

# Alex Honnold: A Soul Freed

Bret Stephens: It's a privilege to be here. It's a privilege to share the stage with, uh, with Alex. Um, I, I just want to begin by saying this is actually a historic occasion, although most of you don't know this and you, you certainly don't know this. Um, Alex obviously is like one of the most badass climbers in the world and, and I'm a hypochondriac. Um, so onstage for the one and only time, the world's most fearless man and the world's most fearful man. Uh, so it's, it's a good pairing. I hope. Um, so I just want to very quickly get a sense of the audience just so that we know who were, who were, who were talking to. Um, raise your hands if you've seen free solo or read alone on the wall. Okay. So you're, you're, you're in a room full of, of of fans. Raise your hand if you are rock climbers. Okay. Raise your hands if you have free soloed.

Speaker 2: Okay.

Bret Stephens: One, two. Okay. Awesome. Now,

Alex Honnold: but raise your hand if you ski cause that's way more dangerous.

Bret Stephens: I'm just, I'm just saying, so, um, this is what I was going to ask. Uh, raise your hands if you consider yourself in some aspect of your life, no matter what you do, you consider yourself a risk taker. Okay. Cause they all ski. Oh yeah. I just don't know they're risk takers. Right. All right. So, so what I wanted to do was really sort of think about, you know, questions of risk, questions about your, your process and uh, and preparation. And when I was reading a loan on the wall, you were describing your, your climb of a moonlight buttress, your first, uh, I guess it was 2008, your first, uh, your first reseller, which you did by yourself. Kind of not telling anyone, right?

Alex Honnold: Yeah. The most of have been by myself except for the note walks action of, of making a movie about free. Freezone but for the most part, free is totally by yourself. But you just didn't tell, you didn't tell a soul you were going to do it. No, the whole, my whole experience, I mean, my butter's midnight was one of the first big freestyle ones that I didn't or is sort of at the beginning of becoming a professional climber. And getting sponsored by companies and things like that. But, um, but the whole process took me less than a week. I mean, I basically showed up in Zion national park, spent a couple days working the route, then it rained a little bit so I had to rest and then I did the climb. And so it's pretty, you know, it's a pretty contained experience. So one of the things he wrote a what and and and to be fair, I mean it's pre smart phone. I didn't have that many friends. You know, there's nobody really to

Bret Stephens: tell about it, you know what I mean? Like there's no,

Alex Honnold: do you want me to, I was living in a car by myself and I just, you don't, you don't have great cell service and you don't have any friends. It's like, it's just

Bret Stephens: like, do you have like dog tags in case you fall and just people can figure, people will find my flip phone and figure it out. No, it's just a, yeah, just, I

Alex Honnold: dunno. Yeah. I didn't really think about it. So one of the things you read about the climb is I was very struck by this. Um, you're right. I was 100% certain I would not fall off. And that certainty is what kept me from falling off. Can you just talk about that sense of certainty that you need to, to climb like that? Yeah, I mean I think that that sentence kind of gets to the heart of resolving in some ways, which is that at the base of it, there has to be a self confidence there. There has to be a real confidence that you can do the thing that you're setting out to do. And I think that, you know, the only way that it really works out is if you can maintain that confidence throughout. I mean, you know, basically if you get scared while free soloing, it all starts to crumble a little bit.

Alex Honnold: You start to not trust your feet, you don't weight them as well. They're much more likely to slip. I mean basically everything can kind of spiral negatively. Whereas if you can, you know, if you're 100% confident you can do the thing. And then you go up and you climb at your best, then you know, then you do actually do it I guess. So I mean, but apropos actually that still needs to be based upon, I mean you do actually have to be able to do the climb. Um, and that's why I had, and that's why I had practiced ahead of time. The thing is basically I had done it on a rope many times. Uh, you know, over the preceding couple of days I had gone up and down it by myself on a rope several times. I knew that I could do it. And so with the same kind of confidence that, you know, you know that you can walk across that table without falling off, you're like, I know that I can walk down a sidewalk without falling and then you just go and execute it.

Alex Honnold: So that's the kind of, what does it mean you were confident or had you memorize the route? How much preparation did that, that's 800 feet. Right? How much did that take? Was it, that particular route is a very straightforward style. It's basically one inch crack that just runs forever. So a, so it's the kind of thing that if you have the fitness for it, uh, you know, if you don't get too fatigued, your muscles don't get too tired, then it feels pretty safe the whole way. And so I didn't exactly memorize all the moves cause you don't really have to cause you just put your fingers in the crack and just crank on them. Um, but, but I knew that I could do it. So a few months later you do your first free solo of Hafta, which is like more than twice the height. It's, it's 2000 feet or so.

Alex Honnold: Yeah, correct. And, um, you're 150 feet from the summit and you, you kind of freaked out. So what happened there that, uh, hadn't happened on moonlight was so that's, yeah, sad, sad. It started like everybody settled in for a sad long story. So, uh, I mean in a lot of ways it was the opposite experience from moonlight. And the thing about moonlight is that there's a, have many of you guys been design National Park? I mean, have you guys all hiked up angel's

landing or hiked at moonlight? It's one of the most beautiful hikes in the country, but, um, but there's a paved trail that goes all the way to the summit of, of Midland buttress. So it's, you know, it takes maybe 40 minutes to stroll to the summit with a bunch of ropes, repel down and work on the climb. So it's really straightforward to work by yourself.

Alex Honnold: Half Dome is the opposite end of the spectrum because it's a 2000 foot face, but it's also 2,500 feet above the valley floor. So you're doing almost 5,000 feet of vertical to get to the top. And then because it's 2000 foot wall, it's not really that, you know, I didn't know, I don't own that much rope, you know, especially back then. Uh, you know, I didn't really know how you prepare something of that scale because it's just so big. And then, you know, some of my friends would be willing to climb the route with me, but, but not really more than once. And I don't have that many friends and it's, you don't want to burn through partners climbing the route over and over. Do you have friends? May have more friends now it's you like friends now you know, anyone want to be Alex's friend?

Alex Honnold: And I'm good. I'm good with partners now. But the, the intervening 10 years I've been good to me, but at the time I was, uh, you know, it was all a little more grim, but so, but so the point with halftone was that it really, because I didn't quite know how to do the prep prep work for it, I didn't really know how to, how to practice. Uh, so I sort of intentionally, and actually, so the physical rating on half of them, technically it's easier than, than moonlight decline when you're talking about before. So the combination, not really knowing how to prepare for it, but then also thinking that, well, technically, you know, physically it is easier so they should be fine. I decided to take a different approach, which was to keep it a little more adventurous and just sort of rise to the occasion, you know, go up there and do my best and see how it goes.

Alex Honnold: And, um, and you know, that's obviously it didn't, didn't go that well, but, you know, I, I thought that it would be an okay start and go that well cause you got a little lost on the route. Well, yeah, I got a little lost on the route. Um, I mean, so, so I'd done the bare minimum prepper, which is climbing, climbing the whole face with a friend of mine two days before with a rope. So I, I knew that I knew roughly where to go and I knew that I could do it. And then, uh, I took a rest day. I sat in my car all day thinking about it, trying to, you know, get psyched. And then the next day I hiked up there by myself, did the climb, but didn't totally know where to go. Um, at the last second kind of made an impromptu decision to bypass one of the sections that I'd gone with the rope before.

Alex Honnold: Um, so that involve climbing this whole section of the wall that I'd actually never been on. So, you know, you're a thousand feet off the ground, kind of wondering if you're offering being like, oh, this is the, seems unfamiliar. Like I hope I can find my way back. You know, and so, and the, the client wound up taking me almost three hours, I think it was two 50. And so at the time especially, I mean, that's still a long time, but especially then, that was a really long time for me to be fully focused and you know, out there like that. Um, it

was much, can I interrupt you for a second? Of course. General question, how important is speed for free? So long? It's saying, it seems to me that speed aides because concentration wanes. Is that right? Uh, yeah, that's, I mean, that's sort of true, but I actually never intentionally try to go quickly.

