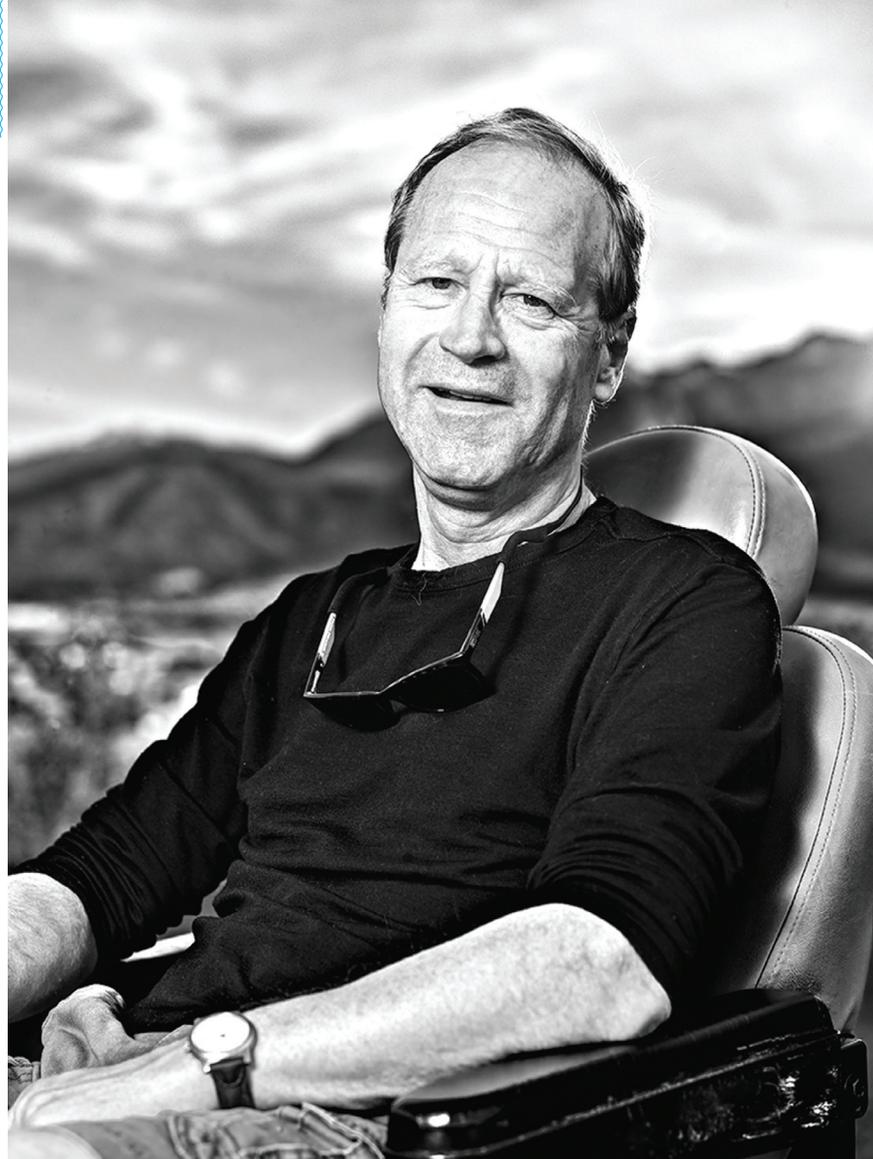


THE FINAL ASCENT

For decades, climber Jeff Lowe sought enlightenment by scaling rocks. A life-altering disease may have brought him a little closer to it.



JEFF LOWE SITS IN SILENCE on the second-floor patio of his two-bedroom apartment in Louisville and shifts uncomfortably in the early September heat. He slouches in his wheelchair; sweat beads on his ashen forehead. Lowe looks frail after his most recent stay at Foothills Hospital's Intensive Care Unit. I regret asking if we could conduct our interview outside, in the view of one of his former climbing haunts—the Boulder Flatirons—and suggest we go indoors. But Lowe remains singularly focused, typing on an iPad his answer to the question I asked several minutes ago: “Are you afraid to die?”

