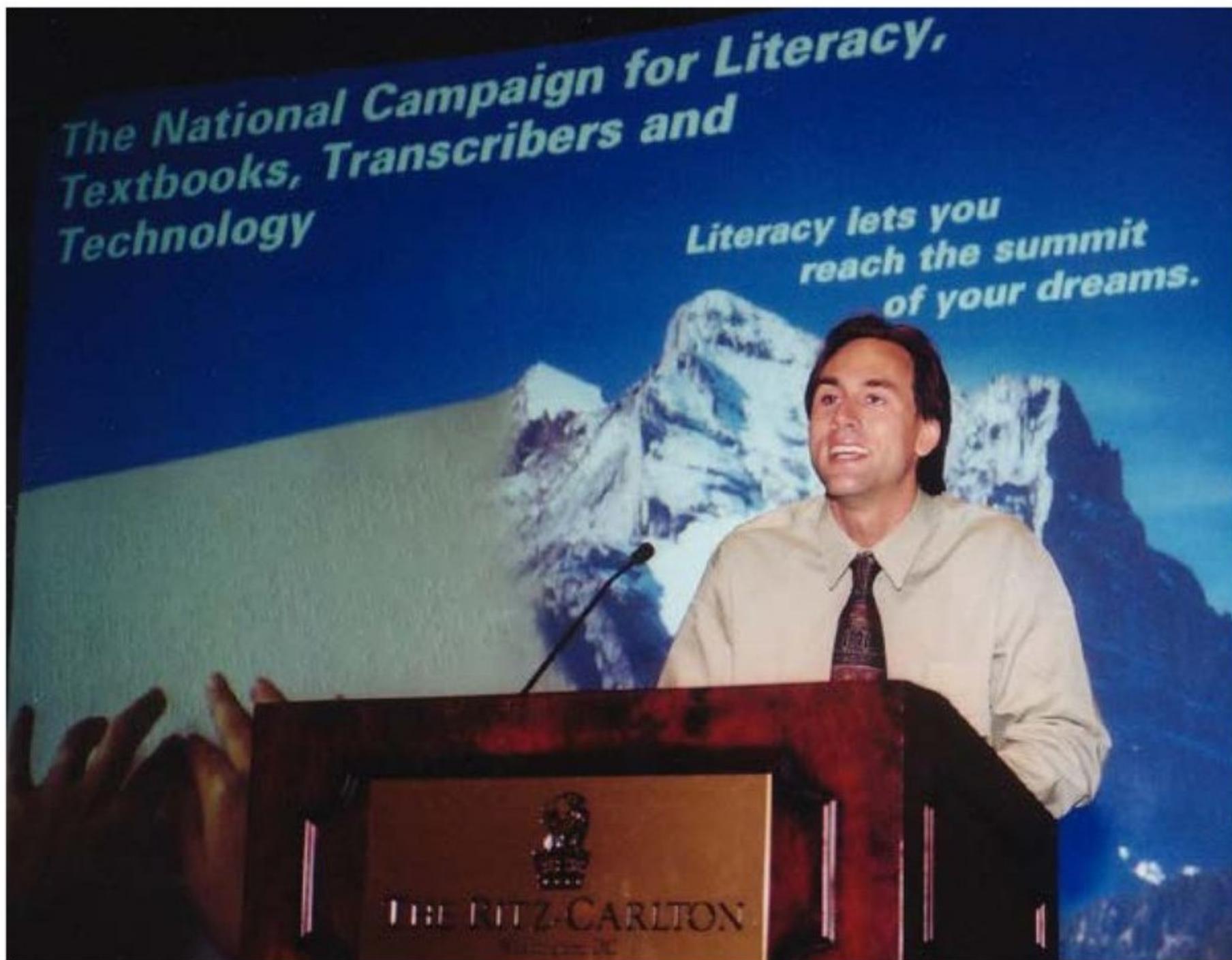
Erik: In some places, people think if you haven't been born perfect, maybe there's a reason, like maybe there are demons inside you. Sabriye is educating these kids, and now they're the smartest kids in their villages. They've gone from being outcasts to being respected. We thought it'd be cool to take six of her most fit, motivated kids up a peak. We picked a peak called Lhakpa Ri that's just north of Mount Everest. We trained them for three weeks in the spring for a month-long trip.

