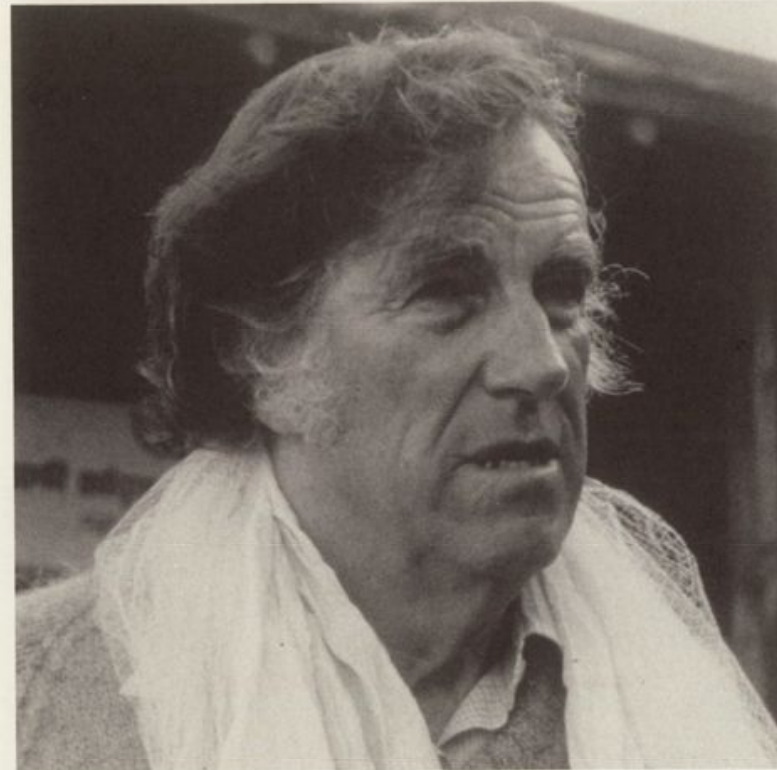


## Chapter 17



*Sir Edmund Hillary*

### Sir Edmund Hillary: In the Face of Fear

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*The greatest obstacle to being heroic  
is the doubt whether  
one many not be going  
to prove one's self a fool; the truest heroism  
is, to resist the doubt.*

— Nathaniel Hawthorne

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**S**ir Edmund Hillary has always been a mountain to me, I think because I grew up in the shadow of his name. In my youth, Hillary was not a common name for a girl, and I would tell people trying to spell it, "It's just like the man who climbed Mount Everest." The first man to reach the peak of what was known as the world's highest mountain represented the highest conquest of self-doubt. My friend Ted Holcomb recently told me that when he heard the news of Hillary's conquest, "Everyone wanted to be the first up Everest in our hearts."

Because I was Sir Hillary's namesake, and he was my childhood hero, I grew up secretly hoping I could some day climb something big myself. When I was invited to New Zealand in 1984 to participate in a diving congress in Auckland, I half jokingly told my hosts that I would be happy to come, if they could arrange for me to meet Sir Edmund Hillary, if only for a minute, if only to shake his hand. My New Zealand friends did more than that. When I arrived in Auckland they announced that they had arranged a lunch for the two of us in a quiet restaurant where we could talk as long as we liked. I was hardly myself the whole time I was in New Zealand just thinking about this meeting.

At 29,028 feet, Mount Everest is said to be the world's highest mountain, a towering shrine that stretches from Nepal to Tibet in the Himalayas. Named after British surveyor Sir George Everest, the mountain is called Sagarmatha by the Nepalese and "Goddess of the Universe" by the Sherpas. Hillary first saw Mount Everest in 1951, when he accompanied Eric Shipton's British Reconnaissance Expedition with the purpose of finding a route up the southern slope of the

mountain to its summit. At the time Hillary was a beekeeper in New Zealand, his native country.

