

IKIGLOO

M A G A Z I N E



THE MANIFESTO

Make Your Life Count.

Always stay true to yourself.

Find out what you love and do it often.

If you can't do something, try it anyway.

Always be kind to all living things.

If someone is trying to stop you – go around them.

Never settle and never limit yourself.

Do more than you think is necessary.

Always show up for the things that matter to you.

Meditate often and take care of your body.

Explore the world, different cultures, and different foods.

Don't be afraid to be alone.

Create your own life story and blaze your own trail if you have to.

Try different hobbies and read books that contradict your opinions.

Reinvent yourself often.

Don't let others' words affect how you view yourself.

Don't stick with things and people you don't like for too long.

Try to become the best version of yourself.

Focus on creating a life worth living.

OUR MISSION

Ikigloo is a lifestyle brand on a mission to empower adventurous, passionate and ambitious people to **find freedom, lead lives on their terms, and create a life worth living.**

We believe that a fulfilling life is not about having everything but about pursuing the things that matter, such as becoming the **best version of ourselves** and leading a life full of **adventure, exploration, and self-expression.**

This magazine is a collection of notable stories of personal discoveries and wins, world exploration, and passion projects shared by those who lived through and experienced them. We hope you'll feel connected to these stories and that they will inspire you to go after what's important to you today.

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Words by Daria Krauzo

“Actress, entrepreneur, book lover, tireless walker. Trying to find the right balance in my mid-twenties. I adore nature, train stations, and carrots. And I believe in magic.”

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Let's take a walk on the wild side



I spent the last three weeks travelling with my backpack and an extra package of endless curiosity through Mexico. Just three weeks but it feels like at least three months, in terms of experiences, the intensity of every hour, and unique memories.

“And if travel is like love, it is, in the end, mostly because it is a heightened state of awareness, in which we are mindful, receptive, undimmed by familiarity and ready to be transformed. That is why the best trips, like the best love affairs, never really end.”

At the beginning of my journey, I found accidentally the autobiography written by Charlie Chaplin. It turned out to be the best possible company for this trip. We both are dreamers.

It was a time of starting days with 1L of a fresh green juice and finishing them with warm quesadillas. Time of talking, but mostly listening, to people. Time of taking the always astonishing with their inner capacity colectivos, sharing a space in almost-in-pieces vehicles with colourful locals, curious where do I come from and where am I going. Lots of mosquitos, but even more beautiful humans.

When you travel, finally there is no rush, no urgency, nowhere is calling you and you are great just where you are, knowing that tomorrow might be everything you want it to be.

Travelling for me somehow is also like a homecoming. To myself, mostly. I read books, savour breakfasts, walk everywhere and I watch the sun fall below the far-off horizons with an endless amazement. I find simplicity in the sky and feel small against the ocean. I find more in less and I feel grateful, because what I have today is all I need for tomorrow.

I wait, I exercise my patience, I do not measure time and I forget about my computer and phone. And although not everything is easy or perfect while travelling, one thing is certain: I am finally paying attention.

Wherever you are, make sure you're there. At some point I sat down in Mazunte and I thought: yesterday I spent the night in the middle of the jungle, where the sounds of nature are louder than any music, all the smallest insects and curious animals singing together their late-night hymn to the dark sky, praising the stars.

Two days ago I was able to get to an indigenous village, where people pray in their local language in a small church full of candles, sacrifice chickens and heal wounds.

Four days ago I explored an amazing canyon, designed only by mother nature, waving hello and goodbye to crocodiles and looking up to restless birds.

Isn't the world just a gorgeous and ever-surprising place to be? I must admit I spent my last day in Mexico laying on the beach of a hidden village lost somewhere along the Pacific Ocean and listening to the sound of the waves hitting the coast. Pacific ocean is everything but pacific in the end.

They are the small moments that save us. I was laying in the hammock and thinking how wonderful it is to be alive, to be able to find an immense beauty in the shimmering sand and to sit still and listen. And during my last night, I jumped to a warm lake, full of fluorescent plankton: swimming and shining, shining and swimming. It feels like all the stars are being reflected in the water, and all over yourself.

Travelling is like falling in love all over again. And it is also addictive. Especially when you can Couchsurf, be yourself, and live through every sunrise and sunset without any rush, feeling light & right. You sleep like a stone wherever it might be, on a floor, on a couch, on a hammock or a borrowed air mattress. You wake up and you do not even go with the flow, you are the flow.

Now I am back, landed safe and sound in Madrid, which somehow feels more or less like home. I will try to keep shining my best light, even without the help of the wonderful fluorescent plankton covering my body. And I promise I'll also try to keep paying attention.

How Selling Everything to Travel Transformed Me as A Writer



Words by Rose Hedberg

Content Writer and Editor for SMP. An expat from Colorado since 2016. Rose and her husband Tom reduced their belongings to two 65 liter Gregory backpacks and headed for Colombia with no returns tickets. Currently they are living in Vietnam and writing a travel blog.

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When I graduated from UNC Greeley in 2014, I found myself asking what's next as my diploma sat on display in my parent's house. My Liberal Arts degree in English didn't come with the guaranteed career path like the degrees of my Nursing and Teaching friends. Theoretically, I possessed a set of integrative social, critical, and analytical skills for a variety of fields. I needed to narrow my pursuits to one. The pressure of being without a career at 25 was overwhelming, and I felt guilty. My degree was collecting dust, and I wasn't gaining any traction in the world of freelance writing, crippled by self-doubt and a lack of inspiration. My solution was to buy a one-way ticket to South America and to write about the journey.

My college sweetheart and now husband, Thomas Brath, and I sold everything from our basement apartment on 19th Street until our belongings fit into two 65-liter Gregory backpacks. We quit our service industry jobs and fled the country in search of something bigger—the two of us and our blog, Scratch My Pack Travel. Our year abroad was planned to take us 360° around the globe as we navigated South America, New Zealand, Asia, and Europe before planning to return to the states. The 12-month mark surfaced and then settled in the past. Now, we're going on three years outside of the country. We found work along the way, bartending and cleaning in hostels, picking vines on a vineyard, working as a sous chef, and a barista in New Zealand, but each job was temporary—a pawn in the bigger scheme of making a career out of travel. When we made it to Da Nang, Vietnam, our perspective was different, and our pursuit for employment had matured. We wanted to find more meaningful work.

Tom and I approached this question in different ways. Tom has his licensure in Secondary Education with a Theater Emphasis from UNC, so he found a position teaching for an international school. I found a job as a content writer at an The American University in Vietnam. Both of us were working on the same campus, and to our surprise, three other UNC alumni were working here as well.

We met Dr. Maynard Yutzy, the Vice Principal of the elementary school, who is a graduate of UNC with a Doctorate in education. He's as kind as he is brilliant. He's been an educator, an administrator, and a founder of several international schools around Asia since his first trip abroad in 1968. He speaks in an encouraging and caring way beyond the antics of nicety. He's the type of educator who, even as an adult, you want to notice your potential, to nurture your ambition, and to push you in the right direction. We explained our reason for traveling as a feeling of being unsettled with our work and way of life in America. "In my experience, most children don't have a clearly defined interest, and I partly blame our schooling system for this," Maynard says.

As he guided us in a conversation about careers, he asked what we passionately do even though we don't get paid for it. Travel was our answer. It was the drive fueling us when we were broke, the crutch when we missed something back home and our endless source of joy. It was easy to talk with Dr. Maynard about adventure. He spoke to us about travel with conviction, lingering on the importance of finding and maintaining your passion.

A fellow teacher on our campus, Andrea Peroutka was the perfect example of someone our age having found her passion abroad. Andrea teaches first grade, and as another graduate of UNC, she shared how incredible it was to be teaching abroad with her master's degree in Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Education.

"It's crazy. I love working here more than being an art teacher in Windsor," says Andrea "Now, I'm explicitly responsible for teaching English. Every single kid is learning English as a second language which, for me, is what I love, that's why I mastered in ESL." Similarly, her fiance Clint McBride received his masters from UNC, though his was in Jazz Studies, and Vietnam has been a welcoming and unique place for him to explore his love for music as a teacher. "The opportunities are out there," Clint said, "even if you really have to look."

Educators and colleagues who loved their work were all around us, but what was our path? Where did we fit in as backpackers wanting to get paid to travel? While talking with Clint and Andrea about how UNC had prepared them to be teachers, I questioned what I had gained from University as I hadn't found my purpose immediately after college. "What I learned in Greeley," Clint said, "unbeknownst to me, prepared me for the cultural adjustment of living in Vietnam."

I liked this thought. Maybe I had developed some underlying skills which years after college were becoming evident. All the critical skills I learned in my literary classes, the social skills I acquired as an RA, the management skills I gained as a peer educator, the inspiration gained from my creative writing classes, seminars, and late night coffee conversations, these activities unknowingly prepared me to travel the world.

If I had the courage and skills to leave the comforts of Colorado behind, I could be a full-time writer—a travel writer.

I thought of how I had shared with a classmate in college that I was planning to travel the world someday. She looked at me with feigned interest and told me how travel was a nice hobby, but a waste of time. "You can't put that on your resume," she said.

If a resume is a collection of past experience, is experience limited to professional opportunities? Having met Dr. Maynard, I was reassured that travel was a foundational part of building a successful resume. "I wanted to become an elementary school principal in Jeffco, but HR said I had to be 30-years-old to do that," Maynard says. "So I left for Guam Island instead and fell in love with Asia."

Now his resume lists how he's taught in Japan, China, Vietnam, Guam, and all over the USA, he was a chairman of the department of elementary education at the University of Guam, a coordinator of the State University of New York for Quality Schools International (QSI), a teacher, educational consultant, and a leading researcher in education. But it was never about the resume. Helping children is his life's passion, and traveling was a resource to do so.

Although it's taken me four years since graduation to get in the groove of writing, I've had the foresight to invest in my interests. I'm not rich with a book deal, and I still have to thread different writing opportunities together for money, but my definition of utilizing my degree lies in my success at happiness.

I'm traveling while I'm young, without a family, and while I don't have the financial worries of a house or car. I've seen 27 countries, bungee jumped, camped, hiked, and ate my way across four continents, married my best friend on the edge of a dormant volcano and discovered the more I travel, the easier writing becomes.

I left the USA looking for a way to give meaning to my dusty diploma, and in my search for a job and financial footing, I found a lifestyle of travel, a source of passion worth more than a lifetime of corporate experience. As Dr. Maynard says, "Be honest with yourself, be introspective and listen to your emotions. Keep expanding your experiences, and you'll land on something you love."



Ayah is a novelist, speaker, and filmmaker whose life's mission is to share the fusion of fiction and metaphysics.

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What day jobs do to artists...

The sounds of my job: the door opening, the morning meetings, the smell of the coffee, good morning routine that I had come to appreciate, the first network of people I was around daily that treated me with compassion... They did not know I was leaving. Did not hear me typing the resignation letter.

It felt as if every sensation in my job was coalescing into this innocent animal that I was preparing to slaughter. For some of us, the guilt is that palpable.

I gave my letter to my manager, who said she hoped that this might be better for me. Her kindness shattered my heart. I closed up the fabrication lab. I packed as much of my things as I could into my bag, and, on the way out, the tinkle-tinkle of financial independence that was my key and badge gave me pause. I stopped. I plucked the thing from my pocket. I stared at my own smiling photo, my name underneath it. I was proud of it.

