

Possible Discussion Questions for *To the Last Breath*

1. Why does Slakey choose to climb mountains and surf? What do those two activities have in common? How are they different?
2. Ask if any students are climbers or surfers. Why would a person want to do such a dangerous activity like mountain climbing? What about surfing? What is the reward of surfing and climbing?
3. What kind of man is Francis Slakey at the beginning of the book? How can you explain his personality? What happened in his life that shaped him and his personality?
4. One of the events that changes Slakey is the white-out in Antarctica when he spent days alone in silence. What place does silence have in our lives today? How easy is it to come by? Why?
5. Slakey's life was further changed by his narrow escape in Papua. Ask students if they have ever been in a similar situation. Have they had events that changed their lives? Can they describe what affected them?
6. Aristotle said that we are born with a character and that we can develop the aspects of our character in many ways, but we don't really change who we are. Is that true of Slakey? Does he have any character traits that stay the same, even after his turnaround? (determination, sense of adventure, etc.)
7. Why did Slakey write *To the Last Breath*? What was the idea he wanted us to take away from the book?
8. For Week 8, students are asked to bring in an article they find online about Slakey, *TTLB*, or a related subject. Have students summarize the article they brought to class; discuss their reaction to the article. What drew them to that particular article? What kind of information did they WANT to find out?
9. Talk about the metaphor of climbing a mountain. How is it relevant to students?
10. In one interview, Slakey says that climbing a mountain made him feel as though he were conquering something. Do we all have the need to conquer? What are other, more esoteric examples?

11. The loss of his mother and his friend caused Slakey to avoid relationships with other people. Does loss affect everyone this way? Do your students have examples of how they have dealt with loss?
12. Early in the book, Slakey, hanging on the side of the mountain, is faced with a decision: trust his safety rope or untie the safety knot and depend on the untested rappel line (pp. 8-9). How much of life is “untested versus proven,” as Slakey says (p. 9)? Is it easy to step out where we cannot see clearly? How can we move ahead in our lives if we live holding on to a safety rope?
13. What are the conditions in some of the countries that Slakey visits? What are the education systems like in those countries?
14. How much should one respect the customs and traditions of other countries? What if those customs/traditions seem backward to us? What if we think we could “improve” their way of life?
15. When one goes surfing, sometimes the waves are just not there. How does a surfer handle that sort of situation? How do we handle our lives when the “waves” don’t come? What do we do when our plans don’t go the way we want? What is the importance of flexibility?
16. What other people do you know of who have overcome some major obstacle in their lives? How did they handle the obstacle? What helped them overcome?
17. Slakey began to involve himself with others after his visit to Antarctica and to Indonesia. How do we react when we see some sort of injustice in our world—whether on the personal or global level? What does it take, character-wise, to confront any kind of injustice? Should we confront it? Or should we just let it alone, each man for himself? (This idea might connect with the section on student involvement.)
18. In Chapter 4, Slakey describes his climb up Mt. Everest. He says, “I have been on this mountain for fifty-four days and I spent just two minutes on the summit” (p. 69). Is this a metaphor for life? Do we spend most of our life getting somewhere or attaining something and then spend little time enjoying it? Is it the “getting there” that is more important anyway?