Interviewer: What was the training like?

Erik: We brought them out in the mountains, roped them to experienced climbers, and put crampons on their boots. One day we went over a big 17,500-foot mountain pass where there's no trail—just terrible terrain. It was storming—all the kids were shivering, one was throwing up, and one fell into a river. We wanted to test them, to push them, and they all passed, so we think they're ready. They're really tough. We think this project will create leaders out of these kids and give them a sense of their lives being full of possibilities. We also think it's a message to the world about what people are capable of.



Erik leads the Climbing Blind Tibet 2004 team.

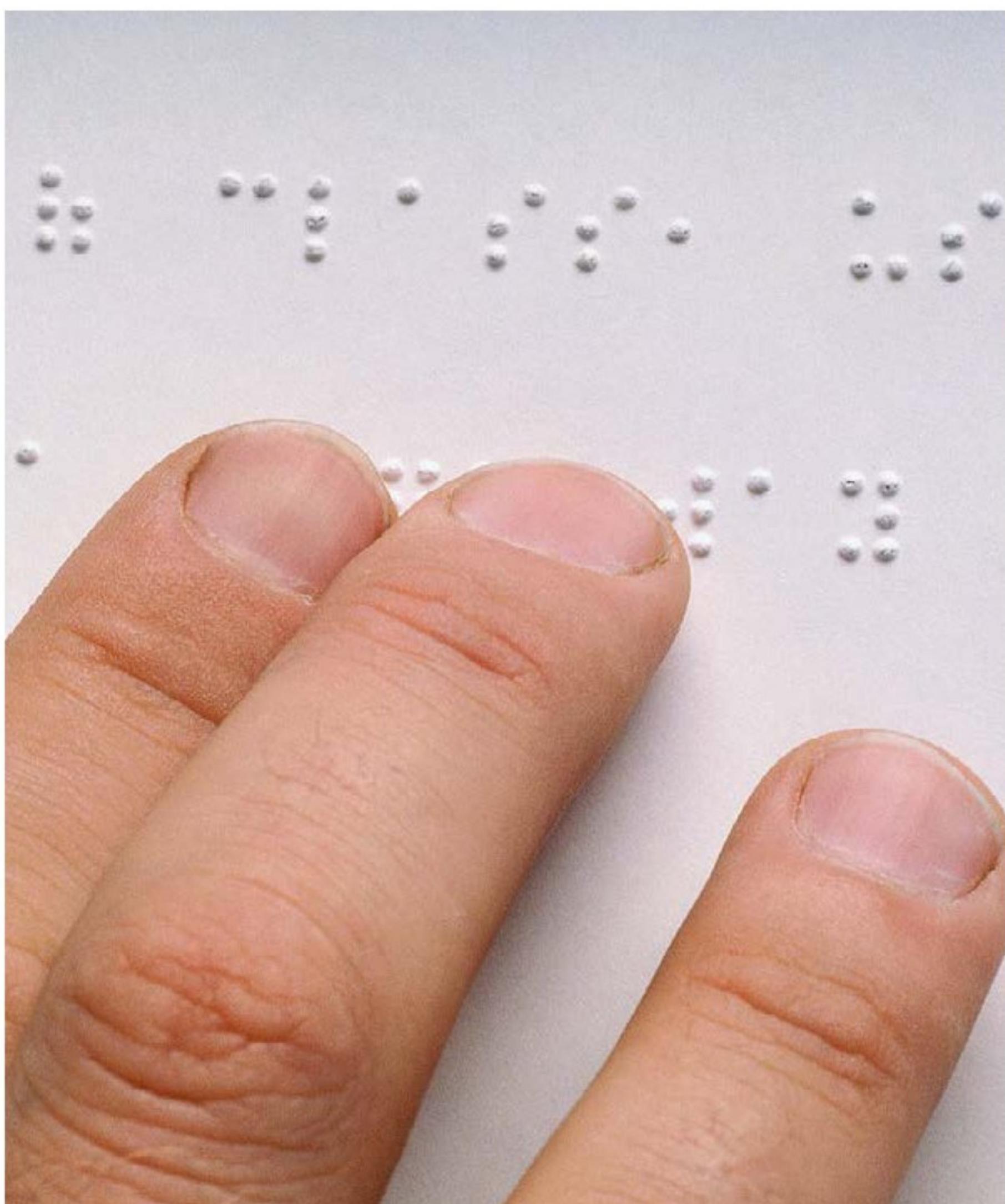


Erik speaks to a group about Braille literacy.