Then I dropped it in my manager's mailbox and it landed like the sound of a snapping neck.

Let's back up to the moment I was hired. All my dreams were on the verge of coming true. Out of 100 job applications, I got just one offer, and it was for the highest paying job I applied for. I got a job in a beautiful little fabrication lab. In a place where I volunteered as a kid. It's rare to find creative jobs where I live, so I was very lucky. It was the kind of position I could only get with a degree in the arts; finally, a reason for my immigrant parents to be proud of their "art skool" daughter.

A delicious salary and benefits awaited me. A casual dress code. The money I could hoard until I saved enough to live on for two years, giving me a solid runway for my career as a content creator, a speaker, a novelist, and a filmmaker. All from the comfort of my very first apartment. This, by the way, was not plan A. I didn't think it was The Idyllic Plan. I thought it was The Practical Plan.

I tried for years to catapult myself into publishing before I graduated. Every query, grant letter and residency application vanished through my inbox and into the Nothing. Hundreds of them. I'd been trying since I was twelve. But that was okay. After nearly as many rejections of job applications, I was employed! Less than a year out of college and I had a great job. I didn't listen to the professors and the advisor at my school, all of whom, when I asked for help in finding a day job, tilted their heads, widened their eyes and said:

"No, Ayah. You must be joking."

"I'm not joking. I think a day job would be wise."

"But you can make it and be self-employed. You can start a production company. What about your work? It's very hard to make work and be in a full-time job."

"I need money. I need a place to live."

Once, in the half-light of my senior professor's office, she turned to her laptop and said, "I'll help you right now, let's get you an LLC. I'll sit you through the whole thing. We can do it today."

I told her that when it came to doing my art, I didn't want to compromise. I didn't want money on the mind. I wanted the luxury of writing what I needed to write, and my stories do not fit into a commercial box.

I did not want the pain of opening the door to social media and living a life of distraction while I tried to network and make daily decisions about whether or not I was compromising my vision. I also did not want to deal with the judgment of my family. She looked at me and said, "You have to be self-employed."

That was the end of that discussion. No further help in the job search. Her words still haunt my dreams. I didn't know they would. I just knew that every time my mind wandered to an upcoming expense after getting the job offer, I breathed a sigh of relief. From here on out, I thought, I can pay any bill that comes. I will not deal with daily harassment and bullying from my parents about how inadequate and lazy they think I am. I will be too busy earning my independence from them.

I left my part-time jobs and mourned a bit; I had worked with kids, who almost invariably seem to like me. I took a few days off. And then I started writing a pilot episode that actually mattered to me. I could not help myself. My stories are involuntary. The visions, the words, and the characters act independent of my will and I decided, hey, I have a few days off before I start. I can start something new if I want to.

This pilot was a pilot-light. I love it like it is my own blood.

I was writing with more fervor than I had in a while, and then my job started. I got up early, wrote, went to work and came home to write some more. I was so drained by the job that I binge ate to find relief. My room was a mess.

Then the writing slowed down. I came home and all I wanted was to shut my mind off. To forget who I was, because who I am did not have a place outside of writing stories, and that was not my job.

This is not a new story for me, or for many of you. I felt just as hopeless and dead inside as a kid. I lost my desire to live before until I homeschooled myself and had the power to set my own schedule. I'm not alone, either. We all desire some control over our schedule and destiny. None of us like to be under scrutiny.

I can't make progress writing regularly without four-hour blocks of time, so I started editing old projects instead. I made a schedule. I wrote lists of every little thing to love and appreciate about my day job. I reminded myself that I could have a nice place to live, soon, all thanks to the salary.

Then came the unbearable headaches, nausea, back pain, panic attacks and abdominal pain so bad I found myself at the hospital. My cycle lost balance after 14 years of regularity. I bled for weeks at a time. I didn't relate to anyone around me.

Also came the flood of sexual/gender confusion that happens to all daughters of immigrants when we are working. I felt like an animal for taking the job. Like a workhorse that was play-acting manhood. Like warts were growing on my shoulders and making me hideous. I did not care about not having a man, but working made me feel less precious than the wrapper of a straw.

I wasn't supposed to take an hourly job growing up, because my mother said that was "beneath me." But now that I'd walked into a professional career, I was completely unprepared. I found myself wishing that I was making lattes at Starbucks instead of trying to explain the limits of laser cutting to someone who didn't know it existed a moment ago and was already disappointed with it.

I saw my peers slumming it, but making good work. Traveling. Going to other cities. Working on sets. I thought, in school, that I would physically be unable to do set work as a filmmaker, but I could barely keep up with my 8-5 and suddenly wish I'd given myself more chances on set or moved to a big city. I thought that working full time in my mid-twenties would make me feel at peace with life, but it did the exact opposite. I learned that my social media—mild and unaffiliated though it was—was being monitored.

I didn't feel that pursuing any dream could be compatible with this lifestyle. I dissociated completely. Hours would go by without me being certain about who I was or what I was doing. I saw visions of a wolf trapped in the fabrication lab where I worked, whining and suffering more by the day. I felt bad for the animal.

Now just wait, wait a minute. I did not have a sudden urge to quit and run an online business as a lifestyle entrepreneur. Even in my misery, I knew that was not practical. Not right away.

But I've been at this writing thing a long time. I wrote five books. While in school, I took business classes online on top of my major courses and studio. I studied digital business models, learned about what worked for me and what didn't. In fact, it's because of all this study that I felt a day job would be a better path for me, at least at first.

I don't take this "running your own business" thing lightly. But after one too many sick days, I started to think about it. By "think about it" I mean that I went back to the inner world that had shut down in favor of my day job (I call it Loft).

I needed to revisit my place and find out what was going on. I shut my eyes and found myself standing on the edge of a cliff in semi-darkness, with my princes watching.

Hold on, relax, you didn't "miss something." I'm talking about imaginary characters that live in my inner world.

I call them princes to protect their anonymity, and yes, as a metafiction writer, it's natural for me to interact with them. It doesn't hurt that they have insights into how I'm doing. And before I go on, you might want to know that I'm not the only woman with a legion of imaginary men in her head. See Carl Jung's Theory of the Anima or any female artist between the age of 12-17 on social media. More on that later.

So I'm standing on the edge of this cliff, looking taller and more man-like. I was, after all, play-acting manhood in real life. I turned around in search of the palace where my princes are kept, and it was gone.

I felt like someone had punched me in the gut, but it was a punch I expected. My body had already shown me the toll that a day job was taking on me. The Loft had taken hits before. We lost princes to death and drowning (bad breakup) and even recovered from a flood (unrequited love). I can handle a great deal and still appear acceptable on the outside, but it will always have an effect on my inner world.

I whistled, and heard a whistle back: Prince Alpha heard me and showed me around. The princes were living in trees. Beta grew glowing mushrooms to illuminate handmade bridges. I visited Phi, and he was so still in his bed that I checked to see if he was breathing. He was not. We have since buried him under a rock. If you're having trouble visualizing all of this, imagine the infrastructure of Pixar's Inside Out with the aesthetic of Von Trier's Melancholia, and you'll have a better idea.

The last time I suffered like this, I had permanent consequences to my health. I promised myself that I wouldn't do that to myself again. That when I was an adult and had more control, I would not force myself to be in a situation that was making me lose the will to live.

I did not want to break that promise, but I hesitated. I went to therapy. I took up yoga. I spent my money on books. I toured luxury apartments and tried to force myself into this model of day-job-satisfaction. But then I would still have to face the mirror.

If you think I'm being an over-sensitive fairy, then you are right. I am a fairy. It was just a day job—a decent one, at that. It was not trying to hijack my soul, but I still suffered.

I was overstimulated. And in another world, in another time, I may not have made it. I wake up every day knowing I may not make it in this world, either. But is it necessary to suffer?

Today's economic, political and social reality is changing hourly. There is only one practical truth: If you are talented at something, and you are willing to put yourself out there, sacrifice a lot, learn new skills quickly and work incredibly hard, you can live well just by being exactly who you are.

I have no kids to support. No spouse. I have this option: to sacrifice a lot, to work incredibly hard, learn fast, put myself out there and pray. What good was all the money and security in the world if I had no ability to love with all of myself? Will I really regret sacrificing fun and travel in my twenties to work 15 hours a day on my passion if this ends up working out?

I wanted to leap off the cliff. If I failed, I figured, I could get another job—maybe one in a city with more people like me—and I would start again. And this was going to be my life.

I realized I would rather feel fear than feel nothing. I applied for a remote job as an independent contractor and was hired within a week.

Now, I reflexively am experiencing what happened to my inner world in the time that I was eyes deep in the day job. The princes could barely see. The sky in Loft was clouded with phrases like “How can I help you?” and “let me get that for you.” The words became ash. The air was unbreathable.

When I was working for someone else, it was as if I was asleep. Ironically, the challenge of my job did not push me but made me complacent. I leaped off the cliff, and it's still pretty dark in Loft. I look different. Darker. Taller. I feel like there is a purple light around me that was not there before.

I feel stronger. Braver. Terrified.

I have enough money and clients to fly for a little while. I'm putting a book out this year, and it is scary. I hear from people who benefit from my videos and hearing about my experience, and that reminds me why I'm doing this. It combats the glow of high-paying job listings, for now.

Even as I write this, I'm not sure where I'm sleeping tonight. But there is light in my eyes.



Words by Enrique Fiallo

Life Coach and Author. Writer for The Ascent, The Startup and surTHRIVAL Skillz. Let's crush your challenges through simplicity and focus.

www.fiallo.com

Do you want to merely survive?

This is why you should thrive

Merely surviving is not a path I care to walk down...

I've had to "merely survive" several times in my life. It wasn't being stranded on a desert island, or lost in the wilderness. I wasn't held hostage at gunpoint, nor did I have to live through an airplane crash. Nothing you'd see in a movie or Netflix series. No, none of that. My survival stories were "tamer", and included these life events...

As a kid, living through a period in life where we arrived in a foreign country—poor, down and out, disoriented. As a young boy, losing my mother and grandmother temporarily due to illness and accidents and being passed from house to house. As the CEO of a start up, when I plead guilty to SEC violations and began serving a 48 month sentence in a Federal Penitentiary. Living through a Stage IV Cancer Diagnosis—enduring 12 rounds of chemo therapy, 2 surgeries to remove a 6 inch piece of colon and 65% of my liver, and 8 rounds of radiation therapy. Cancer sucks...

The point is, we've all got some survival stories to talk about. Some perhaps a bit more dramatic and requiring more courage and fortitude than others. But I'm not about to play the comparison game here. Who's to say your situation was any less dire, your circumstances any less desperate or your story any less dramatic than mine? No sir or madam. I will not try to one up you on the severity and degree of difficulty of your survival. Let's just call all of it even, shall we? And get to the REAL heart of the matter.

The Heart of the Matter is that We Shouldn't Just Be Surviving

Surviving is just staying alive. It's maintaining. Just holding our heads above water. Marking time. Treading water. No Suh, or Madame. We should not just be surviving. There's more to life. I've seen it. Felt it. Experienced it. I know you have too. The "more" to life is called Thriving. We should be Thriving. Thriving is to prosper, flourish, blossom, and grow. It's to do well. To advance. Succeed. It is to develop vigorously.

