

DREAM BIG



Mags MacKean is author of 'Meetings On The Edge, A High Level Escape From Office Routine'. The former BBC Journalist charts her life climbing mountains around the world, after quitting her 10-year career. Since then, she's lived in the Amazon jungle, trained with medicine people who have an incredible knowledge of the healing power of plants and trees, and coaches young people and adults exploring their potential and life's direction.

Her Gordonstoun lecture, 'Beyond School', offered ten tips for how to live an extraordinary life. Here they are in brief:

Tip number one: nothing is ever a waste of time (even if your 'better and wiser' elders say so!) Everything leads to experience and knowledge, which you would never have otherwise discovered, even if the wisdom to be drawn is: 'I'll never do that again'.

Tip Two: face your fear. Time and again, I have faced great tests in endurance and the courage to face my deepest fears – especially alone in the mountains. On the very first day of my 72-day traverse of the Pyrenees, the range separating France from Spain, I encountered a naked man in boots. As I pounded the rural track, he leapt out of a bush and stood there in front of me. After all the months of training and planning, that was NOT what I expected: getting lost, tired or possibly injured? YES! Being flashed for the first time in my life, in such an unpopulated stretch of rural France in Basque Country? NO! As I waved my two walking sticks and shrieked, 'Non Monsieur', recalling my most basic school French, I didn't have any time to feel the fear, which only erupted after he finally pounded off down-hill, leaving me startled in a trail of dust. If I had quit my plan then (which would have been a reasonable thing to do), I would never have experienced one of the greatest adventures of my life: where I carried my shelter, food, water and equipment on my back, relishing the freedom to sleep and wander wherever I chose for a whole two-and-a-half-months.

Tip three: Courage draws on strength you never knew you had. Courage, I can say, is not acting in the ABSENCE of fear, but the will to keep going in the PRESENCE of fear. It is human, and essential to our fulfillment whatever age we are, to draw upon the will to expand our horizons, which can lead us into situations that test our self-belief.

When you commit to your vision, breaking with the routine of the predictable, something happens. It's as if the world responds to your courage to say, 'I'm crazy enough to give this a go, with NO guarantee of success'. Many human 'angels' have appeared when I've needed help – in the most unlikely situations.

Tip four: Be flexible with changing plans.

Sometimes we have to shift our original vision. Self-leadership is not about doggedly sticking to an original plan, just to save face. Showing you're so committed that you'd risk everything to carry it out is NOT the courage I've been talking about. I've turned back from a summit attempt in the Himalaya, within thirty feet of it. Climbing Mount McKinley ("Denali") North America's highest peak, was full of the unexpected and dangerous. Our expedition party dwindled from eleven to four due to accident and mishap. Our overall safety and welfare as a group depended on a continual reassessment of the rapidly changing circumstances.

Tip Five: Life is not an endurance test. If we're not enjoying the route to our goal – what on earth are we doing it for? We are here to test and stretch ourselves, to learn and grow, to reach beyond known limits. Think to your sporting heroes or the people you most admire: all of them will have endured fear, discomfort and doubt, as well as passion to work very hard to perform as the stars they are. Following the heart is the signpost to a life of joy. Not, 'is this the life I should be living, or other people think I should live?' BUT 'what do I choose to be or do?'

Tip six: Doing comes from being. We are not human doings or doers, but human beings. A man in New Zealand shared an amazing insight with me during a lift to a trailhead, where I was planning to spend four days alone exploring a remote mountain area. At the end of the ride, Alec said, 'Mags, your life sounds exhausting. Give yourself a chance to slow, a chance to rest. You have to know who you are first, to know what to do next. Trust me, the doing comes from the being'. So, I began to reframe the question, 'what can I do next' with, 'how do I want to be next?' That has altered my experience of life completely: from one of focused pursuit, to a series of enriching moments.

Tip seven: relationships are where we find meaning: We learn from people all the time – inspiration is to be found in the example of others. Sharing is also so much more fun and pleasurable than looking out for one-self alone. I lived in the Amazon jungle for eight months, where nature is graphically interconnected. Trees fall allowing light to flood the space for more life to grow. Ants and termites can raze an empty home of wood and leaves to the ground within three months. Predators feed on prey – every species depends on its place to feed and be consumed, in the delicate interplay of eco-systems. The Amazon communities value their environment because without sustaining it, they won't be able to live by it. The western brands and power giants are encroaching on their simple heritage. Already, vast areas of the jungle are a swampland of felled trees, oil pipes, expanding cities. Our choices, wherever we are, make an impact in ways we don't always see. How we vote, where we shop and the products we buy or companies we profit does matter.

Tip eight: each moment is so precious. Recently, a dear friend of mine died of cancer at the age of 41, a mother of two girls, newly turned one and two years old. As my friend lay dying, she reflected on what then mattered most to her: all the people she loved (not her successful BBC career or the size of her savings account.) When her illness was diagnosed only months before, she shared with me how 'each moment is so precious'. Her terminal illness showed her what is ultimately important when time is running out.

Tip nine: success is a choice – not a lucky break.

A successful life is not about convenience: waiting for the opportunity to invite you to step in: the phone call, the letter, the golden handshake from above. Success is about commitment: the decision each day to CHOOSE, 'who am I going to be? How can I make a difference?' Every successful person I've met worked hard to create the opportunities that helped them on their way.

Tip ten: "There is no passion to be found playing small – in settling for a life that is less than the one you are capable of living", Nelson Mandela.

As today's dreamers, you are tomorrow's leaders – allowing your vision to carry you through those tougher moments. By committing to living your best life, you inspire others to follow...and the view from in front is so much more scenic I find that following up the rear!