

a friendly guide to fear

project by _sarah_christina

The explosion in popularity of gym climbing created a generation of very strong, very timid climbers.

Climbing is a subculture, and as such it reflects trends/themes in the greater culture at a given time.

In the 60s, the era of modern free climbing was born. This period was also one characterized by social movements and political change. People felt emboldened to revolt against the norm; in America one of comfort, stability, and trad values.

This age birthed the civil rights, free love, and anti-war movements in America. Also, notably, the free climbing revolution.



Jim Bridwell, Fred East, Billy Westbay, and Jay Fisk
El Capitan, photo Werner Braun



Hippies at the 'Human Be-In' in SF
Photo Dennis L. Maness

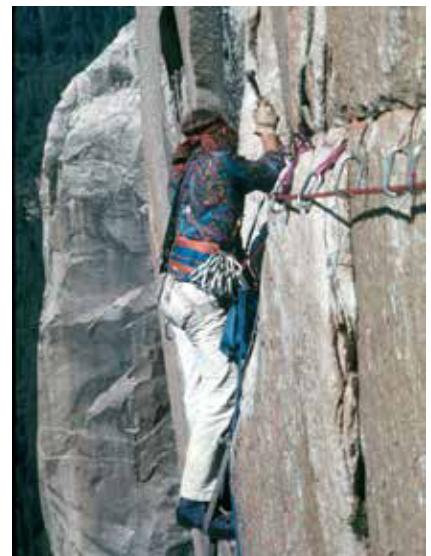
The post-war period in America ushered in a craving for comfort and stability. It was this era that created the standard for suburban American life. Think white picket fences, microwaves and station wagons.

In comparison to this, climbing a blank rock face using only your fingertips was a clear act of rebellion.

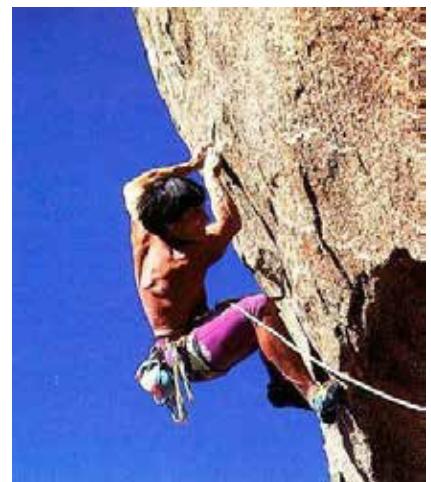
Climbers were reuniting with the chaos of mother nature in all her glory and strength. By forgoing pitons for removable protection, they were not just engaging with nature, but evening the playing field; giving her a better shot to win.

During this period, climbing wasn't real unless there was skin in the game.

The rest was considered practice.



Jim Bridwell hammering away in Yosemite.
Photo Jay Fiske/Eric Kohl collection



Tony Yaniro on 'Warpath' in Joshua Tree.
Photo Heinz Zak

bold climbing: a lost art?

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at the inception of climbing, it was understood to be both physically and psychologically demanding.

**then, the first rule was:
the leader must not fall.**

protection did not yet exist and therefore had to be improvised, resulting in many scarcely protected routes being put up.

**Johnnie Lees bringing up his follower in the original style;
a hemp rope is tied around each climber's waist.**

**in that iron age of climbing, the old gaurd used boldness to flaunt their mastery. dangerous climbing was a means to bragging rights, escaping by a hair's width was a path to glory.
then, boldness was overvalued.
even now this attitude pushes eager-to-prove-themselves climbers to injury or death.**

**as a backlash, protection improved.
apparently not everyone agreed with the sentiment; "life should be a daring adventure, or nothing."**