During this preliminary foray with Shipton, Hillary entered the world of the Sherpas, a quiet people living what Hillary called a tough, hard life in Nepal's Khumbu district. The Sherpas have been called the "Tigers of the Snow", and for generations they have earned their living by freighting equipment and supplies over high glaciers and treacherous mountain passes.

Two years later, Hillary returned to Everest, and with his Sherpa companion, Tenzing Norgay, he reached the summit on May 29, 1953. For this feat Hillary was knighted by Queen Elizabeth of England.

After the Everest victory, climbers and trekkers began to flock to Nepal. In the 1960s, Hillary helped his Sherpa friends build schools, hospitals and an airfield. He soon began to notice the irony of such progress, for as more expeditioners poured into the Khumbu district, the demand for firewood and building timber soared. Hillary saw that the area would soon be a treeless desert unless some action were taken.

Approaching his own government for support, he advocated the establishment of the Sagarmatha National Park, where trees would be protected. New Zealand replied favorably to Hillary's proposal, and in 1975 the country sent its first national park advisor to the area. Soon after, there was dissension over the park idea among the Sherpas, who were more concerned about firewood and fuel than they were about conservation. But the friend of the Sherpas has remained hopeful that the park will succeed.

Hillary himself is as large and formidable as his mountain, with a tangled, rough-and-tumble craggy exterior. He is more inclined toward wearing old, baggy sweaters than the suit and tie he wore for our meeting in Auckland.

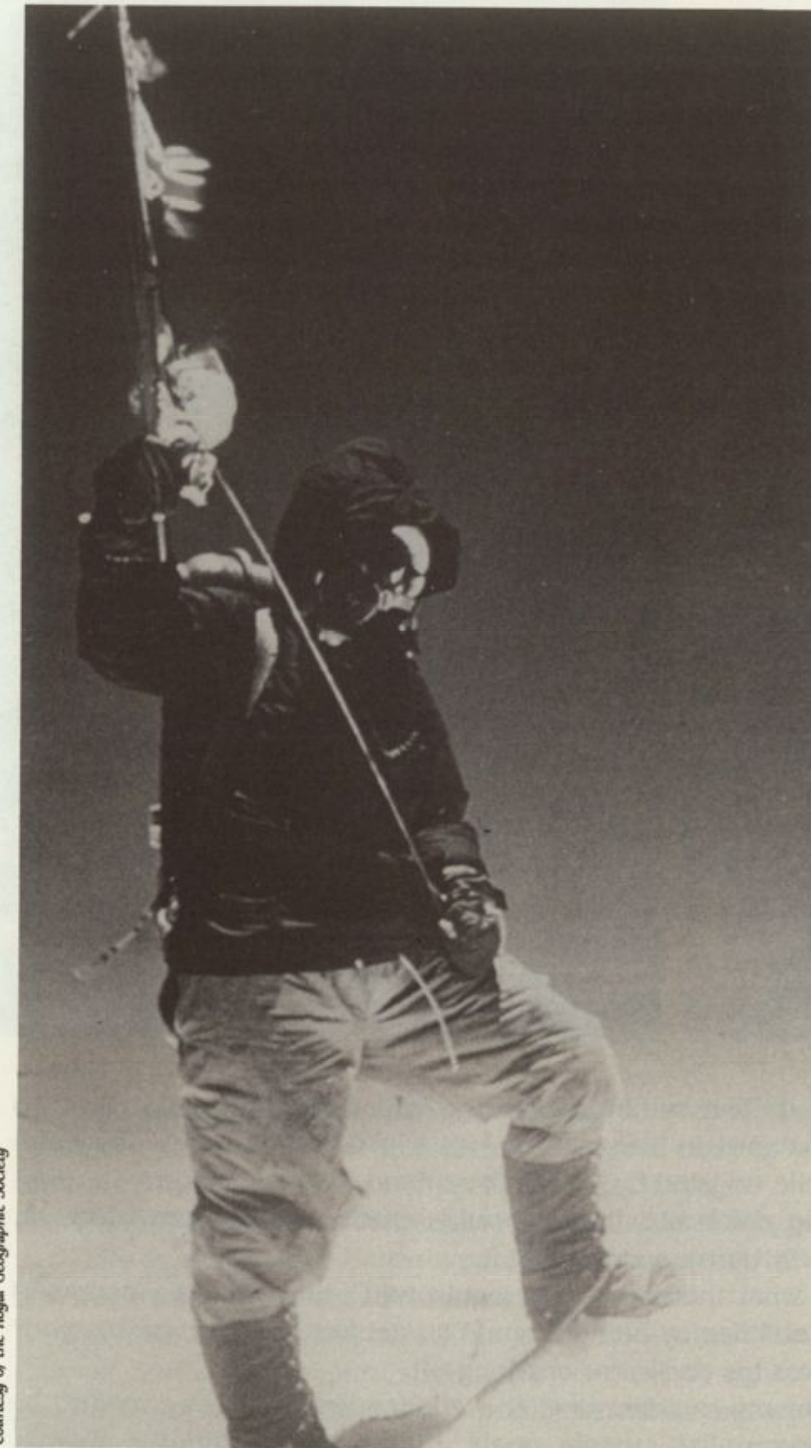
Although he is easily recognized by New Zealanders, who consider him their national hero, Hillary stood alone in the busy lobby, unbothered, when I approached. We went into lunch, and for two hours Hillary talked about adventure.

