

YOU MUST BE CRAZY

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF EXTREME ATHLETES

– Written by Glenn Singleman, Australia

WHY are extreme sport athletes driven to push the boundaries of already dangerous sports such as BASE*¹ jumping, wingsuit flying, high altitude mountaineering, single-track downhill mountain biking, solo rock climbing and other such activities where there is minimal to no-room for error?

This article seeks to explore one possibly powerful motivator: transcendence. It may be that 'Extreme Sport' is a reliable and repeatable pathway to self-transcendence, thus providing a deeper insight into the often asked, but rarely understood question of WHY?

Health practitioners encountering extreme sport athletes are likely to be confronted with severe injuries and complex care requirements. In administering the best care, it is worthwhile to understand the motivations behind activities that are perceived as 'risky'.

Because like the public, health practitioners are exposed to unbalanced media focused on the negative consequences of extreme sport. "If it bleeds it leads", an adage credited to William Randolph Hearst's journalistic ethos as far back as 1890, still applies. The modern addition of POV action cameras adds to the fascination. Every Australian BASE jumping, mountaineering, free diving and climbing fatality is widely reported in graphic detail, frequently accompanied by terms such as 'crazy'. In

contrast the 17,500 people who lose their lives annually in Australia from coronary heart disease go largely unnoticed.

Extreme sport holds a fascination beyond its social, economic, political and cultural significance. Research into the psychology of extreme sport is a relatively new field that shows the motivations and rewards of extreme athletes are complex and life changing.

To begin, I will describe an extreme activity that is the progenitor of a modern extreme sport and an example of self-transcendence. Then I will define extreme sport and self-transcendence more clearly, establish the link between the two in personal and scientific terms and dive into motivational explanations of 'managing fear', 'self-actualisation', 'transcendence' and 'environmental connection'.

Land diving or Nanggol (in Bislama language) on Pentecost Island, Vanuatu is one of the earliest examples of Transcendence in Extreme Sport. At the end of the wet season, local men jump off wooden towers 20 to 30 meters high with Liana vines tied around their ankles. The vines are cut to a precise length to arrest the jumpers fall just before they hit the ground. It is the inspiration for bungy jumping except the vines and wooden tower are not nearly as elastic as modern bungy cord, so the land divers are exposed to significant 'G'

forces (apparently the greatest experienced in the non-industrialized world by humans).

We've all seen photos and videos of the jump but what strikes anyone lucky enough to witness the event personally, is that the jump is the culmination of an elaborate ritual. As the jumper climbs the tower and has the vine attached to his ankles, the non jumping village men and women sing, whistle and dance in a rhythmic, 4 step shuffle. After the vines are tied, the jumper whoops and gestures in time with the song. Everyone, especially the jumper, are in an altered state. The whooping and gesturing reach a crescendo then the jumper crosses his arms on his chest and leaps. The thwack of the vine and lurch of the tower sends a visceral shudder through everyone. The jumper recoils onto the uphill dirt and lies there for a minute stunned. He crossed into the realm of the 'spirit' and returned. Crossing into that realm has social, cultural and personal significance. The promise of a plentiful yam harvest, the transition from boyhood to manhood, the experience of the spirit world, gives profound meaning to the 'extreme' activity.

To progress the discussion, we must agree on accepted definitions of 'extreme sport' and 'self-transcendence'. Not an easy task. There are multiple definitions of extreme sport in the literature. Scholars argue over the competitive/non-competitive nature

*1 BASE is an acronym that stands for each of the four jumps location: from buildings, antennas, spans (bridges) and the earth (cliffs).



Images: Bunjee jumping was inspired by an initiation ceremony in Vanuatu.

of the activity and the degree of risk that constitutes extreme. I prefer the simple and broad definition of extreme sport offered by Australian Professor of Psychology, Eric Brymer, “those activities where a mismanaged mistake or accident would most likely result in death, as opposed to injury”. The attention on ‘activity’ rather than ‘sport’ best describes my own engagement with the extreme.

Defining ‘Self-Transcendence’ is even more controversial. Psychologists variously describe self-transcendence as a psychological state, motivation, personality trait, value orientation, developmental process, dimension of temperament or worldview. For this article, I define self-transcendence by its two most important characteristics: decreased self-saliency (ego disillusionment) and increased connection to others and the environment. Yaden et al. describe other characteristics as mindfulness, flow, self-transcendent emotions, awe, peak experiences, and mystical experiences. Stellar et al. describe self-transcendent emotions as; compassion, awe, gratitude, appreciation, inspiration, admiration, elevation, and love. These emotions are described as key to positive social functioning and connecting to others.