**Dale Bard laughs as he discovers the 'rurp' belay,
Photo Dave Diegeman**

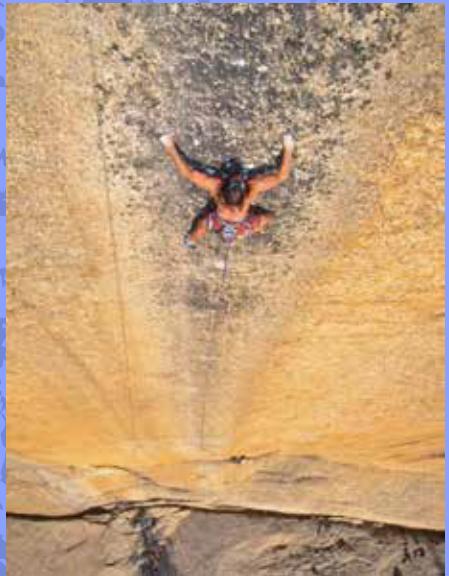


**an impressive collection of Salathé pitons
Yosemite Climbing Association museum**

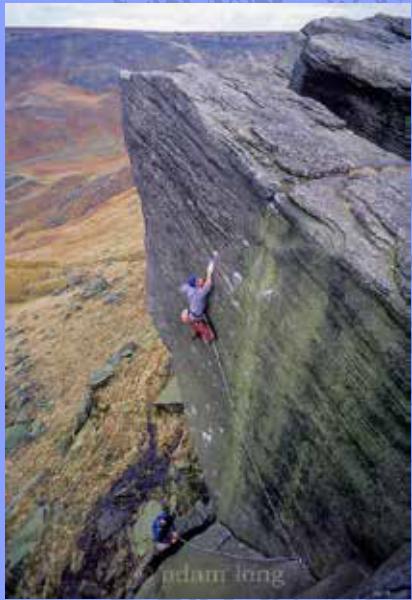
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as bolt lines proliferated the crags, climbers felt more comfortable pushing their physical limits (while being able to ignore psychological ones). eventually, brawn won over brains as the dominant method used to judge and communicate about climbing. a moderate, frightening climb was not as impressive as a physically demanding, safe one. the two styles of climbing coexisted for a while; Kauk's 'Peace' went up right next to the Bachar-Yerian, but a winner emerged.

the bolts held; americans were captivated by the gymnastic beauty of sport climbing.



Ron Kauk's 'Peace' in Tuolumne
Photo Chris Falkenstein



Sam Whittaker on 'Appointment with Death' E9 6c
Photo Sam Long

not every crag went the same way. in the UK, for example, traditions held strong for a bold style of climbing. bolts were seen as an abhorrence, and immediately chopped if not considered "necessary."

out of either a desire to protect the natural features of the rock, or the same machismo that drove the yosemite scene in the 60s, british climbers insisted removable protection over bolts. it was minimalism at its most extreme; the necessity of each piece of pro was in question.

In my experience, fear is a four-letter word in rock climbing. It's surrounded by taboo and mystique, like a dark magic.

"What is Alex Honnold's secret?"

Often his feats of boldness and risk-tolerance are chalked up to a genetic anomaly; "his brain is just built differently than a normal person's."

Rarely does anyone point out that his success could be due to his preparation.



Alex Honnold on the 'Thank God ledge'
Photo Jimmy Chin

On the other side of the coin, no climber is encouraged to admit that they are afraid. Even when they do, they lack the proper language to talk about it.

"Is that climb scary?"

A question that I often hear asked by climbers.

The answer, usually: "Well I don't know, it depends..."

People intuit that there's no way to know what 'scary' means to someone else, and if it lines up with their own definition.

My hypothesis: we don't have enough language to talk about fear.

So we don't.

language: a lost art?

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The purpose of comparing brits and americans is to showcase how the british style of climbing is reflected in a more nuanced grading system. Their ‘E’ rating does a pretty good job of telling the climber what level of risk to expect, while the technical grade (the grade coming after the E rating) indicates the difficulty of the hardest singular movement on the route.

Americans, ever-macho, talk only about the physical difficulty in their rating system. with one caveat, you may already be thinking to yourself.

“Some routes receive extra letters at the end that look similar to movie ratings (PG, PG-13, R, X)” wrote Kevin Corrigan for Climbing magazine.

“Unfortunately, these have nothing to do with the amount of sex you will encounter on a climb. They align more with the violent side of movie ratings. The worse the rating, the more blood and gore your belayer will witness if you fall.

Think of them like this:

G: A safe route that everyone can enjoy.

PG: Pretty safe, maybe be careful above that one ledge.

PG-13: Appropriate for most climbers, but avoid if your belayer is sensitive to swearing.

