

Letitia Popescu

Mr. Greco

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Mountain of Knowledge

Finding a breath of life at the peak of a mountain is rare, but amidst the spines of rocks and walls of ice, a vigorous climber works up. Blades of sunlight reflect off the chilled coats of snow, illuminating the head of our hero like a halo. His helmet had fallen off earlier, but he knew chasing after it would've cost him a price he was not willing to pay. When he pushed further, he lost his crampon—spikes that'd be attached to a boot for better grip. That's when he, Catalin Popescu, realized it was time to stop and make a very cautious and slippery descent. Regardless of how beautiful the Grand Combin is, he knew his life was much more valuable.

My dad is a role model for how people should approach challenging hobbies. Although he may appear fairly average, with his rock band T-Shirts and thinning, grey hair, my dad has a library of stories and knowledge of the peaks he climbs. A very notable feature of his is how kind his eyes look. Locations he visited included the Swiss Alps, Sierra Nevadas, Trinity Alps, North of Carson Pass, Sonora Pass, and many more. He's happy to share the valuable lessons he learned, as well as the cautions one would have to avoid. Although he isn't accompanied by his family, he always comes home with pictures to show everyone.

My dad has been hiking since he was ten with his father in Romania. During these hikes, he recalls the several mountain huts where they'd stay. My grandfather and

dad went for a week, three to four hours a day. He continued to pursue hiking, and as his confidence grew, he grew more comfortable with the idea of going without his parents. The first trip he took alone was when he was at 18. My dad recalls, "I was packing too much", referencing the mistake beginners often make. He then strived to hike as often as possible every year.

With trial and error, he learned tricks to be safer and more efficient. His interest in the outdoors and exploration branched out to mountaineering - expeditions in mountains that require more preparation and experience.

Most would consider a laborious hobby like this to be too intimidating or overwhelming, but to my dad, it's an opportunity to have a clear mind and seek joy. "It blanks", my dad said about his thoughts while hiking. "It's like meditation, you blank your mind more or less." Susan Houge Mackenzie, a psychologist researching the effects of tourism and hobbies, writes in her article, "Beyond thrill-seeking: exploring multiple motives for adventure participation", about the motives those who participate in extreme sport have: "All participants also reported that thrill-seeking was not their sole or central motive." My dad avoids the risk of putting his life in unnecessary danger. It was clear during the interview that he doesn't do mountaineering for the glory or the thrill of it. Instead of dangerous excitement, he finds clarity on the peaks and uses it as an opportunity to relax. The article further elaborates, "The range of adventure motives identified included: goal achievement (e.g., winning competitions); risk-taking and thrill-seeking (e.g., excitement, adrenaline); social motivation (e.g., interaction with friends, teaching students); pushing personal boundaries and overcoming fear; travel/lifestyle; relaxation/lowered arousal; connecting with nature; and pleasurable

kinaesthetic sensations from moving in water or air” (Mackenzie). Seeking adrenaline isn’t always the goal of explorers. My dad finds satisfaction in participating with the outdoors and letting his mind wander alongside him. He feels joy in reaching the top of a mountain and seeing the landscape. His motivators would be the relaxation, connecting with nature, and pleasurable kinaesthetic sensations. My dad adores the textured scenery with the form the rocks bring.

On his mountaineering expeditions, he emphasizes the importance of recognizing the different types of challenges: “One is the obvious physical challenge, keep going when you're tired, or just fighting the fatigue”, my dad describes. “There's the technical challenge, with sometimes it's technically hard to climb some things, finding the route, and actually that's the third challenge - finding your route. And management, in general managing your climb and your exit. You always make a decision. You might have a place at home, but once you're there, things might be different, like the weather. Or the climb is harder than you expected, or you lose the route, the route is somehow difficult” (Popescu). A key step to becoming a better mountaineer and more capable in hobbies is to recognize the challenges that will come. Gavin Bate, an experienced mountain climber, reflects on information and requirements a beginner would need to know for mountaineering: “You need to make sound judgements about safety and self-preservation, where decision making is tested with potentially major consequences” (Bate). That advice aligns with the tips my dad gave. There’s great responsibility on any mountaineer to make decisions and a failure to make these calls puts the mountaineer’s safety at risk. There needs to be extensive research and preparation done beforehand, but factors, such as the weather, can change on a

whim. During mountaineering trips, making choices quickly and effectively is critical. The importance of decisiveness was stressed by my dad.

My dad is familiar with the obstacles he faced on mountaineering, such as ice overhangs caused by blowing winds, also known as “cornice”. If you don’t know where the rock ends below this ice and happen to step on a cornice, expect to be pummeling down. He also gave warnings of the crevices one can find in glaciers. He showed me pictures he took of the glaciers he saw, one being ice at the bottom of two hills with a max of cracks. Falling in one of these crevices can be fatal. Author and Front Range Climbing Company’s Senior Rock Climbing Guide Stewart Green cites data collected at Boulder, California, regarding the number of injuries at the National Park: “RMRG rescued 2,198 mountain and wilderness victims in Boulder County.” In other words, a lot of these injuries were caused by inexperienced or careless climbers. Wisely, Green emphasizes “Prior knowledge” as a preventative measure. The stories my dad brings to the table can be crucial for those who aspire to explore and climb mountains.

So what do you do with this knowledge? You need to know how to apply it on the trail. “You don't want to go under, so you want to go over it,” my dad told me, making sure I saw the labyrinth of cracks. “These are crevices. You don't want to fall in those, okay? So you have to go on them. The hardest part is where it curves in between the rock. Just a river of ice, flows down”.

His experience especially came into play when he went hiking on Aiguille de Chambeyron with a friend. Hearing shouting, they hiked for thirty minutes before finding a man at the base of a cliff. A golden retriever accompanied the hiker who’d gone off trail. My dad recalled that it was evident the fall was nasty, given he could see the tibia

bone of the hiker. Swiftly, a makeshift solution was done where they used a sandal. Given they were in a desolated area and off course, my father hiked with his friend for three hours to go to the nearest hut through the rugged peaks. They were able to notify the French rescue team for these peaks, and after an exchange with the Italian guardians of the mountain, the man (and dog) were rescued. My dad mentioned how important it was to have a guide or friend with you on these trips. If my dad and his friend hadn't found the man, there would've been a grim outcome. Sticking to the trail is also critical advice for any hiker or mountaineer to follow.

Sometimes, you will find yourself alone with your thoughts on the mountain, but there are other people who share that interest. People need to be willing to share what they know with others and lend a hand. Through storytelling and explaining, my dad helped me understand just how valuable the lessons he knows are. A mountain of knowledge, he continuously supports me and others who like to venture into the wilderness.

I felt encouraged to promise to my dad that I would go with him over the summer on hikes. Usually timid, I could see he was touched by the comment. I sincerely look up to his perseverance and wisdom. Mountaineering isn't a hobby for everyone, but the principles and ideas that come with it can apply to anyone. He shared hopes of mountaineering in South America, New Zealand, more of Europe, and Caucasus.

Popescu's ultimate advice is to "Know your limits, don't be afraid to say no, and to return. Don't sort of just 'Oh! I have to do this, I have to do this'. It's not today, it's not today, and that's it. Know yourself, know your limits. Know your level. And that's it."

Works Cited

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