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Men, Mountains and Adventure

Translated from the Italian by Robert Marshall

I have only one aim when I talk about my experiences, to remind you what wise men have always pointed out as the correct path to follow. They say that each of us must be the author of his own story as it unfolds throughout the course of his life. From this idea it is easy to conclude that, if you wish to build your own spiritual identity, your basic need, your only goal, should be to assert yourself and grow. This calls for commitment, which demands passion, perseverance and integrity. This will have excellent results – you will feel stronger and more resolute and as a result will feel like a winner. We therefore should never wait for anything to come as a gift from others, and still less for so-called ‘luck’. Our ‘lucky stars’ are merely what we manage to create for ourselves, step by step, year after year, experience after experience. Everything must be paid for with our own hides. This then is not luck, but continuing growth. To reaffirm what I have just said, I offer the experience of an entire lifetime – my own life.

I am not a mountain man by birth, but became wedded to the mountains by pure passion after growing up in the flattest part of Italy, the plain of the Po valley. I will say at once that my adventurous instincts, which were to become the driving force of my life, were undoubtedly produced by curiosity, an abiding curiosity which little by little became ever more associated with dreams and an insuppressible need to give concrete reality to all this.

A difficult adolescence also contributed a great deal to the development of my character. I reached this rite of passage during the defeat of Italy in the Second World War and by the resultant sudden collapse of human values and the lack of any real prospects, which were totally absent in my country at that time. This happened to a lad who was just then facing the realities of life. The consequence of this environment could drive a man two ways, into moral degradation for the poor in spirit, or to the exact opposite in those with positive potential. Fortunately, this latter alternative was what happened to me.

While still young – only eighteen years old – I began mountaineering at the highest level, and this led me in less than a year to repeat the most difficult climbs achieved up until then by my predecessors. But doing extreme climbs was for me not so much a flight from the daily round, however understandable that might have been, nor rebellion against the misery of a dull world, as Italy was at that time. It was rather an obstinate and irrepressible need to succeed over and over again.

For the next sixteen years, I travelled in the Alps and the other mountains of the world, following my dreams as a means of fulfillment, going always a little further. I believe that only when you dream with your eyes open can you conceive things that represent the limits of your sensitivity.

In fact, my achievements existed for me from the very moment they took form in my mind. To transform them into reality was no more than a logical consequence of that thought. When I first imagined what would eventually become my most significant ascents, I found myself in a peculiar state of mind in which anything seemed possible, even normal. Doing the climb, making it a reality, was no more than the natural and inevitable outcome of that idea, and certainly no more real than it had been at its conception. It is when you are imagining things that you live intensely, and it is only when you believe in yourself that you are able to really develop concepts. So, up there, as exploit followed exploit, I felt more and more alive, free, and true to myself. I was able to satisfy that innate need of every man to test and prove himself – to know and to understand. I have always followed my emotions as well as my creative and contemplative impulses.

From the start, mountaineering for me was an adventure. It could not have been otherwise. I always wished to live adventurously, but with due respect for tradition. Soon, however, this became a fascinating way of living and knowing myself, and it was also helpful to my physical and mental wellbeing. I have always admired mountaineers of every epoch, but I have never regarded any of them as a model. So I read their books, saw, heard and evaluated them, but only to create my own self, not to copy them. I am convinced that mountaineering improves only those who improve themselves. It certainly doesn't improve the apathetic or the arrogant. It isn't being a mountaineer that enriches a man – indeed, as I have already said, what he carries inside himself grows in a particular way if he has integrity.

All my climbs have been equally important to me, leaving aside the difficulty and commitment they demanded. I remember them all in the same way, with satisfaction, because they were all imagined, wanted, sought after, experienced, delighted in, and they have all been cut to my measure and so were right for me at the moment they happened. Everyone knows that great trials either toughen you or annihilate you. This is the story of life. It follows from this that each of us is the sum, the end result, of his own experiences. Mine have made me grow, and so my limits have expanded.