R: Do not fall off this route in the presence of children under the age of 18 or anyone sensitive to blood or screaming. Really just don’t fall.

X: Don’t bother with these routes unless you think unnecessarily risking your life provides you with some kind of spiritual experience, or the route is way below your usual onsight level.”

However, this system is often criticized for being heavily subjective and difficult to interpret. Even Kevin had to explain it in his own flair as there are no set definitions.

language = accessibility

Climbing, like any subculture, reflects trends in the greater culture. If climbers are more timid now than before, it is a symptom of us living in scarier times. (To prove that goes beyond the scope of this essay. But hey, it's clear enough.) Have we have returned to some form of 50s-era suburban numbness? Kerouac would be choking on his beer.

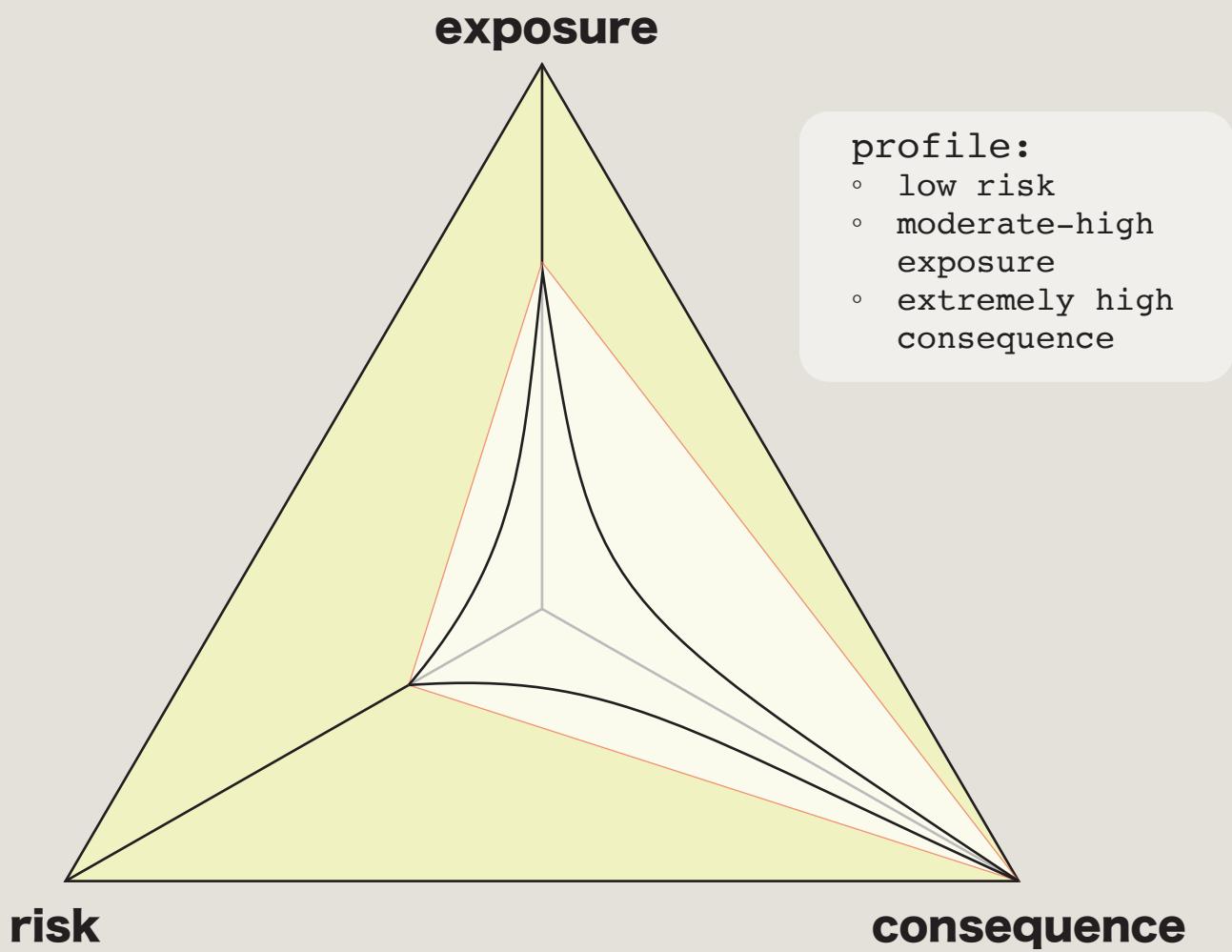
To break down the linguistic taboo surrounding fear, we must create better language. We can dissect the word ‘fear’ into 3 essential components:

1. Consequence: the result of falling. Anything from minor injury to death.
2. Risk: a calculation of how likely a fall would be. Usually, based on the difficulty of the movement relative to the climber’s skill, but some moves present a lot of risk regardless.
3. Exposure: perhaps the trickiest to define, because it is entirely subjective - right Alex? - where the other two are not. Moves with lots of air beneath them are referred to as exposed, but then you’ll often hear a climber say ‘that felt exposed’ even when they were bomber on the sequence. It’s a *feeling*, not an objective reality. That ‘don’t look down’ feeling.

In the following diagrams, each component is represented by one point of a triangle, and each triangle-diagram is dominated by one of the drivers of fear identified above.

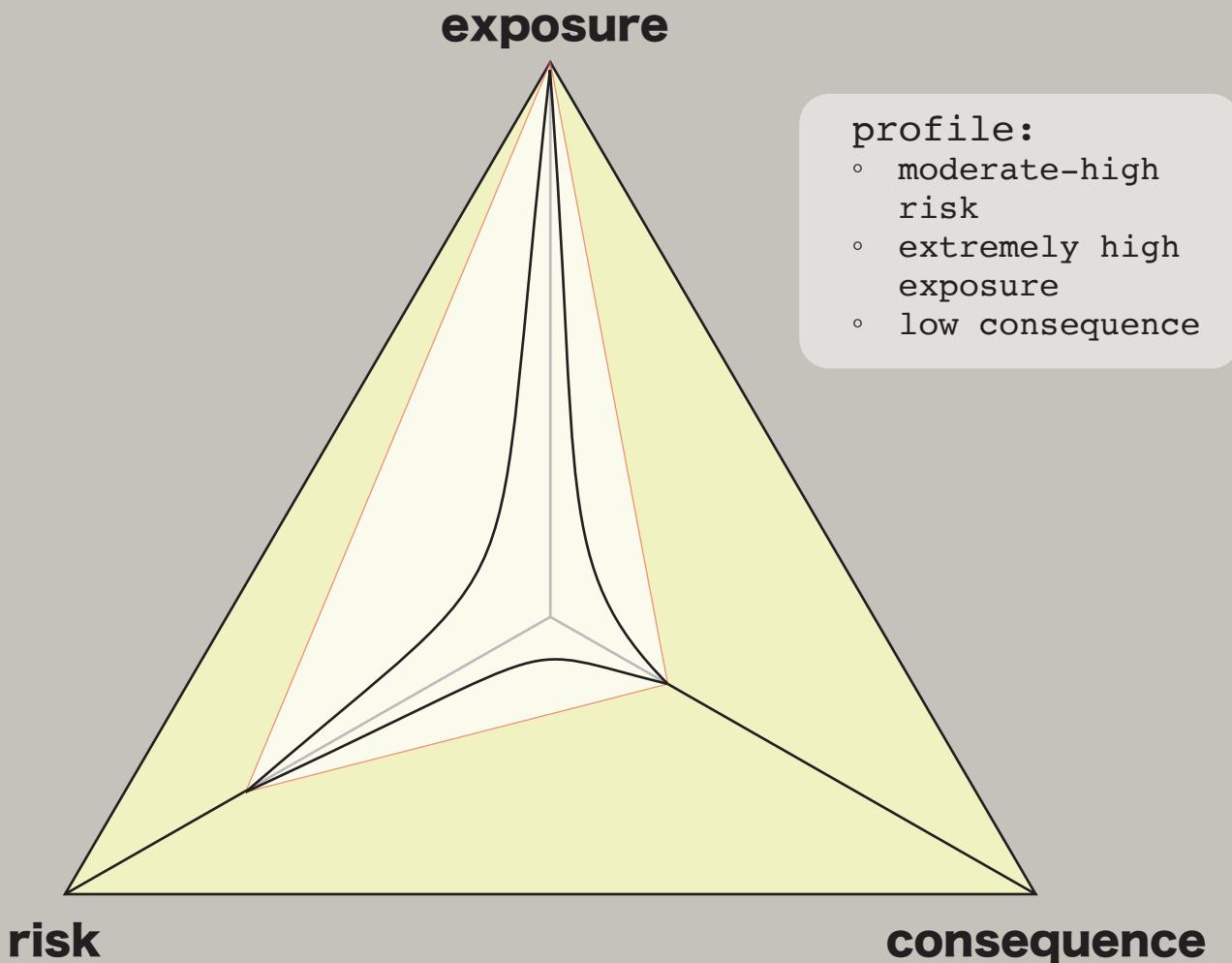
The free-solo mindset

The free-soloist climbs in the ‘no fall zone’, where falling would result in the absolute worst consequences. They minimize their chances of falling as much as possible; by choosing routes that are well below their physical limits giving themselves a wide margin for error, or rehearsing any difficult/exposed movement extensively on a rope first.



