Talks at GS
Jimmy Chin, Mountain Athlete,
Photographer & Filmmaker
Jared Cohen, Moderator
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Jimmy Chin: When you know that the potential outcome could be fatal and you still choose to do something, you know, you're living a life with, like, deep, deep intention.

Jared Cohen: We're joined by Jimmy Chin, a very good long-time friend of mine. So Jimmy's an incredible renaissance man. He's a *New York Times* bestselling author. He's a 20-plus-year member of the North Face athlete team. He is an incredible adventure climber. His photographs have been on the cover of *New York Times Magazine*, *National Geographic.* He won an Oscar. But back in 2017, Jimmy decided that Mt. Everest was kind of boring. He had climbed Mt. Everest, but he's kind of a lazy guy so he decided to ski down it because walking down it was too tiring. But he also decided to tackle what's known by a lot of climbers as the anti Everest, something called Shark Fin in India. I think you're the first person to have climbed it?

Jimmy Chin: Yeah, that route. Yeah.

Jared Cohen: It's, like, pretty dangerous, right?

Jimmy Chin: It's relative what people think is dangerous.

Jared Cohen: He's also very humble. He also decided that it was too easy to climb the anti Everest the normal way, so he decided to carry a camera. And to put that in perspective, that's like climbing the anti Everest with a full cast, like one of those ones where your arm is stuck like this. I actually feel like I, as long as we've been friends, I for some reason don't know the full backstory. You know, there's a lot of reasons why people go and found companies and do things. And just, like, don't understand how this is what you decided to do.

Presumably, you didn't, like, pop out of the womb and decide I'm going to be kind of a death-defying climber, so how did you get into all this?

Jimmy Chin: Yeah. Well, I mean, I'm a very unlikely

climber, high-altitude alpinist. I grew up in, like, a very small town in Minnesota called Mankato. Little, in south central farm -- south central Minnesota, little farm town. My parents are Chinese immigrants. They were librarians at the small university there. And, yeah, not a lot of alpinists have come out of Mankato, Minnesota.

Jared Cohen: It's really surprising. It's surprising to me.

Jimmy Chin: But, yeah, for as long as I can remember, my parents, being good Chinese immigrant parents, basically defined, "Jimmy, you have three careers. Like, we're really looking forward to you being a doctor and a lawyer or maybe going into finance."

Jared Cohen: You didn't do that, did you?

Jimmy Chin: And I literally thought there was, like, three careers growing up. And basically did all the things I was supposed to do. I started playing the violin when I was three. I studied martial arts for as long as I can remember. I swam competitively. All these kind of very rigorous activities, highly scheduled.

But when I got to college, where I studied International Relations and Comparative Religion, I found climbing. And it just kind of took over my entire psyche. And when I finished school, instead of applying to graduate school, I told my parents I'm going to move to Yosemite and I'm going to climb and ski for one year and just kind of get it out of my system.

Jared Cohen: And you moved to a car, right?

Jimmy Chin: And I moved into my car.

Jared Cohen: So not a garage. You moved into a car.

Jimmy Chin: No, no. I moved into a car. And I moved to Yosemite, which is basically, if you want to be a real climber, you have to -- you cut your teeth in Yosemite. Kind of like if you want to be a real surfer, you move to North Shore of Oahu and surf pipelines.

So I, to the horror of my parents, moved into the back of a car and kind of embraced the dirtbag climber's lifestyle. And in the winters, I was a ski bum. And one year of

course turned into two. Two turned into three. Eventually, I ended up living out of my car for seven years. I literally --

Jared Cohen: Car wash?

Jimmy Chin: -- was traversing the country, following the seasons, climbing and skiing full time, doing odd jobs. And I would occasionally talk to my parents. And my dad would say, “Our language is 5,000 years old, and there is no word for what you do. Of course we're worried,” you know?

And I would call my sister and be like, “Hey, how are Mom and Dad doing?” and she would say, “Mom just keeps repeating to herself that she's raised a homeless man.” And I'm like -- and that was kind of how I was moving through the world at that point. And, you know, it was a hard time for me because obviously, like, I felt the pressure of all these expectations. And not just from my parents but, like, from, to a degree, society. Like, living in your car and climbing Yosemite is fringe, you know?

I mean, it's much more mainstream now, especially after some of the films we made. But at the time, it was kind of

a pretty risky choice for me. But then I ended up picking up the camera and started taking photos of my friends and really focused on putting together expeditions. Started filming at some point. And then I'm kind of here.