Eric Brymer’s work most clearly describes the link between extreme sport and self-transcendence. His 2005 paper states that extreme sport “participants report deep

inner transformations that influence world views and meaningfulness, feelings of coming home and authentic integration as well as a freedom beyond the socio-cultural that is best described as a relaxation from mental chatter. Excitingly, participants also describe moments of ineffability that include enhanced sensory, mental and physical prowess, perceptions of time slowing, returning to a primal state, feelings of floating and flying and a deep intimacy with the natural world. Phenomenologically, these experiences have been interpreted as transcendence of time, other, space and body. Extreme sport participation may be a life-enhancing endeavour worthy of further investigation”.

So how life-enhancing can extreme sport be? There are millions of answers to that question owned by every individual who has ever undertaken an extreme sport. Of course there are academic papers that apply measurement tables, graphics and ‘life-enhancement’ scales but ultimately my personal story resonates in a way that I hope is understandable.

30 years ago, I climbed, and BASE jumped the Great Trango Tower, a 6,000m Himalayan mountain. That single event changed the course of my life and continues to have ramifications to this day. At the same time, I was one of the first Australian doctors to ‘specialise’ in expedition medicine. In the 1990s there were no specialist Remote

Medicine colleges, there were no university post graduate extreme environment courses, and I was openly told that I was throwing my medical career down the toilet pursuing expedition and extreme sport medicine. My solution to such blatant hostility from my medical colleagues, was to return to university to pursue a post graduate diploma in documentary film making. In this way, I could get paid to pursue my passion for expeditions to wild places. In those days, expedition medical capability was seen as a ‘value add’ rather than a ‘necessity’.

While doing camerawork for a popular sports program, I met an extreme sport athlete who practiced BASE jumping. At that time, BASE jumping was mostly unknown. I asked the BASE jumper where he wanted to go with the sport. He answered that he wanted to “BASE jump the highest cliff in the world”. He had no idea where that was or how he would get to the summit but by circumstance I had the solutions. I had trained as a mountaineer and done first ascents in Antarctica and Irian Jaya. I knew about the 6,258m Great Trango Tower, after reading an article about a Norwegian team who established the first, Grade VII big wall route at high altitude in 1984. Two of the team died on the descent. With a copy of the article and various photos, I suggested to the BASE jumper that we train each other in our respective extreme sports so we could climb,



Image: Lift off.



Image: The Great Trango Tower, Pakistan. Image courtesy of Dr. Heather Swan.

and BASE jump the ‘highest cliff in the world’ together. This turned into a yearlong adventure project that I made into a documentary film for National Geographic. The project taught me about confronting fear and managing risk on a scale that I had not previously imagined. The actual BASE jump off the mountain was one of those ‘ineffable’ moments described by Brymer. In those few seconds, time slowed down. I was absolutely engaged with the task – focussed, and crystal clear. No other ten seconds of my life has been so deeply etched by my hippocampus. Most importantly, I formed a deep intimate connection with that environment. I felt like I was part of the mountain. I was overwhelmed by the primal power of the landscape. And of course, I was free floating in space, until the parachute opened with a bone crunching thwack. Like the Pentecost Island Land Divers, I had entered the ‘space between life and death’ and returned. Also, like the Land Divers, crossing into that realm had social, cultural and personal significance for me.

The documentary film of the adventure won 26 international awards and was seen by over 700 million people in 176 countries through National Geographic. The story was a literal expression of Joseph Campbell’s so-called monomyth. Joseph Campbell (1904-1987) was a comparative mythologist who analysed the similarities in thousands of myths across hundreds of cultures to

describe the “hero’s journey”. Campbell summarised the monomyth as follows: “A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered, and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man”.

What could be the “boon” that BASE jumping the highest cliff in the world could bestow on “fellow man”? The mountain is a ‘region of supernatural wonder’ and achieving the summit and returning safely is the ‘decisive victory’. On descent, the BASE climbers offer life inspiration to the world-weary. For me, the BASEclimb project was a personalised version of Campbells monomyth. People constantly asked me “why would you jump off a perfectly good cliff?” So, I undertook years of forced (and unforced) contemplation. I believe, the answers are about ‘managing fear’, ‘self-actualisation’, ‘transcendence’ and ‘environmental connection’.