Alex Honnold: Um, I mean, I always keep track of my time because I, I care about that kind of thing. I liked certain speed records. I think it's fun and you know, it's cool, but I'm, but I'm never trying to climb fast. Mostly when I've done big free solar's, they've wound up being speed records sort of as a byproduct of the fact that I don't have a partner. I don't have to wait for, you know, I mean typically when you climb, one person goes weights for the other and you kind of take turns the hallway. So it's relatively slow. Um, you know, so I mean, the timing when you're freestyling just winds up being a lot faster just because you're not waiting for your partner. You don't have the weight of the rope hanging off you, you don't have all the gear on you. It just winds up being a little bit. But I'm, but I'm never trying to go fast. And I think that overall it's safer to take your time and let your concentration. I Dunno. I mean it's a balance because yeah, obviously your concentration starts to fade over time, but you definitely don't want to be hurrying up there either because then you make a careless mistake and fall to your death.

Bret Stephens: So when you have those five minutes of panic, um, like how do you work your way out of that?

Alex Honnold: Yes. Tell me what, what breaths mentioning is the, the whole halftime instruments to bring up your most disgraceful moment as a climber? That's far from my worst. We get, we can get to my worst moments later. Um, but no. So, uh, yeah, towards the top of half dome is the actual physical crux of the route. And by then, you know, I was two and a half hours into this whole experience. My mind was starting to fray. It was all kind of going south and, and then yeah, it got to a part of that was actually quite scary and I didn't know what to do. And so then I spend, it probably is in five minutes, so it was probably 30 seconds, you know, but it feels like a lifetime of saying their thing, you know? My God, I'm about to die. I don't know what to do and my foot is going to slip. I don't know, you know? Oh No, it's all coming apart. But the reality is, I mean, you're standing on these tiny, tiny little edges and your calves are solely getting pumped. And so you know what feels like a long time. It's probably probably 30 seconds and then you make a decision and keep moving since, you know, I kind of had to, since you can't just stand there indefinitely.

Bret Stephens: So your climb of half dome I think was what started to make you well known outside of the climbing community. There was that famous picture of you on what's it called? Thank God, thank God. Later on, thank God ledge on the cover of, of National Geographic, uh, endorsements, uh, started rolling in, money started rolling, people wanting to make films a about you money didn't quite start then, but eventually I started to make a living. Well, at least sponsorships, right? Yeah, I know that's true. But actually it, most of my main sponsors had

sort of happened right before then. And then that kind of solidified the fact that I could now eat. Well, let's get to the, I mean, let's get to the part where, where people start filming you. Um, one of the things you write, which cracked me up in the book is I think you're in Borneo, uh, or Indonesia somewhere and someone's filming you and you say the experiences like being told, you know, dance monkey, like all of a sudden like, you've, you've got to, you've got to perform. So now you're not just climbing for the sake of the climb for the sake of speed or, or whatever it is. You're climbing for a whole team that has a set of, of expectations. Just how does that, what do you have to do to prepare mentally and physically for the fact that you're now not just a climber or an athlete, you're a performer.

Alex Honnold: Yeah. It's interesting. I mean, so, so that kind of crept up over the years. I mean, there definitely wasn't a point where I went from feeling like a climber to suddenly feeling I could perform or, um, it's more like, you know, one day, every couple months you have a day where you have to go out and perform and then, you know, and that never really bothered me because, you know, I mean, we all have to work somehow to support ourselves. And I'm, I don't mind working on the rock sometimes. I mean, I'd much rather work while climbing than than I'm now, you know, I don't really have an education or any other skills. I'm like, I'd much rather be climbing than like laying brick or like roofing or something, you know? Like I don't, you know, and so, I mean, from that perspective, I'm like, this is not a bad gig.

Alex Honnold: You know? Like, I mean, I like, I like climbing, so, but I mean, you're right though, that it does sort of change the experience a little bit. I mean, particularly with the free soloing, I mean it's a little bit of a weird area because you know, if you're risking your life for a camera, it's like a bit of a weird thing though, typically. Um, I mean if we really feel like diving into it, if we're having a chat, let's have a chat. Oh, this is all recorded that, huh? Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. That guy just to give a thumbs up in the back. Yep. This is recorded. Oh yeah. But so I mean, most, most filming is posed after the fact anyway. And so the filming on half Dome, the photos, thank God latch, things like that, those were all taken later. You know, when you just come back to the same climb, you repel into position, you re climb certain sections.

Alex Honnold: Is that true? Free Solo? No, no, that's not true. If Resale. And that's why I won an academy award. Yeah. Yeah. Um, but no, honestly, but that was a huge distinction for me personally was because, you know, I had done a lot of filming and a lot of photography up to them. I mean, so I've also done a lot of work for brands. Uh, you know, I'm sponsored by, by many different companies and, and it's totally common in the outdoor world to go out and do a photo shoot. You know, you choose some interesting looking piece of rock. You climb it over and over, you take nice pictures, you get the, you know, beautiful body positions that the photographer tells you, you know, the best way to look on the rock and you just do it. You just go out and like shoot for the day.

Alex Honnold: You know, Free Solo was sort of my first experience where they were actually just filming what I did for two years. And in some ways it was actually slightly annoying me because I would have preferred having more guidance, more direction because it, not that I'm calling Jimmy Chin a bad director, but, but, um, you know, whereas rock Chai, um, but the, the thing about it is that, are there any scenes in the movie that you're embarrassed by? Oh, yeah. There are plenty of unflattering scenes in the film. Yeah. I mean, you've seen it right three times. Yeah. Yeah, no, no. I mean, wait, hang on. Does anyone think there's a single unflattering scene in the entire movie? No. Are you guys know, have you seen the film? No. It's, I mean, there are whole sections that I find horrifying them. Like for example, where the, I mean, my whole relationship, you're just like, oh wow,

Speaker 4: wow.

Alex Honnold: No, I mean it's, it's hard. We're like wandering to do it into interesting terrain. Um, I mean, the, the tough thing with that was because we started dating basically right when the film were right when they started filming with me. So a lot of the lines in the film where I'm talking about my girlfriend and we're still together and things are great. It's not Sony's great. Um, yeah. Hey job. I'll tell her you're applauded his show. Shall I get the recording? So, oh yeah. Oh yeah. I hope she's not watching. No. But so many of the things that I say about her in the beginning of the film were things that I said about a woman that I just started dating were a couple of weeks into a relationship or like two months into a relationship. She hadn't really started climbing at that point. She was climbing, you know, very casually. So I have a lot of lines in the film where like, oh, she's not really a climber. Like we'll see how this plays out. And you know, I'm not really that invested, you know? But it's like, oh, it's like casually dating somebody new, you know? Now fast forward three and a half years later, you're like, it's slightly embarrassing to see that stuff. That's all I'm saying. Did you, I could've, I could've phrased things a little nicer, a little more nicely, but

Bret Stephens: you must've felt you always had an option to just leave your personal life out of the film. Why did you choose to keep it in?

Alex Honnold: Ah, I don't know. I mean, I, I never really felt that was an option. I mean basically from the beginning, I sort of just committed 100% of the project. And you know, I trusted the filmmakers I trusted in Chester, Chai, Basser, Elliot and Jimmy Chin and the co-directors, you know, I've worked with, worked with and climbed with Jimmy for years, you know, I know them, I trust them and I believed in their process and I sort of, if this is what you guys need, I'll just, you know, and in some ways it's easier not to try to draw a line between that because I just did my thing for two years. I just did exactly what I wanted to do. And they hung out and film parts of it. And then, and I had no editorial control over the film at all. I didn't, you know, I didn't, I didn't even see it till the final draft. And then, you know, I saw it at the end and I was like, oh, oh Geez. Like that's, you know. But

at the same time, it's a totally honest film. I mean, I think they did actually did an incredible job of, of showing just the full picture.

Bret Stephens: Are you surprised by what a mega hit it's become?

Alex Honnold: Yeah. Well, I mean, you know, I don't know. I'm partial to climbing foams. I was like, I think it's pretty good, but, but no, it is a, yeah, it is surprising how well it's, it's resonated with audiences things. Yeah.

Bret Stephens: But you've gone from being just simply like, um, really admired in the climbing community in the world that knows it to being like famous. Um, and talk a little bit about sort of what it means to, to sort of just be well known to be recognized and I'm guessing you're recognized all the time in airports, restaurants. How does it change you? What does it improve and what does it take away?

