

# Peaks and pages: conquering mountains and connecting people through words

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**C**onfession: I don't read enough. And while that might be a dangerous way to begin an article about the importance of literature, I have to approach you earnestly. Instead of picking up a book, I quickly reach for my phone, mindlessly scroll social media, and dutifully respond to texts or e-mails. I'm not alone. The average American spends 11 hours per day on electronic devices. Everyone is glued to their screens. Global smartphone ownership is over 2.8 billion and social media usage has increased by 50 percent in the last decade. It's a wonder we get anything done.

What's more staggering are the social costs of our so-called constant connectivity. The World Health Organization estimates more than 264 million people suffer from depression, and 250 million live with anxiety disorders. We live in a forever-connected world, and paradoxically, we're more isolated than ever. So, what happened? How did we get here? And, more importantly, how can we make our way back?

At the heart of this crisis is a deep desire for connection and belonging. It's a need expressed in stories since the beginning of time. From the earliest cave paintings to the latest best-sellers, we have always sought to share our experiences. We have replaced literature with captioned Instagram posts and status updates. This isn't to blame technology for social amputation. But when adults who spend more than two hours per day on social media are more likely to feel isolated, we must look at it, particularly when the same technology is sold on connectivity. Yes, technology is beneficial. But we cannot make meaning from life within the confounds of a tweet. Storytelling is how we find purpose in a world that's often dark and confusing.

And what could be darker or more confusing than going blind?

Loss of sight can be a sudden, shocking experience or a gradual decay that slowly cuts people off from the world. I cannot comprehend it. Going blind is to see the light of day slip away into

endless nightfall, consuming everything once taken for granted. This is the waking nightmare Liu Fang and Zhang Hong found themselves in. For them, blindness was a deeply disorientating and painful experience that disconnected them from their surroundings, leaving both profoundly isolated and alone.

"I used to have very bright eyes," Liu tells me. Her eyes are playfully twinkling as she talks. "But then everything got vague, and suddenly I went into complete darkness."

For Zhang, blindness was a sunset that never rose.

"I went into darkness overnight," he describes with disarming grace and composure. "The evening before, I could read headlines in the newspaper. When I woke up, I asked my girlfriend why it was still dark. She said it wasn't, and that's when I knew."

Here I find myself in conversation

with two of the most inspiring people I've ever had the privilege or pleasure to meet. Each has overcome unimaginable adversity to achieve great things where most of us would have become understandably broken and bitter.

Zhang lost sight in 1996 at 21 due to glaucoma, a degenerative condition that had previously afflicted his father and uncle. In the years following, Zhang became suicidal, but his loving and committed wife refused to watch her husband be consumed by despair.

"I love soccer," he tells me before widely smiling when I tell him I once served David Beckham as a waitress. "My wife would read me sport updates from newspapers to cheer me up. She read me many books that opened all doors. Later I used audiobooks and Braille. Reading inspired me to acquire information and discover the world, including climbing."

Zhang came across the story of

American athlete and adventurer Erik Weihenmayer, the first blind person in the world to conquer Mount Qomolangma, known in the West as Mount Everest. "It was a turning point. If he could do it, why couldn't I?"

At 43 and without any experience, Zhang began grueling training to achieve his seemingly insurmountable goal. And in 2021, he did, becoming the first blind person from Asia to conquer Mount Everest. An experience he describes as "scary as hell." Yet he's determined to continue mountaineering. For Zhang, each climb is not about getting to the top, but about getting home. Because at home — where life happens — more significant challenges await. Climbing, if you like, acts as preparation for the real tests of life.

I asked Zhang if there was a book that encouraged him.

"The Taoist classic, 'Tao Te Ching,'" he immediately answers. "I read it a lot



Zhang Hong became the first blind person from Asia to conquer Mount Everest in 2021. — TI Gong