It was by practising traditional alpinism that I was able to enter into harmony with mother nature, but it was only solo climbing at the highest level that released the deepest inborn energy of my being. In this way I was better able to know my motivation and my limitations. Moreover, I learned how to make crucial decisions for myself, to judge them by my own measure and, naturally enough, pay for them with my own hide. In brief, solo climbing was an effective, formative school for me, a precious condition, even a necessity at times.

So I reaffirm my conviction that in a climb there is nothing more profitable than solitude and isolation to sharpen your sensations and amplify your emotions. It was thanks to these guiding principles that I was able to complete a fascinating internal voyage of discovery, to examine and understand myself, other people and the world around me. I can say now that I know myself better, know what I have achieved and what I want from myself and others. Naturally I fight against ill-will if it arises, but I can accept criticism. It can be helpful if it is constructive; whereas destructive criticism is like the air to me, it doesn't affect me.

One could say I have been lucky, but I don't believe in luck, nor in fate. Fate is what we knowingly create for ourselves with the sole limitation of the unforeseeable. Many years have passed since the time of my climbs, but the mountains have left within me, still vital and indelible, the imposing images of their architecture, of their superb, severe outlines suspended in the sky – alien at times to the measure of man and certainly far beyond his limitations. With the eyes of the mind I can still recall those freezing, silent heights in every detail and, as before, my thoughts fly in a constant circuit from things to imagination and back again, liberating new perceptions, unknown dimensions which constantly slide away from any attempt to explain them. How true it is that only by understanding beauty do we possess it.

This, and more besides, is what I described in my book *Mountains of My Life* about my experiences, up to the day of my winter ascent of the North Face of the Matterhorn in 1965. It was really then that I concluded my climbing career. I realized that after this adventure of mine, achieved by classical, fair means, I would not have been able to push on further without accepting the compromises inherent in the new climbing techniques, with their battery of artificial aids that I had always disdained.

And now, even so many years after the epilogue of my mountaineering career, I wish to set out some concepts drawn from my motivations in mountaineering. What makes me speak of them is the ever more obvious corruption which undermines mountaineering ethics, making orphans of the values it regards as outmoded, while at the same time persisting in a laboured search for other motivations in which to believe.

Granted, we all are free to believe whatever we wish, to adopt whatever rules we find are most convenient for our aspirations. We are free to climb in our own way. I too, for the same reasons, chose a mountaineering philosophy consistent with my ideology. It was traditional methods that inspired me right from the start. This classical way of climbing is an alpinism that, in the act of measuring your limits against the great mountains, puts your whole being to the test: physical endurance, principles and moral values, with nothing whatever held back. And this, which I define as 'greater mountaineering', becomes especially austere and demanding precisely because of the limitations put on the technical means we choose to accept in confronting the mountains.

But greater mountaineering is even more fascinating and gratifying if we keep in mind its historic and ethical values, quite apart from aesthetics. Personally I have never been able to separate these three elements nor choose between them, since for me they are fundamental. To this end, I committed myself and conformed to the mountaineering methods of the 1930s, obviously adopting the essentials, not to mention the elementary and limited equipment used in those times.

But why would I have chosen limitations so anachronistic in my own era? Certainly not because of masochistic perversion, but so I could preserve an unchangeable measuring stick, a sort of Greenwich Meridian, unalterable by time or conditions, a reliable constant that would allow me to reach an impartial judgment about things and also about myself.

I chose what I believed to be the just, fair rules of the game I had chosen. These rules I imposed on myself right from the beginning, and I would still choose them today, to guarantee myself a bond and a sure means of comparison with the past to which I had always referred. By committing myself in this way, I have been able to test myself to the depths against those who went before me. I have also been able to remain in harmony with the physical and psychological conditions involved in the exploits of the past. I have also been able to evaluate objectively the importance of what I had achieved.

If we ignore the past and refer only to the present in making judgments about mountaineering, I believe we will never be able to formulate just and clear criteria, which allow us to understand what mountaineering really is. The present is increasingly technological, ever more liable to remove from a climb its peculiar difficulties, its unknown problems, even its impossibility. It's a world in which a mountaineering exploit often has the sole merit of confirming the success of technical equipment used. This is the future we face if we have never understood what mountaineering's limits and motivations were in the past.

