Primal Spark: The Enduring Flame

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INVITATION

Dancing with Fire

Chamonix, France 1983

Snowdrifts climbed halfway up the windows, darkening our chalet to a muted amber dusk—though outside it was still midday. The fire popped and hissed, sending shadows crawling the walls like living things. We were in our mid-twenties—that rare stretch of life when the map is mostly blank. But what we didn't know then—what took decades to understand—is that the map can go blank again at any age. All it takes is the willingness to let it.

That night, around that fire, Venture Up crystallized. Not as a business plan, but as a way to fund more climbing trips, more flexibility, more stories to tell. We didn’t seek to build an empire. Freedom and flexibility were priorities. No 9-to-5, no boss, time off when we wanted it. It was about the experience, enriching the moment.

We turned down investors and partners and stayed small—because freedom mattered more than scale. We built a company that let us take months off to travel—one in which the business funded the lifestyle, not the other way around.

We got press we never sought—The Wall Street Journal, Times of India, military publications—because what we had set in motion resonated in ways we hadn’t conceived nor could have predicted.

That pattern became the business we still run today.

What we discovered sitting before the Chamonix fire still holds true: the best ideas aren’t born under fluorescent lights. They ignite in a circle of people absorbed in what’s unfolding—people inclined to trust instinct over convention, conviction over appearance, curiosity over certainty.

Others saw in us what we hadn't seen in ourselves. We never understood why clients kept returning and recommending us when we were simply operating at our baseline—ordinary to us, unexpected to them.

That's the fire that fueled Venture Up. The same one that built every enduring company, every bold idea, every creative leap—that drove explorers and scientists and artists since humans gathered around the first fire. Beneath the weight of expectations, it waits—that original, untamed spark. It's what once made you reckless enough to believe anything was possible. And it’s still there waiting for whatever comes next—at any age.

CHAPTER 1

Welcome to the Fire

We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit.

— Aristotle

Avalanche reports shaped our days. Each morning's pressing choice: climb, ski, or slip through the Mont Blanc tunnel into Courmayeur, Italy—to wander the cobbled lanes near the old Grivel ice ax factory, mingle in a café, and casually drop the centuries-old dispute over which country owns the tip of Mont Blanc: Italy or France.

Mont Blanc (or Monte Bianco) spans both nations, yet neither side has yielded—the claim over its summit is ancestral, older than flags or borders, a matter of pride that refuses to die. Mention France as the rightful owner, and the air quickens—instinct rising beneath the words as if ghosts of mountaineers long gone had each pulled up a chair.

And in the end, neither citizens nor diplomats nor borders decide. Nature does. It subtly shifts the summit as glaciers reshape the mountain itself.

Back in the States, we began adapting to the free lifestyle Chamonix had already ingrained in us. With twelve years of college between us—and not a single business class—we were on our way. Our biggest problem was settling on a name.

The first and final choice was already carved in stone on that steno pad by the Chamonix fire. Venture Up—the name that struck instantly.

David, doubting then as he still does today, started filling the pad with alternative names anyway,

sharing them with friends in Arizona and sending them to me as I prepared for our August wedding in New England. I listened, entertained the suggestions, and never wavered. I had no doubt we'd land with Venture Up. We incorporated the company in July 1983.

By September we were in full swing, set up in the corner of our family's agricultural lab, working on our new Apple III — a hyped revolution turned dinosaur, quickly outpaced by what came next. We kept it for five years anyway. That black screen, those green pixelated letters. I still wonder how I didn't go blind staring at it.

At night we worked on our cut-and-paste brochures—layouts spread across lab tables, pushing test tubes and dusty soil samples aside—spraying vellum with adhesive to prepare for offset printing in the days before everything went digital.

Somewhere in that flurry, the math changed.

We had escaped the 9-to-5 only to build an 8-to-midnight. Skipped lunches, a big dinner, if any. At times we forgot to eat until hunger hit on the drive home.

The intensity of our efforts devoured the hours. That primal spark burned steady and unquenchable. We were driven by raw instinct—the kind of knowing without the clutter of doubt — that fueled momentum, pushing us to act, adapt, and press forward. The same fire that burns on an icy slope or in any shared endeavor.

Learning by Doing

We offered climbing and caving trips in Arizona, mountaineering and trekking in the Alps, the Himalayas, and Mexico—intermixed with corporate programs we didn't seek out.

Clients from our local adventures talked their bosses into hiring us for what they called “team building.” Arizona was a prime conference destination, and meeting planners followed.

At first, we treated corporate programs as another odd job. David had a habit of singing, “Yes we do,” before ever answering the phone. A church hired David to climb a tower and fix a bell. Our team arranged adventure backdrops for fashion model shoots. We worked on film projects, including a volunteer one for a Tucson Center for the Arts commercial—David rappelling between buildings to the director’s music.

