

BOOK REVIEW

DESTRUCTIVE GOAL PURSUIT: THE MOUNT EVEREST DISASTER

By D. CHRISTOPHER KAYES
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Reviewed by Becky A. De Oliveira

As an avid hiker and *very* amateur mountaineer, I love reading books about mountaineering almost as much as I enjoy striking out with a pack on my back and a summit—however modest—in sight. Mountains are an almost eternal metaphor for the triumph of the human spirit—so much so that the image of the mountain in any discussion of leadership is a grievous cliché. But even so, there is something about the individual—or team—striking out against nature, battling against the odds of weather, stamina, altitude sickness, accident, and any number of equally dire perils to achieve the glory of a summit that has the ring of a grand story. Cliché or not, it stirs the soul. We are human; what we do is overcome things. We live to achieve. We live for goals. Sir Edmund Hillary’s much-quoted answer when asked why he climbed Everest—“Because it’s there”—may have been tongue-in-cheek, but it certainly contains more than an element of truth about human nature. Perhaps because it is so much in our nature to pour everything into achieving our goals, those who engage in any dangerous sports—such as mountaineering—have to continually rein themselves in with reminders of the inherent perils in climbing so close to the gods.

“The summit is *not* your goal,” my father reminded me constantly as we prepared for our 2006 ascent of Mt. Rainier in Washington State. At 14,411 feet, Rainier is less than half the height of Everest, but deadly in its own right. Quickly changing weather, combined with crevasses, avalanches and other dangers, make this mountain, along with many others of similar size, objects to be approached with caution and

respect. Over one hundred people have died on Rainier since the late nineteenth century, including legendary American mountaineer Willie Unsoeld. “Don’t lose respect for the mountain,” my father said. “Never forget for a minute what this thing is capable of.” And as for our *real* goal? “The parking lot,” Dad said. “When we’re at the summit, we’re only halfway. We have to make it back to the car. That’s the goal.”

Every mountaineer knows the line about the summit being halfway. It’s a common saying. Before a summit attempt, you self-impose all kinds of rules. You decide the absolute time at which you will turn around and head back. You step outside your tent and peer anxiously at the sky, wondering if the clouds will dissipate before your window of opportunity is gone. You accept an element of risk—but just *how much* risk is perhaps a highly individual thing. The safest and most successful mountaineers are those with an uncanny sense of what they can and cannot do. Perhaps they also benefit often from a little luck. But risk-takers tend to wind up dead sooner or later. The smart play is cautious. You tell yourself that the real goal isn’t the summit anyway and try to console yourself when nature doesn’t play along with your plans. But this doesn’t in any way quell the disappointment that comes with a failed summit attempt. To be willing to give up the enormous investment you’ve put into reaching a summit is not an easy thing. At the point you decide, perhaps for reasons of inclement weather, to turn around and begin a descent—maybe even within a few hundred vertical feet of your goal—you will have spent money. Maybe a lot of it. Maybe more than you could even comfortably afford. You will have spent time. You will have suffered, perhaps slept in discomfort, often been either too hot or too cold. Put simply, you will not want all that you’ve been through to come to naught.

You don’t have to be a mountaineer to relate to this. Just imagine any goal you’ve ever set that was important to you, a goal in which you invested an enormous amount of time, energy and perhaps money. Now imagine giving that goal up, just when it was within sight. The thought alone is painful. But if you ignore potential hazards and think only of what you set out to achieve—that something being the summit, whatever “the summit” might mean to you personally—you are setting yourself up for disaster.