Alex Honnold: Yeah. The, I mean, we're in Aspen, I feel like at least 15 people in this audience who come up and give the same answer. You know, if you're like, well, you know, I wear my Arista know yours. Oh yeah. Well why do the same thing as everybody else? I pull my hoodie down. I keep my, no, um, no, it's just, it's just one of those things. I mean the way I look at it and yeah, it has actually been crazy with the film. Uh, being in public spaces is definitely a little, little different. Being in airports, like being in the subway in New York is, is a, it gives me a lot of anxiety now cause you get, I mean, as it is, it's really kind of Claustrophobic, but then you wind up with like seven people staring at you. Like you feel like a hunted animal and you're like, oh no.

Alex Honnold: And you know, you like pull your head a little deeper and you're like, maybe I should exit. You know, maybe I'll connect to the I train right now. You know? Or like it's all sort of, um, yeah, it's not ideal. But at the same time, you know, I mean, I made a bunch of choices that, that led to this, you know, I mean, I agree to make a freaking film about myself. Obviously. I'm not going to complain that, that it wound up being too successful. I'm like, well, you know, I mean basically if you're gonna, if you're gonna make a film, I mean, you want it to be the best possible film. And I'm like, well, they did a good job.

Bret Stephens: So on that, does it limit or expand your freedom?

Alex Honnold: Uh, I mean, I mean a little bit of both. Uh, you know, in some ways it limits my freedom for sure. I mean, so I was just in Yosemite this last month for a few days on and off, sort of in between. I've still been doing a lot of travel and events around the film and then just a lot of work related things, you know, obligation to sponsors and things. And so I had basically four climbing of three climbing days and you send money with one day of hiking. And so it spread throughout a couple of weeks, which, which in some ways is a little sad for me cause I'm used to just spending two months, two and a half months just living in Yosemite with, with nothing else going on. And so the timer just came on and



that does seem extremely distracting. I feel like they're trying to hook us off the stage. If it's like the biggest numbers I've ever seen. Don't worry. Don't worry. We're gonna ignore the numbers. We're going to all night.

Speaker 4: So, so, so

Alex Honnold: the thing about about being in the valley, the season was that all the places that I used to hang out all the trails that yeah. I don't know. I mean it just, it was a little too, too crazy. Like I couldn't just like hang out in public spaces. You still free soloing? Uh, I mean, yeah, from time to time. I don't know. Yeah, nothing. I haven't done any serious reselling since the film, I don't think. But, um, but it's kinda where you draw that line. I mean, today I went bouldering and independence pass for those that live here? No, no. The climbing, I did a couple high ball boulder problems that uh, one of them was pretty fricking high and getting to the top of the actual boulder is probably, I don't know, 25 feet off the ground. It's all sort of Mossy or like, like any, I guess if a slightly crumbly rock with Lichen and now it's like, oh, I haven't done this in awhile and it's Kinda scary. And I was like, I don't really want to fall 25 feet. So,

Bret Stephens: so, but actually that, that, that brings me to my next question for me, I don't know if this is true for most people, but for me the single most moving moment in the film is your first free solo tent, I guess like October, November, 2016. And you start before dawn, you're somewhere on one of the free blast slabs and you just stop and that, and you decide you're not continuing you. You right. The fear I felt on the Finn moves on free blast was telling me something I needed to heed the warning. So what was that warning?

Alex Honnold: Well, I'm in the mornings like, you're going to die. I mean, you know, basically overwhelming fear, just like, oh no. But, uh, I mean, so that was, so there's a specific move on the free bus labs where you have to trust your full body weight to a right foot. And I'd sprain that ankle pretty severely earlier in the season and my foot was still kind of swollen and my climbing shoes are really tight. And you know, it was early November, so it's kind of cold out and it was dark, uh, just because of the way the timing is that how many year. And so, you know, I was like, oh, it's dark, it's cold. I can't feel my toe. And I'm about to trust my life to standing onto the right toe or the big toe of my right foot and I can't feel it. And it was just this obvious like this is like, I should not be here. Like this is not for me.

Bret Stephens: But, um, one aspect, which after that you, you, you go back down, um, and with obviously probably mixed emotions, but then you really prepare the route and you learn things about the route that you didn't know before. Like variations. Yeah. So, and you also have like an insight which was that you are there to a free solo el Cap, not free solo free writer. So tell us about how like that changes the experience. Yeah. So



Alex Honnold: what Brett's referencing is sort of, I had always felt like I was trying to free solo at the route that I had climbed with the rope because uh, you know, in some ways I felt slightly constrained in my vision of it because I'd climbed El Cap. You know, there are many different routes on our cap and there there's something like a hundred different routes and of those maybe 15 or 20 of them can be free climbed, which means climbing with just your hands and your feet, like not using any artificial gear to pull your way upward. Free climbing is an important distinction from free soloing, which means not using a rope and, and you're still using your bare hands and feet type deal. But no rope either. So of the 20 routes at Belle cap or 15 routes of El Cap, that can be free climbed. Uh, the easiest one is the free rider, which is the one that the film is focused around.

Alex Honnold: And so I sort of felt like I had to free solo that route. And then over the years I sort of realized I don't really care which route I free, so I just want a free solo cap, you know? And so all of a sudden I started broadening my search quite a bit and swinging out far to the side of, of where you would normally climb with the rope and where you climbed the wall with the rope is sort of dictated by where the people did the first ascent and where they originally drilled the protection bolts. So they're basically metal bolts in the wall that you normally clip your rope and do to protect you if you fall. And so when the people, you know, basically row Robinson Monch Denard the first incentive of that section of the wall in 1961 or three or something like basically early 1960s, they chose a certain path and everyone else has kind of taken that path since then.

Alex Honnold: And it suddenly occurred to me that I didn't really have to take that path. I was like, I'm not going to be clipping a rope in anything anyway. I'm going to go wherever the heck I can find good holes. And so I started searching with a much broader eyes, swinging all over the wall, looking for other variations. And so I wound up finding a couple of ways to go around sections of the normal route that I felt safer doing. [inaudible] it just felt like more secure and, and yeah. And so ultimately the route that I want up climbing, you know, isn't exactly the free rider, but it's pretty freaking close. But you know, few variations

Bret Stephens: climb. You had a debate with your friend Tommy Caldwell and, uh, who is a opposed to free soloing and described it as aerospike in his own case, irresponsible and disrespectful to his family. And you said, I understood his point of view but disagreed, so why?

Alex Honnold: Well, yeah, yeah. No, I mean, I don't know. I mean, uh, the thing about Tommy, so Tommy and I, it's not like one, one conversation we've had about this. I mean, we've talked about this all the time and Tommy and I have spent probably hundreds of hours hiking together, hiking down from the top El Hiking, no, there we, you know, we spent four days here on a sleeping bag together while climbing a thing in Patagonia. So I mean we've had a lot of cozy time to chat together. And so, and the thing is, I mean he always, he loves to, to kind of play me off as like, oh this bad influence and you know, I'm the one you free soloing and Tommy's all safe. But Tommy and I basically do the same climbing. I

mean he doesn't explicitly free Solo, but we do the same things in the mountains.

Alex Honnold: We do the same thing. Speed climbing. We basically climb and totally the same style except that, you know, except that he doesn't explicitly free solar. But so we take roughly the same risks and in every other aspect of climbing, you know, we climb and very much the same way. Like when we're engaging in albinism together, when we're climbing big snowy mountains together, we make the same decisions and we have the same threshold of safety. And so, and, and while we've been climbing mountains together, I mean he has done quite a bit of free soloing with the rope on meaning, you know, he technically is tied to a rope, but he's just, you know, but I'm not blaming him, let's say, cause I'm dealing with something else. I'm like pulling the repel line down. I'm coiling things up, I'm packing up our 10 like whatever. I'm dealing with other things and he's just going up the next section of the wall with the rope.