Jared Cohen: So in preparing for this, I learned something about you that I didn't know, which is that you only climb with people that you trust. Trust is such a critical theme in everybody's business, and the stakes are pretty high given the types of extreme climbing that you do. So given the stakes are like life and death, what are the metrics that you use for deciding who you can trust? Is it intuition? Is it something more formulaic? How do you know when you can trust somebody enough to climb a mountain with them?

Jimmy Chin: Sure. Well, there's often -- there's different degrees of risk in the type of climbing that we do. But as the risks escalate and the types of climbs that we do are at more of the cutting edge, then trust becomes much, much more important. You know, you're literally tied to your partner, and they have your life in their hands. They're belaying you with a rope.

But there's also a lot of other decisions around climbing. So if you go to kind of, like, the cutting edge of climbing -- and just to give it a little context, you know, as a professional climber, you're seeking to do first ascents. Things that no one's ever been able to do before. Climb mountains that have never been climbed before. It's really about a lot of different things, but it's about the craft. It's about the craft of climbing as much as it is about the craft of risk management and how you approach a mountain.

But when you're pushing at the far edges of what's possible with climbing, obviously the team that you want to put together is a team that you trust very deeply. That's built over time. You know, you don't necessarily dive into something that's extraordinarily risky and high stakes with someone you don't know. You get to start climbing with them, building a rapport, see how they function in different types of situations, and of course the best way to kind of make an assessment of your partner is to see how they function when everything's gone sideways. And how do they manage themselves in that situation?

And I'm sure you can all relate. In those moments, some people have, like, the best version of themselves come out.

And then some people have the worst versions of themselves come out. So you kind of make those observations as you're building that kind of climbing relationship. But, you know, a lot of the people that I climb with are partners when I go to the most difficult climbs, they're usually at this point the same people. People that I've built, like, a lot of trust with over the course of many years.

Jared Cohen: So one of the things you often hear entrepreneurs comment on -- it's a bit cliché but it's true -- which is fail often and fail fast. I think what you do is very entrepreneurial, right? You sort of identify a gap in the market, something somebody hasn't done before. You figure out how to do it, how to fill that gap, and you go and you execute on it.

The problem is you don't really have the luxury, if you're free soloing some really steep thing, to say fail often and fail fast. You, like, die, right? But failure is still highly relevant to what you do, so how do you think about failure when the stakes are life and death?

Jimmy Chin: Well, yes, I think that's true in terms of

how I think about failure because climbing is basically an exercise in failure. You don't necessarily pick easy climbs that you know that you can do. I mean, you certainly do that as you're kind of building up your repertoire and résumé. But when you're kind of pushing at the edge of what people have done and the things that we were interested in doing, you are definitely looking at projects that have a very high chance of failure. Like, the margins of success are usually very, very thin, which then pushes you to kind of analyze the situation very objectively. But --

Jared Cohen: And that gets into this whole how do you evaluate risk?

Jimmy Chin: Yeah, which we could talk about. Be failure is definitely, like, what we do is a lot about embracing failure because it's about learning from your mistakes and not being able to climb something. And Meru is a classic example where it was, like, there had been 30 expeditions to attempt this climb, so it had a lot of notoriety. And my partner Conrad had already been on it and attempted it and failed.

We went back in 2008, tried it, attempted it, and failed.

And I just remember even on the way down from that climb, we were talking about the different equipment we would bring next time. Like, it had to be lighter. We needed warmer sleeping bags, not -- you know, even though they were heavier. But there were all kinds kind of decisions that we were already making.

And it was through kind of, like, this attitude of embracing failure that really allows us to progress as climbers and on these types of trips.

Jared Cohen: But it has to be so tough, right? You're two thirds of the way up. You're so close to having achieved it, and you have to turn around. Or, I mean, how does that feel when you kind of make that decision that you're just not going to get to the top?

Jimmy Chin: Yeah, I think over the years, as I've -- I've been on many expeditions that did not achieve their objectives. And part of the process is also that, like, we talk a lot about embracing the process and it's not just about the summit. But of course, we all want to get to the summit. So.

Jared Cohen: Yeah, of course.

Jimmy Chin: Or to finish a climb. But a lot of it is that you focus on the process and the craft and managing the variables that you can control and kind of identifying the ones that you can't control. But kind of gearing everything towards being able to achieve this objective in all the details that you can put together because that's how you get there. And by embracing the process and not so much fearing failure or being too attached to success, in general, for us, allows us to get where we want to go.

