

## Pass It On®...

### It's Okay to Admit When You are Wrong.

*A cancer survivor and his best friend live through an avalanche and preserve their friendship. A [StoryCorps](#) story.*

Longtime friends Alex Lewis and Matt Koch hiked into the Colorado backcountry in December of 2016, planning to spend four days in the wilderness, miles away from the nearest town.

The first leg of the trip was a three-mile ski into a hut at base camp. The uphill climb was an arduous journey that had its reward of solitude and beauty. The friends were making a pilgrimage of sorts to the wonder and awe the winterscape provided. A year earlier, Matt had been diagnosed with Hodgkin's lymphoma. He was now cancer-free, and the trip was a ritual celebration of life.

"This trip was kind of an opportunity for me to prove to myself that I could do things that required a physical fitness level I thought maybe I'd never have if I was a cancer survivor," Matt says. "This was my message to the universe of like, 'You didn't get me. I'm still here.'"

Backcountry skiing has its challenges, and this seemed perfect for Matt and his new lease on life. But the physical demands began to take their toll. Heavy snow weighed down every step as they herringboned their way forward. Matt became painfully aware that his recovery from cancer had taken a toll on his physical health beyond what he had realized. He was not in the physical shape he needed to be.

Night quickly approached. Temperatures were dropping, and the wind picked up. The two seasoned outdoorsmen decided to burrow into the snow and make a shelter in the trees. They could rest for a few hours, regain some energy and push on to the hut in the morning. But the wind kicked up, and the shelter collapsed.

After a cold night, the two were happy to see there wasn't much farther to go. But there was a lot of fresh snow. "Our progress was pretty slow because of the steep terrain. And I just remember taking this step, and, all of a sudden, hearing this rushing water sound," Alex recounts. "And being knocked off my feet onto my hip and starting to slide. And I

realized that I had triggered an avalanche right underneath me."

The avalanche left Matt stranded up higher and surrounded by heavy snow that was very difficult to traverse. Alex hiked his way back to Matt. The young man who had courageously fought cancer was exhausted from his struggle to overcome the elements.

"I had nothing left," Matt recalls. He didn't have the strength to go up or down. He made the difficult decision to stay and send Alex for help. It was extremely hard for Alex to leave, but he knew it was the only chance to save his friend. He skied the treacherous canyon toward the road until he could get cell reception and called the sheriff.

It would be six hours before Matt was pulled from the mountain. He would spend weeks recovering from hypothermia and frostbite.

"I was so weak and demoralized and just frustrated and angry with myself for allowing this to happen. I just completely did not respect Mother Nature and her power," Matt says.

The ordeal left Alex guilt-ridden. It was difficult for him to face his friend. Ten years later, they came together to tell their story on StoryCorps, and that's when forgiveness and understanding finally came.

Matt had no idea his friend blamed himself for the near-death experience. When they were finally able to talk about it, the feelings poured out of each of them, and all blame and pain dissipated.

"You did everything within your power," Matt says tearfully to his friend. "You did everything right. You rescued me, you saved my life."

**Forgiveness...** [PassItOn.com](https://passiton.com)

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