Passion and Purpose

To me, a meaningful and fulfilling life should be one lived with passion and purpose. What we do should make a difference. It should matter. We should be excited to our core. Whether it is what we have chosen as our profession, or our personal time, our social-ness, family life, or spirituality. Hopefully all 5.

I know that some people are content to merely survive. They go through the motions. Chug along on auto pilot. Get up at 6:00 AM. Commute to work. Punch in. Stagger through the day. Punch out. Mindlessly drift home. Have dinner. Then watch some Telly. Go to bed. Wash, rinse, repeat... That's OK. I'm not being judgmental. Whatever floats your boat. I experienced my Dad live his life pretty much like that. Problem was, when Mom died, and he finally had to retire at age 78 (yes, 78), he had nothing at all left to live for. Out of gas. Spent. He passed away shortly thereafter.

So I say, let's strive to live our lives with passion and purpose. Let's not allow Passion and Purpose to be missing from our lives, or merely pin it all on a job. Through Passion and Purpose we find true and complete fulfillment. We Thrive...

Mastery

For me, a fulfilling life includes having achieved dominion over a certain profession, role, vocation. Mastery of a skill. It is self-fulfillment of the ultimate kind. When you achieve mastery, you reach the level of proficiency that is immediately recognizable by both masters and novices. It is evident to anyone. Acknowledged.

For example, a concert violinist achieves mastery over their instrument. You don't need to be a world class musician to recognize it. Amateur musicians, or even those that just like music can recognize the accomplishment. I say, let us strive to master at least one thing in life. To the fullest. Complete mastery. Superior performance. Outstanding outcomes and results. Through Mastery we Thrive...

Autonomy

To be autonomous means we become stewards of our own destiny. Forgers of our own unique characters. Builders of whatever legacy we choose to leave behind. Not to have any of those elements chosen for us, or thrust upon us unwittingly and involuntarily. Choosing for ourselves... In some cases we won't get to decide the "what". But we can decide at a minimum, the "how" of what we do. That is also autonomy. Selecting for yourself. Being in control. Having autonomy. Through Autonomy we Thrive...

Empathy

Empathy is the ability to place yourself in someone else's shoes. To fully understand their position, and what they are feeling. It implies caring for others and for a higher cause. Compassion. Feeling. Empathy is the highest form of listening. Caring. Understanding.

If you are an empathic leader, your team will develop a fierce loyalty. Because they know you "get" them. You care. And you have their back. An empathetic person is highly treasured and sought after. For their insight. Advice. And just because they listen in a non-judgmental manner and they care. Through Empathy we Thrive...

Sparkle

I love this word. This way of describing certain people. Their humor and joyfulness. Wit. Frivolity. Laughter. Enjoyment. Plain old fun. They sparkle. People want to be around them. Bask in their glorious charm and effervescence. Hoping it rubs off on them. It usually does. By Sparkling we Thrive...

Elegance

I see some people that carry themselves with great style. Quality. Grace. Class. Taste. They are polished. But never snobbish. They maintain a quiet down to earth flair. We see what it's like to experience the beauty and magnificence of our world while watching these people. We would do well emulating their manner and behavior. Through Elegance we Thrive...

Can we possibly achieve all of this? Or is it all beyond our reach?

I saw my mother achieve this in the last 10 years of her life. A barely educated Cuban immigrant. No wealth. Limited resources. She achieved all of these. So I ask you—why not? What is stopping us? Does it have to be Grande? Expensive? Imposing? Majestic? No. None of those.

It just has to be—Us. Ours.
Thrive. Don't just survive...





IF IT SUCKS, DO SOMETHING ELSE

Words by Maarten van Doorn

Maarten is a PhD-candidate in philosophy at the Central European University. He blogs about what is worth caring about and what isn't. In a time where we're obsessed with winning the game of life, we've forgotten what it actually means to win at this game. He writes to help people make sure that your ideas about success are truly your own.

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I nearly cried when I had this realization: I don't allow myself to do things solely because I enjoy them. After my Master's, I went volunteering in Africa. My family encouraged me to keep a travel blog, so I reluctantly started one. Some months in, I discovered that I actually like to write. Later, I started blogging 'for real'. Now you're reading this. Instead of writing whatever I want, I care about how well my articles perform.

Another example: I enjoy talking philosophy. Naturally, I had to start a podcast. Instead of spending a pleasant afternoon discussing whatever, I am now concerned with whether I delivered an interesting conversation. When I add a goal to something enjoyable, the activity transforms—it becomes about accomplishing something difficult. Which is cool. I like that. But in the meantime, self-improvement has made me worse.

Zooming in on the problem

This is not due to the amount of work. I'm OK with working all the time. I don't want to rent out my time, but I want to add value to the lives of others by creating something. I happily spend many hours on that. I don't believe in a 'work-life balance': "Everything that is related to any goal you have, counts as 'work'. Work is the sum of everything you want to do in your life. Working is fulfilling your potential and expressing yourself optimally." This is a core conviction of mine. It makes many areas of my life into a 'performance domain'. The blog and the podcast are good examples of this.

Right and wrong reasons

A year ago, I did Tim Ferriss' fear-setting exercise. In it, you define your fears and write down the bad things that would happen if they would come true. Next, you write down what would happen if you would allow that to stop you from doing the things you're afraid of doing.

Usually, it turns out, the potential costs of inaction are greater than the potential costs of failure. One of my fears might sound a bit weird: 'What if I allow myself to do what I like?' I was afraid that doing so would derail me from getting to where I wanted to be. I was frightened that, if I would leave myself off the lease, I would cease to make progress towards my goals. Making the most of it all involves work. To achieve anything worthwhile, you need self-discipline. That's where the meaning of life is to be found. I still have all these fears. I've been reading my fair share of self-improvement and might have internalized ideas like Benjamin P. Hardy's: "If it doesn't suck, it's not worth doing". As such, I'm afraid that when I enjoy reading, writing and podcasting, I'm doing something wrong.

Evaluating my day

Every day, after dinner, I journal. I repeat and revise my goals and evaluate whether I made progress today. I also list three good things that happened today and one point for improvement. Lately, the point for improvement has been the same day after day. Looking back on the day, even though it was objectively good, I noticed I didn't enjoy it. Every day, my diary would tell me to be the fuck happier. I didn't enjoy doing the things I did, even though I knew these were the things that I like to do.

I have always separated my time in work-hours and leisure-hours, and—echoing Hardy and co—for the former category, whether something is ‘fun’ seems to be beside the point. After all, there is a mission to be accomplished. Cheerfulness is out of place. You can’t have your cake and eat it too. I will be happy when I’m done. If you work “all the time” and think that work shouldn’t be fun, this mindset is to be expected. This is not how I want to be.

The wrong turn

It’s now clear how self-improvement made me worse. Things that I started doing out of enjoyment, are now about accomplishment. When an activity is about accomplishing something, caring about enjoyment seems to be inappropriate. Almost by definition, one of the characteristics that make a goal challenging is that it’s not roses and sunshine all the time. For such endeavors, the correct attitude seems to be, as Hardy writes, “do something and don’t stop until it’s complete”. You’re gunning for success—have a mission to accomplish. Enjoyment is the wrong reason for doing it. And so we’ve come full circle and the process you once loved is now your enemy. You have to do it.

What it means to win the game of life

When I’m in this mindset, the focus on the end-product makes me equate being good with being productive. That equation is a mistake. When I hold myself to this standard, I change into Mr. Stressed Out. I’m hurried, impatient. I want to hustle. I become frustrated with colleagues I actually like for “taking away” time. These might be my personal shortcomings, however.

Generally, equating being good with being productive shows that you’re taking yourself too seriously. Why else would you go through all these experiences that suck to reach your targets? Self-improvement often suffers from an inflated sense of self-importance. It’s not rare to come across condescending attitudes towards “ordinary people” in self-improvement circles. Why so judgmental? Part of the rationale is genuine anger. ‘Why am I sacrificing my family dinners to _____, if you get to work part-time?’ This complaint is not justified. They don’t need to do anything. And neither do you.

When you live like this, you’re losing out on the stuff that matters. While your work is important, this mindset misunderstands what it means to win the game of life. What matters is to be effective while also being a good human being. Extreme productivity doesn’t impress me. Healthy priorities do.

What does science say?

An important question we haven’t tackled yet is whether there is indeed a negative connection between enjoyment and doing things that are “worth doing”. If there is, then statements like “if it doesn’t suck, it’s not worth doing” would seem to be justified, despite their bitter taste. The plausible idea behind such inferences is, I think, that fun will run out sooner or later—the long-term persistence that is needed to accomplish something big is hard. If you stop trying the first time shit hits the fan, chances are you won’t get very far. Science tells a more nuanced story. Studies done by motivation researchers Ayelet Fischbach and Kaitlin Woolley reveal that enjoyment best predicts persistence on long-term goals and New Year’s resolutions.

Psychological research paints a picture according to which willpower and the like are less relevant, whereas the experience itself matters more. When you want to know whether a person will stick to something, it's more important to know whether he/she, in fact, likes the daily grind than it is to know how mentally tough he/she is. Self-discipline has its place, but one should employ it in moderation. If you rely on it too much, you should rethink your motivations. It's not going to get you there. Yet, there is some truth in the connection between hardship and valuableness that Hardy-like folks emphasize.

Meaning in life

John Stuart Mill—the great Utilitarian—argued for a distinction between ‘higher’ and ‘lower’ pleasures: “It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied.” Bluntly, according to Mill, happiness that is not achieved by completing some challenges is qualitatively inferior to happiness that was reached thusly. In a similar spirit, fans of hard work are right to distinguish pleasure from happiness. There is something right in Hardy's claim that when we “push through the difficulty, there will be a higher joy”. A life spent Netflixing was probably not a very meaningful one. But neither should we err to the other extreme. Fun shouldn't be your enemy—enjoyment and usefulness are not contraries. Ideologies like “if it doesn't suck, it's not worth doing” are not helpful guidelines if one wants to win the game of life, because life is a single-player game.

The only scorecard is internal. Also, if that's the way you approach your projects, then you're biting the hand that feeds you. Sparks of enjoyment come from somewhere, and this pool is finite. When it's dried up, you're, as we say “burned out”. “If something really sucks, do something else”, sounds like a better strategy.

Which things matter?

I want to close by emphasizing two things. On a strategic level, it's vital not to confuse growth-pains for the hurt of pointless shouldering on. Remember that (1) since you don't need to do anything, there won't be a reward at the end and that (2) enjoyment matters for persistence. That means that enjoying the process is more important—and less ‘shallow’—than it may seem.

On a deeper level, when you think about it, mantras like James Clear's “fall in love with the boredom” and Benjamin Hardy's “if it doesn't suck, it isn't worth doing” build on rather grim philosophies of life. In most cases, when you continue to spend your day doing something that sucks, you're not being heroic, but mistaken. In most cases, similarly, prolonged boredom is not worth it.

I'm trying to change. The first question I ask my diary is no longer ‘Did I progress towards my goals?’. Rather, I reflect on whether I have enjoyed myself and on whether I was the person that I want to be. These are the things that matter.

Words by Reece Robertson

Reece is a writer who's focused on sharing interesting and practical ideas that encourage and inspire individuals to live fulfilling lives on their own terms.

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Want to be successful?