The 1996 Everest Disaster

Probably most people recall, in some hazy corner of their minds, the Mount Everest disaster of 1996 in which eight people from three different expedition teams died as a complicated result of bad weather and a series of poor decisions. D. Christopher Kayes was trekking in the Himalayas at the time of the disaster, and spent years afterward trying to unpack the leadership principles that can be gleaned from the various failures leading to the deaths of eight climbers—including two extremely experienced guides. Before you read *Destructive Goal Pursuit*, I'd recommend *Into Thin Air*, by journalist and author Jon Krakauer, who was also on the mountain that season. His account of the disaster is widely regarded as one of the most compelling books written on the drama and danger of high-risk mountaineering. Both Rob Hall and Scott Fischer, veteran climbers and owners of competing mountaineering companies, died on the descent, along with several of their clients and members of other teams. Hall and Fischer seemed to have succumbed to a kind of arrogance regarding “the big E,” believing they had developed a science for getting clients successfully to the top. This, combined with the pressure of gaining the necessary publicity to guarantee the success of their businesses and a need to help their climbers achieve the summit, resulted in disaster. Krakauer's book describes the harrowing events that took place on Everest, detailing the characters and events that came together in such tragedy. The thoughtful reader can intuit valuable insights about goal setting, critical thinking and other aspects of decision-making and leadership simply from reading *Into Thin Air*.

But Professor Kayes, a specialist in organizational behavior, takes these insights further, delving deeply into the dysfunctions in goal-setting, single-mindedness, and poor leadership that proved such fertile ground for disaster. His insights offer a thought-provoking account of what can happen when individuals put goals above everything else and become blind to the dire consequences that can result. They have very real implications to anyone in leadership—particularly in Christian leadership, where the need to achieve “goals”—such as conversions or baptisms—can make leaders more likely to make disastrous decisions, even if for all the right reasons. By carefully taking apart and analyzing the actions and attitudes of those involved in the 1996 disaster, Kayes discovers some surprising truths about human behavior.

The Problem of Goalodicy

This book began as an article and a series of presentations and evolved over the course of a decade into a full treatment of the complexities of what Kayes calls *goalodicy*. This word is a combination of the words “goal” and “theodicy”—a philosophical term used to describe the actions of people who hold onto beliefs even when all evidence contradicts the validity of these beliefs (p. 43). Interestingly, near the beginning of the book, Kayes recounts an exchange with a Russian student who seemed to take deep offense at the idea that Kayes would dare to attempt to draw leadership or managerial lessons from a tragedy at all. The main thrust of the student’s argument was that the arts deal with human tragedy and emotion, while business and leadership seem to exist on an alternate plane of some kind—apart from the messiness of human existence and frailty. It seems to be this idea that Kayes is most eager to counter. His is a spirited defense of the necessity of investigating all manner of human experience for lessons that provide insight to others.”The events of 1996,” he writes, “provide, in my experience, one of the most powerful stories of how leaders create and lead through human dilemma. The events can instruct other leaders, working in other circumstances, of the perils of goal setting gone too far.” (p. xiii).

One of the central questions in this book is a paraphrase of a statement Ed Viesturs, perhaps the most successful contemporary U.S. mountaineer, made when watching a team approaching the summit of Everest from a lower point on the mountain through his binoculars. “Why haven’t they turned around?” he mused. This group had been climbing for fourteen hours and had still not reached the summit. They were long past their pre-determined turn-around time—and on Everest, with the necessity and scarcity of bottled oxygen, turn-around times are more crucial than perhaps anywhere else on earth. Kayes expands the meaning behind the question, asking, “Why would a group continue to pursue a goal despite mounting evidence that it could not be attained?” (p. 28). In partial answer to this question, he cites research indicating that the greater the insecurity a group feels of their chance of achieving the goal, the harder they’ll try. The more likely they consider failure, the more entrenched they become in their particular set of behaviors.

