



Blind to Failure: Coaching and Courage

Time (June 18, 2001) featured the successful Everest climb of a blind mountaineer in an article entitled “Blind to Failure” with the words “a killer peak is no obstacle for a man who can conquer adversity.” The magazine story is a testimony to the athleticism and endurance of a blind man who will not think of himself as “handicapped.” While his accomplishment was amazing, what most impressed me was his team of fellow climbers who overcame the overwhelming by coaching a “V.I.P.” (Visually Impaired Person) to triumph. It is an inspiring story knowing that 90% of able-bodied climbers fail to reach the summit and many professional climbers fail to make it home.

My 23-year-old son is legally blind (David has less than ten percent vision and no depth perception) and we decided as a family to attempt a 3000-foot climb on a local island mountain. Really just a hill in comparison to Everest, this was still a hardy hike for the sure-of-foot, including shale slopes at forty-five degrees. David is one of those people who is “blind to failure,” finding success and enduring hurt when most of us would willingly stay at home. We led David hand-to-hand or hands-on-shoulders as we struggled over mossy logs and mountain scrub. When we reached the summit to view the vistas of oceans and inlets, islands and mountains, David shouted his joy. That three-hour climb—often more a crawl on the descent—taught me several principles about the experience behind the theory of “coaching.”

1. Coaching involves one who is able and one who is not as able working together as a team. It is a relationship of the advantaged with the hindered, the skilled for the inexperienced, bound together with a common goal. When you imagine climbing a mountain without vision, depending on the suggestions of others for the placement of your boots, what handholds will work, what direction to lean, then you can understand the need for a coach. The coach offers his skill (in this case the skill of sight) to supplement the other’s needs to reach a determined goal. Coaching is not the diagnostic expertness offered by the medical doctor, nor the interpretation of the projective provided by the psychological counsellor, nor the friendship and prayer embraced in the homegroup and church. The coach is a fellow struggler to whom you are yoked to achieve a defined goal and a preferred future.

2. Coaching “up” is easier than coaching “down.” I would expect that most climbers who have “made it to the top” of their profession or at the precipice of their prestige are afraid of the inevitable descent. That was true for David as he laboured upwards, anxious of the forthcoming climb down, and I suspect it is true for the dot.com entrepreneur, the “third wave” church leader or the recently elected politician under democratic review. None of us wants to fall from the peak of our success. In business and in church life, all of us are anxious about gravity. And, in fact, the descent was more difficult, requiring one seeing person in front of David and one behind—team coaching. There was no triumphant shout at the bottom as there had been at the top. But there was relief that firm-footed safety was found. Finishing well has its triumph.

3. Empathy and reassurance may help build a relationship in counselling but in the pragmatics of coaching, these skills may offer a false support. The communication that is needed is precise and concrete: “move to your left ... no, your left;” “I will take your foot and put it on the rock;” “grab this branch; it will hold you;” “place both hands on my shoulders.” The “you

can make it” enthusiasms were background noise to the necessary and unglamorous instructions of putting one hiking boot in front of the other.

4. Coaching is an immensely personal and exhausting service. When we reached the bottom of the mountain, I could see my son’s dirty handprints on the shoulders of my daughter’s boyfriend. Brent is an athlete who would have loved to run up the hill and then continue on to another. But he conformed himself to David’s needs; his shoulders bore David’s weight and provided ballast for his shifting balance. In coaching, it is not just sight that is necessary but the willingness to serve in soiled conditions.

5. The coach works for the success of the protégé. We all made it to the top of the mountain and we all got down as well; we were all successful and we were all tired and we all wanted lunch. But our success was in David’s achieving his goal. The coach works that the other would become greater and, in so being, the coach becomes less.

Throughout the climb I reflected on Jesus’ words in Matthew 11: “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Matt 11:28-30 NIV). We were yoked to David; his pace determined ours; his weakness defined our strengths; we learned to see, balance and grab like he did. His burden was born on our shoulders. This is what it is to be a coach and mentor under the discipling hand of Jesus Christ.