Alex Honnold: And so, you know, technically he's not free soloing, but I mean, he's not, you know, no one's going to catch him if he falls, you know, it's all a bit of a gray area. You're sort of like, well, I don't know. Basically, I just think that we all sort of make intentional decisions about how we manage risk in our climbing. And I think it's, I'm not going to call out to Tommy's my personal heroes since I was a little kid. I mean, he's the man and you know what I mean? He's from Colorado, he's, he's awesome. But you know, it's slightly disingenuous to say that, you know, like, oh, he's not taking risks in his climbing. But I am because I'm like, you know, in many aspects of our climbing, we're taking all the same risks. I'm just choosing to pursue this one style of climbing that he's not into.

Alex Honnold: And you know, and I think that within free soloing specifically, I try to minimize my risk as much as possible. The same way that when, when we're climbing mountains together, we try to minimize our risk as much as possible. I mean, basically I think that we kind of have a very similar risk profile, but mine is just extended into another aspect of climate that he's not understood. So that's a very long convoluted way to say that, you know, I mean, I think we're all just trying to make the best decisions that we can. So you, you, but I have to ask this question. This is a stupid curiosity you listen to music on when, when you're climbing right? Sometimes and as a John Denver and it's definitely not genda I don't even know. No, I don't know what that is.

Alex Honnold: I mean, I've heard of John Denver, I just, it's, I think it's before my time. Who, who do you listen to? I like modern rock, like punk type. Like it just to pump you up. Yeah. That's all I listen to in general. Really. Is it sort of like to just Blair out the noise of your own? No, no, and that's actually the key thing is I only listen to music when I'm climbing. Really easy train, uh, when, when I don't need to be fully focused. I actually prefer silence. If I, if what I'm doing matters. You, you, you get to the top of El Cap. Uh, June 5th, 2017. Um, you actually look, uh, happy third June 3rd. Excuse me, writing the record for the recording. Thanks for the correction. Um,

Bret Stephens: uh, I remember you're, you're on the phone with Sanya. You're saying, I'm so delighted. How long does that sense of satisfaction actually last?

Alex Honnold: I mean pretty, pretty long actually. I mean, I was, I was smiling a lot for the whole week afterward and then even now if I watch the end of the film, if we, if I get to talking about it, uh, I'm mean, it's pretty satisfying. Like I am very proud of the effort I put into it and of the climate itself.

Bret Stephens: But part of it, I mean, one thing that, that is tough about a client like that is it such a life ambition, it's, it's, it's unprecedented. It's not likely, well, I don't know, maybe it is likely to be repeated sometime soon, but what then becomes your next free solo of El Cap? What is an ambition if there is any that kind of equals it for you?

Alex Honnold: I mean, I honestly don't know. Um, and that's kind of thinking about it. Yeah. Yeah. No, I mean, I've been thinking about it a bit and honestly that's been one of the biggest challenges of, of being on the film tour for the last six months and promoting the film and everything is every single movie screening, someone's like, watch next. Like when's Free Solo Two? What are you working on? And you're like, man, I don't know. You know what I mean? Okay. Sequels are always worse except for the godfather too. That's the only good sequel. Yeah. Yeah. I don't think there's definitely no free. So at two that's for sure. Um, yeah, I know, I honestly don't know. I mean,

Bret Stephens: so I don't know about your, your, are you like talking to people? Like what would be something that's really like,

Alex Honnold: well, I don't think talking to people would be the way anyway. I mean, it has to be something from the heart to some extent. Something that inspires you, inspires me from within. Um, I mean, I've been working on, on physically improving as a climber, you know, training, just trying to climb harder, uh, you know, improve as a climber of do you think you could break too on, on El Cap? Yeah, yeah, we did. We did last summer. You done? Yes. Up Two hours on. Oh crap. Oh my. Actually there'll be a whole 45 minute film about that. Oh, well there you go. Yeah. So, but it's not free solar too. It's a, I don't know what it's going to be called, but um, but so for those here who are real climbers, the real rock tier this year, which is a climbing film tour that travels all over the world to have this 45 minute film about me and Tommy Climbing El cap and in a sub two hours, which was our big goal last year.

Alex Honnold: But that's kind of, so that's actually been the really interesting things. Everyone asks what's next? POSTDOC cat. But, so this will be a long ramble here, so, so settle in. But so part of, part of my process for, for free soloing El cap was to not build it up too big in my mind. Uh, you know, I mean obviously it was this dream that I had forever. It was really important to me, but I didn't want it. But I was, I had been physically able to climb el Cap without falling since 2008 or nine or something. So basically, you know, it'd been almost 10 years that I was

physically able to, you know, that's kind of the bare minimum to consider free sewing. Okay. Opposite. You obviously have to be able to climb from the bottom the top without falling off or using your rope at all.

Alex Honnold: And so technically I'd been there physically for quite a long time. And so really it was the mental side that that took so many years to develop. And you know, it took a long time for me to feel confident doing it. And anyway. So because of that, I didn't want to build it up too big in my mind because I didn't want to put too much more pressure on the mental side of it. I didn't want to put it on this pedestal. I was like, this will be the craziest thing I've ever done. This is so extreme. This is the hardest thing that any human can imagine. You know, I didn't want to like put it way up here when the reality is that physically, you know, I was capable. I just had to actually do it. And so part of the way that, that I kept it from putting it too high in my mind was to kind of treat it as one of many other climbs during the year.

Alex Honnold: So I had all my norm as a professional climb where you basically go on expeditions, you, uh, you know, you work on other climbing goals. So right after, uh, right after I did the free Solo, actually I went on an expedition to Alaska with some of my teammates on the north team and to climb big mountains, uh, near Denali. Well, not that 5,000 foot rock walls. And so not really mountains, you know, but, but big walls and so, and that was specifically training for northeast expedition in that winter, going to Antarctica to climb versus sends a big walls, which was something was an incredible experience for me. Something totally new for me, you know, really character building cause I don't really ski that well until like live on skis and the Antarctica climbing big granite walls. It was, you know, it was incredible. But, and then later in the year, Tom and I did the speed record on the nose.

Alex Honnold: And so the point is I had all these other big climbing goals lined out in front of me and so I freestyled it all cap. I immediately went to Alaska, I practice my skiing a bit. Clemson mountains. That got me ready for Antarctica. You know, I trained a bit more during this springtime than Tommy and I did the speed record as your, is your physical stamina? Like it's not slowed down at all or are you still improving? Are you feeling like your old age? Oh, it's, I mean, well, obviously I've already begun my decline. I mean, I'm, I'm, I'm 33 I'm, you know, I'm halfway halfway done now actually looking around the room. I'm like, oh no, you guys, no, no. I mean, I don't know. It's hard to say. Um, actually I'll get to that in one second though, because, so my point with the, the whole thing is that I did all that climbing and then the film came out and then, so since then it's been, you know, seven months a touring with a film, going to the academy awards during the whole crazy thing.

Alex Honnold: And so now every day people are like, what's next? In some ways I'm like, well, I already did what's next? You know, I did the climb and then I kept doing interesting things for a year. I kept challenging myself as a climber. I did several things that I'm quite proud of. You know, climate and El Cap and sub two hours

had been, had been a bit of a dream as well. And I mean, we were pretty proud of it when we did it. We're like, that's awesome. But of course it's overshadowed by this incredible film that goes on to win an academy award. And so, you know, it's a little bit weird for me to be like, what's the next big thing? I'm like, I don't know. I'll just keep chipping away at, I'll keep setting goals for myself. I'll keep trying to improve. I'll keep doing things, you know, I mean, who knows if they'll ever be, I mean, basically they'll never be as good a film about it.

Alex Honnold: So it's like, you know, for the mainstream public, no one's ever going to be like, that's incredible. In the in the same way, but, but for me personally as a climber is, it's fine, you know? Do you ever imagine a future without climbing? Uh, no. No, I don't think so. To Sani. No, she, I mean, she loves coming to, we climb together all the time. Um, I mean, there will almost certainly be a future where I'm not pushing as hard at climbing, where it's not my every thought when I'm not training all the time. When I'm not worried about my diet, when, you know, when I'm just casually climbing. For my own fun. Um, but you know, we'll see when we get there.

Bret Stephens: One of the things I want to ask you about before we turn to audience questions, because this is important as a, I'd like you to talk about a bit about the hunted foundation. What, what it is, what you're doing, what your ambitions are for it.