Another interesting tendency can be observed in a group trapped in this particular mindset. As they observe their surroundings—take the weather, for instance—they will interpret conditions more negatively

than they really are, almost searching for further evidence to suggest the likelihood of failure. These indicators of failure then cause the group to put even more effort into achieving the goal. Why? Perhaps it's because from the time we're children it is drilled into our heads that we can do anything we want if we *try* hard enough. The more difficult the obstacle, the greater is the achievement in overcoming it. Sometimes mountaineers will describe the final ascent of Everest in terms of time—twelve hours to the summit, six hours down for a total of eighteen climbing hours. Kayes points out that “the problem with such a statement is that it has the potential to lull climbers into thinking that all they need to do is put in 18 hours of effort and the goal will be achieved.” (p. 70). This is a widely simplistic view of what really happens in mountaineering or in most complex activities. A certain amount of our success is always derived from effort, but there are other complex factors involved that make success generally uncertain. In mountaineering, these can be factors as wide-ranging as a shift in weather or personal illness or equipment failure.

Kayes points out that “goalodicy reminds us that ambitious people may seek to accomplish seemingly insurmountable goals by pushing themselves and their communities to the limits, only to encounter the limits of their own capacity.” (p. 45). This certainly rings true for me. On a recent climb I attempted, aiming for the summit of Mt. Adams, a number of factors caused my team to turn around after having spent a night and several miserable hours in the rain waiting for the weather to clear so we could make the final ascent. The weather had become unexpectedly nasty over night and visibility was low, making an ascent more dangerous than normal. Furthermore, because the sun was hidden behind the clouds, water from the glacier was not melting and we were forced to melt snow for water—a time consuming and energy intensive process. An unforeseen equipment problem—our water filter breaking after we'd filtered just enough water to get us to the summit and back—meant that we were in a less than ideal situation. We had enough fuel to melt more snow, but as time wasted away, this meant spending at least a couple more hours on the mountain and possibly having to descend in the dark. Much as we hated to, we knew the only option was to descend—and this was a painful decision that meant giving up something we'd worked and suffered for. Goals, once set, are very hard to abandon without a lingering sense of loss. No one likes to be a quitter.

This is part of the problem with goals, according to Kayes. They are simply hard to give up. Psychological research has shown that gamblers and investors have a lot of trouble with weaning themselves from putting money into losing prospects (p. 45). Kayes cites research from Ross and Straw (1993) who found that organizations with established goals tend to stick with those, going in the same direction regardless of consequences, rather than changing course. Straw calls this “escalation of commitment to a failing course of action” (p. 46). It is easy for even the most casual observer to catch glimpses of this kind of behavior in all sorts of organizations, including governments. Kayes points out that “by focusing attention on a distant, often idealized, future goal, goals inspire action directed toward the goal” (p. 46). People stop thinking about the resources and sacrifices that will be necessary in achieving the goal. They stop asking whether it’s really worth the consequences. Once the goal is set, it’s hard to let it go.

Goals also actually limit learning. Individuals perform better when simply told to do their best, rather than asked to aim at a particular goal. “Too much effort actually gets in the way of making good decisions” (p. 48). Goal setting works best when effort, not learning, is paramount. Setting and pursuing challenging goals is a good strategy to follow when you want to increase the effort that people put forth to accomplish a goal. Goals cause people to take risks they might not think to take otherwise. Finally, pursuing goals to the exclusion of all else makes individuals more likely to be unethical in their behavior.

Destructive Goal Pursuit: A Case Study

One of the funny things about the concept of destructive goal pursuit is that, like so many things, you immediately begin to diagnose the problem in others. While reading this book, I thought of individuals and organizations I have known; I considered the former U.S. presidential administration with its determination to invade Iraq at all costs. It’s all too easy to look at Christian organizations that can become fixated on certain evangelistic methods that don’t seem to work and to nod your head and think, “Destructive Goal Pursuit: Exhibit One.” But what is interesting about the book and the comparison with Everest is the fact that the two main expedition leaders who were killed, Rob Hall and Scott Fischer, up until the times of their deaths were very successful in the mountains. That’s why people paid lots of money to go with them to

the Himalayas. Their goals didn't seem out of whack with reality; there was nothing to indicate that they couldn't be achieved. The two had summited Everest many times before. Maybe it's more relevant to think of destructive goal pursuit in relation to people and organizations who have not, at this point in time, actually failed, rather than those whose failures have become evident, the punchline of late-night television comics. Having consistently achieved your goals does not make you immune to goalodicy. You may be vulnerable to exactly the same way of approaching problems that can lead to possible disaster if you're unable or unwilling to change the way you consider goals and define success. It's always better to deal with a potential problem preemptively, rather than waiting for it to become unwieldy and dangerous.