MANAGING FEAR

I believe that extreme sports can help anyone learn how to manage fear. My wife and I tested this theory at the Westmead Institute Brain Dynamics Centre with studies that assessed our emotion-modulated startle response using picture-viewing paradigms. In other words, we watched flash cards

of faces while wearing headphones that occasionally startled us with white noise blasted into our ears. For most people, the startle response is enhanced after viewing fearful or unpleasant faces and inhibited after viewing pleasant pictures. Our fear potentiated startle responses were about half the population average. It’s worth noting that this response is completely lacking in psychopaths.

I’m not a psychopath but I have a lower startle response due to increased cortical inhibition of my limbic system. This makes sense from a neurophysiological perspective. Those of us fond of neuroanatomy, will remember that the amygdala, the insula and the dorsal anterior cingulate are brain regions involved in generating threat and fear responses and the medial prefrontal cortex, the rostral anterior cingulate and hippocampus are involved in modulating/dampening those same fear and threat responses. The evolutionary younger prefrontal cortex is neurochemically weaker than the older parts of the brain in the limbic system. To exert a modulating influence over the fight-flight-freeze system, the prefrontal cortex must build the strength of its control (neurochemical pathways) over the limbic system. This process takes time. Nobody becomes a fearless warrior after a weekend of rock-climbing, but after a lifetime of successful deliberate choices, I believe the extreme sport athletes pre-frontal cortex

can exert more rational influence over the limbic aversion (freeze) reflex. It can use risk management strategies, technology, judgement and experience to choose a considered, manageable pathway. To me, this is one of the true benefits of extreme sport. Further, I believe that level of control can spread into other activities of daily life.

Brymer expressed it thus: “extreme sport participants face intense fears, accept that control of the future is not always possible and move through these fears to fully participate in the action. It would seem that by taking this action despite the intense fears participants were able to move towards a greater understanding of self. Furthermore, the indications are that a participant who makes that choice, who participates despite the fear reportedly has a magical experience, that is, something that cannot be expressed in words”.

SELF-ACTUALISATION

The late British mountaineer Doug Scott was the first Englishman to climb Everest (with Dougal Haston) as part of Chris Bonington's 1975 south-west face expedition to climb Everest “the hard way”. Of the summit day he said, “Suddenly we were cut off and getting further and further from the rope and more and more absorbed in what we were doing. I was hardly aware of Dougal [his climbing partner], let alone all the people back home. It was just being completely there, in the moment. Moment after moment with this calm presence that we were going to make it. There's that wonderful feeling that you

get when you're out on a limb, going for it and you just put your trust in the lap of the gods. It's very exhilarating... everything was right on the day.” Doug's description is a classic example of self-actualisation and flow.

To understand self-actualisation, we must revisit Abraham Maslow's 1943 paper ‘A theory of human motivation’ - a classic of modern psychology. He was one of the first psychologists to study the motivation of healthy people. Maslow defined 5 sets of basic needs that are related to each other and are arranged in a hierarchy of prepotency. When the most prepotent goal is realized, the next higher need emerges. The hierarchy is often represented as a pyramid, although Maslow did not include this in his original paper. The classical pyramid ascends from bottom to top through: physiological (survival) needs through basic life necessities; safety and security needs through law and order; belongingness and love needs through group affiliation; esteem needs through recognition and achievement; self-actualization through fulfillment of personal potential.

As part of his research Maslow interviewed many people about their ‘moments of extraordinary experience’. These experiences are profound moments of love, understanding, happiness, or rapture during which a person feels more whole, alive, self-sufficient and yet a part of the world, more aware of truth, justice, harmony, goodness, and connectedness. He named these moments ‘Peak Experiences’

and found that self-actualizing people are more likely to have them. In other words, these “peak experiences” are the reflections of the realization of one's human potential and represent the height of personality development.

During a ‘peak experience’ Maslow explained, the individual experiences an expansion of self, a sense of unity, and meaningfulness in life. “The peak experience is felt as... so great and high an experience that it justifies not only itself, but even living itself. Peak experiences can make life worthwhile by their occasional occurrence. They give meaning to life itself”.

FLOW

Maslow died in 1970 and another psychologist, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, took up his work on peak experience as part of research into ‘how to achieve happiness’. Csikszentmihalyi was curious about what motivated the average citizen - what activities produced their deepest enjoyment and greatest satisfaction. He interviewed a wide range of experts and non-experts. He found that regardless of culture, level of modernisation, age, social class, or gender, everyone told him the same thing: they were at their best and felt their best when they were experiencing sensations very similar to Maslow's peak experiences.