In 1953, when he and Norgay became the first men to conquer Everest, Sir Hillary's biggest challenge was to overcome his own fear. This conquest is the backbone of all adventure, of all challenges, he said.

"If people say they're not afraid, they're either stupid or not telling the truth," said Hillary. "You have to keep at it until the fear becomes much more acceptable. You want to overcome it, carry on and achieve, despite the obstacles."

Adventurers, he said, are those people who are willing to put themselves in the face of fear, because they want to challenge themselves. Each adventurer has his own brand of fear to conquer.

He talked about the Japanese climber, Naomi Uemura, who disappeared on Mount McKinley in Alaska while climbing alone. Uemura's trademark was that he



Tenzing on the summit of Mt. Everest.

Courtesy of the Royal Geographic Society



Courtesy of the Royal Geographic Society

Sir Hillary below the final summit ridge (below and right).



undertook difficult expeditions by himself. These feats included a solo climb to the top of Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania, a raft trip of 3,700 miles down the Amazon, and a 7,500-mile dogsled trek from Greenland to Alaska. Hillary thought that Uemura was taking risks and that it would "catch up with him," but, he added, he understood why Uemura was doing it.

"He wanted to see what this aloneness would add," he said. "He increased the challenges and his abilities by being alone. You get better by increasing your challenges. Aloneness was his particular challenge."

Step by step, a person can increase the challenges he faces, proving to himself that he can accomplish certain goals. Hillary talked about a Sherpa



Courtesy of the Royal Geographic Society

Tenzing and Hillary prepare to launch the expedition's second assault (left). Tenzing and Hillary after the summit success (below).



woman who weighed only 73 pounds, but who carried an 80-pound load up a mountain path in Nepal. The fact that she could carry "a good load"—one heavier than her total weight—was her particular challenge.

Without challenges, life becomes boring, said Hillary.

"Life is a constant battle against boredom, isn't it?" he said. "Once you've done one thing, you want to do another."

He said he originally titled his book about the Mount Everest climb *Battle Against Boredom*. His publishers were vehemently against it because they didn't want the word in the title. That book eventually became *Conquest of Everest*. According to Sir Hillary,

... what is boring to one person may not be so to another. What makes some people seek challenges while others sit back is a matter of one's having been born with curiosity, he said. Curiosity must be exercised, however, if it is to be increased and stimulated. The curiosity-stimulation relationship is similar to the link between talent and practice: one without the other adds up to very little.