Be an outsider

“The ones who make it onto our radar, the ones who made an impact, have chosen to live a life of standing out, not fitting in.”

- SETH GODIN -

If you look through the top performers; the entrepreneurs, the breakthrough artists, and the best selling authors, you'll notice a reoccurring theme: these people were outsiders. They weren't the most popular kids in school, the class presidents, or even the homecoming queens.

In most cases, they were simply societal neglects who's behaviors and beliefs had been labeled as foolish and naive by most people. They left behind the crowd to pursue a dream that would ultimately come true.

And hence why Anthony Moore once wrote, "Ironically, it is those rare individuals who decide to leave the crowd and act contrary to what "everyone else" is doing who typically achieve true success, wealth, and fulfillment."

*You'll Never Be Successful if You Keep
Playing by Other Peoples' Rules*

"When you really dig into the lives of the most creative and successful people in the world, you notice that at some point, they stopped following the "rules." - Benjamin P. Hardy

To be frank, most people will never be successful. Not because they aren't trying; most people are trying incredibly hard to be successful. They have big dreams and ambitions they want to achieve. But it's simply that they're still playing by other peoples' rules; they're chasing other peoples' definition of success. They want the high paying salary, flashy cars, and holiday homes all without realizing that it won't make them happy or successful.

As Nicolas Cole once wrote, "Where people get into trouble and begin to feel unfulfilled with their work is when they move relentlessly towards a goal that has nothing to do with their definition of success." When you move towards a goal that has nothing to do with your definition of success, you'll never reach it. Even if you do, it will only leave you miserable and unfilled as it's not what you truly want. Recently, I finished an Accounting degree, and while everyone was thrilled for me to finally get into the corporate world, the thought of it was making me miserable. I had to stop playing by the rules, disappoint a lot of people, and forge my own path. I've gone all in on my writing dream because I'd rather disappoint others than disappoint myself.

Are you seeking status and approval or personal success and fulfillment? Because they really go hand and hand. Status and approval are a consequence of personal success and fulfillment. Not the other way around.

Your Behaviors Should Seem Absurd to Most People

“Take your actions to a point considered unreasonable by the world.” - Grant Cardone

Most people are doing only what they're told to do. They're following instructions and conforming rather than using their initiative to create their own manual. As a result, anyone who decides to leave the crowd and act contrary to what “everyone else” is doing, will have their behaviors labeled as absurd and ridiculous simply because no one else is doing it. Indeed, in order to achieve greatness you've got to be willing to get laughed at.

“If you want to improve, you need to be OK getting laughed at. This is how greatness is achieved. This is how becoming a master works. First, they laugh at you. Then, they criticize you. Finally, they brag to others how they know you.”
- Anthony Moore

If your behaviors seem absurd to most people, you're probably going in the right direction. You've stopped limiting your actions to what seems “reasonable.” You're free to become who you should be, rather than who other people expect you to be. You're exploring and creating the future you ought to inhabit.

In Conclusion

Are you chasing yours or someone else's definition of success?

Are you following other peoples' rules or have you created your own?

Are you seeking status and approval or personal success and fulfillment?

Indeed, in order to make a real difference in yours and other peoples' lives, you eventually have to stop looking for approval from others and do what is truthfully best for you. If you're seeking to live a remarkable and extraordinary life, your behaviors may be considered unreasonable by the world. You need not lower your standards, but bring others to yours.

As Dan Sullivan has said, “It's better to be an example of someone living a powerful life than to live small in order to make other people feel comfortable around you.”



Words by Anthony Tumbiolo

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What does it (really) take to be an entrepreneur?

I refreshed the page over and over again until, finally, I saw the dark, bold word I was looking for: “SOLD.” I couldn’t believe it. Jumping up and down in my room, I realized this was what I wanted to do with my life. I was hooked.

The truth is, everyone’s journey towards entrepreneurship is different. I first started selling stuff around my house – guitars, books, whatever it was, really – on eBay until my parents realized it was getting dangerously emptier. But what else could I sell? I had to figure out what people wanted, how much they were willing to pay for it, and how could I source it for less money.

I finally ended up selling women’s purses (yeah, weird, ok). To not get stuck with inventory, I’d list an item online first and, if it sold, only then I’d go to the store with the money I just made to buy it and ship it. I was only fifteen at that point. I didn’t consider myself an entrepreneur yet. Or a business owner. And definitely not an influencer (still don’t).

But I did learn all about profit margins, managing inventory, cash flow, competitive advantages, and business models. I learned by doing, making mistakes, and simply adapting. This was way before founding Jakt and building it to about \$4M in yearly revenue. Back then, I was just trying to make some money, escape the stuck-in-a-cubicle from 9–5 life, and find something I was actually passionate about.

In college at NYU, I threw parties while teaching myself how to code. Later on, I founded Jakt - a digital product and innovation studio -, and we are now in year 7. I've had the chance to learn how to lead a team, what being a CEO means (not the same as a founder), and how to run a business that solves major problems. After playing this game for years, I am starting to understand - and I'm sure my thinking will evolve over time as I gain more experience - what makes or breaks an entrepreneur.

1. A different understanding of what risk truly is
Many people, including my parents, have told me how “scary and risky it is to start a business.” But entrepreneurs look at it differently. Having a job always seemed crazy to me.

Not only you're a pawn with no decision power whatsoever -at least that's what I thought in my head when I was young - but there's a chance of being fired and replaced at any time. And if that does happen there's nothing you can do about it other than try and find another job.

These thoughts also led me to start Jakt with the idea of creating a company that I would love to work for myself. Where people really enjoyed working and didn't feel like just a pawn or disposable. It's a challenge that drives me every day to improve.

Despite what they say, I am actually very risk-averse. I hate losing money. Money is hard to make but very easy to spend. Even when I'm investing in service based businesses through Polpo Group, I am not gambling - I am calculating and limiting all potential risks I can foresee. Always managing cash flow to ensure a profit. The question that has helped me build Jakt is this: "How can I minimize my downside risk while keeping my upside benefits as high as possible?" It worked for me as a kid: I would always

2. Blindly believing in yourself

Self-confidence is often misunderstood. It's not about thinking you're the most good looking dude out there. Or the smartest. It's not about looking at yourself in the mirror and repeating over and over again that you're going to be a billionaire. No, when it comes to entrepreneurship, self-belief is simply about knowing that, no matter what comes your way, you'll figure it out.

It's about believing in your (and your team's) abilities and character to the point that, one way or another, you'll always be able to weather the shitstorm and keep on fighting.

3. Always fighting one more round

When you're trying to build something that matters, there will be some fucked up times. You'll want to quit... and that's ok. But those that can roll up their sleeves and get through shit are the ones that will come out on top.

The truth is that most people just give up. And I don't blame them because there have been a handful of times that Jakt could've gone down: like when my co-founder left in 2014. When we lost a 200k contract after it started because the client didn't actually have the funds (leaving us with 4 empty-handed employees). The time 50% of our team left within a month and we went from 15 to 5 people almost overnight. Or when...

And, trust me, these things will happen. No business always runs smoothly and cruises through the years. We definitely did not!! But why do some people say “fuck this, I’m out,” while others fight through when it really (really) sucks? I’ve seen that if you don’t immensely care about the work you and your company does, your company’s vision, and the problems you solve, it’s just too easy to quit. Perseverance, resilience, and grit all come from caring to the bottom of your heart about your vision, your team, and your clients.

4. Not caring about being cool or chasing money

Entrepreneurship now is trendy and cool, which is great. But growing up, it was far from popular. When I graduated from NYU Stern, 99% of my classmates went into either Wall Street or consulting. Except me, the weird kid who was “doing this startup thing.” I turned down jobs and fought with my parents. I saw my friends make a lot of money and pay for me when we went out. Or barely scraping by to cover food. Or when I had to Airbnb my OWN room and sleep on the couch to pay for that month’s rent.

Not fun, I promise you. But I still thank them for those drinks! Branching out from the traditional path was a taboo. But I didn’t care about being cool. I didn’t even call myself an entrepreneur! All I cared was about working hard on my passion and giving my everything to make this business a success.

So don’t let these “gurus” that flood your Instagram feed with the Ferraris (that they rent for the day) and the stacks of money (that go back to the bank right after the picture is taken) fool you. They’re money chasers that are following a fad. They’re fake.

What does it take to be an entrepreneur?

The truth is that most businesses break even or lose money. The look behind the curtain is not as pretty as they want to make you think. But real entrepreneurs don’t do it for money, or fame, or recognition. We do it because we love our work — with all its highs and its lows.



I ditched my phone, moved to Nepal, and it changed my life.

Words by Kendall Marianacci

Kendall is an avid traveler, rock climber, and writer. Through her travels and studies she has investigated the importance of human connection. This led to her founding her company [enJoinIt](#) which is a mobile app to connect people to the community around them, wherever they are.

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At 19 years old, I dropped out of college and moved to Nepal without any contact to home. Well, first things first, I think it's safe to say I'm out of my mind. A young girl moving to a third world country with no technology, contact to home, knowledge of the language, or understanding of the customs. I had no idea what I was getting myself into. The situation that led to this decision was simple... college. For me, college was an experience of sameness. I became overwhelmed with privilege and societal expectations that I needed to see who I was when I was stripped of everything that made me, me. Hence, Nepal. The experience changed my entire outlook on life and still continues to impact the way that I live.

Culture shock can be an instigator of change

When I arrived in Nepal late one night, I sat in van going to my hotel, looked out the window and literally said, "What did I get myself into?" The streets were lined with power lines, it was pitch black, and all I could hear were the barks of stray dogs. Prior to this moment, I was so excited for this adventure. For the first time, I became nervous and scared about the decision.

I woke up the next morning to realize that everything in this country was different. I literally had to learn how to eat, bathe, and use the toilet differently. I had always had a fork and a knife available to me in the USA, I had no idea how to eat with my hands. It seems simple, but honestly next time you're eating rice and beans that are piping hot, you tell me how you eat it with your hands. There's a whole thumb action that is not intuitive that is essential to eating Dal Bhat. Not to mention, this was all I was eating! For the first time in my life, eating was no longer pleasurable, it was a daunting task that was purely necessity to keep me alive.

Taking a shower? I'm used to using warm showers for however long and whenever I want. In Nepal, I was taking bucket showers, freezing cold water showers, or using public bathing taps. Showers became rare and a tedious task. Using the toilet? I'll spare you the dirty details.

But what I will tell you is that in Nepal, the toilet is a hole in the ground and there's no such thing as toilet paper. I had to learn how to wipe my ass with a pail of water and my left hand.

While having to relearn basic things seemed miles outside my comfort zone, the experience taught me about how differently the world operates. Not having my phone gave me no safety net. I couldn't retreat to the online world of Facebook and Instagram to give me familiarity. I had to fully immerse into this world that was obscenely different from my New York, suburban lifestyle.

It was embarrassing and hard to have to ask people for help teaching me how to blend into this foreign land. However, despite how uncomfortable it was, it pushed me to expand my horizons and push the boundaries of who I was. It encouraged me to explore different sides of myself which instigated me to think about my own traditions.

Suddenly, I was questioning the way that I was cultured to think about things. Nepal had radically different views on fashion, body-image, religion, and priorities. The culture shock allowed me to normalize differences and truly experience them and adopt them into my perception and self-identity.