Corporate team building sat in that same category, something we did, not something we chased.

Then the phone began ringing consistently. Incentive houses and HR departments needed programs to support conferences and training objectives. Concepts first, activity second. Weekdays filled with corporate groups. On weekends, adventure programs booked our technical staff. Two hours of corporate work could replace days or weeks of expedition programming. We adjusted. Not reluctantly—practically.

We kept rock climbing and the Mexican volcanoes expedition because they were our identity—our roots. Over time, the consistent odd job—corporate team building—became our primary revenue stream.

While we had always said we would never dress up for work, our livelihood continues to depend on those who do.

The irony isn’t lost on us.

Our strategy was simple. Honor the phone call. Listen to details, repeat our understanding of what the client just said, and provide a proposal by the next day. Then deliver an event beyond their

expectations. We didn't require clients to fill out forms before our review—so common today—but made a human connection instantly while they were in the moment.

Across millennia of commerce, sellers earned a buyer's attention and honored it with conversation.

Today's automation often asks the buyer to perform first—completing a form and giving the seller the option to respond, as if qualification now precedes the conversation.

When buyers are required to sell themselves first, that's customer service in reverse.

To this day, our relationships begin with a conversation. Our aim is simple: make the customer's job easier.

No extra funds needed to make our system work. Loans weren't the right fit for how we operated.

The decision to keep debt-free shaped the company as much as any program we created.

We got on the right path after every detour. We were never starving or desperate. We were adjusting to each new turn as it arrived.

The Rare Breed

At a corporate retreat in the Arizona desert, a CEO stood gazing at the massive ropes course—fifty-foot poles and cables rising from the ground. Red-haired and pale-skinned, the husky six-foot-five leader was about to spend the day with his entire company in full sunlight. Looking like a lobster during his speech that night would not reflect well. Unlike most top brass, he was not content to stand on the sidelines; he had the courage to participate fully, sharing vulnerability with every level of the three hundred who took part.

I walked over and handed him a travel-size SPF 50. “It’s all voluntary,” I said, glancing at the poles. “Nobody is forced to take part. No trap, no pressure.” That went for him too. I paused to his vacant response, then added, “Except when it comes to cheerleading. Everyone is expected to make noise.”

He laughed.

Speaking in general terms, the message was clear: participation was voluntary, and leadership set the tone. Halfway through the program, streaked with dust and sweat, he looked over and gave a quick nod.

He was one of a rare breed.

Wrapping up the ropes course program, David took to the stage to congratulate the teams and recognize their standout CEO.

They roared.

What changed the atmosphere wasn’t a strategy or a speech. It was shared exposure to looming uncertainty. All levels participated. Hierarchy dissolved. Barriers collapsed. Distance became closeness.

No one announced it. It simply happened.

Detours

In the 1980s, David worked intermittently at the lab, which operated mostly in summer, alongside what was then an affiliated Texas Plant & Soil Lab.

Since we had enough staff to run the Venture Up show, I was travel writing more than rock climbing, driven to immerse myself in Indigenous cultures. I saw a newspaper ad for a job at a Native American museum, applied for fun, and forgot about it. Messages piled up on our answering machine

while I was out. I never called back. I froze. Did I want a real job?

Eventually I picked up the phone, caught off guard, and agreed to talk further. One conversation led to another. I got the job.

From the start, I was asked to support visitor figures they affirmed were inflated. Instead, I sidestepped the topic and spent much of my time in the museum with the artists—watching sculptures take shape, listening to stories unfolding. When the bureaucracy and rigidity didn't sit well, I was gone in a year, reaffirming that the 9-to-5 wasn't in the cards. The lasting relationships formed with my Navajo friends were worth the detour.

You Already Know This

You've experienced moments when plans fell away and action took over without conscious thought. A group falls into rhythm without explanation. The next step was obvious without discussion. That's when we act before thought can catch up.

That's how we built Venture Up, day after day. We weren't trying to create a method. We aimed to create an experience that engaged people in something already present in them: their primal spark.

If an activity stopped being fun, we changed direction. What people responded to wasn't the activity itself. It was the recognition of their own capacity reflected back at them.

The spark doesn't need to be defined or invented.

It surfaces when trust and freedom meet.

The fire is already lit.

In reading this book, you are already stepping close enough to notice it.

Sometimes, late at night, I still smell pine resin in a room that isn’t there, and hear the quiet snap of a fire settling—a reminder of Chamonix, where all of this began.

CHAPTER 2

The Skull of Kino Bay

The past is never dead. It's not even past.

