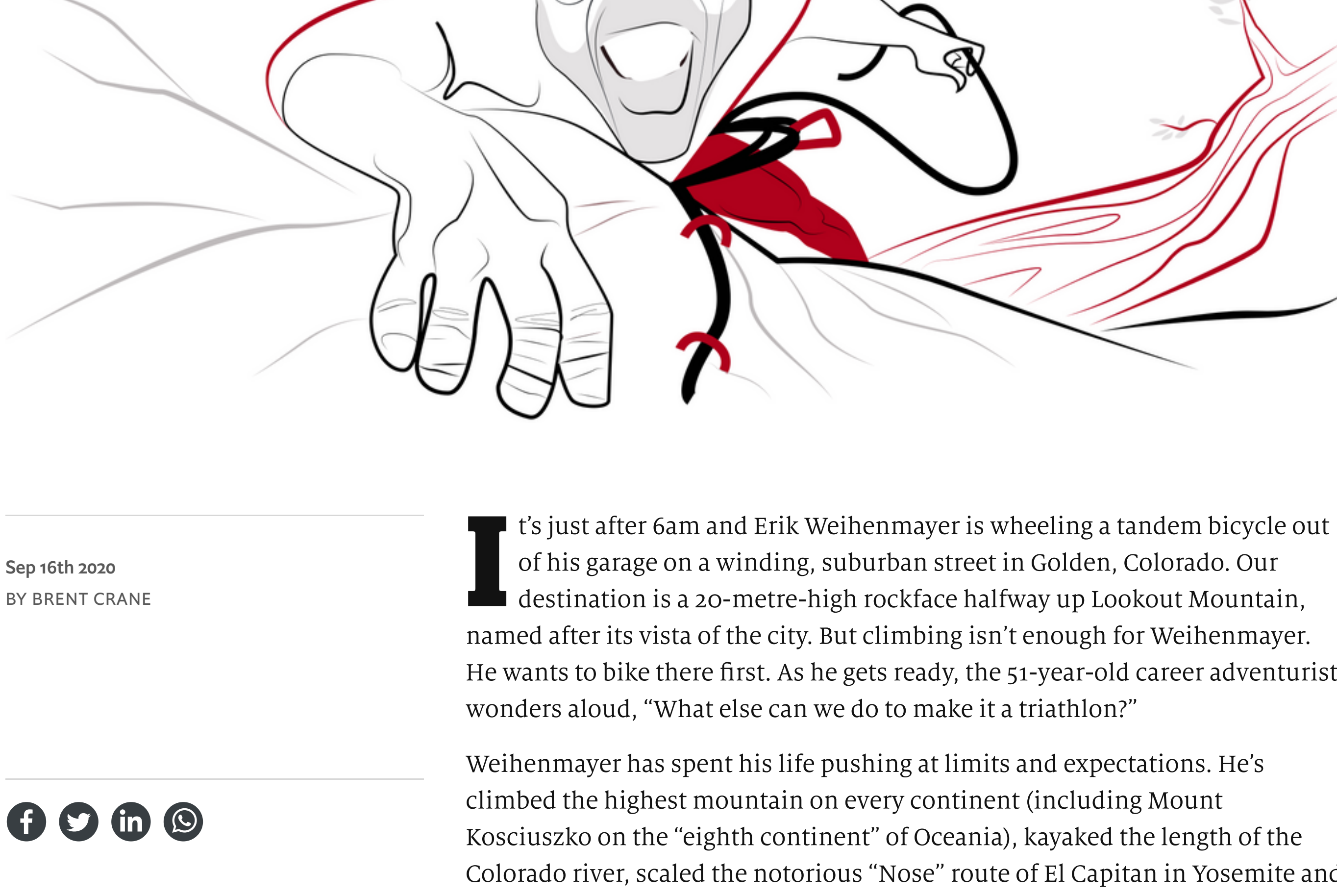


THE 1843 INTERVIEW

Climbing with Erik Weihenmayer

The blind adventurer has climbed the highest mountain on every continent. He isn't done yet



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BY BRENT CRANE



It's just after 6am and Erik Weihenmayer is wheeling a tandem bicycle out of his garage on a winding, suburban street in Golden, Colorado. Our destination is a 20-metre-high rockface halfway up Lookout Mountain, named after its vista of the city. But climbing isn't enough for Weihenmayer. He wants to bike there first. As he gets ready, the 51-year-old career adventurer wonders aloud, "What else can we do to make it a triathlon?"

