

SUMMARY HAYS-FORUM BASEL 2015

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Life-expanding experiences

Life-expanding experiences are experiences that deeply embed themselves in our memories. Because of their profound impact, these life-expanding experiences have the power to make people re-evaluate their values, to let go of entrenched beliefs or ideas and add new ones. Life-expanding experiences have the power to quickly shake people out of their complacency and fill the resulting void with new insights, opinions and even better behaviour. Put succinctly, life-expanding experiences have the power to make a person a better human being.

It is, therefore, astounding that the majority of individuals in the world either decline to accept such experiences or actively seek to avoid them.

My personal experience

I personally had a very natural, instinctive curiosity about life-expanding experiences as a young woman.

What sort of person would I be if I went beyond common, accepted boundaries? Who am I if I exceed the boundaries with which I am familiar; those given to me by society through my upbringing – be that via my parents, school or my initial work experiences?

I wanted to know who I am and how I would react if my comfort zone were exploded and I had to make vitally important decisions while exhausted, cold, hungry, and full of despair.

Aiguille du Dru

My very first life-expanding experience occurred when I was 19 years old. I was already into mountaineering and was ready to undertake my first big mountain face. The Aiguille du Dru in the Mont Blanc massif is a 1,000-metre high vertical granite tower.

When my climbing colleagues and I reached the summit after a 12-hour slog, a storm descended over the mountain. We were caught in impenetrable snow and fog – a complete whiteout. With the damp also came the cold, and the storm made it feel like we were transformed into pillars of ice. It was in that moment that unimagined forces were released within me. I took over the lead and was firmly convinced that I would find the bivouac area (our refuge for the night). I tried to convince two other rope teams to follow us, but they were apathetic, indifferent and unwilling to move on.

We were the only rope team that, in spite of the storm, managed to descend that day. The next day, the other rope teams were rescued by helicopter, fortunately without suffering any permanent damage caused by the effects of the frostbite they had suffered.

But this experience – this life-expanding experience – was a turning point in my life.

Turning point

At that time, I was working – very much to the bemusement of my father – as a sales assistant in a sports shop. My father had given up on me in terms of my career. He felt I'd never make anything of myself.

This experience on Aiguille du Dru, however, showed me that I was capable of so much more. Namely, that when others, (particularly men), find themselves in a seemingly hopeless situation and become whiny, apathetic and impassive, unimagined strength and an unprecedented force of will are released in me.

This experience was the turning point for me. I was determined to train to become a qualified mountain guide (at that time, women weren't permitted to pursue this profession and the law had to be changed to allow them to register for this).

A few years later I completed my training and became the first female mountain guide in Europe – probably in the world. I then founded my own mountaineering school and developed my abilities further. I called these my first "journeyman years".

First journeyman years

During this time, I undertook my first expeditions into the Himalayas, made my first ascents, climbed in Patagonia on the dreaded granite giants found there and refined my technique to the nth degree. One solo climb followed another. I climbed all the difficult faces the Alps had to offer.

I climbed the infamous north face of the Eiger – in winter, at -17°C. This was followed by a solo summer ascent of the northeast face of the Eiger. I had long since made a name for myself in the mountaineering world, which led to me being selected for a live broadcast documentary for Swiss and German television.

The north face of the Eiger – Live

The live broadcast of the north face ascent of the Eiger was the event of the year. It even won the 1999 "Documentary Film of the Year" award.

It took a team of 120 professionals to film every second of the four of us battling up the infamous north face of the Eiger.

This was my first contact with journalists. Now, it's a journalist's job to ask questions, so the following question was put to me:

"Evelyne Binsack, why do you seek out these situations that test you to your limits? Why take the risk? It's cold, it's dangerous, it's uncomfortable to spend the night sitting on a rocky ledge in sub-zero temperatures. Why?"

The question of "why"

At that time, I had no plausible, meaningful answer to this question. I knew HOW it felt to push my boundaries and even how I reacted to this. But I had never asked myself "why". This question would remain with me for over a decade.

2nd Journeyman years

After the Eiger north face ascent was on TV, I entered what I call the second phase of my journeyman years.

I was the first Swiss woman to climb the highest mountain in the world: Mount Everest.

I also trained to become a helicopter pilot and actively worked in this field.

In addition, I undertook further expeditions to the 8,000 meter-high mountains of the world.

Between 2006-2008 I carried out my "Expedition Antarctica": an undertaking whereby I travelled 25,000 kilometres to reach the South Pole – relying only on my own strength and endurance. By bike, on foot, using skis and sledges, it took 484 days to complete this trek.

This challenge took me to the absolute limits of my endurance; it was harder than all the mountains I'd ever climbed combined. But still, I didn't have an answer to my "why".

Hollywood

In 2012, I successfully completed a documentary training school in Hollywood.

In a class called "Storytelling" it all suddenly became so clear:

Hollywood is without a doubt the most successful storyteller in the world. Hollywood knows the human psyche inside and out.

During this class, it occurred to me that Hollywood and Jesus Christ both have something in common: both know about good and evil.

Good and evil are a part of every human being.

The Bible (and other philosophical works) gives us direction with regard to what is good, what is less good and what is evil. And we have a conscience that can navigate us reasonably well through life.

However, Hollywood takes this "humanness" and makes it into two people: one good and one evil.

It creates heroes and anti-heroes.

The hero encompasses everything that is courageous and heroic: He is selfless, has an overarching goal. He is passionate, willing to make sacrifices, absolutely fair and loyal. He is the reflection of all that is good.