Jared Cohen: So let's move from fear of failure to, like, actual fear, right? So all of us are human beings. Presumably you're also human, although I would question that. And it's just a human impulse, right? You almost fall, you almost get into a car accident. These things happen. Your heart starts pounding and you just get fearful.

Jimmy Chin: Yeah.

Jared Cohen: I think you are made up of some kind of DNA, also, right? So you presumably have those emotions.

Jimmy Chin: Yes.

Jared Cohen: So talk to us about real encounters with fear. Look, we all recognize your threshold is, like, on another level, but, like, I'm certainly curious and I think the audience is probably curious. Like, what does fear look like for Jimmy Chin? And maybe even give us an example of a close call.

Jimmy Chin: Yeah. I mean, fear I think is healthy. Like, there's a reason why we have fear. It keeps us alive. There are moments when fear is not useful, where it does not serve you. That's when it becomes paralyzing or you're overwhelmed by fear.

I think over time, I've gotten to understand how to manage that fear. A lot of the athletes I work with or have documented all have this kind of sense of managing fear, first and foremost, because they understand when fear is not serving you. I mean, fear can serve you. It can sharpen your senses, motivate you, but there's a moment where it crosses this line where it's, like, it turns into either panic or it turns into something that's just too big and

overwhelming to manage.

I think one thing we often do is, when those situations arise, well, A) it's anticipated all the potential problems that you're going to face on a climb or a ski descent or whatever expedition you're on, staying ahead of it. But what happens is when these moments come together, like, you are all the sudden caught in a massive storm in the mountains. You had a different weather forecast that said it was fine. You are up high. And there's a lot of variables that you have to manage to survive.

In those moments, we kind of have the saying where it's, like, slow is fast. It's like you take the moment to kind of pull yourself together and take stock of the situation, which is often identifying and being analytical about it. And this can happen actually pretty quickly. It sounds like it's kind of, like, a slow process, but it's not. But it is, like, identifying what the perceived risks are in that moment and what the actual risks are. And really focusing on the actual risks versus the perceived risks.

And it helps kind of cull down all of this overwhelming sense of what we're going to call fear.

Jared Cohen: And what's the most fearful moment in your entire career, where you were, like, really -- where you thought, you know, maybe I'm not going to make it?

Jimmy Chin: The most dramatic was probably getting caught in a very large avalanche. It was a Class 4 avalanche. And avalanches are kind of defined by different classes, and the classes are defined by how destructive they are. So a Class 4 avalanche is an avalanche that can take out, like, houses and trains. It's a very, very big avalanche.

People die in Class 1 avalanches. I was caught in a Class 4 avalanche, and I took a ride. That was a long enough ride where, you know, you had a lot of time to contemplate, you know, your demise.

Jared Cohen: How far?

Jimmy Chin: Well, over 2,500 vertical feet. And it was a massive avalanche. It went from wall to wall on the entire face of this mountain. And miraculously, I won't go into the entire ride, but I was basically getting pushed

under and then crushed by millions of tons of snow. But there was this one moment where I'd pop back out, and I was literally riding the entire mountain coming down this huge face. And I could see, as far as I could see on either side of me, these undulating -- like, you're going, like, 80 miles an hour down this mountain.

And then at the very end, at the bottom, somehow I did not get completely crushed or torn apart. And I got pushed to the bottom and basically popped out at the bottom. I don't know. Divine intervention. Not sure how it happened. But it wasn't my day.

Jared Cohen: It makes activist investors look like small potatoes, right? I mean, I don't really know how to transition from that, but I'm going to attempt to. You're what I would sort of describe as a multifaceted serial entrepreneur in the sense that you're entrepreneurial in lots of different domains -- photography, writing, athletics -- but within the extreme climbing and within the sort of athlete side of the house, you're constantly reinventing yourself. And that's something a lot of entrepreneurs think a lot about. So, like, what's the next reinvention look like or the next big task in the extreme side of your life?

Jimmy Chin: Yeah. I mean, it's probably in filmmaking right now. I mean, I think what you said is very true about how I came up as, first, a climber and then became a professional climber. But then also saw that there was this opportunity to document a lot of my friends and peers who I was inspired by. And I started shooting photography. And then of course at that point I was, like, okay, if I'm going to shoot photography, I want to shoot for *National Geographic.* I set these kind of goal posts for myself.

