

Personal Project-Interview 2

Interview Podcast conducted by Francis Geissler

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Interviewer: Francis Geissler

Interviewee: Steven Gregory, School Counselor, BBIS; and mountaineer

Questions:

FG: Based on your personal experiences, what do you think are the physical benefits of mountaineering?

SG: I think mountaineering helps with muscle development, upper arms, legs and back. I think it depends how technical mountaineering experience is. Not all mountaineering is climbing based, so may not have to then rely on anything other than back and legs muscles. But in respect to the other physical aspects of it, most thousands meter mountains... you're talking a good (especially for beginners) days worth of walking (8 hours of walking). Having the physical endurance to be able to walk at a speed to complete that within daylight hours is something that you build up..... And I think the more you do this, the more the body becomes trained and acclimatized to managing to walk long periods up, steep inclines or down steep descents trains the body in a way where your breathing can be regulated and how you use your energy through that, how you pace yourself at times where you need to push yourself in order to overcome technical obstacles whilst giving yourself energy still to deal with descent is important. I find that the descents are often far more problematic and tolling on the body (especially for my age now). **I think even as a youngster, there's often this assumption of getting to the top, but it's actually all about getting down safely ... which is the bit where people often make mistakes.**

FG: What do you think are the mental benefits of mountaineering?

SG: Growing up as a young person I had quite bad asthma and I was very fortunate to have a scout leader who was technically able to take young people into the western highlands (in Scotland) during the winter to do alpine climbing and hiking. And he never allowed me or never fed into the sense that my asthma would prevent me from hiking. So yes, I had my medication with me, my inhaler and I was always taken where I needed to. But there wasn't a lot of focus on that. There was focus on physical fitness and focus on the sense of "you have the technical skills to do this" and for me, as a hiker, where perhaps some self-doubt has entered my mind has been whether or not I had the physical health to manage to do this. Having adults around me... whoever allowed me to walk at a pace that worked for me and when I needed to have a stop and a break to take my inhaler, it was done in a way that didn't make me more anxious or anything like that. I also think doing more technical climbs where we've done hikes that lasted a lot longer or even overnighted up on ridges and being with other young people or adults who have modelled that to us or given us that confidence/self belief, I think has been immensely valuable.

Nowadays, we call this concept a "growth mindset". All of these amazing organizations that we have in the world that have a big focus on outdoor education like: Outward Bound, Duke of Edinburgh

award, the “Schule Schloss Salem” and The United World College have built a foundation to promote outdoor activity. The person who created Outward Bound, Kurt Hahn, (he was a very famous German teacher)... one of his personal mottos (often used by Outward Bound and the Duke of Edinburgh award) was that there is more in you than you think. I think part of this idea of the psychology of mountaineering is **unlocking that potential and not allowing the technical skills needed to do it safely be overwhelming**. Giving yourself the patience to spend time and develop those skills (documenting it in my log-book) and not ignoring that you don’t have those skills, but instead build up to the level that you can do this is important. **There’s no short-cuts and you need to be able to reward process and growth, instead of this final destination.**

I personally think that you cannot and should not use psychological or motivational tools to in a way trick yourself into thinking that you can climb this mountain without practice, as it is quite dangerous. When you have times of self-doubt telling you that you don’t have the ability to do this safely, then you shouldn't ignore that. If I just gave you my car keys and said: “go and drive my car and let loose”, how is that any different from telling you guys: “go and climb any 1,000m+ mountain in alpine and winter conditions”. I would never do that if I didn’t have the technical skills to manage that. **Being cognizant of pushing through mental and physical barriers so that when you’re feeling exhausted but have the experience of knowing when you need to stop and have breaks and also talking with the other group members that you’re hiking with (being aware of their needs and knowing that you can have conversations about that) having that exchange in an honest way, is a large part of mountaineering (this team dynamic).**

So yes, I think the psychological element is there, but I don’t think it needs to play such an important role if you have the experience, physical health/endurance and technical skills.

FG: How can different psychological aspects of mountain climbing/mountaineering be used for other situations in life (like a problem solving tool) to better the overall quality of life (maybe sports in general are just an outlook/lense for goals)?

SG: In respect to your age group: listen to your inner voice and intuition and knowing how to think pragmatically; knowing what’s rational and logical and not irrational. I think there is a difference between positive self-talk and negative self-talk and how it affects our emotional state and our behaviour. I think it’s useful to understand human behaviour and know what drives that. And so, if you find yourself in situations in life where your wondering whether you’re good enough or whether you are capable of achieving something (especially new experiences). **With mountaineering, when you look at some of the world's leading mountaineers or the pioneers mountaineering, they were groundbreaking in doing things that others hadn’t. And if you look at your life and your career path, we do have and we will have students at our school who I am absolutely convinced you are going to go on to do groundbreaking work and groundbreaking experiences whether it’s in sports, leadership, in industry or pioneering.** In the end, I think what you guys have to notice, is that those possibilities are out there for all of us; especially in a school like this, where those opportunities exist. Overall, there’s that fine line balance between following your inner voice as a warning to you tell yourself to take it easy and be safe, and then following that inner voice which says: “you’re not good enough, you can’t do this”.

There’s a little bit psychology that tells us: “knowledge isn’t always power”, because we often tend to overcomplicate things or perhaps make excuses or fuel our own anxieties through that understanding. When looking back at my younger self, I didn’t have that understanding of the mind and it gave me some freedoms (especially when it came to climbing). **When we look at gear nowadays (how modern and more useful climbing gear has become), it’s important that you remember that you have to be far more reliant on yourself than the gear.**

FG: Who do you think, as an experienced psychologist is mountain climbing for? Is age a factor? Would you personally want my website to include a target demographic of all ages?

SG: It's been very interesting looking at how over the last 20-30 years how much of a dramatic shift away from the professionalism of mountaineering to a very open sport/recreation. I was very grateful when I was young, I had the opportunities from my scout association to go mountaineering. When looking at my scout leader from back in the day (approaching 80 years old very soon) he is still a very active mountaineer. I even took one of my sons a few years ago back when he was 4 years-old to go hiking once and he loved it to bits. From these experiences, I can say that there are no limitations with mountaineering; try and reach out to all audiences. I was one of the first scout leaders in the UK that ran a co-educational scout troop (so I had girls and boys in my scout troop). The idea that girls cannot become competent mountaineers is nonsense. If anything, there is a maturity to girls with leadership roles and assessing risk that we boys often struggle with (this idea of ego from our side). And so, I do think it is available to everyone; you should try and pitch it to everyone. I think if you have the physical fitness and technical skills to be able to know what your doing and do it safely, then do it.

I'd say the one thing that upsets me about mountaineering and why it's problematic is that it is not accessible to everyone from a socio-economic standpoint. I guess if you are alpine climbing and mountaineering, it's not a cheap hobby. I'd say, if you have some links on your website, you could make it more inclusive (linking Outward Bound or the Deutscher Alpenverein) to everyone and not present it as a sort of expensive hobby; advice like that, I'd like to see.