Weihenmayer has spent his life pushing at limits and expectations. He's climbed the highest mountain on every continent (including Mount Kosciuszko on the 'eighth continent' of Oceania), kayaked the length of the Colorado river, scaled the notorious "Nose" route of El Capitan in Yosemite and completed some of the world's most gruelling races. His accomplishments would be jaw-dropping even if he could see. But Weihenmayer is completely blind.

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His madcap adventuring began as a hobby and became a career. Weihenmayer has written three books about his exploits and been the subject of five films and countless TV shows. He skis, rafts, ice climbs, mountain bikes, surfs, paraglides and, with his wife Ellie, raises two teenagers.

The ride up the mountain lasts half an hour. I struggle to keep up as Weihenmayer and Skyler Williams, his close friend and long-standing assistant, peddle in unison on a tandem. They chat the whole way – about renaming the Washington Redskins, about the etiquette of spitting while cycling, about Weihenmayer's new guide dog, Zena – not remotely winded by the many switchbacks en route. "This is it," says Williams as he comes to a stop at a bend in the road. "Told you it was a short ride."

We step over a guard rail and make our way onto a rock ledge. We have to descend before we can climb. As Williams scopes out a route on the face below, Weihenmayer pulls out a jumble of multi-coloured carabiners from his pack which jingle as he fingers through them. His olive glass eyes, purely ornamental, glint in the morning sunshine.

He ties the rope to my harness with a perfect figure-of-eight knot. "Just lean back," he instructs, clutching my lifeline. "Is this your first blind belay?" he grins (belaying is the crucial act of managing a fellow climber's rope).

My belly erupts with fear as I sit into the air over the side of the cliff, but soon I'm floating to the bottom, bouncing my feet along the marbled rock. Weihenmayer follows, dropping like a fishing lure. As soon as he's down and standing next to me on the lichen-green slab below, he starts dusting chalk on his palms. He's ready to climb up.

Weihenmayer was born in Princeton, New Jersey, and spent an itinerant childhood in Miami, Hong Kong and Connecticut. He started losing his sight as an infant, suffering from an inherited condition, juvenile retinoschisis, that causes slow disintegration of the retinas. He was on his grandparents' dock in Florida, aged 14, when he realised he couldn't make out the walkway. "I remember going, 'Oh my god. I literally can't see enough to take a step.'"

Wanting a "normal" adolescence, Weihenmayer initially spurned the idea of using a cane or guide dog. He was frightened of being cast to the sidelines, forced into "sitting in the corner listening to life go by". That scared him more than losing his sight, he says.

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Unable to play football or basketball, he joined the high-school wrestling team in Connecticut and found that he excelled. Wrestling was mostly about feel – something that was also true of climbing, as he soon learned at a summer camp for the blind. "I scan my hands across the face like a grid," he tells me, as we ascend. "When I find a hold I say, 'Ok, how do I get my body from here to there?'"

I'm doing the first climb of the morning and follow a vertical gash in the wall, jamming my limbs into cracks for leverage, as Weihenmayer has instructed. It's been over a decade since I've scaled a real cliff face and halfway up, when the gash ends, I flounder. Weihenmayer senses the stillness of the rope that joins us and starts coaxing me on.

"Trust your feet," he tells me from below, his voice at once goading and indifferent. He has helped many climbers with far more reason to be nervous than me: in 2005, along with two other disabled athletes, he formed a non-profit company called No Barriers, to support people with disabilities. "I've got you," Weihenmayer soothes, in a cheery climber-bro cadence. "You can't fall. Top-rope climbing is a great opportunity to take risks."