He idolized climber Eric Shipton because Shipton was a man of "wide experience and tremendous drive"—qualities Hillary admires. "He always looked where no one had looked before. In that sense, Shipton had a greater curiosity than mine. Right up until he died, he had that curiosity."

Determination is an important factor in the exercising of curiosity. As a child Hillary was "very determined" and, to become competent in something, he said, a person has to be determined.

Climbing was something he did every chance he got. "I didn't have talent as a climber," Hillary said, "but I had determination."

He said the main goal in a person's life should not be to become the best of something, but to become competent.

"In America, you have the notion that anyone can be president," he said. "That's pure rubbish, simply because millions of people can't be president. Isn't it far more important to become competent?"

Today's adventurer can go into previously unexplored areas because technological improvements have enabled him to do so, Hillary said. "Techniques have improved so much in every field that the modern adventurer can do things that are harder. On Everest, today's climbers can take different, more difficult routes. There are always more and more difficult routes."

Man can also go farther, deeper, higher, because more is known about human physiology. "The idea now is to climb quickly, as fast as possible," he said. "In the old days we thought to go slow, relax, rest."

Physiologists continue to make new discoveries about man at high altitude, but experience is still the best teacher, said Hillary. He, himself, cannot now climb above 14,000 feet, because he once suffered cerebral edema, a potentially fatal condition brought about by high altitudes.

However, while technological advances have enabled men to do more difficult things, the irony is that the same scientific advances are responsible for making men "soft". Hillary talked about a Russian expedition to Everest in which a communications system was set up from below. The climbers were given instructions as to what loads to carry, where and how to climb.

"It was like a moon operation, but where's the motivation?" he asked. "It was very successful, but to me, it lacked the heart and soul of adventure."

Space travel fascinates him, he said. He's wondered for a long time what it would be like to be an astronaut. As an interesting probe into the possible relationships between space and earth exploration, Hillary and Neil Armstrong planned to go to the North Pole together in an expedition to be filmed for television.

Space travel, said Hillary, is very different from mountaineering, in that the former involves team effort and the latter involves individual effort. He still likes the individual effort the best.

Today, he spends much of his time alone, a fact he doesn't particularly enjoy but finds necessary because of an extensive lecture schedule. He also continues to write books about his experiences. One book, *Ascent*, coauthored with his son Peter, took a radically different tack from Hillary's normal adventure themes. The autobiography details the one tragedy in his life that remains unresolved—the 1975 death of his wife, Louise, and daughter, Belinda, in a Himalayan plane crash.

Hillary spends a good part of each year in Nepal, where he helps to build schools for the Sherpas and continues to work on the reforestation program of the region. Addressing the idea that he is giving back to the country that has given so much to him, Hillary replied, "That's rubbish. I'm doing it because the Sherpas are my friends."

The big challenge of today, he noted, is in the area of international relationships. "The things we seem so hopeless at are human relationships, peace, overcoming hunger. We're still lousy at this. The major challenges are here on earth, are between people."

Two months after our Auckland meeting, Hillary was appointed as New Zealand's High Commissioner to India, as part of his country's reestablishment of full diplomatic relations with New Delhi. When I heard that, I was struck by the fact that a major achievement in one isolated discipline can have far-reaching effects across the globe. In Hillary's case, one of the world's most challenging mountain climbs has led to a challenging climb for world peace.

#### Suggested Reading

Edmund Hillary, *Conquest of Everest* (E. P. Dutton: New York, 1954).

Sir Edmund Hillary, *Ascent: Two Lives Explored: The Autobiography of Sir Edmund Hillary and Peter Hillary* (Doubleday: New York, 1984).

Sir Edmund Hillary, *Nothing Venture, Nothing Win* (Coward, McCann and Geoghegan: New York, 1975).

Sir Edmund Hillary, *From the Ocean to the Sky* (Viking Press: New York, 1979).

Louise Hillary, *A Yak for Christmas* (Doubleday: New York, 1968).