Learning in this way, the mountains have given me more than I could ever have hoped for. This was despite the fact that I eventually realised I wasn't just a mountaineer. As the years passed I came to understand that my true character was driving me always more to experience adventure in its widest universal expression. So I had to broaden my horizons. I was then transferring my extreme mountaineering, with all its psychological components, out of its vertical surroundings and putting it into an adventurous context which was just as extreme but, for the most part, as yet unknown.

I had to trust the instincts of my life in an even vaster multi-dimensional cultural world, where the real space in which I was travelling would be, above all, that of the mind. In short, I felt that I was embarking on a period of personal growth. After the great mountains, a huge world now awaited me. From then on I went everywhere, and came to grips with forests, deserts, lost islands, the depths of the sea, volcanoes, icy and tropical latitudes, not

to mention primitive peoples, wild animals, the remains of ancient civilizations. But everything I did provided me with the most beautiful, significant and richest of sensations because, as before, I used to intensely long for every one of these experiences before living through them.

I had the chance to become a journalist, a special correspondent of the then great Italian weekly journal *Epoca*, published by Mondadori, and had *carte blanche* to produce, where and when I wished, my 'extreme journalism' and 'introspections'. But how did it start, this new adventure?

First of all, I revisited my childish fantasies and the books I had read as a boy concerning the things I used to dream about so much. At a certain age we all dream about what we read. I was now able to give life to these dreams and make from them the motive for my travels. At that time, in the 1960s and 1970s, there were almost always difficulties. Very few people had been to such places and few even knew anything about them. In the journeys I made, I tried never to fight with anyone or anything. I was seeking a point of contact with the savage world in order to know it better, assimilate it and transmit this world to others by means of words and pictures. This is what I wanted to do, developing my own variety of journalism, making the reader understand that behind the notebook and camera was a mere man, full of curiosity and alone with his emotions.

It is now clear to everyone that I am instinctively attracted to and fascinated by primordial nature. Because of this I climbed down into active volcanoes and I went into those smoking craters above all to see how the world was made when it began, to imagine how things would have looked the day after its creation if anyone had been there to see. One can therefore imagine how much emotion, surprise and admiration was aroused in me by an episode of that sort.

What drove me on and sustained me in all those situations I lived through, in every experience I had after I had given up mountaineering, were the same forces which had driven me up 'impossible' mountains. Nothing had changed. But in all this, my intention was always to know and to consider, to test myself, entering as far as possible into conditions that were able to awaken long-buried ways of being, inherited through the generations, but now dormant in most of us.

I wanted to experience to the full the freedom of knowing myself to be absolutely detached from any sort of technical, organised support which if necessary would have helped me, supplied me with provisions or even saved me if I got into trouble. Naturally the places and situations I chose offered all those ingredients which could give life and logical sense to my adventure as I envisaged it.

In this way, detached and far away from all that one might regard as the developed world, I can say that on most occasions I came to know a world still untouched from the time of its origin. On my travels I encountered all manner of wild animals, and also primitive tribes whose mode of dress had remained unchanged for millennia. In those places sun and rain, birth and

death remained the only reality, which regulated their lives. Their survival was torn tenaciously from a difficult environment hostile to life. They were ignorant of the rest of the world, which ignored them in its turn. But then, in those far-off lands, huge and without history, where nothing changes, everything repeats itself in an endless cycle. I experienced fears and hopes, discomfort and exaltation. I listened to absolute silence, to hurricanes. I inhaled the vapour of volcanoes, the smells of the jungle. During dark nights my merest glance encompassed a plethora of stars. With my mind floating I have wandered, dreaming of impossible horizons, giving human proportions to the infinite, until I have lost myself in the universe. Now more than ever I am convinced that a man's life makes sense only if it encompasses everything he has within his being. It is there, in the mind, that real spaces are created.

However, although on my new travels in the six continents there was no lack of great mountains, Mont Blanc has remained the one I have most assiduously explored again and again by all its ridges and valleys. I have done this much as a man returns to his own father, to converse together with all the affection and memories a son looks for in a parent.

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