It's a question people have asked Lowe for decades. He's flirted with mortality since 1965, when, at age 14, he ascended—solo and without ropes—an unclimbed slab on Utah's Mt. Ogden. An icon of alpine mountaineering, Lowe completed more than 1,000 first ascents up rock walls the sizes of skyscrapers in Zion, Utah; jagged icefalls in Colorado; and oxygen-starved summits in the Himalayas and the Alps. On a 26-day climb in 1978, he nearly succumbed to dengue fever near the summit of 23,442-foot Latok I in Pakistan. And on a winter solo climb up the Eiger's infamous Mordwand, Lowe hunkered, soaking wet, in a cave just below the summit for two nights—hypothermic,

low on food, and delirious—as he waited out a storm.

But death drew closest after Lowe quit climbing. He gave up the sport in 2006 because of worsening balance and tingling limbs that made his movements clumsy. Two years later, his doctor diagnosed him with a rare neurological disorder called olivopontocerebellar atrophy and said he would likely be dead within two years.

The disease would shrink his cerebellum, ultimately shutting down his body's motor functions, which are largely controlled by that part of the brain. Lowe closed his climbing guiding business and film festival and started saying goodbye to friends and family. Perplexed that he was still alive years later, doctors changed Lowe's diagnosis to “unknown neurodegenerative process”—something similar, they thought, to amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS). (Today the doctors say the disease is unlike any they've ever seen.) With his body withering, Lowe began hospice care in 2012.

And yet, here we are, on his patio. “No. I am not afraid to die,” he says through the computerized narrator. He smiles and begins to describe the final chapter of his life—a life that for so long was defined by physical accomplishments. Now that he has little

ROCK SOLID Jeff Lowe in Ogden Valley, Utah (above); Lowe climbing at the Button Creek Reservoir in Colorado.



use of his body, he's discovering things that long eluded him. "There will probably come a point where it takes all my energy just to stay alive, and I don't see much point in dragging it on after that," Lowe says. "But right now, I'm still interested in what's coming."

LOWE GREW UP NEAR Utah's Wasatch Mountains and became fascinated by mountaineering at a young age. When he was seven, he became the youngest person to summit Wyoming's 13,776-foot Grand Teton. By his teenage years, Lowe was camping overnight by himself and would rise at dawn to climb whatever chunk of rock looked appealing.

Lowe churned through books at night by the fire. He read *The Agony and the Ecstasy* (a biographical novel about Michelangelo), Nikos Kazantzakis's *The Last Temptation of Christ*, and *The White Spider*, Heinrich Harrer's classic retelling of the first attempts to ascend the Eiger's north face. All three accounts are about men searching for enlightenment, and the stories stuck with Lowe. "Climbing, for me," he says, "has always been a sort of spiritual pilgrimage."

When he was with his friends, Lowe was self-deprecating and funny, and with his wild golden hair, wire-rimmed spectacles, and lithe, muscular frame, he had no shortage of female admirers. "Ladies sort of migrated in his direction," his brother Greg has said, "and he didn't discourage it." But when Lowe was in the mountains, he focused on climbing and the natural beauty that surrounded him. He possessed a Zen-like calm and the rare ability to move fluidly between rock and ice, even on the most exposed high-altitude terrain. By the 1970s or early '80s, Lowe was widely considered the greatest alpinist from North America, and everyone from *National Geographic* to Eddie Bauer lined up to sponsor his expeditions. "He was one of the climbing gods," says climber Malcolm Daly, who met Lowe in the '70s.

Lowe lifted the sport of ice climbing to a new level in 1974. He and his climbing partner, Mike Weis, forged an ascent up the 365-foot icefall Bridal Veil Falls near Telluride. (Lowe founded the world-famous Ouray Ice Festival decades later. The festival is now in its 21st year and draws thousands of international climbers to the Colorado mountain town each January.)

His next big accomplishment came in 1979: Lowe completed an expedition up Nepal's 22,349-foot Ama Dablam for an ABC production. The following morning he woke up hungry to do something of his own: He spontaneously soloed an unclimbed 4,000-



SPECTATOR SPORT Visitors at the annual Ouray Ice Festival gather on a bridge to watch a climber several feet below.

foot route on the mountain's south face.