It is ironic that at the same time I was reading this book and writing about it, I also fell into a pattern of destructive goal pursuit. I was leading a writing retreat at a remote Mennonite retreat center in Cass County, Michigan, called The Hermitage. While it is set on sixty acres of land and has numerous trails for walking, the property also backs onto another retreat center called Gilchrist and a Benedictine monastery called St Gregory's Abbey. I was determined to find the Abbey through the forest. By road, it's very easy to find. You turn right out of The Hermitage and drive a mile, turn right and drive half a mile and it's right there on your right. But through the forest, it's much more complicated. I like to think of myself as a skilled forest person—even though I grew up in the suburbs of a large city and have not exactly spent the majority of my time wandering amongst trees. But I do feel supremely happy in the forest and I'm not generally frightened of it. The time I spent on the retreat was a welcome opportunity to not only spend time writing and thinking, but walking in the forest and admiring the wildlife. I saw deer, a wild turkey, woodpeckers, and a soaring hawk.

The very first day I determined that I would find the Abbey. While we had maps of the trails on The Hermitage, the map only showed the point at which you diverge from Hermitage trails to go in the general direction of the Abbey. The first time I went out, I followed the path and arrived at what I thought was the Abbey. I could see a couple of buildings through the trees that looked more or less like those I'd seen from the road (same color) and given that I was going to be late for lunch, I hurried back, promising myself I'd visit again later and look around. At lunch, I began to boast about how I'd found the Abbey and

the leader of the retreat center was very impressed. A little too impressed. “That’s pretty tricky,” he said. “Most people don’t find it because they follow the logging road.” I realized that I had done something wrong—and a visit back to what I thought I’d found confirmed that it was not the Abby, but someone’s private residence. If I’d walked just a little farther earlier in the day I would have seen that the logging road finally intersected with the main road only about half a mile from the Hermitage. Not only had I not reached the Abbey but I wasn’t even close!

This is where goalodicy came into my life. I was hugely frustrated to have failed to find the Abbey, especially after boasting to everyone that I had found it. I couldn’t let the day finish without finding it. After resting for a half hour or so, I set out again, determined to see where I’d gone wrong. Right away I noticed, off to the right of the main trail, that there were several trees marked with orange ribbons. I began to follow these marked trees, knowing that they were leading the general direction of the Abbey, but not sure whether they were actually marking an established route or not. Anxious to find the Abbey, and knowing that I’d definitely be able to find my way back my road if I did, I plowed on without looking back or even paying much attention to where I was or where I’d come from. I wanted to reach my destination and I wanted to do it fast. I walked faster and faster until I was practically running and I finally came to a clearing that contained a wheelbarrow and piles of brush—evidence of working monks.

But at this point there were no more orange ribbons, and there were at least two different paths that could be taken. I chose one and followed it for a long time—until I found a large lake and no evidence of buildings. I decided to go back and take the other path, so I did. It turned into a rough road and eventually led me to the Abbey. Success at last—I had reached the “summit”! But just as in mountaineering, the destination is only half the journey. I still had to get back. Now I knew that I could go to the main road and walk back, but I didn’t want to do that. Proud of my woods-woman skills, I wanted to prove my Pocahantas-like skills, and I was now determined to come back the same way I’d arrived. The only problem was that heading back everything looked different than it had before. I saw only two orange ribbons and then no more. But I was following a fairly clear path, in that it appeared to have been trod before. Covered with leaves, it still contained no trees and was relatively open. It felt as though I was going