It wasn't until I returned home to New York that I realized how much I had changed. I became quieter because the Nepali people believed in mindful communication. They didn't just speak to fill empty air. They spoke with intent and purpose. I learned to listen and respond in a meaningful manner rather than just waiting to say my piece.

Paying attention to the life in front of you opens a new world.

Not having any distractions of a phone and being immersed in this different world, I had to pay more attention to my surroundings. I took walks every day just to explore. I went out of my way to meet new people and ask them questions about their lives. When this became the norm, I realized I was living for one of the first times of my life. I was not in my own head distracted by where I was going and what I needed to do. I was just being. I was present and welcoming to the moment. I was compassionate and throwing myself into life with whoever was around me. I would look up in the sky often and recognize the beautiful blue and white swirls in a way I never looked at it in the USA.

I danced in the streets with strangers or helped women weave baskets on the side of the road. Life isn't just about us. It's seeing beyond. It's not just looking and observing at our surroundings, but letting our curiosity take us to be a part of something bigger than what we know. It's stepping outside of our comfort zone and being with those who we know nothing about.

Living in Nepal wasn't hard. Almost everyone I talk to about it says, "You didn't have a phone or even a real bed? Sounds horrible." It was the best few months of my life because it was no distraction, no luxury, or fluff. It was a simple, authentic life that put an emphasis on the human experience. There was no distraction from what the purpose of life is.

Life isn't about going to work every day. Nor is about achieving happiness or comfort. Life is about connection. It's about standing on the ground and feeling the earth beneath our feet. It's about looking up at the sky and noticing its beauty. It's looking into someone's eyes and recognizing that there is a whole life that brought this person to meet your glance. It's about letting go of what's familiar and jumping into the present moment with a whole heart and quest for further understanding of what it means to be alive.

When I ditched my phone and moved to Nepal, it changed my life. It taught me that all I have is this second. The only way to truly live is to be present in the moment with those around us. Life is too short to not eat with your fingers, dance with strangers, and fall in love with the sky. The only way to truly live is to step outside of our comfort zone, listen to our curiosity, and say, "Hi, can I sit with you?"



My 10 day Vipassana Meditation Experience

An endless silent retreat story

No talking. No gestures. No eye contact. No music. No physical contact. No lying. No reading. No electronic devices. No killing. No running. No physical exercises. No stealing. No sexual activities. No intoxicants.

Words by Tiziano Antico

A curious, open-minded and enthusiastic individual who loves challenges, travelling and trying out great life-changing experiences. As a Computer Scientist, Tiziano's passion for the topic makes him find ways to apply his skills to solve real-life problems which can make a positive impact on people.

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After a very stressful year of my life, I just wanted to take a break from everything and everyone. I needed to energise myself and get back all my energies (from mind to body). What's the best way of doing so if not joining a course where they teach you one of the oldest Indian meditation techniques? The so called Vipassana Meditation—a technique which aims for the total eradication of mental impurities and full liberation.

I remembered of a friend who told me about the experience he did when he was younger. I have always been fascinated about that story. Day by day and month by month, the willingness of undertaking such an adventure was growing into myself.

So that, five months ago, in a moment of perfect craziness (and unawareness)... I finally decided to submit my application for a 10 days meditation course.

I am basically a very quiet person who loves to be on his own. How can a silent experience scare me? It should not be a big deal—this is what I used to tell my mind when the start of the adventure was getting closer and closer.

Well, I was wrong. It was much more than being in silence. It was being with my mind. It was dealing with my thoughts. It was running away from myself. It was about finding inner excuses and new stimuli to not meditate. It was a face to face encounter. It was a big inner battle.

December 26th, 2018

Day 0

Everything was finally ready. My luggage filled with all the needs which would have allowed me to live for the next 10 days. I took the train early morning from Macerata (my hometown) directed to Faenza. Here, I met the first adventure mates with whom I was going to share this life changing experience. Few hours later, a private shuttle for “Centro Vipassana” arrived and, after several minutes, we reached Lutirano (FI) where everything started. We were welcomed by a light dinner. Afterwards, the organisers explained us all the rules we had to follow for the next ten days. Moreover, we had to undertake several points about the course discipline and we had to assure the wellbeing of our physical and mental conditions. Done! I signed my life away!

The Noble Silence started.

All students must observe Noble Silence from the beginning of the course until the morning of the last full day. Noble Silence means silence of body, speech, and mind. Any form of communication with fellow students, whether by gestures, sign language, written notes, etc. is prohibited. Students should cultivate the feeling that they are working on in isolation.

The daily schedule

No free time. No possibilities to relax properly. The schedule was full from early morning to early evening.

Every single day starts at 04:00 a.m. with the sound of the gong—your best (and worst) friend throughout the entire duration of the course.

There are 3 breaks along the day:

Breakfast break (06:30am–08:00am): you have 30 minutes to eat. You have to be fast. Servants need to get their meal as well, after the meditators.

Lunch break (11:00am–12:00pm): same story. You are given 30 minutes to finish your dish.

Rest break (12:00pm–01:00pm): you can have a face-to-face talk with the teacher (for no more than 10 minutes). You can ask all the questions you have regarding the technique and other issues related to your progress.

Tea break (05:00pm–06:00pm): other 30 minutes to finish your meal are given. If you are a new student, you are allowed to eat some fruits. If you are an old student, you are not allowed to eat anything at all. On the other hand, you can get a glass of hot water with lemon.

Every day, the meditation activities were located between the hall and your own room. Three times per day in the hall, precisely. During this time, you were not allowed to change your position for the whole hour (even if you experience painful sensations in the body).

In the evening, after the group meditation in the hall, you have the chance to listen to the Teacher's Discourse. Basically, a series of recorded (life) stories from S.N. Goenka, the Indian teacher of Vipassana meditation who passed away in 2013. Most of them are very inspiring and may help you see things from a very different perspective. They help you to meditate on small and big life concepts.

We have to learn to see things as they are. We have to be objective and accept what happens around us. We have to learn that there is nothing permanent in life and we must be able to be detached from emotions and feelings.

On the other hand, we need to observe them in order to act properly by developing a sense of equanimity. Nothing is permanent, that's the life. Anger, happiness, love, sadness and any other kind of sensations are not forever. They come and go. We cannot be attached to something that will soon disappear. It is the attachment that makes us miserable. It is the attachment that makes our minds unbalanced. Another important lesson from S.N. Goenka was: "Learn to observe objectively whatever is happening. If someone is angry and tries to hide his anger, to swallow it, then it's suppression. But by observing the anger, you will find that automatically it passes away. You become free from the anger if you learn how to observe it objectively."

Days 1, day 2, day 3, and day 4

During the first days of the course, they teach you a breathing technique. It is called Anapana. Everyone has to put aside the thoughts and focus on the breath. You should be able to feel it, getting inside and outside of your nose. You should strongly focus in order to feel the touch of the air which goes inside and outside. It seemed easy. It was challenging.

There were two issues which hindered me:

Being motionless: I was unable to sit down for more than 10 minutes in a row. I always felt the need to stand up and do something else. I could not stay quiet, I needed to do things. I am a super proactive person and I can't really stop for a moment. Moving, moving, moving. Escaping, escaping, escaping. My mind talking.

I couldn't pay attention to the most natural sensation of my being.

The vortex of thoughts: I've never realised how much my mind has to say. The first days were terrible since I couldn't stop the flow of thoughts. My brain was thinking, continuously: past, future, future, past again, breath, past, future, future, future of the future, back to the past and then a jump to the future again. It was incredible. I couldn't focus in the present, in the moment. I couldn't focus on my breath for more than 3 minutes.

The first days were endless. Everything was going extremely slow and my mind wanted to escape from that place, I wanted to do something different. I felt like I was in a prison, I felt like every day was the same of the previous one. No changes, no new activities, no possibilities of doing anything. I immediately noticed that the more my thoughts were negative, the harder it was for me to survive that experience. I learnt that the only solution to not get crazy was the peace of mind. I had to focus on my breath.

During the Teacher's Discourse, I understood that the two points mentioned above were the main causes for people quitting the Vipassana course. In fact, the lesser motivated meditators decide to leave the center either on Day 2 or Day 6 (when the Indian mediation technique is being taught). I was so happy I managed to be strong enough to overcome the first "rock". Even though six more (endless) days were waiting for me...

Days 5, day 6, and day 7

I've finally reached half of the course. God, I couldn't believe I'd been able to go so far! On day 5 we started to learn Vipassana. It's basically a very powerful meditation technique which consists of feeling the emotions of the body without reacting to them. It was taught in India more than 2500 years ago as a universal remedy for universal ills.

We were taught to focus on our body, without letting the mind wonder. You have to start from the top of yourself and, minute by minute, you are asked to reach the feet. During this time you have to focus your attention to each part of your body. You have to be aware of the sensations. Once a sensation arises, you have to observe it for a while and then you have to move on. You are not allowed to be attached to any of the feelings. By doing so you eradicate bad thoughts and bad energy from your soul that have accumulated in you since the day you were born. It can also happen that a sensation can bring up particular thoughts of your past. You can't react to them, you can only observe them. If you do react, you generate more negative energy which won't help you feel better.

In overall, the technique seems quiet easy. At the beginning you might just feel gross sensations in some parts of the body (such as pain, coldness, warmth, etc.). As you get more sensitive, you can experience subtle sensations (such as tingling, pulsations, energy throughout the body, etc). Once your body gets free from any sensations, you reach the state in which you can experience a free flow of energy inside your body. That's the state when your body completely dissolves.

Personally, I have mainly experienced gross sensations. Just a couple of times I've had the chance to feel more subtle feelings in my hands (such as a kind of electric discharge). When that happened I got scared and I immediately "woke up" from the meditative state. I think you should feel completely ready to experience such unusual "vibrations". I was definitely not ready for such a strong experience.

Day 8: "Teacher, let me get out of here!"

I will never forget this day. I really needed to quit the Vipassana Center. This day I was about to get crazy and, to be honest, I was afraid of passing away. It was since I started to scan my body that I started to feel a strange sensation at the bottom of my stomach. It was like a blocking feeling, I couldn't continue the body-scan after that point. Day by day, this perception didn't disappear and it got more intense ... till day 8 when it became unmanageable and it exploded, literally.

It was so intense that I suddenly started to cry, without a reason

After the 2 hours morning meditation, I was resting on my bed and I reached a very deep state of relaxation. Suddenly the sensation at the level of my stomach appeared again. This time it was unpredictable and stronger than usual. It was so intense that I suddenly started to cry, without a reason. I had big difficulties in breathing and this "block of energy" was coming up into the mouth. I did not vomit and I tried to bring it down, without any success. I decided to move to the bathroom, tried to understand what was happening to me. The sensation was strong, even trying to focus on my breath was difficult. I kept crying for no reason till mucus started to come out from my nose and rheum from my mouth. What the hell was happening to me? It took almost one hour till I could get back to a normal breathing, after I stopped crying. I was really exhausted. Few minutes later, my brain started to work properly again.

I suddenly felt light and great. When energies came back, I decided to run to the teacher. I had to tell him what happened to me.

Me: Teacher, I felt a very gross sensation in my body. It was at the stomach level. I couldn't handle it.

Teacher: That's great. It means you are working properly.

Me: Working properly? I felt very bad. I want to quit the Center. This experience is too much for me!