Becoming blind wasn't the only blow to strike Weihenmayer as a teenager. When he was 16, two years after his sight failed entirely, his mother died in a car crash. His father, a veteran of the Vietnam war, started taking him and his two older brothers on walks through the wilderness. "My dad wanted to keep us close together," he says. These were no countryside jaunts: they slogged up peaks in Spain, Peru, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Pakistan. "I hated hiking at that point because I hadn't discovered trekking poles," says Weihenmayer. "I was trying to use a cane. My brothers really had to pay attention guiding me. It was really, really tricky stuff." But it also acted as therapy of a kind.



After graduating from Boston College, where he studied communication and English, Weihenmayer got a job as a primary-school teacher and wrestling coach in Phoenix, Arizona. It was during his time that he became enthralled with climbing, encouraged by members of the Arizona Mountaineering Club who "were like a family", he says. In 1995 he ascended Denali in Alaska, the highest mountain in North America. With his first big summit he was hooked.

Weihenmayer has climbed Lookout Mountain before and ascends fast. Drifting his hand against the rock, he searches for holds with his hands and feet, demonstrating an impeccable spatial awareness. Williams gives him only one tip during the ascent: that he has reached the top.

At the summit Weihenmayer scurries around, transferring rope to a second anchor for his next climb before coming down again. The next route is more challenging as it has a massive overhang at the top, known as a "roof". He struggles to conquer it, but after a few failed attempts, he clears it with a floppy leap. "That was a little awkward," he huffs.

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Weihenmayer still gets scared, he says, but he has also learned to control his terror: he envisions "a box, a vacuum, a quiet space" in his mind, which turns his fear into a "functional fear, a fear that's there to keep you safe, nagging away on the periphery". It's a common tool of cognitive behavioural therapy. The idea of mind over matter has been a persistent theme of Weihenmayer's life, both in his own adventures and in his mentoring and coaching.

Painstaking preparation and dogged determination are also key to his success. It took him six years of training to attempt the Grand Canyon in a kayak. "It's all about building systems," he explains. For whitewater kayaking, Weihenmayer keeps in contact with his guide via a radio mounted on his helmet. To paraglide, he relies on a hanging bell that rings when it touches the ground below him. When he skis he follows a guide who wears a speaker on his back to amplify directions.

He's resourceful, too. When Weihenmayer first started ice-climbing, he'd been warned that swinging his cane indiscriminately could mean that ice chunks would fly in his face, but he soon discovered that he could use the cane to "scan" the ice face instead. "I could tap the ice and I could feel the vibration through the ice," he says. "You could hear the density of the ice."

Though he's clearly addicted to pushing himself in all adrenalin sports, Weihenmayer says he isn't a daredevil. He constantly heaps praise on others and bristles when he's complimented. When I applaud his perseverance at conquering the giant overhang, he laughs nervously. "I show people how not to do it," he quips.

One minute he's like an overgrown schoolboy with a fondness for toilet humour, the next he's a soothing self-help guru

This doesn't sound like the reply of a man ravaged by ego. Yet Weihenmayer has made a career out of self-promotion. He earns most of his money as a motivational speaker, touring companies such as Google, IBM and Apple. One minute he's like an overgrown schoolboy with a fondness for toilet humour, the next he's a soothing self-help guru keen to enlighten you on the richness of teamwork and perseverance. The switch, he admits, makes him "a little squirmy".

"People can give you all these accolades but when you look inside you're like, 'I'm just a normal person. I'm stupid in certain ways. I'm vulnerable. I'm scared. I don't have all the answers. And I don't want to bullshit people,' he says.

That hasn't always been the case. In his 20s Weihenmayer set out to prove himself "to myself and the world". "I did everything. I tried everything," he says. "I'd be the first one to jump off the cliff at the Devil's Glen into a pool of water from 40 feet up." Then at 23 he nearly had a fatal accident after a mistake while climbing in Arizona. He knew it was caused by his own hubris: "I got to the top of that route and I thought, 'What are you doing? You're just gonna live your life where you're trying to prove everything to people?'" he says. He was "reacting to negatives", as he puts it.

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Today his motivation lies in discovering "what's possible more than what I want to prove". The pioneering life nevertheless takes a toll. Over the past year Weihenmayer has had two operations to reconstruct the tendons on one of his fingers ("Totally ruptured – such a bummer"); he got a diarrhoeal disease during a climbing expedition in Nepal ("I got pretty sick but we made it somehow"); and he had a hip replaced.