In other words, while the things people found enjoyable varied completely, the feeling the activity produced, the why behind the enjoyment, was globally similar. Csikszentmihalyi called that feeling ‘flow’.



Adventure is a gift that allows us to see and experience things differently, with more intensity and awareness.



He defined the flow state as “being so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter. The ego falls away. Time flies. Every action, movement and thought follows inevitably from the previous one, like playing jazz. Your whole being is involved and you’re using your skills to the utmost”. When he dove deeper into the data, he discovered that the happiest people on earth, the ones who felt their lives had the most meaning, were those that had the most experiences of flow. He wrote, “It was clear... that what kept them motivated was the quality of the experience they felt when they were involved with the activity. The feeling didn’t come when they were relaxing, when they were taking drugs or alcohol or when they were consuming the expensive privileges of wealth. Rather, it often involved painful, risky, difficult activities that stretched the person’s capacity and involved an element of novelty and discovery”. Csikszentmihalyi believes “that the whole effort of humankind through millennia of history has been to capture

these fleeting moments of fulfilment and make them part of everyday existence.”

Csikszentmihalyi’s work on flow has led to countless books about the role of flow in business, sport, IT, music, personal development, relationships etc. and what it means to be ‘in the zone’. Steven Kotler’s book ‘The Rise of Superman – Decoding the Science of Ultimate Human Performance’, has taken Csikszentmihalyi’s theory of Flow and supercharged it into the world of extreme sport. Says Kotler, “it’s action and adventure sport athletes who have taken things the farthest...while finding flow may be the goal of every athlete on the planet, for action and adventure sports athletes it’s a necessity. In all other activities flow is the hallmark of high performance, but in situation where the slightest error could be fatal, then perfection is the only choice – and flow is the only guarantee of perfection. Thus, flow is the only way to survive in the fluid, life-threatening conditions of big waves, big rivers and big mountains...when you’re pushing the limits of ultimate human

performance, the choice is stark: it’s flow or die.” Through interviews with dozens of extreme sport athletes, Kotler zealously makes the case that extreme sports “really are worth dying for.”

Kotler’s book documents the work of outstanding researchers and neuroscientists who offer fMRI-based explanations for the flow state implicating ‘transient prefrontal cortex deregulation’, and reduction in DMN (default mode network) activity. About half the extreme sports athletes interviewed in Kotler’s book are friends of mine and I could add gushing examples of the role of flow in my own adventure career. But a profound personal experience has led me to believe there is more to extreme sport than self-actualisation.

SELF-TRANSCENDENCE

Through my career, I have spoken to hundreds of corporations, universities, schools and community groups about the importance of adventure, managing fear, flow and peak experience for personal



Image: When the slightest error can be fatal, perfection is the only choice.

development. A frequent quip I make is that “anyone who can control their fear, jump off a chair and pull a handkerchief out of their pocket, could potentially BASE jump the highest cliff in the world.” Of course no one took me seriously except my wife, Heather Swan. When I was told about a higher vertical cliff than the Great Trango Tower, it was Heather who suggested that I train her to climb and BASE jump so we could BASEclimb Mt. Meru (6604m) together. Initially, she thought it would be ‘romantic’. What followed was a challenging 6 years of intense physical, mental and emotional training. She acquired technical skills in rockclimbing, mountaineering, skydiving, wingsuiting, BASE jumping and wingsuit BASE jumping sufficient to set a world record. The physical journey was documented in 2 television documentaries and a book. However, the more profound journeys were the mental and emotional voyages. Heather’s transformation from corporate executive to world record holding extreme sportsperson involved radical personal change. A self-confessed scaredy-cat became “the epitome of a badass skydiver”. The countless interviews she has done on television programs like ‘60 Minutes’ and ‘Australian Story’ show a woman meeting all Maslow’s descriptors of self-actualisation; fully functioning, capable at her highest potential, self-determined, strong, single minded, fully volitional, being without fear/doubt or inhibition, spontaneous, expressive, naturally flowing and not constrained by conformity, mindful of the present moment, open and creative. Heather believes these mental and emotional ‘boons’ made the physical pain and difficulties worthwhile.