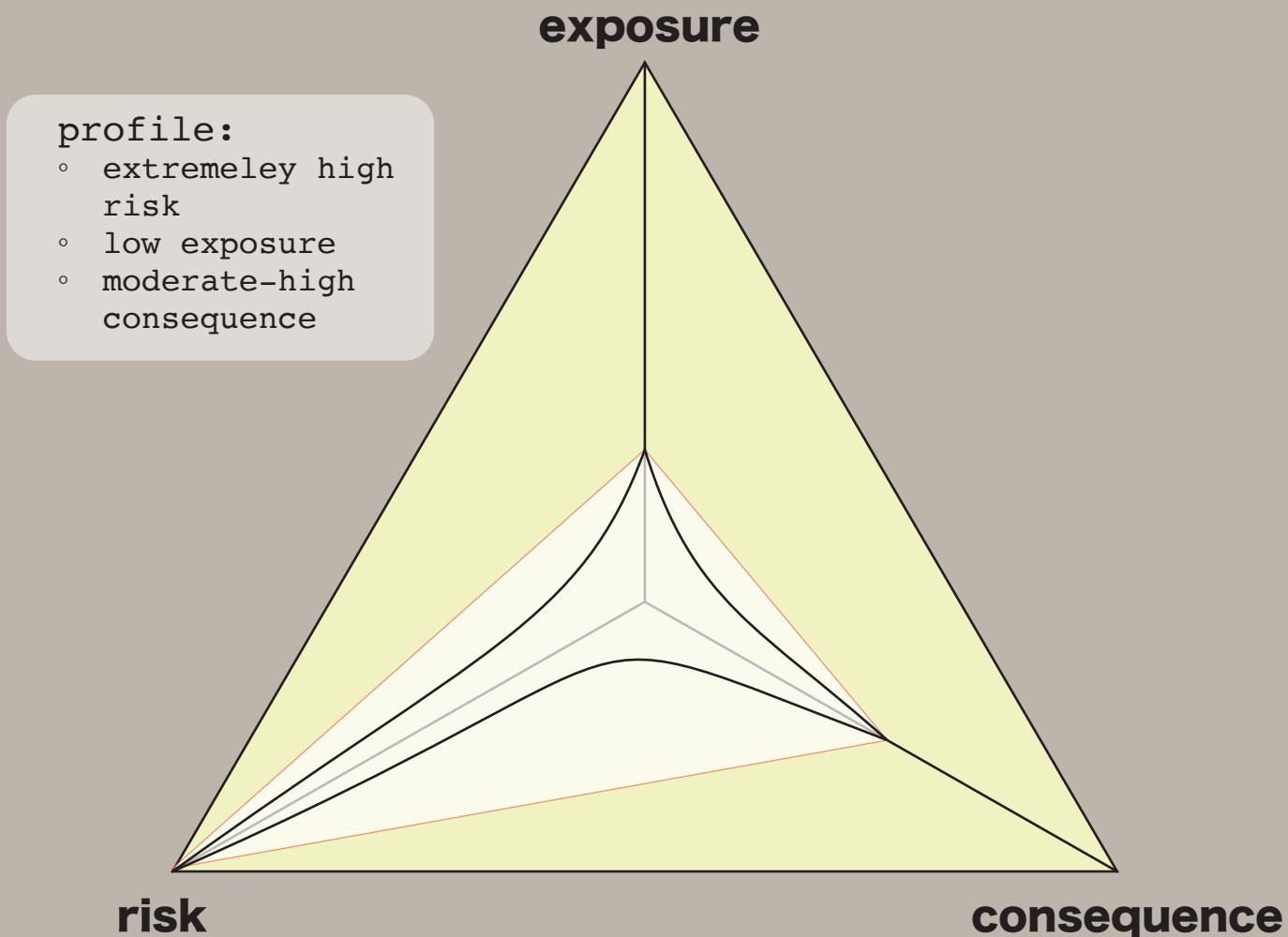
The lead climbing mindset

The lead climber uses ropes, bolts, traditional protection and a belayer to protect falls. Therefore, they can climb in the most exposed environments while facing relatively low consequences. Routes to reach high exposure require lots of effort, therefore the climber is tired and faces high risks of falling.



The highball mindset

The highballer seeks to execute movements close to their physical limit, exposing themself to a high risk of falling. Often onto an unfriendly landing. The exposure is still relatively low compared to a free-solo or lead climb, however.



Epilogue

The “secret” to managing fear is not to avoid it. It should be accepted while doing what you can to protect yourself physically and emotionally.

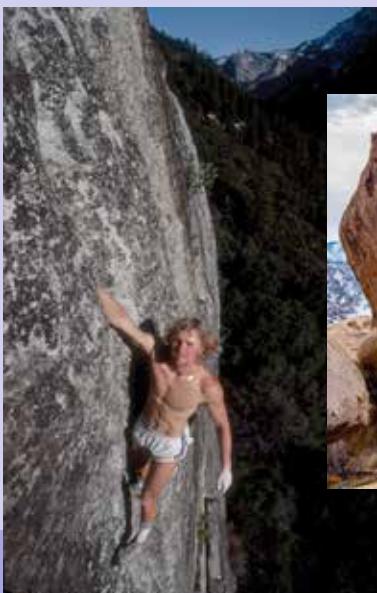
Each mindset is dominated by one of the fear characteristics (risk, exposure or consequence) in an effort to make it easier to identify what to do about that type of fear:

The answer to risk is commitment,

The answer to consequence is preparedness,

The answer to exposure is confidence.

Not every climb will fit perfectly with one of these three models, each is a unique situation. What if you were to visualize what the triangle would look like for a climb that is intimidating you?



Keenan Takahashi highballing on
'A Little Life'
Photo Eric Bissell



Bachar soloing 'Five and Dime'
Photo Phil Bard



Lynn Hill climbing The Nose free
Photo Robert Frohlich

