



**WHAT** really matters?

WORDS *Megan Michelson*

**The closest I've ever come to death wasn't my death. Instead, I scoured the snow, nauseatingly, as three friends I was skiing with that day met the sudden end to their lives under the weight of an avalanche that still haunts my sleep nine years later. Part of me died that day, too.**

But, of course, now loaded with a tremendous amount of guilt and sadness, my life did go on. It wasn't the same. Prior to the avalanche, I would have told you that what mattered in life was being happy and what made me happy was skiing. I've been a skier since I could walk and the brightest people in my life are those I met sliding down mountains. So, yes, of course skiing mattered. But after I saw firsthand how the lure of powder just outside the ski resort boundary left two young girls without a father and three families in a spiral of grief, skiing felt like the most selfish, the most deplorable thing in the world. Of course, skiing didn't matter.

In life after avalanche, I didn't want to waste my time commuting to a job I didn't love in a city that wasn't home. I didn't want happy hour at 5 p.m. to be the happiest part of my day. So, a month after the worst day of my life, I had the best day: I married my best friend while a blizzard raged outside. Soon after, the two of us left the city and moved to the mountain town that's always been close to my heart. I quit my job and became my own boss, something I'd wanted to do for ages. We bought a house and made it our own. My most cherished part of each day became my time outside, exploring the mountains. I was terrified to return to backcountry skiing after the avalanche, but here's the weird thing: being out there felt like the only place I could restore myself. With skis on my feet and the quiet wilderness around me, I began to feel whole again.

The closest I've ever come to life wasn't my life. It was the night my daughter was born. Hours of agonizing pain made everything else float away. My body, and what it was capable of, was all that mattered in that moment. Breathe. Endure. Breathe. Finally, the sweetest relief. She had arrived. And she was perfect and strong and healthy and staring right at me.

If you ask me what matters now, I will tell you it's them. My daughter and my son. Giving them lives they can grow from. Teaching them to be kind and brave. Doing my best to make sure the world they inherit is better than the one we got. But here's the weird thing: The moments when teaching them all of that comes the most clear and easy when we're skiing.

---

**Skiing doesn't matter, but if it's the vehicle that gives you clarity, if it's the moment that makes you realize what does matter, then maybe it matters, too.**

---

The other day, I was skinning uphill on a snow-covered trail behind my house. I was towing my four-year-old son up the slope with a bungee strap attached to our waists and my husband was doing the same with our now six-year-old daughter. For a moment, I felt alone in my thoughts, breathing heavy. Breathe. Savor. Breathe. My son was singing to himself joyfully behind me, relishing the free ride through the snow-covered trees. In that space, skiing gave us a chance to be free — to be our own selves — but also to be together. Skiing doesn't matter, but if it's the vehicle that gives you clarity, if it's the moment that makes you realize what does matter, then maybe it matters, too.

At the top of the hill, I set my son loose and he skied down on his own, free as a baby bird taking flight into the world. ■