Teacher: You are not going to leave the Center. I won't allow you to do so. There are other two days left. You'll complete this course. You're working fine.

Me: I don't want to experience what I experienced again. It was terrible. It was like a panic attack. I've never experienced a panic attack in my life.

Teacher: You're working deeply. You're eradicating negativity in yourself. Do not get stuck in your emotions, it came and it went away. I won't let you leave the course. No way. This experience will make you stronger. Go in your room. Go to meditate.

He showed me how to deal with that gross sensation in case it happened again. I understood I had no choice. I signed my life at the beginning of the course. I couldn't escape it now. I went back to my room to rest and meditate on what happened to me. The other part of the day was better and I felt really relieved.

Day 9, day 10

The last two days of the course have been endless. I was tired of being there and I just wanted to go out, see my friends and my family. During these last days I could not focus on the meditation activities. I was too tired to keep going and I was not motivated in doing something that I did not want to do. The time seemed to have stopped. Finally, on Day 10, the big news. The Noble Silence was over, you could now start the Noble Speech. However, we were not allowed to make any physical contact till the end of the course.

It was amazing to hear the sound of my voice again. It was a bit shocking and weird to be able to talk again with the people around me. Everyone started to share their experiences and everyone had different ones. It was inspiring and interesting to come back to the reality of the world after such a long time. I finally had the chance to get to know my five roommates (one left on Day 4) with whom I never talked for the past nine days. We were strangers, sharing the same space. I recognised how weird it was!

Day 11

At 06:30, breakfast time, the course was finally over! We got our phones back and devices that we left at the reception on Day 0 and we could finally contact our family and friends. Yes, we survived! Before leaving the center we left a donation (which will cover the expenses for the next students). Moreover, we helped with the cleaning tasks. Everything had to be ready for the next course which was going to happen within 3 days. We exchanged the last goodbyes before the shuttle drove us back to Faenza's train station. From here, the life started again. And, this time, with more awareness.

Final thoughts and lessons learnt

Our mind is a powerful tool: We are so miserable. We act without thinking. We think without being present in the moment. We always think about the past and the future but we are not good at living in the moment. We are so attached to what we have experienced in the past that we want to relive some situations again and avoid others. By doing so, we do not live in the moment. Our mind is so complex. Living with a mind full of thoughts makes it difficult to understand ourselves, our body and our feelings.

Vipassana can make you go crazy: There were times, during the meditative state, when I couldn't see things properly. My mind was full of colours, pictures, videos. All related to my past and my future. It was weird. I thought I had some problems with my brain.

We live, we have feelings: I experienced that abstract sensations become more concrete by listening to the body. Every sensation is linked to a specific part of the body. By understanding these subtle and gross sensations we might be able to understand ourselves better ... even living in a world full of chaos. I experienced so many sensations (even the ones I have never felt before) throughout the course than anyone can even imagine.

One reason which made me choose Vipassana was the positive effect they say it has on sleeping. Unfortunately, this didn't work for me. During those 10 days, my brain couldn't understand when to sleep and when to meditate anymore. It was (almost) always awake and aware. I used to sleep no more than 3-4 hours per night (when I was lucky). At the end of the course I was exhausted.

Funny fact: when the Noble Silence was over, I discovered that sleep deprivation affected lots of meditators. It seems that it was a side effect of this technique.

At the very end of the course, you can notice that your mind is more focussed. The flow of thoughts is decreasing and it allows you to live a better life. You start to see things from different perspectives and you learn to observe the world with equanimity.

Would I recommend this experience?

I think it is an experience that needs to be done at least once in life. It helps you understand lots of points of your personality that you were not even aware of. Go for it if you feel really ready. It's not a joke. Vipassana Meditation retreat is a powerful tool that will change your life forever (in a bad or in a good way). What you are going to experience is personal.

Keep in mind that the problems people have are always the same. They are linked to their past and to their future. An experience like this one will help you cope with thoughts for sure. It will help you to accept that everything comes and goes. It doesn't make sense to be attached to anything. Everything is mutating in life, continuously. It's an experience that teaches you how to die and how to live.

Personally, I'll think twice before doing it again... and you?





The Profound Art Of Rock Climbing

Despite the inherent difficulty (and oftentimes great risk) associated with the sport, why, exactly, are so many completely obsessed with it?

Words by Christopher Drifter

Christopher Drifter is a writer, comedian, and entrepreneur, best known for his book “Rules of Thumb: How to Hitch-hike and Live on the Road”. When not writing or performing, Christopher plays the piano, runs in the mountains, or goes rock climbing. He is also the CEO of CREATE Barcelona and founded CJ International Services ltd. in 2017.

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There was a large hole in the middle of the rock face in which most of my lower body was wedged at an awkward half-horizontal position some 30 feet above the ground. My white-knuckled hands, numbed long ago by the grip of cold stone, struggled against gravity's tug while my brain hammered out increasingly nightmarish visions of what would happen if I fell.

In my imagination, wrecked internal organs blossomed into deep bruises across my deathly pale skin; limbs released themselves and escaped at wild angles; horrifying wounds, as deep as ravines, spewed blood across the dewy morning grass in a vicious mockery of celebratory shaken champagne.

The rope attached to the harness around my waist snaked guiltily away from me. It had meant to grant me safety, but I was too far from my last point of protection. If I fell from my current position, I would certainly hit the rocky ground below.

"Why is this happening to me?" I wailed down to two friends who were standing safely at the base of the very rocks I found so threatening. They looked up with a mixture of pity and boredom in their eyes. For me, caught in purgatory, time had lost all meaning. For them, 45 long minutes had passed watching my nervous breakdown, and their interest was beginning to wane.

"Come on, mate, you can do it," said one of them helpfully. I was in the middle of a section of the route that required me to move horizontally across the rock face. I looked back the way I had come. To abandon the climb, I would have to make four or five long, strong moves before I would be close enough to my last point of protection to be able to fall safely.

I flexed my arms briefly, asking their opinion. My aching muscles replied that success in that direction was unlikely. Ahead, the route was bare. A long horizontal crack led the way to safety, but it was too shallow to jam my hands in and it would be easy for my fingers to slip from its gently sloping rim. Footholds were entirely absent—I would have to smear the toes of my climbing shoes against the flat rock in a desperate hope for friction.

Four or five technical moves would take me to solid handholds, but before I could start, I would have to lean backwards out of the hole, my head parallel to my waist, exposing me terribly to the empty space below and sending the blood rushing to my brain.

Tentatively, I maneuvered myself into position. After inhaling deeply through my nose, I leapt from the safety of the hole before my conscious mind had a chance to realize what was happening. My hands bounded after each other in a series of tenuous grips, following my body's momentum like a train-hopper chasing a speeding carriage. My tired muscles screamed at me to stop.

"You're half-way there, said a voice in my head, maybe you can rest". I paused for a moment and looked down. "Nope, if you stop, you'll fall", another voice immediately replied, so I hurried on until, at last, solid handholds sprang out of the rock in front of me. As I held on, finally secure, my breath spasmed into gasps of relief. I'd made it.

"Holy fucking shit," I shouted to my friends. They looked at each other and rolled their eyes.

At its best, rock climbing symbolizes freedom, adventure, and courage—which is a pretty decent return, considering that it’s one of the most accessible sports out there.

Climbing is also an objectively dangerous activity. Like worrywart moms, the disclaimers in climbing guidebooks, gym posters, and registration forms constantly remind us of the risks we take. It’s not uncommon to read about climbing deaths in the news—whether it’s the experienced climber in a freak accident or a novice suffering the severe consequences of a safety lapse. This is unfortunate, both for those who are hurt and their families, but also for the climbing world, whose achievements are overshadowed by tragedy. The reminders are constant, and they are not always seen on the mountainside. Climbers sometimes arrive at the gym, psyched up to climb hard, only to find paramedics attending to some poor guy sprawled on the mats with a limb askew, everyone around him nervously climbing easier routes for a while.

Often, climbing isn’t even a comfortable activity. When climbers are not practicing indoors in hangers that freeze in winter and broil in summer, they are outside. Bleary-eyed and hungover after a night of wild camping and wine, sunburnt and insect-bitten, walking approach trails with sore feet, those who climb know that once the destination is reached, it’s only a matter of time before fingertips, already worn paper-thin, will finally tear into painful flaps of loose skin—‘flappers’—on the unforgiving sandpaper-like rock.

Still, countless climbers deploy the laser-like focus of martial artists, and dedicate their lives to the sport. Climbing has a way of sneaking into a person’s life and taking it over completely.

The crags are filled with people who turned up at their local gym for a bit of fun and general fitness, and now regularly risk serious injury so they can move vertically up 100 feet or more of solid rock, only to descend immediately afterwards, too exhausted to take in the view. So, what is it, exactly, that makes the climb so compelling?

Climbing has a lot to offer for the uninitiated. Recently voted the U.K.’s sexiest sport, muscular rock climbers silhouetted beneath steeply overhanging rocks have been a staple of motivational posters and travel advertisements for decades. In his book *Training for Climbing*, Eric Hörst explains that the skills of climbing are split almost exactly equally between strength, technique, and psychology. This means that there is a remarkable amount of flexibility in terms of what a “strong” climber looks like. A person who is physically weak can use good technique to easily out-perform a much stronger competitor, but even the best technique is worthless against a lack of psychological self-belief.

Thanks to the unique interplay between these three elements, climbing is a sport in which children can turn professional at 12 years old and adults can continue climb at an elite level well past 60. Whether tall or short, thick or thin, anybody can potentially excel. It also means that women can use superior technique and courage to leave their male counterparts in the dust. Unfortunately, like many physical sports, climbing is still largely male dominated, but this has begun to change in recent years with tough women like Alex Puccio, Sasha DiGiulian and Hazel Findlay showing that there’s no reason females can’t compete at the highest levels of the sport.

Climbing is more of a social endeavor than a competitive one.

Being able to climb “better” than the next person, however, is almost irrelevant. Alex Lowe, one of the finest all-round mountaineers of his generation, famously once said: “The best climber in the world is the one having the most fun!”

Elitism is strongly discouraged amongst most climbers, and the biggest rock-stars routinely rub shoulders with first-timers at the same gyms and crags as everyone else. Of course, like any sport, climbing has its hero-worship and its easily bruised egos, but the real challenge isn’t against other people—it’s between yourself and the wall.

The joy of self-challenge is one of the first meaningful aspects of climbing beginners embrace. In fact, many of the limitations for a novice climber is connected to a lack of belief; a lack of understanding of the movements required in the vertical dimension that leads the brain to say, “I can’t.” It’s amusing to see new climbers just let go or jump away from the wall, believing that they have fallen. It’s even better when you see them realise they are far more capable than they had thought, and the rapid progress that is made thereafter. “Just believe in yourself” may be an empty cliché, but it has real, immediate and practical applications in rock climbing.

Self-challenge over competition is why groups of climbers with extremely disparate skill levels can easily and enjoyably climb together. Ultimately, climbing is a social activity. Most of the time climbers are required to work together with a partner in order to create a system of mutual safety—it’s the trust-fall exercise taken to extremes, and a highly effective bonding experience.

The climbing subculture has its own set of celebrities, legends, achievements, habits, and slang which provide common ground for climbing partners from radically different backgrounds. Even partners who do not share a spoken language can still communicate through physical imitation and examples of moves—body language is universal. Because it is difficult to climb without a partner, climbing with strangers is a normal part of the sport and, thanks to the natural social bonding aspects of the activity, strangers often quickly become friends.