Lowe's life on the ground was far from perfect. By 1991, he had creditors hounding him after a couple of disastrous business ventures, was reeling from a separation, and was estranged from his two-year-old daughter, Sonja, after a highly publicized affair with female mountaineer Catherine Destivelle. Lowe's refuge was climbing. In February 1991, he traveled to the Eiger in Switzerland and attempted Mordwand, one of the most deadly walls in climbing lore, a climb he'd envisioned since boyhood.

After nine days on the wall, Lowe was exhausted. He ditched his rope and backpack on the mountain (a desperate and taboo move he would regret for years) and scurried to the summit unprotected—again making history. He later told friends that on the final ascent he heard a harmonic hum and felt a sense of peace and connectedness he'd not felt before. "Not to get too esoteric," Lowe says. "But I met my true self up there. Energy and spirit, not flesh and blood." Lowe named the route "Metanoia" after the Greek word for a transformative change of heart. Then he returned to the realities of his everyday life.

LOWE WAS ICE-SKATING with his daughter in 1998 when his legs slipped out from under him. It wasn't long after that his body began

to deteriorate. Running became impossible in 2000. He needed a cane to walk a few years later, and by 2009 he was confined to a wheelchair. In 2012, the neurons controlling his bulbar muscles, which are responsible for speech, quit firing. It became difficult for his friends to understand what he was saying.

But as his old life slipped away, new opportunities arose. He returned to Utah in 2002 to spend time with his ailing mother, Elgene, before she died. And after an on-and-off romantic relationship that spanned decades, he reunited in 2009 with climber Connie Self.

Lowe and Self crafted a short bucket list. They went back to the Eiger with Colorado climber Josh Wharton. Lowe looked on delighted from a helicopter as Wharton retrieved Lowe's backpack, which had been frozen in ice since the day he left it there in 1991. Lowe and Self moved to Colorado from Utah; they rented an apartment in Louisville so Lowe could spend his final days near family. Filmmaker Jim Aikman also began to chronicle Lowe's life on film. "Everything," Self says, "was about beating this deadline of him dying."

On July 30, 2015, hundreds crowded into the American Mountaineering Museum auditorium in Golden for a screening of the resulting documentary, *Jeff Lowe's Metanoia*. Celebrity climbers and Lowe devotees drank beer as they waited for what many suspected might be their last chance to see Lowe in person. Instead, when the credits rolled, a

wearily-looking Self announced that Lowe was in the hospital again, this time with a feeding-tube infection. Moments later, Lowe appeared via Skype from his hospital room on the big screen behind Self. Lowe's daughter stood at his side. The crowd rose in a standing ovation. Lowe gave two thumbs up and wept. It seemed like a perfect goodbye.

THIS PAST SEPTEMBER I traveled with Lowe and Self, now his life partner and caregiver, to Estes Park. The granite walls of Lumpy Ridge rose in front of us. Lowe and Daly once pioneered a notoriously steep route called New Music on the ridge. Lowe's last visit to the ICU had been six weeks earlier, and at that time even he suspected he might die. Instead, he's improving. He looked better than when we met on his patio a few weeks earlier. He barely uses his iPad today; he now answers questions in a deliberate growl that sounds like a tape recorder about to run out of batteries.

Self explained that Lowe's speech had improved in recent days and he's resumed speech therapy. And he's only using supplemental oxygen at night, a stark contrast from a year and a half earlier. But his day-to-day care is still daunting—20 pills per day, nebulizer treatments to clear his lungs, massages to prevent pressure sores, and help with bathing and bathroom trips.

That day in Estes Park, Lowe and Self told me they've recently made an important decision. They are no longer preparing for Lowe's death. Rather, they want to live—together. They've got two books in the works. Lowe has begun sorting through thousands of slides to identify the subjects and locations in them. And seven years after doctors first told him to get his affairs in order, Lowe and Self just celebrated Lowe's 65th birthday. "With climbing, you do the best you can with what you've got, from where you are right now," Self says. "That's precisely what Jeff continues to do now."

Monks meditate for hours, runners suffer through ultramarathons, and for centuries, climbers have scaled mountains in pursuit of some ethereal sense of enlightenment, some inner surety that there's something bigger out there and a feeling that we're connected to it. Lowe had a transformative experience on the Eiger. And even now that he can no longer climb, the understanding he gained on that mountain is still with him. Now, he says, "it never leaves me."▲▲

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