— William Faulkner

The sun streamed through a ribbon of clouds on the Sea of Cortez horizon, casting light on pebbles and tiny shells revealed at low tide. It was Sunday, past time to hit the highway back to Nogales, but we still stalled our return to Arizona, walking the beach as the sky darkened, the dazzling shells and long shadows swallowed by dusk.

Kino Bay, the ancestral home of the Seri people, was empty. The villagers who had been fishing and playing along the shore had retreated to their homes.

We walked alone. That moment when day lets go, but night hasn't fully arrived.

That's when we saw it.

A white bulge jutting up from a bed of shells and pebbles at the shoreline. Not driftwood. Not a boulder. Too smooth. Too deliberate. We brushed sand away with our hands. Coarse. Dense. Weathered. Bone? Larger than it should have been.

The more we dug, the wider and bulkier it became. Fingers burned. We exposed a bulge too large for the two of us to unearth before dark. The sun surrendered into the Sea of Cortez. Whatever we found, it went deep. Darkness fell. We stood there committing the spot to memory, already planning to return the next weekend, hoping the tide would not reclaim it.

Rolling back into Kino Bay the following Saturday, our Phoenix climbing friends, shovels in hand, began digging—first fiercely, then carefully, certain we were about to uncover something rare. We dug a trench around the bulge, careful not to crack it. Seri children playing at the shoreline came over to observe what the gringos found so special. Fishermen cast their lines. A few stands lined the sand with Seri carvings, a tradition and skill that transcended centuries.

Sweating, digging, the sea breeze keeping us cool in the midday sun that sent the Seris in for a siesta.

Two hours later it broke free: a massive whale skull, eye sockets large enough to stick two heads inside.

Perfectly formed. Unbroken. Immovable. And too big for our trucks. A local Seri man, José, leaned on his pickup, watching our breathless excitement with quiet amusement. What felt extraordinary to us was ordinary to him—just another piece of the beach.

He named his price without hesitation: fifty dollars to haul the skull to his patio for safekeeping until we could return with a larger rig. It was steep for such a haul job, but this was a rare find, at least to us, and he was the only game in town. We didn't bargain, though we usually would have.

We arrived at the border as dusk settled, the sky bruising into deep oranges and purples over the long, snaking line of cars. Engines idled in a low, constant rumble, exhaust mixing with the sharp tang of gasoline and the sweeter scent of corn boiling on portable stoves. Vendors threaded through the stalled traffic like a living current, hawking carnitas wrapped in foil, steaming tamales, cold drinks, and whatever else might tempt hungry travelers trapped in the wait.

Little boys, some no older than eight or nine, darted between vehicles with buckets of soapy water, stained rags, scrubbing windshields without permission. Their small hands reached in windows for tips. Their quick, practiced movements cut through the haze of dust and fumes, turning annoyance into reluctant gratitude for many drivers.

The whole scene pulsed with restless energy: a cacophony of Spanish and broken English rising above the engines. Organized disorder, a border limbo where time stretched thin and every sense stayed on high alert amid the smells, sounds, and slow crawl toward the other side.

Our first rig sailed through with hardly a glance. Ours got the full treatment: doors flung open, staccato questions, Belgian Malinois in harnesses—the ones who don't meet your eyes, aren't allowed to be pet, and would tear off an arm if you offered a treat.

Every inch inspected with care. Crossing checkpoints alone, I always slipped through fine. With David? Expect delays. Was it our combined countenance that set something off?

Or David's calm reply to the usual question, "Why were you in Mexico?"

Our sandy car signaled a typical stay at the beach—cold drinks, tortas and sunburn—but the truth, "We were digging up a whale skull," landed differently. The agent, turned conversational, explaining that importing it as planned would've run afoul of the rules protecting marine mammal remains.

That sucked the wind from our sails. A legal issue never crossed our minds.

Our original plan was discovery, but the effort it took to retrieve it elevated its value. A primal territorial urge surfaced in us to claim it—not unlike the French and Italians who believe they can own the summit of Mont Blanc. It's not every living room that holds a whale skull, and it would have suited our eclectic home, already filled with artifacts from years of global travel and historic auctions. We would have reduced it to spectacle. The skull belonged to the Sea of Cortez, or José's patio.

The disappointment didn't sit long. We knew our friends, twenty minutes ahead of us, were reveling in the moments of wild discovery. Rather than catch up and risk dimming their mood with the new

revelation—that skull wasn't ours—we chose to cruise behind. Better to let their joy linger a little longer, untouched by our reality.

The defeat was temporary. Then it became funny. The absurdity hit all at once—the digging, the planning, the certainty—and then, simply, no.

The story we still tell today lives on, while the skull rests in Mexico.

Something shifted.

The momentum stopped.