Alex Honnold: Uh, yeah, so the Huddle Foundation, uh, is, you know, I started at five, seven years ago. I guess that's, it makes me feel it's speaking of aging. Um, so I started many years ago and, and, uh, we've been giving grants to other nonprofits, basically supporting solar projects around the world, supporting energy access and, uh, and I mean, I guess the long answer of it is that, uh, I don't know. I mean, how, how do, how deep we should we, should we go in this audience? Go for it. Um, yeah. Well, okay. So when you ask about what's next, I mean, honestly the foundation projects that we're working on are an hour, a big part of what's inspiring me and sort of motivating me right now because I've been doing so much traveling with the film that, you know, I just don't have any big climbing dreams right now. But some of the work that we're, you know, we're supporting the first cooperative solar micro grid in Puerto Rico, um, which is potentially the islands first.

Alex Honnold: And so, and so a month or two ago I went to Puerto Rico, visited the community group that we're, that we're working with, you know, saw the project, saw the, the businesses that that will be effected by it, you know, anyway. And it was incredible. I mean, it's pretty, it was personally very satisfying. I was like, Oh, this is, you know, I mean, this is great. And so, you know, when people ask what's next, I'm kind of like, well, I don't know. I mean, people want to hear free solar to, or like some rad climbing objective. But the reality is that I'm pretty content training in the gym, improving as a climber, working with a foundation, you know, basically living life and sort of seeing how it plays out, you know, just

trying to do something useful in the world while still trying to improve as, you know, what I do. Um, I dunno, it's just not a second

Bret Stephens: the answer. And if someone wants to get linked up to the huddled foundation, what did they do?

Alex Honnold: Um, so Hano foundation.org, uh, you can see all the projects that we've supported over the years. You can see the type of projects that we're supporting currently, um, around the world. We're mostly focused on the Americas for the next couple years just because it's slightly easier to oversee. But, um, but yeah, I mean, reach out to a hundred pollination under org goes to the executive director who's this incredible woman who, and, uh, you know, basically we're just, we're just working away. I think later, later in the summer, uh, I'm going to be going to Detroit to do a project there. It's more, more domestic. But, uh, you know, I'm still very much an area with, with some need and, uh, yeah, I mean it's, it's nice.

Bret Stephens: Um, we're gonna now start doing questions. Uh, I guess I'll call people. Um, and, but I'll cut you off if you start bloviating so, um, ask a question. Um, like one, two sentences, question mark and then you're good. Um, so there's a young woman right here. Uh, there you are. Maybe just tell us your name and stand up and ask a

Speaker 5: hi. I'm Maddie Mamani from the Bayzos scholar foundation and I was wondering what inspired you to start climbing?

Alex Honnold: Uh, there wasn't a specific thing that inspired me. I just always loved climbing as a little kid. I climbed on things, I love climbing trees and buildings and whatever else. And then, uh, and then a climbing gym opened in Sacramento, which is where I'm from. And so my parents read about in the newspaper and they just took me to the climbing gym cause they thought it'd be a more structured outlet for, you know what I mean? It's better than me jumping off the roof and playing around at home. And they were sort of like, oh, at least this way you can do it properly with padded floors and ropes and all that kind of thing. And so then obviously I loved climbing in the gym and then did that for the rest of my life basically, but still going to the gym all the time.

Alex Honnold: Um, up here, this gentleman, Hey, uh, would you consider releasing all four hours of footage? Pretty pleased. Uh, I mean, I have no say in it. I, you know, I don't have any, like I said, I had no editorial control over the film. I mean, I would actually be sort of interested in seeing that too, but I think it'd be pretty boring. Um, you know, it's hard to say, cause I mean, the reality is that free selling is, is pretty, you know, it's a nice, even pace. It's pretty mellow. I mean, there's a lot of easy climbing on OCAP. Um, it just, you know, I mean, it'd be four hours of just trotting up the wall.

Speaker 4: Yeah.

Alex Honnold: I think people would love if subway, there's also the, they'd have to sensor out a bunch of full frontal nudity cause obviously I peed off the wall like six times.

Speaker 4: Is there something, you know, and few things like that, but that's fine. It'd be rated R. Okay. Okay. Uh, uh, let's see

Alex Honnold: someone from this side. Yes.

Speaker 5: Um, I wanted to know what motivated you to keep achieving these extraordinary goals?

Alex Honnold: Um, I dunno. I mean I, I think for me part of it is the fact that I've always felt like I can do a little bit better. I think that the real motivation is improving and, and in some ways all these, you know, what you call incredible achievements or goals or whatever you said. Uh, I mean they're just, they're just ways of sort of measuring improvement for me. You know, I like to take on slightly bigger challenges. I like having slightly more complex challenges and so you just keep, you know, I've always been all about incremental progress. I mean, it's funny cause the, the soul is that we talked about were sort of big milestones for me and my climbing, but I've done, um, I think maybe 35 free solos that are the first, you know, first free solos are things that I'm sort of proud of. And really when you lay them all out at 35 of them, it's, I mean it's a lot. It's a long, long road that eventually culminated with El cap for me. You know, it's like many, many small steps in different directions until, until I finally was able to actually climb o cab. Um, uh, right here in the middle. Uh, yeah.

Speaker 5: Hi. Um, I was just curious what impacts your growing fame has had on your mental stability and clarity when you climb today compared to, say five, 10 years ago?

Alex Honnold: Um, I think overall it hasn't had that big of an impact. I mean, so I think obviously when I'm climbing and climbing gyms and everyone's staring at me, it's, you know, slightly distracting and a little bit harder to perform in the way that I'd like, you know, it's, it's hard to totally shut that aside. Um, but I don't know. I mean, you know, I went on climate on the past day and I felt just like, you know, it, it felt just like any other day climate. It was incredible. Um, so I mean, uh, yeah, I don't think it's had that big of an impact. I mean, to some extent, I think that's what I love about climbing is the fact that it forces you to focus 100% on what you're doing and, and you know, it really, that's the joy of climbing is that you're so in, you know, in the actual activity of it that, that you're not self conscious about those kinds of things. Um, oh, okay. Well, yeah. Eagerness counts. So definitely over there.

Bret Stephens: Yeah. Oh No, they're all heckling. I know them and I don't like them. Well, we had a question because, yeah. Um, Emily and I have both watched you solo in person in real life and it was absolutely horrifying. Yeah, that's fair. But you also were witness to one of the more horrifying free Solas I, well, I shouldn't, that's



not totally true. So for those that don't know, they're both also professional climbers that were on the north face team, so they're heckling and they should be removed. No, no, no, no. But we are, I do have a legitimate question with regards to free syllabus. How did you feel knowing that your friends were watching you? Like it, it talks about it in the film a little bit, but actually really, how did you feel?

Alex Honnold: Yeah. Um, I mean, I don't want to sound too callous. I didn't totally care. I mean, I knew that, you know, I know it's super stressful to Washington. I don't like watching other people free solo if the, if they're pushing hard. Uh, I mean it's, it's really stressful to watch. It's, yeah, I mean, it's, do, did you get stressed out watching the movie? Like, no, no, no. I mean, that doesn't stress me out because I'm like, oh, that's me and my best. I'm like, that's awesome.

Bret Stephens: Ah, no bread. But watching a lot of my friends, yeah.

Alex Honnold: You know, I have a lot of other friends that have sold things and it's, yeah, I mean it can be stressful, but, um, but no, I mean I think that that the main thing was that I cared about my own safety more than they cared about my safety basically. I mean, I kind of already knew that I was, that I was being as careful as I could be that I was preparing as much as possible. And so I knew that it was super hard for them to watch, but at the same time, I also knew that I was only going to do the climb if I felt totally comfortable and if I felt comfortable, it should be okay for, you know, they should be able to hold it together, basically. I Dunno. Um, I mean, I know it's, yeah, it's slightly, I don't know, there's no great way to say that. Right. But they're professionals, you know, they just have to put on their, yeah, I don't know. Up here on freight face.

Speaker 2: Yeah.