Despite all the talk of being "centred" and "solid", his drive to compete seems undampened. To test the new hip, he and Williams circumnavigated Manhattan in kayaks in nine hours. "Skyler and I could have done it a lot faster, actually," he says, with a faint scowl. He blames the time on a sluggish tour guide: "Don't you think, Sky?"

As the morning draws to a close, Weihenmayer attempts a lead climb, which means he's the first person up the cliff, clipping into anchors along the route. If he falls, he falls two or three metres, farther than he would when top-rope climbing.

When he reaches the overhang he struggles to find a hold. "I'm at the blankest spot yet," he gripes, stretching his hands in all directions.

"Yeah, the feet don't look so good," notes Williams.

"Am I off route?"

"Maybe a touch to the right. The next bolt is straight above your head."

Weihenmayer prepares to take on the roof. "Ok, could be taking a big old finger here," he warns.

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"I bet you could reach it with your left hand," advises Williams. "You gotta be real close."

Weihenmayer strains against the jagged slab. He is nearly upside down. His quads tighten, glimmering with sweat. He thrusts his hands upwards and with a grunt he kicks his right leg high, impossibly high, propelling his body towards the ledge. And then he's over. Williams and I start packing up. We'll meet Weihenmayer at the top. ●

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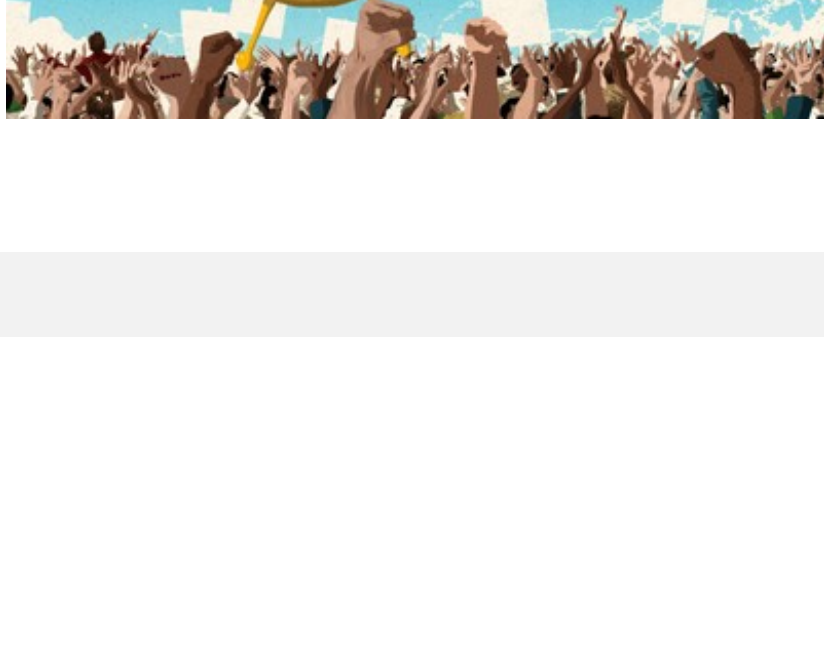
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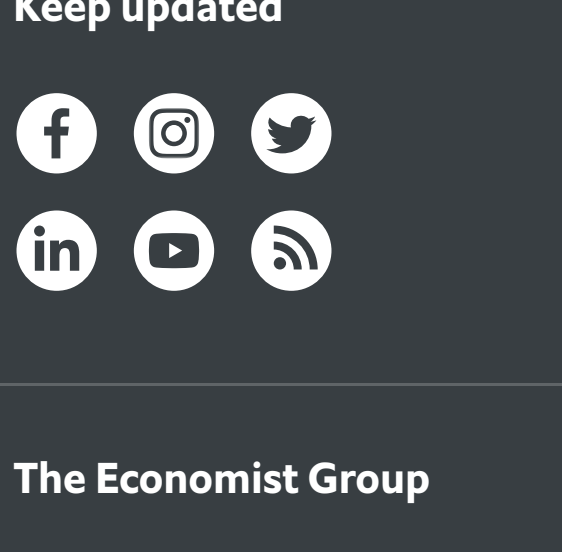
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