somewhere—but then I started to worry. I came upon a tree chair I hadn’t seen before—and I began to realize that even if the path was leading somewhere, there was no guarantee it was leading anywhere I particularly wanted to go. I hadn’t seen any orange ribbons in ten minutes—and I remembered that I’d made various turns on my approach that didn’t seem to be happening in reverse. “I should just go back to the Abbey and out to the road,” I told myself, since I still knew how to get back. But my pride didn’t like this idea—nor did my tired legs. I’d already walked a mile perhaps—going back to the Abbey would have added an unnecessary two miles onto my journey, not to mention the extra mileage that I would use walking back via the road. Just as I was debating this in my head, I caught sight of an orange ribbon. By this time, I was in a slightly fevered state, and I bounded through thick brush to reach that ribbon—cutting my leg on a sharp thorn and managing to scratch my hand.

The orange-tagged tree didn’t appear to be on a path and no matter which direction I walked from it, I couldn’t find another tree nor any sign that I was on the right path. I decided to go back to the Abbey, but realized just about then that I was turned around and wasn’t for a second even sure that I could find the path I’d been on originally. I began to run back through the brush the way I thought I’d come and it was lucky that I found the path. Even so, I wasn’t immediately sure it was the right one. Travelling in the opposite direction, everything looked different again and it wasn’t until I came upon the tree chair that I knew I was indeed going the right way and that the Abbey was within reach.

This story demonstrates my remarkable stupidity in the face of a goal I wanted desperately to accomplish. I didn’t care about anything other than finding that Abbey—and the results could have been disastrous. And I *know* better—just as Rob Hall and Scott Fischer knew better. But wanting something badly enough can cause you to ignore your gut feelings. *That’s* destructive goal pursuit.

Rethinking Leadership in Organizations

One of the first things that gets abandoned in the pursuit of goals is the learning process, Kayes maintains, pointing out that “scholars and practitioners alike spend too much time thinking about goals and not enough time thinking about learning” (p. 151).

A primary lesson that can be learned from the Everest disaster is

that failure to develop individuals within an organization can be disastrous. Rather than teaching climbers to make sound decisions for themselves, Rob Hall and Scott Fischer made their climbers overly reliant on themselves as leaders. Leaders need to recognize that they are not infallible. Just as they can develop the vision and driving force within an organization, they can also lose touch with what is really important. Leaders need to remain grounded and to have others around them who are capable of stepping up when necessary. This book will make you rethink the whole way you approach goals both as a person and as a part of something greater, and will help you develop a more positive approach to goal-setting and working with others.

Questions for Christian Leaders

Do you see evidence of an unhealthy pursuit of goals (goalodicy) in your organization or in yourself?

What should the ultimate goal of the Christian individual or organization be?

Kayes suspected the Everest climbers had been "lured into destruction by their passion for goals." They were too fixated on achieving their goal of successfully summiting the mountain. The closer they got to their goal, he reasons, the harder it would be to turn around. This isn't just an external goal. It's an internal one. He also wrote a book on it called *Destructive Goal Pursuit: The Mount Everest Disaster*. In the corporate world, we're often focused on achieving our goals at all costs. This eventually reaches the status of dogma. This insight is the core of an important chapter in Burkeman's book, *The Antidote Everest Climbing Disaster*.

Destructive Goal Pursuit
The Problem of Goalodicy
The Limits of Leadership
The Breakdown of Learning in Teams
PART II: OVERCOMING DESTRUCTIVE GOAL PURSUIT
Learning Teamwork
Ethical Decision-Making
PART III: REMEDIES: EVEREST AS A SOURCE OF LEARNING ABOUT LEADERSHIP
From Destructive to Productive Pursuit
Rethinking the Role of Leader.

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