Bret Stephens: Thank you. First of all, thank you. This has been an amazing conversation. Really, really great to have you here. Um, Alex in the film, your personal life is really sort of on

Audience Member: display, not just the unflattering stuff, stuff that you thought was unflattering and the beginning of your relationship, but there's like, you know, filmmaker prerogative and what's shown and what's not shown. And there's a sort of story arc to your personal development that goes along with your development as a climber and your, your breakthroughs and climbing and your personal breakthroughs. How, how real was that and how much of that was licensed by the director? And I mean, did you feel like you had a sort of true personal breakthrough in, in your capacity to have a relationship and be, you know, committed to somebody?

Alex Honnold: Um, I don't know. She's a psychologist. No, no, no. I'm, I'm about ready to lay down on the sofa and just open up. Um, I'm ready. Um, no I don't, I don't know. I mean, I don't, you know, I definitely don't think that they took any creative

license with it. I mean, I think that it's all honest, it's all in there. I mean there are a couple of things that I'm like, so for example, with, with my relation with my girlfriend, uh, at the end of the film I say I love you on the summit of the mountains and hiking down in the many audiences interpret that as the first time. I say I love you to her because of the first time it's shown that, I mean that's not the case. I mean we've been dating for two years already. You know, I tried to use the I word sparingly, but it does come out from time to time and, and so, you know, I mean I wouldn't call that artistic license though.

Alex Honnold: I mean I think that, I mean cause that is an honest moment that you know, every, everything in the film happened, you know, like it's all honest. It's all there, you know. But they had 700 hours of footage that they had to condense down to a 90 minute film. Obviously they did it in the best way that they could. So I don't know. I mean, yeah, I think there's some legitimate, well, I mean honestly I would hope that anybody has some kind of actual personal growth over two years of, you know, over two years of life. Uh, you know what I mean? And, and Sony, Sony is an incredible woman and she definitely has pushed me on a lot of those things as well, you know, I mean, she's kind of required me to be slightly better in some ways. And so, you know, I've done my best to, to, to, to meet her expectations, you know? Right. Um, over, let's go to the far side. This young man in green. Oh, awesome.

Audience Member: What's your where for so long moment. Oh, good question. Well we are going all night now. They're there. They're funny. I don't know. So it depends what you mean by worst. I mean, so the closest that I've come to falling off things has definitely been, I've had maybe a half dozen experiences where I've broken holds or things, you know, things have suddenly happened where like a hold snaps off the wall. But the thing about those is that in some ways they're at my worst moments because they're over before you even realize what happened. Basically if something breaks off and you don't fall off the wall, then you know by the time you realized that you broke a hole, you already didn't fall off. And so basically all there is to do is take a breath and just, you know, compose yourself and sort of carry on. Um, it's kind of like, you know, if you narrowly avoid a car accident or something, I mean, by the time, by the time you know what happened, the accident is already avoided.

Alex Honnold: So there's nothing really to be afraid of at that point. Even though you still feel a big rush of adrenaline and your body starts to shake and can be all traumatizing. But you know, the reality of it is that the, that the dangerous situation has already passed at that point. So I think that most of my most dangerous situations and free soloing weren't really that scary because they just happened instantly. And thankfully, uh, you know, they didn't wind up being catastrophic. Uh, most of the scariest experiences were sort of things like half dome that are sort of long, you know, mounting dread where you're like, am I off route? Like will I ever make it to the top? Who knows if this is the right. Um, actually, particularly when I was younger and I was sort of learning how to free, so I had a

bunch of experiences where I was really bad at reading Topo Topez, which is the, the maps that people draw for where routes go.

Alex Honnold: I used to be really bad at interpreting like, what's the left face in corner? What's a right face corner? Where's the crack? Where's the little roof? You know, so, so now you can like look at the map, look at the wall and be like, okay, I'm going to go up there and then left. And then up and it's gonna be perfect. But when I was younger, I would just sort of like, oh, I think this must be the one. And then a climb halfway up it and be like, I don't remember the map saying they were supposed to be bolts on this route and it'd be like, why am I passing bolts? And then suddenly realized that I was like 500 feet away from the root that I thought I was supposed to be on and I was actually just on the wrong wall. And you're like, oh no. And it start to panic and then, you know. So really I think that experiences of mounting dread have always been the hardest. That's the long answer. But, uh, another one over here. You Sir,

Audience Member: I know that your Max climbing grade is obviously higher than the grade that you're willing to necessarily solo at. What, uh, grade would you solo at at this point? What's kind of the Max grade that you would consider?

Alex Honnold: It's not really a great thing. It's basically how secure does it feel. And that's kind of the challenge of El Cap. I mean El cap isn't actually really that hard of a grade. By comparison. The t, the technical difficulty grade of El cap is a grade at which I often warm up on at a sport crag. Like when I'm just out for a normal day of climbing a cliff with the rope, you know, that's what I would kind of consider generally my second warmup of the day. You know, once I kind of get limbered up a little bit, I'm like okay, I'm still still warming up. So I mean you can't really compare the, the grade. I mean it really just comes down to how secure you feel while you're doing that style of climbing. But let's go in the middle with this guy waving his arms frantically waving. He must be psyched.

Audience Member: I'm not a climber. So this is maybe a naive question, but it seems like a a, my assumption is it's easier to climb up than it is to climb down. So if you, is there a point of no return where you have to keep going up? That's not totally true. I mean

Alex Honnold: I'm climbing. So it is fair to say that in general, climbing up is easier than climbing down. And part of that is just because when you're climbing up, you can see where your hands are going. But when you're climbing down, it's really hard to see where your feet are going just because they're blocked by your own body. So it's basically hard to see. But there are some styles of climbing that are a lot easier to go back down like say chimneys or you know, certain types of cracks you can kind of slide back down them. It's actually physically a lot easier to go down. Um, I think the biggest difference though is that most people find it easier to go up because that's all they ever practice. Uh, very few climbers spend a lot of time down climbing so they're just not to that, that style of movement.

Alex Honnold: But I have spent a lot of time down climbing cause that's really an important part of resoling is to feel comfortable reversing things. And so in general, I feel pretty comfortable reversing almost everything that I've sold a, I mean, that's not totally true on something like, okay, I, because it's just so big and so hard and you know, such an undertaking, um, that, that typically it's probably better just carry on to the top than, than reverse. Uh, you know, the thousands of feet that you've climbed. But, um, but in general, uh, you know, down climbing is an important thing for Zolan.

Speaker 2: Okay.

Alex Honnold: Um, next question. Uh, I see hands way in the back on the left.

Speaker 2: [inaudible]

Audience Member: wait for the microphone. Hi, I'm Sarah. Thank you. Oh, this is actually a question for my boyfriend. He wants to know, um, how many times on Free Solo did you come down to like one feature? Like where maybe three limbs were off.

Alex Honnold: Oh, I see what you're saying. I mean, basically, how often was my life depending on a single limb. Yeah. Um, uh, I don't know. I mean, I have to count all the different things about all the moves on the route, but they're probably, um, you know, a couple of places basically. But I mean specifically that move we were talking about on the free by slab where your whole weight is on one foot hold just for a moment. Um, there probably a couple other things sort of like that. Um, but there are tons of places on the route where if a single thing slipped, you would fall off. I mean like, uh, you know, not to say that you're only using one limb, but if you're in counter pressure between one hand in one foot and you're pushing between them, if either of them slipped, then obviously you're no longer in counter pressure. You're just pin wheeling backward off the wall. So, you know, so there are whole sections of the wall that are climbing in that kind of style that you know, require all of your limbs to stay on the wall.

Speaker 2: Okay.

Alex Honnold: Um, let's go to the center. There is a lady waving her hand right here.

Audience Member: Hi, my name's birdies. I wanted to ask about your claims where you use a gear. Um, what are the notable improvements that you've had with, um, gear and are there any innovations that you would recommend or, um, have had changed with the gear that you use? That's

Alex Honnold: it. In all my months of touring, nobody's ever asked about innovations in gear, and I appreciate that. Um, uh, so yeah, I mean, over the 20 years that I've climbed, there definitely have been big improvements in gear, but they're sort of all incremental. I think for the most part, uh, things get a little lighter. Uh, I mean, particularly with climbing hard goods, like the actual equipment that

you're putting into the rock, it's all gotten a little bit safer, a little bit lighter. Uh, ropes have gotten thinner, uh, which means that they weigh less and they're easier to, to pull behind you. Um, I mean, in general, it's all just gotten slightly easier, but, but nothing groundbreaking, you know, it sort of in the same way that peril continues to get better. You know, you're a little bit warmer, a little bit lighter, a little bit more waterproof or better wicking or things like that.