But in each iteration of my career going from being a climber to a photographer to a filmmaker, it was always -- you know, I saw something that I felt like I could do that maybe was different or fresh or that maybe no one else could do because I could combine these different perspectives and life experiences and be able to ultimately, for me, be a storyteller and tell stories that were deeply meaningful to me that I could kind of excavate because I also had the personal experiences of being a climber and I understood what all these emotional pieces in the story meant because I felt them. And I wanted to translate them.

So I started shooting as a photograph. Then I became a filmmaker and made *Meru*, which was my first documentary, with my wife and co-director and co-producer Chai Vasarhelyi. And then we started making more documentaries. We started -- she had already made five or six documentaries when I met her. We made *Free Solo*. We made *The Rescue* last year. This year, we made quite a few other ones.

But we also decided that we wanted to break out even further and try something new. And for us, that's narrative films. So we just finished our first narrative film, which we wrapped production on and we're in post production on. And it's about Diana Nyad, the woman who swam from Cuba to Florida.

Jared Cohen: I want to talk about ethics a little bit. So I don't know if you remember this. It was right before the moment where Alex Honnold was going to free solo. And you and I were together, and you had a lot of anxiety. I mean, I could, like, really see anxiety in you, which is not something that I'm used to seeing. You're, like, a pretty calm and sensitive fellow. And you were really stressed about it.

I remember you said to me, like, he could die, right? And we're there with a camera, and, like, what do you do if you're filming and he falls off the mountain? I mean, this is a really interesting and complicated ethical thing to grapple with as a filmmaker, as a climber, as a friend. The entire world is watching. If it happens, what do you show? What do you not show? Walk us through the ethical complexity of managing all that because, I mean, I really have never seen you so stressed out.

Jimmy Chin: Yes. I was a little bit stressed. I had worked with a ton of athletes over the last 20-plus years. At that time, I guess it was 15 years of filming with really the top adventure athletes in the world. The best snowboarders and climbers and alpinists and skiers, all of these super elite athletes. And I had never seen anything like what Alex was doing.

Like, he was doing things that even the top athletes in that specific space, in climbing, weren't even imagining or talking about. You know, so futuristic or unbelievable. So I knew that he would be an interesting subject, but at the time, I was already conflicted about it. We started pitching

it. Then *National Geographic* said we want to finance the film. We were excited about that. And then after we found out that we were going to get financing, Alex said, "Oh, I want to free solo El Cap," at which point I actually said, "Oh, we're not making that movie."

So for six months, I tabled it.

Jared Cohen: Because you thought it was crazy.

Jimmy Chin: Yeah. I was, like, I'm not going to make that movie. I can't carry that kind of pressure. Or, like, I don't know if it's even ethically okay to, like, go into something like this. But at some point, I was having a conversation with my good friend and mentor John Krachauer [sp?] and I said is it even okay to do this, even think about this? And of course, like a good mentor, he didn't give me a straight answer. He just asked me three questions.

He said, "Well, is he going to do it anyways?" And I said yes. And he said, "And is there someone better, more sensible to document this if he does do it?" And I thought, no, because I had been climbing with him for ten years,

and we had shot together on a lot of different projects and he was a close friend. And then he said, “Do you trust him?” And that I paused on, and I thought, well, I do trust him because I've seen him climb and I've seen the decisions he makes and I understand why he makes them. Like, he does not have a death wish. He wants to live, arguably, more than anybody else because this is how he feels alive.

But he's also one of the most calculated people I've ever met, and he's so meticulous about everything that he does, to a degree that's, like, on the spectrum to some degree. Like, he's so insanely meticulous about his approach to climbing and free soloing. So that's when we decided to move forward with the film.

And I had to give myself, like, guiding principles to kind of, like, in difficult decision-making scenarios, like, how would I kind of make decisions? And it was really about the fact that I said, you know what? I'm going to be his friend first, and I know what it feels like to be filmed because I've lived on both sides of the camera. Like, I am really going to be focused on preserving his experience because, in the end, as a friend, I'm just here to really support him achieving his goal.

Anything with the film's needs was never going to overshadow his needs. And being a director was always going to be secondary to me being his friend. And in the end, the production actually really helped him achieve his goal because we were fixing all the lines, and we were supporting him in all these ways. But we did grapple every day with the fact that, like, things could go wrong. But this is part of what the film is about. It's about people who live examined lives.

Like, when you know that the potential outcome could be fatal and you still choose to do something, you're living a life with, like, deep, deep intention.

Jared Cohen: Thank you, Jimmy.

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