

Overcoming fear greatest challenge: Sir Edmund Hillary

By Hillary Hauser
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AUCKLAND, New Zealand — An adventurer is someone who voluntarily puts himself in fearful places as a challenge to himself, because, to the adventurer, life without challenges is boring, says Sir Edmund Hillary.

In New Zealand, Sir Edmund is a national hero, a household word — which is the way it's been since May 1953, when he and his Sherpa guide, Tenzing Norgay, became the first men to conquer Mount Everest.

Overcoming fear, said the world-famed mountaineer, is the backbone of all adventure, of all challenges.

"If people say they're not afraid, they're either stupid or not telling the truth," he said. "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."

Hillary, 64, is big and formidable, like a mountain. He has a craggy exterior, tangled, rough-and-tumble — more inclined for old, baggy sweaters than the suit and tie he was wearing.

Editor's note: News-Press Staff Writer Hillary Hauser was recently invited to lecture at Oceans '84, an international congress in New Zealand that focused on scuba diving and the sea. While in Auckland, she met and interviewed Sir Edmund Hillary.



Sir Edmund Hillary

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Determination took Hillary to the top

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He is also extremely accessible and congenial — "low-key," as Americans say — with a big smile that goes from ear to ear.

He said that adventurers are those people who are willing to put themselves in the face of fear, because they want to challenge themselves, and each adventurer has his own brand of fear.

He talked about the Japanese climber, Naami Uemura, who disappeared on Mount McKinley in Alaska in March, while climbing alone.

Uemura's trademark was that he undertook difficult expeditions by himself, including 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 dog-sled trek from Greenland to Alaska. Hillary said that he and others had thought Uemura was taking risks, that it would "catch up with him," but added that he understood why Uemura was doing it.

Aloneness a challenge

"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 he can accomplish certain goals, said Hillary. He talked about a Sherpa 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 that was heavier than her total weight — was her particular challenge, he said.

Without challenges, life becomes boring, said Hillary.

'Battle against boredom'

"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 his Mount Everest climb "Battle Against Boredom," but that his publishers were vehemently against it (the book was eventually titled "Conquest of Everest").

But what is boring to one person may not be so to another, and what makes some people seek challenges while others sit back is a matter of a person being born with curiosity, said Hillary.

The curiosity must be exercised, however, if it is to be increased and stimulated, he said. The curiosity/stimulation relationship is similar to the link

between talent and practice: one without the other adds up to very little.

Hillary idolized Shipton

He idolized climber Eric Shipton, he said, because Shipton was a man of "wide experience and tremendous drive" — qualities he admires.

"He always looked where no one had looked before," said Hillary. "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, he said, adding that he was a "very determined child." Climbing was something he did every chance he got. To become competent in something, a person has to be determined, he said.

He added that 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?"

"I didn't have talent as a climber," Hillary said, "but I had determination."

Today's adventurer can go into previously unexplored areas, said Hillary, because technological improvements have enabled him to do so.

"Techniques have improved so much in every field that the modern adventurer can do things that are harder," he said. "On Everest, today's climbers can take different, more difficult routes — there are always more and more difficult routes."

Man aims ever higher

Man can also go farther, deeper, higher, because more is known about human physiology, he said.

"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, he said, are continuing to make new discoveries about man at high altitude, but experience is still the best teacher, said Hillary. He, himself, cannot climb above 14,000 feet, after once suffering 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," said Hillary. He talked about a recent Russian expedition to Everest in which a communications system was set up from below, so that climbers were given instructions as to what loads to carry, where and how to climb.

'Where's the motivation?'

"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."

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

But 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 individual effort the best.

These days, Hillary spends a good part of the year

in Nepal, where he is helping to build schools for the Sherpas, and to contribute to a reforestation program in Nepal. Addressing the idea that "I'm 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," he said.

The big challenge of today, said Hillary, is in the area of international relationships.

Relationships challenging

"The only thing we seem so hopeless at is human relationships — peace — overcoming hunger," he said. "We're still lousy at this. The major challenges are here on earth, between people."

Hillary spends much of his time alone, these days, a fact he doesn't particularly enjoy. This, he said, is because he lectures extensively, and he continues to write books about his experiences.

An upcoming book, which he has co-authored with his son, Peter, 30, and which will be published in September, will take a radically different tack from his normal adventure themes. It is about the one tragedy in his life that remains unresolved — the death in 1975 of his wife Louise and daughter, Belinda, in a Himalayan plane crash.

It is a subject that remains painful for him, and it seems to be like Mount Everest — something that will just always be there.