Alex Honnold: But, but at the same time I'm, you're still clothes. I mean you're seeing, you know, so, um, yeah, I mean it hasn't, hasn't totally changed the game, but it is nice to have lighter mountain boots, lighter equipment. It's all, it just means that you can climb a little faster basically. Is News climbing going to become a thing that not by me right now actually. I mean, and so speaking of that, so climbing's in the Olympics next year, so climbing's in the 2020 Olympics and climbing in general has been booming as a sport. And so I am personally sort of curious as to where, you know, what happens if more money comes into climbing, if there's more innovation? Cause there hasn't really been any major changes in equipment and in a long time. Uh, it'll be interesting if people really push it in new directions. Uh, yes. Uh, you.

Speaker 2: Hmm.

Audience Member: Hi Alex. Um, I hate to get back to your relationship, but if your first film was called free and then Oh, solo, what would the next one be called? Okay.

Alex Honnold: Well, I mean, the film crew always jokes that it's still salt

Alex Honnold: when, when Sony Sawhney me and I'm back to living in the band, you know, but uh, but yeah,

Alex Honnold: I think the answer she was looking for was married with children, isn't it? Isn't that a TV show? Oh yeah. Yeah. No, that sucks. I don't want that.

Speaker 4: Well, let's see. We'll see.

Alex Honnold: I'm at the show sex. I'm sure life will be great, but okay. Um, uh, yes ma'am.

Speaker 2: Real fast.

Alex Honnold: Oh wait for the mic so we can record you. Is there someone there? Thanks. You're really making poor Mike runners just really get their exercise.

Speaker 2: Yeah.

Audience Member: So first question, are you still eating off the spatula? And the second question is about the MRI in your brain. So do you really think that, I mean, did I understand correctly that the test said that you experience less fear than another person would?

Alex Honnold: Okay, so first of the Spatula, uh, I mean, when I'm in the van, yeah, I often need office fashion too. I mean, the whole point that you don't have this fashion is you don't scratch your pan. You have fewer dishes. It's very efficient. It's very practical. I strongly encourage everybody to do it actually. Um, anyway, the Amygdala thing, uh, we're chatting about a bit backstage earlier, but basically, uh, I mean, what exactly is your question? If I don't feel fear at the same as other folks here,

Speaker 2: feel less weird.

Alex Honnold: So yeah, so I think that, uh, for those who haven't seen it in the film, there's this, you know, maybe 32nd scene where I take an f for MRI, they scan my brain, um, and it basically shows no activation in my amygdala. Uh, would you sort of fight or flight center of the brain, uh, during this specific round of tests. But the takeaway from that wasn't so much, but, but the thing is, it's there and it works fine. Just don't get me wrong. It's, it's all good. Um, the thing was that basically through years and years of practice, I've desensitized myself to certain levels of stimulus. I think. And that's kind of the takeaway. We talking with the researcher and, and uh, and there's a full feature link to article about that exact, I mean the reason I was taking the FMLA was for an article for Nautilus magazine who is a Science magazine.

Alex Honnold: And so if you're interested, read the article, dive in deep to it. But basically over years of exposure to scary situations, I've sort of desensitized myself to the point that the, the test that you take where you're laying in a tube and you're looking at images as like, I didn't, I didn't find it very scary because it's not, you know, because it's not dangerous at all. But had they thrown a snake into the Fri with me, I'm sure my Mengele would've lit up like Christmas story. And you'd be like, oh Geez. You know, but so, you know, I saw it as all perfectly rational, totally normal know. I was like, of course my, my brains aren't gonna light up looking at black and white photos while I lay here. Perfectly comfortable and safe inside a tube. I was like, that's stupid. But apparently the average human mind does react to the images the same. You know, as if they were actually experiencing it. But I think it's because the average person hasn't, you know, been scared out of their mind for years and years and years and you're having near death experiences over and over, you know. Okay. Uh, um, there is a young woman directly in front of me, uh, in the middle there raising your head. Yeah.

Alex Honnold: Coming from both sides such that this is a big moment for the mix.

Audience Member: Um, so when, so when you're climbing with other people, do you, um, like when they gave you, when they give you beta on a route or no?

Alex Honnold: Yeah, so which is so Beta is what it's called when when a, you get a method for how to climb something. And so it's really common for climbers to tell each other, you know, like raise your left foot and sag your right, your right hip and

you know, open up to the wall and grab that with your left hand. Like that's what's referred to as Beta. I freaking love it. Um, I, whenever I get to climb with folks who are, who are much better than me, it's such a pleasure to have somebody just tell you like, here's how you should do it. And you're like, oh, that's so nice. I find it. I mean, actually, so today I was climbing with two guys who were both very good climbers and it was really nice to be able to share Beta. They were also both slightly taller than me and, and big and strong strapping men.

Alex Honnold: And so it was kind of Nice to have people who are roughly the same size, roughly the same strength, to be able to just tell me like, here's how you do it. And just, you know, I was like, oh, it's such a pleasure. It's like having a guided tour. Yeah. I love that. Um, some people really hate it though. Yeah. I mean, particularly if you're climbing and commercial gym, it's a kind of poor form to just yell advice. It's somebody that you don't know being like, raise your left foot and they're like, F you. I'm like working it out for myself, you know? Um, but I, I like it, um, uh, on the left right there.

Speaker 2: Yeah.

Audience Member: So I'm not a professional climber either, but I had a question. As a ultra runner,

Audience Member: I always carry water with me. How did you do that whole climb with no water?

Alex Honnold: I didn't, I stash a reader of water and a little bit of food in two different places on the route. So, um, and, and that's part of the appeal of having a camera crew and having stuff like that is that it makes the logistics a lot easier because for them to get into position, to film the climb, they had to repel huge sections of the wall. So they were able to stash them food and water for me, uh, they carried my, my sneaker, you know, my, my shoes up to the summit so that I didn't have to pre stash them ahead of time. You know, all the things they did for me are things that I easily could have done myself a couple of days before with a lot more planning and foresight. But because they're filming it just makes it pretty easy where the morning of you're just like, here are all my snacks, put them, you know, put them up there when you go.

Alex Honnold: It's like, no. Yeah, I mean, and, and honestly that's one of the reasons that I've agreed to work with film crews over the years is because you know that in some ways it does make your actual climb easier or it makes your own logistical process easier. Uh, this side of the room, um, sir, with the white shirt. Yup. So when you think about, um, the limits of what you can do, is that defined by what you think, which is physically possible or your intuition? Uh, I mean, I think it's mostly limited by what's physically possible. I mean, you know, there are some things that I just can't do. I mean, there are some little edges that I cannot pull with my fingers. Uh, you know, I mean, that's, I mean, so if you're talking about specifically with free soloing, I think that being able to physically do something is the base.



Alex Honnold: And then beyond that, you know, whether or not you mentally can, can do it. Uh, you know, that's, I mean, that's kind of the extra step, but, um, but there's this whole physical layer at the bottom that, I mean, if you can't do it, you can't do it. And, and to me, the physical side is always come harder. Like I'm not actually the guy heckling me over there, that guy, frequently strong fingers, very, very strong, naturally gifted in a way that I never happened. And so, you know, the physical side for me has always taken a lot of work, a lot of, you know, a lot of training, a lot of effort, and I still just can't really be that strong. I hope Maddie psyched over there. He's, he's single, by the way, kissing him, he's interested.

Speaker 2: Right? Um, that's him. He's, he's, he's living out of a tent I think. But you know, that's pretty cool. But

Alex Honnold: anyway, so for us, for some climbers, you know, the physical side comes easier in the mental side is really hard. For whatever reason, the mental side is always been side easier to me. But, but the physical side is, is still a struggle. I mean, it's just not that easy to pull yourself up on a tiny little edge, you know? It's okay. Um, I'm just trying to go, uh, now you asked a question already. Uh, uh, I'm right there. Yeah. Yeah. Whoever. Alex planted the guy right next to the microphone at the black. Yeah. It's all about keeping it right by the mic and it's easy. Hey Alex, it, it seems like any time a new record at any sport is set that no one ever did before somebody else comes along and duplicates it. What you

Audience Member: doesn't seem like it's readily, readily duplicable. Is there someone in your community, or have you met someone who said, I'm going to do what you did and in, in a way that's credible, that's believable, impossible. Or is this something that's years and years away from being replicated?