But what about the best of the best?

Official competitions do exist, of course, with national and worldwide championships held every year amongst climbers of dizzying talent, and many climbing gyms host local competitions regularly. Elite climbers compete outside the gym, too, trying to climb harder projects under more difficult circumstances. That said, bitter public rivalries are rare—professional climbers competing for the first ascent of the same project are more likely to help and encourage each other than succumb to unfriendliness, even when the stakes are high.

The climbing world is filled with its own legends and celebrities, thanks, partially, to the increasing popularity of climbing films which display their inspiring feats of strength and courage. But, whereas in other sports the biggest names compete in far off arenas at a distance from the public, even the most famous climbers hang out in the same crags and gyms as everyone else. They don't have a choice—that's where the climbing is. It isn't uncommon for the casual climber to run into elite members of the sport at popular crags, only to watch first-hand the incredible moves they had previously only seen on TV.

What's even better, though, is that many of the most well known climbers are relaxed, humble, and encouraging when they meet beginners, often lending their support and guidance. This is, at least in part, probably why the climbing community takes great care to record and remember the history and achievements of the climbing elites. One can usually find a chapter describing the history of a crag somewhere in every climbing guide, and, just as importantly, the name of the person who climbed it for the first time.

The sport's "Safety First" mantra is driving its newfound mainstream popularity.

Thanks to advances in technology, climbing has become safer and easier over the last 70 years—so much so that some of the classics of the 50s and 60s are of only moderate difficulty today. When climbing classic routes, the engagement with history is astonishing.

In other sports, history buffs can visit stadiums to recapture glory. In climbing, one faces virtually the exact same challenges as did the heroes of old—touching the same rock, moving the body in similar ways, experiencing similar emotional demands during the ascent. Nowhere else in athletics is there such potential to connect to history. Even with the advance of technology, however, modern climbers are pushing the boundaries of what that technology can allow them to do. Alex Honnold, probably the most famous climber in and out of the sport, regularly chooses to climb without anything to catch his falls—he is kept safe only by his confidence in his skill, aided only by his chalk and climbing shoes.

Dean Potter sees the future of climbing as 'freeBASEing', a style in which a parachute, rather than a rope, is used to catch falls. (The method is so alarmingly dangerous that few climbers are following suit just yet.) At the other end of the spectrum, Tommy Caldwell and Kevin Jorgeson used a huge amount of cutting-edge gear in order to ascend one of the hardest climbs of all time, the Dawn Wall project in Yosemite Valley. The incredible feats of these climbers are now being noticed by the mainstream media—most of the biggest outlets covered the Dawn Wall ascent, including The New York Times and the BBC—and the sport seems destined to become increasingly popular as a result.

Not that the sport runs the risk of "selling out" any time soon. As climbers continue to explore the very limits of the human body, there are few who follow the stringent lifestyle demanded of athletes of other disciplines.

Thanks to climbing's natural sociability and general lack of elitism, it is rare to find a 'healthier than thou' attitude. In fact, to some, the liberal consumption of fast food, alcohol, tobacco, and marijuana is practically a cornerstone of the experience. There is a climb in Wales, 'Lockwood's Chimney' (VD), that must be climbed "at night, in stormy weather, drunk and naked" in order to be considered complete in the proper style. To paraphrase Johnny Dawes, a defining figure of British climbing, "You might be able to climb well, but can you climb well after a long night of drinking, and get the route done before the pub opens again?"

With its relaxed attitudes, inspirational history, and low barriers to entry, it's easy to see why so many decide to try rock climbing, but that doesn't explain what makes climbers obsessed with the sport given the inherent dangers.

There are almost as many kinds of climbing as there are rocks to ascend. The only limitations are those in your mind. At this point, it's worth mentioning that there are many different climbing disciplines. 'Bouldering' consists of very short routes with difficult moves and the use of crash-pads, rather than ropes, to catch falls; 'sport climbing' takes place on taller walls with permanent metal bolts providing secure protection in case of falls; 'trad climbing' is similar, but no bolts are provided and the lead climber must place gear—pieces of metal and loops of cord—into the rock for protection instead. In trad, the security of the gear relies upon the skill and knowledge of the climber, and trad routes often require a very cool head to climb successfully.

Trad and sport climbing can be 'single-pitch' or 'multi-pitch'. In single-pitch, the belayer, someone who manages the rope to keep the climber safe, never leaves the ground, and the route is normally between 50 to 100 feet long. In multi-pitch, the belayer and climber take turns to move up the rock face, and the route is however long as it takes to reach the top.

'Big wall' climbing pushes multi-pitch to the extreme, with climbers taking days or even weeks to complete routes. Routes can be 'aid climbed' (pulling on gear to ascend), 'free-climbed' (only relying on the rope to catch falls), or 'free soloed' (climbing without anything to catch falls).

Most climbers gravitate towards a style of that suits them, which is what makes the sport so attractive. Once one discovers what they enjoy, they can just go and do that. There's no need to spend much time on general training or conditioning—the complex movements required are best learned simply by climbing as much as possible. Building up muscle beyond what is needed to make those movements just makes you a heavier, less efficient climber. And, if training in your chosen style ever gets tiresome, you can always move on to a different style that forces you to use your existing skill-set in a new way. To a certain degree, skill level is transferable between each style, so taking a break from one to try another can allow you to return stronger in the future. With so much variation, it's difficult to get bored of the overall sport.

Despite being easy to make progress initially, the path to mastery in climbing is a long one. The key is to keep advancements in physical strength, technique, and psychological strength balanced, and this has to happen over an extended period of time.

The physical strength of tendons is paramount and takes much longer to train than muscles. Technique must be honed over hundreds or thousands of repetitions of similar moves. Psychological strength must be gained by gradual familiarisation with the dangers of climbing, or else there is the risk of learning only stupidity. Progress is measured with brutal honesty—you're either on the wall, or you're off.

Although the path is long, the rewards are significant. Accomplished climbers ascend rock as though they are dancing. They transfer their weight between each point of contact fluidly to maximise efficiency, create and conserve momentum precisely, and use strategic hand grips and foot placements with incredible accuracy. 'Flow' is a term that describes an elevated mental state in which complete immersion, total focus, and absolute enjoyment come together to create a near transcendental experience. It can be reached in many different sports and disciplines, but, in climbing, 'flow' makes you feel like you're flying.

For most, entering the 'flow' state is rare. More often, climbers are exposed to a range of emotions: nervousness, terror, indecision, anger, frustration, relief, determination, focus, tenacity, and sheer joy are all part of the regular climbing experience. In short, climbing represents the entire human emotional spectrum. And, despite the undeniable presence of negative feelings that can and arise, those lows only serve to intensify the highs. That climbing almost always ends on a high—thanks to the endorphins released from physical exertion and the mood-boosting effects of achieving goals—only makes it that much more addictive.

Perhaps this is a root of the obsession with climbing? It's almost as if the sport is a drug—new users get immediate heady highs, and committed users face a roller-coaster ride of dependency and satisfying their urges. Regular users require steadily harder climbs to reach similar levels of gratification. And, as with drugs, a welcoming subculture with its own ways of dressing, speaking, and thinking is ready to absorb you, ready to convince you no matter how bad it gets that quitting just isn't an option. If climbing is indeed a narcotic, though, it's a magical one. Whereas drug abuse causes addicts to become emancipated, nervous, and slow-minded, climbers become muscular, confident, and sharply in control of the movement of their bodies.

The truth is, there are many reasons for the obsession with rock climbing. It's an intensely rewarding activity for newcomers and elite participants alike, with a multitude of sub-disciplines that people can, and do, dedicate their entire lives to.

Climbing builds close relationships between people—travelling climbers find themselves welcomed into an inclusive community that transcends language and culture no matter where in the world they go. The sport can be enjoyed across the generations, from childhood until old age, and its lessons in problem solving, courage, and mental strength are applicable across all areas of the human experience.

Ultimately, climbing can be whatever the climber wishes it to be; intense or relaxed, dangerous or safe, competitive or casual. It becomes a reflection of our mood, our personality; it can help to shape our entire attitude towards life. It has the potential to change us into better people physically, mentally, and socially. Maybe, in the end, it's not climbing we're obsessed with, but instead it's humanity's immutable need to constantly strive for grander adventures, wilder territories, more extraordinary lives. Whichever it is, climbing is really, really fun.

"Safe," I shouted down to my friends. I was at the top of the last climb of the day, and this one had gone like a dream. The nightmare of my earlier nervous breakdown had become a distant memory, quickly forgotten.

I began to set up an anchor for the rope, a series of points of protection in the rock that would catch my friends if they fell while climbing up to join me. I was totally immersed in the work, only partly sensing my adrenaline levels subside and my breathing return to normal.

If someone had asked me how long it had taken me to climb the route, I could only have guessed maybe 45 minutes. An hour, even? It had been hard, and I had shouted with the effort of some of the moves, taking long rests on solid holds before venturing across blank and complex faces. As each move had been completed successfully, a new move had presented itself, and my brain had focused on that, and nothing else.

As my friend began to ascend, I sat by my anchor gathering the rope as it slackened through my belay device. In front of me lay the whole valley, a patchwork of green and yellow, cars like dots following a thin hedge-rowed road network, scale-model houses with windows that winked gently with reflections of the setting sun. My whole body was tired, but now I needed do nothing more than relax on the rock, enjoying the warmth trapped from heat of the day, filling my lungs with the sweet scents of the trees as the sky gradually turned a deep blue above me. That night, we would drink wine.



Words by Vincent Kavanagh

Vincent is a storyteller, writer and filmmaker, who also runs a publication The Trip on Medium, dedicated to new and emerging voices in Spirituality, Philosophy, Mental Health and Mindfulness.

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I Died On Magic Mushrooms

What It Felt Like And What I Learned About Reality And Myself

I was guided through death, reborn into my body and taught to live all over again. I did this alone in my bedroom, with the help of some dried psilocybin mushrooms and a dash of hope.

And you know what? I learned more about myself in six hours than I did in 20 years of being alive. With the release of Netflix's 'Have a good trip', it's dawned on me that we're getting closer and closer to widespread de-stigmatisation of psychedelic substances in modern society.

So what better time to tell the tale of my first mushroom trip? It is to this day, one of the most life-changing and eye-opening experiences of my short existence.

This story is of course for safety and educational purposes only. I am in no way encouraging the use of any substances. My goal is merely to share my experiences and to give you an honest and real description of the effects. At least, in my case.

Be warned, it's a wild ride and longer than the average read on Medium. You may want to get comfy...

Taking The Plunge

I was a 20-year-old lad in my second year of university. My time at university was largely spent seeking identity and meaning.

A major component of this search for identity was the use of psychoactive substances. It was like a church for my friends and I in some ways. Society, elders and peers offered little in the way of spiritual guidance. So for us, it was a way of exploring the different possibilities of reality, together. This particular spiritual excursion, however, I decided to face alone.

It was a nerve-wracking concept, but I felt I needed to go further into the depths without distraction; without anyone to use as my crutch. I needed to face it alone; I needed to face me alone... I certainly got what I was looking for.

Of course, I took the necessary safety precautions that anyone even considering a trip needs to think out: set and setting.