But something even more incredible occurred. Through sharing hundreds of climbs, skydives and BASE jumps the connection between Heather, and I deepened and flourished. We saw each other’s strengths and weaknesses. We learned to support each other through fear. We had to discuss and agree on critical decisions that really mattered. We had to trust each other. We literally put our lives into each other’s hands innumerable times. This amplified the already powerful connection between husband and wife. Added to this was the connection that we each felt to ‘place’. Almost all our adventures occurred in a remote wilderness setting. We felt like we became part of the natural

world, indelibly linked to the primeval power of the awesome landscapes that we were living, breathing and playing in. Extreme activities in extreme environments filled us with wonder, awe, reverence and connection. The relationship that we forged with nature and each other transcended our individual potential even at Maslow’s ‘self-actualised’ level.

Analysis of Maslow’s later writings indicate that he was on the verge of revising his hierarchy of needs to include a sixth tier need beyond self-actualisation. He referred to this sixth tier need as self-transcendence. Maslow described self-transcendence as “a person’s ability to obtain a unitive consciousness with other humans”. The transcended person can view the world and their purpose in the world in relation to other human beings on a more global scale and is aware that they can have an impact, not just within their own geographical boundaries, but on the whole world. Maslow held that “self-transcendence is reached when a person seeks to further a cause beyond the self and to experience a communion beyond the boundaries of the self”. “Self-transcendence is being no longer grounded or anchored in one’s own culture alone... Through self-transcending culture, one can better identify with others”.

Professor of Psychology at NU LA, Henry Venter writes about the need for self-transcendence to counter societal

insularity and “political closeness”. He states, “For years, the academic and organizational world failed to see that without Maslow’s previously omitted sixth level of motivational development, self-transcendence, and exclusive focus on self-actualization, people will become infatuated with the self. In addition, when lower order needs are perceived to be threatened by some, such as migration of jobs and influx of immigrants, it will trigger regression and closeness with a focus on policies that will signal a return to fragmented, individualized, and isolated societies... We need self-transcended people... advocating not only for their own needs, but for the needs of others... all over the world. We need people expanding the idea of human rights and freedoms to take the plight of the environment and global health of the planet up as a cause and a personal responsibility.”

I agree with Venter’s sentiments especially regarding the environment. Maslow died in 1970, before the effects of climate change were ubiquitous, so his writing shows little concern for environmental consciousness. Adventurers often find themselves at the sharp edge of environmental change – mountaineers and Antarctic explorers see glaciers disappearing before their eyes, skiers witness the premature closure of resorts, surfers lament the erosion of beaches, divers behold coral bleaching etc. etc. An example

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that shocked me is the 2008 repeat ascent of the Norwegian Pillar on Great Trango Tower. The 2008 team (also from Norway) found they had to climb an additional 1,000 feet of moderately steep rock that was covered by a glacier on the first ascent in 1984.

The intimate relationship that many adventurers form with their chosen environment and their experience on the edge can prompt transcendence and the change in attitude necessary to protect and advocate for nature. As Doug Scott said, “normality eats away at our intuitive faculties and the awareness of life, both of which need not only space but our experience on the edge of things – danger, suffering, simplicity – if they are to survive, and without them we are divorced from all that is most profound and satisfying in life”. I met Doug in Pakistan in 1991 after he raised the funds and organised the installation of 17 fresh-water standpipes in Askole, the last settlement before the Great Trango Tower, that reduced local infant mortality by half. He is an inspirational example of the self-transcendent extreme sportsman.

My wife and I believe that adventure is a gift that allows us to see and experience things differently, with more intensity and awareness. To experience ourselves as a small part of nature means that we appreciate and respect the power of the wilderness. This has led us to become environmental defenders. We’ve left the city, purchased a degraded 100-acre former cattle property and are re-wilding it by planting 4,000 native trees. Through academic and general articles and a documentary film we hope to inspire other small to medium land holders to follow suit. New Australian government carbon credit incentives are providing farmers with a carrot rather than stick option to minimise their carbon footprint and reforest degraded landscapes. In this and other ways many extreme sport athletes are becoming wilderness advocates and leading the sustainability charge.

CONCLUSION

Returning to the proposition at the beginning of this article “that extreme sport can be a pathway to self-transcendence”, I have given personal examples of how the flow and self-actualisation that can accompany extreme sport decreases self-saliency. Further, Csikszentmihalyi, Brymer and Kotler have given countless examples of extreme sport athletes being

so involved in the activity that ‘nothing else matters, ego falls away’. My examples of increased connection to others and the environment are personal but supported by a multitude of phenomenological studies by Brymer and others, sufficient to support the link between extreme sport and self-transcendence. Of course, many activities, practices and insights can prompt self-transcendence and the realisation that we are a small part of nature, but I think that because of the potential of death, extreme adventure sports do it “better, quicker and more profoundly”.

References

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