Alex Honnold: Yeah, that's an interesting question and it's really hard to know for sure because like I was just saying, I mean there's such a difference in the physical side of it and the mental side of it. And so physically, they're probably, you know, there are many people on are on earth right now, climbing who, who can physically climb el Cap without falling off. Um, you know, I mean there, I dunno, maybe 20 people or something who could potentially walk up to the base, climb from the bottom of the top without falling, you know, but none of them, none of them free Solo. And none of them really have the drive for. And none of the necessarily want to. But conceivably, if any of them were just like, screw it, I don't care about living or dying, I'm just going for it, you know? I mean, one of them potentially could. So I mean, in some ways I've always, I've always kind of, you know, darkly joked that that the right person just has to have a bad breakup and then they'll just go,

Speaker 4: you know, and you know, so

Alex Honnold: well, I mean, okay. No. So to bring it back full circle though. So Tommy Caldwell went through a really difficult divorce many years ago and he did have a

moment. He's the most successful cap climber ever. He put up most of the other free routes on the wall. The climbing shoes that I was wearing are named after him. You know, the, the Tommy Caldwell pro model, like he designed them for climbing on OCAP. He's an incredible climber. And so he was going through this very difficult divorce and you know, he had a moment where he was sitting on top of this route, you know, looking over at El cap and like I should just go over there and soul that, you know, cause I mean, I don't know, sometimes you have dark days and, and he is somebody who physically could, you know, I mean he, you know, he was in the right mood potentially he could.

Alex Honnold: And so it's kind of a weird thing though, because you know, I don't think that anyone's actively trying to, I don't think that anyone really wants to, I don't think that anyone's really in the right place that they should. But you never really know. I mean somebody could, but I mean time will tell though, if history is any guide, most of the other big cutting edge resellers haven't really been repeated for 20 years or so. And so, you know, it seems to be sort of a generational thing, but you know, time will tell we are over time, but I'm told we can go over time. So are you good with that? Yeah, I mean whatever you guys want.

Speaker 4: Yeah, we're just partying. Okay.

Alex Honnold: So I'm, I'm, yes, over there. Maybe just a few more questions and then, um, I'm happy to hang out and chat with whoever, whoever wants you afterward. And so, you know, don't feel like we're holding you hostage, but, but if folks are interested, we can, we're happy to chat as long as you guys want. Okay, great. Thank you. What would be an activity that you would be too freaked out to do? Like skydiving or, Oh, like knitting?

Speaker 4: Yeah.

Alex Honnold: Ballroom dance. That ballroom dancing, like, oh goodness. Um, no, I dunno about freaked out. I mean, in general, I don't, I don't know, public performance. Like, if I had to sing opera mine, you know, that's, that's not for me.

Speaker 2: I don't know.

Audience Member: Thanks so much for this by the way. This is a real treat and I was just curious as to, I mean, I'm sure this theme has been beaten, beaten to death here, but, uh, I'm wondering what your risk assessment kind of strategy is, how it's changed over the last couple of decades and maybe kind of who your mentors are in that or if there are any, or if you're, you know, studying risk assessment. I know it's a big deal in other sports, you know, pilots, kayaking. What's that

Alex Honnold: first we studied risk assessment. I don't technically know anything about it. Um, you know, from, from an education standpoint, um, though I have had, you know, countless conversations with people like Tommy Caldwell, other climbers,

you know, peers in, I mean, and even conversations like this. I mean, basically climbers talk about risk and managing risk all the time because it's such an important part of, of the sport. I mean it's, it's, you know, sort of at the core of, of climbing is how do you manage the, the risks associated with it? You know, I don't know what was the first half of the question if you, oh, how, how's my process changed over time? Yeah, yeah, yeah. I Dunno. I think that maybe my biggest development has been sort of accepting. I don't know. I think as I've gotten older I've sort of accepted that even though something might feel like 100% realistically, it's never 100%.

Alex Honnold: There's just always, I mean, I've just seen too many friends have terrible accidents, too many, you know, unfortunate things happen and happen in the mountains. And so, you know, I've kind of realized that, that, you know, something feels a hundred, you know, I mean, it never actually is a hundred. And, and in a lot of ways I've actually really limited my, my easy soloing now because I feel like that's kind of where I'm rolling the dice the most. Um, when I was younger, I had a lot of kind of high mileage days where I was going out and climbing things that were physically easy but tons and tons of them, like say 50 roots in a day or something. And, um, and I think that was a really important way for me to sort of build my base and to feel comfortable soiling and to, you know, to grow as a climber.

Alex Honnold: But I pretty much don't do that at all anymore because I recognize that even if it's an easy route and I feel totally fine on it, there is, you know, a slight chance that something's just randomly gonna break or something, something random is going to happen. Um, just because I have, you know, I basically know many people who have had accidents like that and you're sort of like, well, so I mean, I guess that, yeah, I'm a little more conservative over time, which is ironic because you watch the film free Solo and you're like, oh, that guy's crazy. But, but in a lot of ways, that actually represents me raining it in quite a bit because I trained for two years to do one climb that I really cared about as opposed to just going for it. You know? I mean, had I just not really cared about it, I could've just tried on day one, you know, it probably would've worked out, probably 85% chance would have worked out fine and there wouldn't be a movie, you know. But instead I wanted to get to a hundred. So I spent two years working on it. And, and it's funny because people watch for sale and they're like, oh, so much free soloing. But I mean, that's two years of climbing. And I did what, maybe four or five free solos in the film culminating with OCAP, which is obviously really important to me, but, but I did, you know, maybe six or seven days if resoling mixed, you know, intersperse through our two years of training. So, I mean, the ratio is pretty good.

Bret Stephens: Let's take one more question. Uh, and that will be, uh,

Alex Honnold: to the really enthusiastic, really enthusiastic person all the way in the back. Yeah. She seems like, all right. Is that, is that even the, she, I can't tell. I won't go with sex because it's really hard to see. I apologize.

Speaker 2: [inaudible]

Audience Member: um, did you memorize every single move? Not just the biggest ones. And do you still marrows them?

Alex Honnold: Uh, no. So I didn't memorize every move on the whole climb. Uh, mostly because I didn't have to, like I was saying earlier, the El cap maybe breaks down into a third relatively easy climbing, a third sort of moderate climbing and a third really hard climbing. So the hard climbing, I knew every move, I knew everything about it. But for the easy climbing, I just knew that I could do it. And just, you know, obviously I had climbed it many times before, but I didn't have to memorize the moves. I could just trust that I could go up there and have a nice time and just climb. Um, you know, so I basically, I saved my effort for the parts that mattered the most.

Bret Stephens: Um, let me just sort of take advantage and just ask you a final question. So there's been a lot of really young people, um, asking you and you know, you write about how you were a young kid with like not quite posters of Tommy on your wall but pretty close. So now you're that role model for I think a lot of really young climbers. And what role do you want to model?

Alex Honnold: I don't know. That's a hard question cause I've definitely never aspire to be a role model of any kind. I would tell kids to stay in school even though I unfortunately did not. But you know, but learn from my mistakes. Um, no I don't. I don't know. I mean I think that, I think the film is a good job of sort of showing that if you put enough work into something, I don't know. I mean, I guess if I want to be any kind of role model, I want it to be around living, intentionally choosing the things that you care about, working hard toward them and putting in the effort required, you know, working on the things you care about. I'm doing them. Um, I mean, it was never, you know, that was never my, my design. And you know, I've, I certainly would never call myself a role model, but I'm sort of like, if you're going to pull anything from it, I mean, I hope it's something like that, you know, choose, I mean, we all have a finite life. I mean, we're all gonna die. We have a limited amount of time. You use it for the things that you care the most about how a tunnel [inaudible].