I decided that my room would be a comfortable environment. It was after all the most personal space to me. I had an ensuite bathroom at the time too, so I wouldn't need to leave the room for the full duration of the experience.

I made sure that my flatmate was in the apartment. He wouldn't be of much help if things went wrong as he had never taken a psychedelic before, but he could at least serve as someone to tell me that I wasn't going to die. Fortunately, I didn't need him. However, I did die...

Part I: Death

I took two grams of dried Hawaiian mushrooms at 21:19 (I wrote down the time like some kind of psychedelic scientist). It was scary, I'll be frank. I almost chickened out. It was like standing on the edge of a cosmic diving board, looking down into a giant black void.

“Should I really do this?” I thought.

But of course, I did. I reasoned that I shouldn't let cold feet dictate what I should do. I had already decided to do this. It was now or never!

So I gobbled them up, and went to my room, bidding my roommate farewell.

Yum yum in my tum! Oh boy was I in for some fun!

“See you on the other side!” I declared.

For this experience, I had prepared a playlist of music, and a series of Alan Watts lectures to listen to. Surprisingly, it only took about 15 minutes until I started to feel effects: a light body load at first.

I put on one of Alan's lectures and lay down on my bed: his voice gently guiding me as the effects of the mushrooms became more and more pronounced. I looked up to Watts and his philosophies, so it was a great way to soothe the nerves of the 'come up' period.

It didn't take long (maybe 30 minutes) for me to realise that this was coming on strong... stronger than I had anticipated... perhaps too strong? Things started to make less and less sense, I became more and more confused by even basic notions and concepts. My heart rate soared. Alan's words no longer provided any comfort. I started to feel confused and a little disturbed. So I brought up the playlist I had prepared and hit shuffle, then lay back down on the bed.

Things Start To Become Very Wonky Indeed...

From this point on, I can no longer verify the order of the following events. I will describe them in the order I believe they happened in, but I am probably wrong. The most mind-bending effect of the psychedelic experience is the alteration of time. Time no longer exists, it reveals itself to be an illusion of 'ordinary consciousness'. It has no place in the psychedelic realm. If you try to cling to it, then you will be in for a difficult experience.

Sounds now had an intense reverberation and delay to them. I remember smacking my lips, and the sound bounced endlessly around the room as if I were in some kind of giant subterranean cave system. I could hear a constant high pitched tone that definitely was not there before I started tripping... My depth-perception became incredibly altered: I could no longer tell how far or close objects were to me. When I tried to grab my water bottle I ended up grabbing at the air in front of it. When I tried reading the time on my laptop, I recognised that there were indeed symbols on the screen, but they held no meaning to me.

Textures now began to warp... the walls were breathing. If I dared to move my body, it moved in slow motion: It would seem like minutes before my body would obey a command sent from my mind. I was worried... confused... unable to process any of this. The analytical side of me was dying. How could it not?

I remember circling my room like an insane person, trying desperately to figure out what was happening and what to do. I pulled at my hair, hard, muttering over and over again: "What is it? What is it? What is it?". It was pure insanity. I was lost. Nothing in the world made any sense whatsoever. I felt like a spec of dust floating in an endless void of nothing. It was not a pleasant experience... to say the least. It was self-induced psychosis, no doubt about it.

There was nothing I could do, no one to help me, nothing to rely on... eventually, I surrendered to the bed. I gripped the bed sheets and rode the wave as reality began to disintegrate before my eyes.

But I didn't feel alone. Not even for a moment. Yes, I was scared, and in complete awe of what was happening to me. But I did not feel alone. I did not feel helpless.

Mushrooms have a very peculiar attribute in that they feel alive. They feel as though they have their own consciousness. I won't argue for or against the idea that they are a conscious entity here, but I will state this fact: I felt accompanied by them on my journey.

Not only did I feel accompanied, but I visualised their presence and was comforted by it in a very real way...

As things became overwhelming, I shut my eyes. I felt an extreme amount of tingling, pulsating energy running up my spine to the back of my head, and in my teeth and gums. All of this was pure input. There was no voice in my head analysing any of this... there couldn't be. It was pure and total ineffable experience: there was no room for reason.

I began to experience closed eye visuals: a swirling of patterns and geometric shapes in the dark void. I can't explain them. But they were not the most interesting thing I experienced with my eyes shut, not even close.

My Spirit Guide

Amidst my closed eye visuals, I saw a woman looking at me from within the void. She seemed to be of eastern origin and wearing a headscarf. I could only barely make out her face. She did not speak to me directly. She did not need to. Her mere presence was enough to calm and reassure me that all would be okay: I needn't be afraid.

Who knows in which order these events occurred. But I remember seeing myself from the third-person perspective: from above my bed looking down on my body.

Then, before I lost all consciousness and gave in to the chaos, this final event occurred which to this day still bewilders me:

Eyes still closed, I saw what I can only describe as wires or strings protruding from my skull and shooting off into the endless void. Like I was physically connected to something that I could not see. All of a sudden, a white light shot through the wires and entered inside my skull. It was a very real physical sensation. I felt my body (be it physical or spiritual) being struck by this force. I don't know what it was or what it did, but soon afterwards I was gone.

All memory stops here. Whatever barrier it was that I was approaching at speed, I had now passed through it. And I was no more. Complete Ego Death; Nothingness.

Part II: Rebirth

Why do I call this part of the story the 'Rebirth'? Well, I'm not exaggerating when I call it that...

After this psychological death, I lost all sense of identity. I no longer knew who I was, where I was or what I was... everything was brand new to me. My body was new to me, my mind was new to me...I didn't know my name, I didn't even know what a 'name' was! Sound scary? It was the opposite. In this case, the saying 'Ignorance is bliss' could not be more aptly applied. I started from zero. And what a perspective shift it was...

Suddenly, I rose from the bed and gasped for air. As I looked around, I realised that everything around me was beautiful beyond description, I was in complete awe. The colours were so incredibly vivid and the walls were pulsating and breathing like crazy. Everything was alive and everything loved me... I could feel the energy of everything flowing through me. Although 'me' was not a concept I had in my mind at that moment.

I was still confused, but I was feeling good. The music was still playing, it sounded great. I sat at the edge of the bed, as I did, I happily shouted "Hello!". I was quite literally greeting the universe as if it were the first time I were meeting it.

The next thing I know, I'm stumbling around my room as if I'm drunk. But I'm not drunk, I just don't know how to walk. So I begin to learn again, carefully placing one foot in front of the other and using the wall as my guide.

As I'm stumbling around, I notice my curtains waving at me. I stop, smile, and wave back at them enthusiastically. I begin to dance with them as they sway, I playfully point at them as if they were a person. They might as well have been. In this state: everything is a living breathing entity.

I felt like I had finally woken up for the very first time in my life. As if everything up until this moment had been a distant foggy dream. This is reality. This is what it's all about.

But I still had a question: What did I leave behind?

I felt as if I had shed a thousand layers of my being during my death. And now that I was learning to live once more, a burden that I previously carried was no longer on my shoulders. I paced around the room, repeating that question over and over again... trying to remember what it was that I left behind. In between earnest questioning, I would suddenly stop and burst out laughing at how silly I was, then go back to thinking hard...

Eventually, I gave up on the question. Realising how futile it was.

Meeting Myself For The First Time

I ventured into my bathroom and I saw a man! Then... I realised: It's me! And this is a mirror! I burst into laughter. I then begin to examine myself. I was fascinated...

I pulled silly faces and posed in different ways to make myself laugh. It was a beautiful moment because this was the reintroduction of my ego. I was welcoming it back with joy and open arms, but not taking it too seriously! I spent quite a while in front of the mirror. "I look like a jolly mushroom!" I remember thinking. My beard was multicoloured and glowing, and my eyes were stunning, it was easy to get lost in them.

I never thought I'd get lost in my own eyes. What a ludicrous thought!

As I went to leave the bathroom, I again saw the woman from my visions. She appeared to me in the pattern of my bathroom tiles. I wasn't alarmed. I was comforted. I simply greeted her as I passed. Perhaps she was checking in on me as a loving mother would...

Next: a mini dance party with myself and the universe! The music was still playing and all matter around me was dancing to it. I was regaining more control over my body. The joy and utter peace I felt is truly indescribable. It is the feeling of not needing. Not wanting. The entire universe and God are smiling down upon you. It was a sense of true perfection and wisdom. I wasn't perfect, or wise even. It was I and the universe together which was perfect and wise... I had a new sense of connection with reality: everything I looked at was God, and so was I.

Slowly, memories were starting to return to me.

"I'm a 20 years old guy..." I suddenly say.

"And I took mushrooms? Oh yeah!"

It was as if I was an alien who had been shot into this body from space and now I was reconnecting with the memories and feelings of this meat sack!

I then couldn't help but notice, that the carpet looked very, very soft. So I threw myself onto the ground and rubbed my face all over it. I was right... it felt like heaven.

A Child Once More

As I lay on the ground, I stared at my hand. Suddenly, I realised that it didn't look like an adult hand... it looked like a tiny baby's hand. Like a small wrinkled little newborn baby's hand. I was mesmerised, to say the least. I moved the fingers and watched the baby hand move. As I looked up to the ceiling I saw that the world was suddenly a lot bigger than it previously was. The ceiling looked like it was impossibly far away, the walls towered above me like skyscrapers!

I realised that I was tapping into old memories...

"This must be what it is like to take the perspective of an infant..." I thought.

It was an extremely profound moment. I was hit by a wave of overpowering nostalgia. I felt tiny and fragile, but unafraid.

"There isn't much difference between who I was then and who I am now..."

I put my legs up against the wall. I stared at the creases which formed on the red tartan pyjama bottoms I was wearing.

Suddenly, the light in the room was the sun. The creases were mountains. My pyjama bottoms became a landscape. Not only my pyjama bottoms. But anything I focused my attention on seemed like an entire miniature world... pulsating and breathing with life.

Such beauty... such peace... all silly frustrations and day to day quarrels obliterated. I cried. I don't cry often. But at this moment, I experienced a deep awakening. Akin to what the Japanese Zen Buddhists call Satori. Never in life had I ever discovered such transcendental peace and beauty... I wept in sheer awe of what I was realising. I was happy to weep. They were tears of the deepest joy possible.

Don't misunderstand me. It wasn't a feeling, it wasn't merely that I was 'happy' because I had ingested a substance. It was far more than that. The realisation I had at that moment has continued to guide me since. I realised that I am not my ego. I am not my thoughts. The universe is a never-ending cycle of energy, and I am just another wave, whether I realise it or not. There is not anything for me to do except to exist. Wherever I am, whatever I am doing, I am exactly where I'm supposed to be.

What was I afraid of? Merely existing and being true to your nature is all that is required.

After The Fact: Integrating the experience

A lot of this will happen subconsciously, but deeper insights can be gleaned from the analysis of these states, similar to dream interpretation I think. I'm by no means an expert of course, and to this day I am still processing this experience. It is important to point out that with the ingestion of any substance there is always a risk. I do not wish to romanticise psychedelics.

The safest approach is always to not take anything at all. But if you are going to take a substance, then do your research: know what you are taking and what the appropriate dosage is. Get a testing agent to make sure that what you're taking is indeed what you believe it to be. Take it in a safe environment with people you trust and love. Remember: you can always take more if required, but if you take too much, there's no going back.