Interviewer: What work are you doing now besides mountain climbing?

Erik: I often speak to schools and show our Everest **documentary**. I read from my book, which is being used quite a bit in schools. The book is a lot about leadership, about losing something and then regaining something. It's about pushing into uncertainty, about climbing blind, which is not just about climbing a mountain as a blind person. It's about moving forward when you're not sure if you have what it takes, pushing through fear and doubt that can keep you from your goals.

I'm also a Verizon Literacy Champion for the American Foundation for the Blind. I speak to different educational groups about the need for blind kids to learn Braille, just like sighted kids need to learn print. This literacy program is publicizing the need for people to learn to translate books into Braille.



Braille uses patterns of raised dots that are read using your fingers.

Interviewer: What are your next goals?

Erik: I would like to climb hard for another four or five years. Climbing goals never end. I have a list a mile long—ice faces in Alaska, rock faces in Canada, rock and ice faces in the Alps, climbs in Chile and Peru and the Himalayas . . . the list goes on and on.



Erik treks up to Everest base camp. Having made it to Everest's summit doesn't mean he is finished climbing.



The Climbing Blind Tibet 2004 team celebrates.

Interviewer: What's your message for other people who are facing difficult challenges?

Erik: I don't climb to prove that blind people can climb mountains; I climb because I like it. But when a blind person stands on top of a mountain, it makes people reconsider what they think is possible. I think doors are opened because of that. People think less about what they can't do and more about what they might be able to do. We don't have to live our lives completely the way we, or others, expect them to be. Kids will pioneer new things in their lives that right now we can't even dream of. There are so many opportunities to nudge society forward. People write off their own ability to change the world, especially kids, but we all have extraordinary power in our own two hands.

Interviewer: Is there anything else you want to share with the people who will read this book?

Erik: I've learned from the mountains that you don't have to be the fastest, or the smartest, or the most popular, or the person with the best eyesight to be a leader. You need some skill, but you also need a vision of who you are and what kind of person you want to be. Then you need a lot of courage to carry it through. Many adults try to lead through their intentions and words, but I think you lead best by your actions.

Climbers call it "taking the sharp end of the rope," which means actually getting out there and climbing. When I think about leadership, it's about taking the sharp end—it shows in your decisions rather than in your words.



Erik takes the sharp end of the rope by continuing to climb.



Erik reached the Seven Summits with teams that believed in him.

Interviewer: So in other words, people will follow you when you act rather than when you try to gather them up behind you by talking to them?

Erik: Yes. You need to gather a good team of people who believe in you, but what moves the world forward are people who are willing to step out and take the sharp end.

Explore More

To learn more about how Erik has pushed past the limits placed on him by blindness, read his book, *Touch the Top of the World: A Blind Man's Journey to Climb Farther Than the Eye Can See*.

To learn more about Erik, visit his Web site at www.touchthetop.com

Glossary

avalanche	a large mass of snow and ice sliding down a mountain (p. 10)
Braille	a system of printing for the blind that uses raised dots for letters (p. 15)
couloirs	open, deep gorges or gullies usually containing snow or ice (p. 7)
crampons	metal spikes attached to the bottom of boots to allow firm walking on snow or ice (p. 8)
crevasses	deep cracks, especially in glacier ice (p. 9)
documentary	film that dramatically shows factual events (p. 18)
echolocation	a way of locating objects by sending out a sound and measuring how long it takes to bounce back (p. 12)
endurance	the ability to make it through suffering and strain (p. 6)
genetic	having to do with heredity and variation of living things (p. 3)
outcasts	people who are rejected by society (p. 15)
terrain	the characteristics of a piece of land (p. 7)
vibration	a rapid back and forth movement (p. 8)

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