The anti-hero, however, exists to cause harm. He seeks to bring down the hero. He is cunning, deceitful, vile. He is the reflection of all that is bad.

We understand both entities, because both exist within us. We feel empathy for the hero, antipathy for the anti-hero. Both are active, both at work. As a rule, the anti-hero does not manifest himself as a murderer or crook. Instead, we can regard the anti-hero as being our fears. Our reluctance. Our inertia. Our dark side, our weaker self. Our inner demons. Because it is the anti-hero, the spoil sport, who stands in the way of our inner hero.

Answer

This is why it is important that we seek out experiences that push us to our limits, so that we can grow. So that we can battle against our fears, our demons, and triumph over these so that we can rise to the challenge at hand.

To come back to my original topic, expeditions have long since ceased to be imperialistic conquests. We can no longer conquer a Mount Everest, a South Pole, a North Pole. There is no America left to discover.

Expeditions are journeys that take us to our physical and mental limits. If a situation turns bad, be it because of a storm or the cold or both, due to hunger and exhaustion and exposure, then all the defences a person has built up around himself just fall away. This is when the true nature of the individual comes through:

- When such a situation arises, will I be the person I expect of myself?
- Or will I become whiny, apathetic, indifferent and just give up?
- Am I willing to risk my life for others or am I just saving my own backside?
- Can I remain fair and am I still capable of making decisions that will enable me to accomplish my goal?

These sorts of questions can't be answered in the warmth of our front room. To be able to answer such questions, we have to master these sorts of situations. Or to emphasise this just a bit more: No individual can be a good leader, a good guide, a good boss, if he has never had these experiences. Because he has never had to face the baser aspects of his character.

Reinhold Messner, the most famous, most successful and greatest mountaineer of our time puts it this way:

"When I'm on an expedition, I don't just encounter my own courage. Above all, I am confronted by my fears, my doubts and my shortcomings. And I see just how small and insignificant I am."

And nevertheless, the most famous of all mountaineers has never stopped re-exploring the limits of his abilities, has never stopped encountering new aspects of his personality, has never stopped filling his life with new experiences. Today, he is over 70 years old and yet he still does not tire of pushing the boundaries of his current abilities, his experiences and his possibilities.

The arrogance, cockiness, exuberance of the antagonist

Very few people die while ascending Mount Everest. The majority of people who die on Mount Everest do so during the descent, *after* they have reached the summit.

When something goes wrong on Mount Everest, the highest mountain in the world, it goes really wrong. People die.

Mountain climbers expend so much physical and mental energy in their ascent that their strength fails them during the descent. Many die of exhaustion, altitude sickness and dehydration. The film "Everest" gives a very impressive contemporary insight into what happens to a climber who ascends Everest.

Cockiness, arrogance and extreme ambition are all part of our personalities. This, our spiritual attitude, is not what kills us. Instead, the effect of trying, day in and day out, to overcome our various stresses beginning with dissatisfaction or a feeling of futility, usually leads to us to seek escape in more work, addiction or an affair and *ends* in arrogance, cockiness, extreme ambition and burnout. At best, marriages end in divorce or, at worst, the *antagonist* commits suicide.

It is extremely important here to differentiate between "force of will" or "willpower" and what scientists would call a "loss of self-control".

Antagonistic motives such as arrogance, extreme ambition, cockiness and greed for more recognition, for more money, for more power are by no means indicative of "willpower," rather they show a *loss of self-control*.

The uncertainty of the antagonist

In exactly the same way, uncertainty can also prevent you from reaching your goal. I myself experienced uncertainty at the start of my 484-day adventure – from my departure from Switzerland to reaching the South Pole relying solely on my own strength and self-resolve. This journey led through, among other places, Mexico, Central America and Peru, areas that, for me travelling alone as a woman, were rather dangerous. Would I be kidnapped, would I be raped, would I ever make it to my goal? These were questions that weighed heavily on my mind, especially as I had invested everything I had in the expedition. I was under a great deal of pressure and knew that I couldn't answer my questions before I had, at some point in the next year and a half, achieved my goal.

Most people (studies say between 80-94%) succumb to their feelings of uncertainty and never even try pursuing experiences that would push and reshape their boundaries. They have resigned themselves to settling for doing something less interesting and, although they are not satisfied with their lives, they suppress their dissatisfaction with an array of distractions.

Unconquered uncertainty manifests itself over time as inertia that leads to a comfortable, convenient existence, but also, unfortunately, to cowardice.

Such individuals talk about unfulfilled goals in a "could have if" sort of way: "I *could have* achieved this goal *if...*" with the statement usually being completed with excuses.

Of course, we all experience uncertainty and leave things undone that seem all too uncertain for us. And that is a good thing. But in terms of life as a whole, it is essential that we confront our uncertainties time and time again and learn to overcome them. Because otherwise, the uncertainty overcomes us. And, as previously stated, it ends in smugness, a comfortable, complacent existence and inertia.

Closing remarks

In my summary of the presentation, I have consciously avoided using the first person narrative for discussing this, my personal story. Rather, the aim of this summary should be to make us aware of the leveraging effect our own individual internal hero and anti-hero can have. It is important that we consciously promote the hero and defeat the anti-hero.

Attitudes such as humility, endurance, sacrifice, loyalty, fairness and selflessness do not fit somehow into a world determined and controlled by competition.

They are, however, the characteristics that make us true human beings and heroes.
I wish you all every success and great perseverance.

Evelyne Binsack