I hope it's clear enough that the purpose of this essay is not to shame climbers who feel fear and actively avoid it; it is to empathize with it. I suppose it's possible that some people are just born with boldness; I was not. So I know firsthand that for whom boldness is not given, it's built. But climbers can't build anything if scary routes are reserved for those with the correct mental faculties and no one talks about how to develop them.

I could not write this without pointing out that being able to risk your own health and safety is an enormous privilege. Many climbers now are weekend warriors. They have families, responsibilities, stressful jobs. It isn't surprising they're not risking their lives on saturday and back in the office on monday.

Then, I have to give an honourable mention to those who take it too far in the other direction. To knowingly put yourself in a dangerous situation, especially in front of other people, should be considered poor crag etiquette.

Even the most experienced risk-takers are not immune to the random chaos of nature and its destructive effect. Best not to exhibit hubris when your life hangs in the balance.

“If you’re afraid, don’t do it.
But if you are doing it, don’t be afraid.”

These are the words that naively carried me through my first free-solo experience. I didn’t fall, and yet the words have stuck with me.

Danger is real.

If your gut tells you not to go for it, holding back is never the wrong call. Sometimes intuition knows something that consciousness does not. Ask yourself; what is it trying to tell me?

In the face of an intimidating climb, forcing yourself can engage your fight/flight response.

Watch out for shaking yourself off the rock on easy terrain.

I’ll leave it at this:

If/when you find yourself in the deep end, suddenly, unwillingly, terrifyingly,
faced by the possibility of being swallowed,
try to ride the wave.