

'It's not the mountain we conquer-but ourselves.' Sir Edmund Hillary

by Catherine DeVrye



Few of us will ever have the desire to set as tough a challenge as conquering Mt. Everest, but most of us do indeed set smaller personal challenges for ourselves along life's journey. Facing my fortieth birthday, I was determined to avoid a mid-life crisis and replace it with the experience of climbing the highest mountain in Africa, Mt. Kilimanjaro, nearly 6000 metres high.

They say that life begins at 40, but when I commenced training, I was quite convinced that everything else began to wear out, spread out or fall out! As plans for the trip progressed, it occurred to me that I wasn't really the rugged outdoors type. In fact, my normal idea of roughing it was when room service was late at a luxury hotel! And as for sleeping under the stars, I definitely preferred the creature comforts of the five stars!

Nevertheless, planning and training continued for this challenge, which I couldn't quite explain to others. Everyone thought I should be satisfied to have a party and receive insulting birthday cards from well-meaning friends. But...

For a moment, picture yourself standing, on top of the highest mountain in Africa. Dawn breaks on a crystal-clear morning as you breathe in the freshness of the rarified mountain air. You gaze down on the vastness of Kenya to one side and Tanzania on the other: 360-degree views over Africa, as far as the eye can see. The sun bounces a beautiful pinkish-blue light off the icy glacier-like formations at the summit. It is a freak of nature for these peaks to be located at the equator. It was the most beautiful sight I had ever seen.

At the same time, imagine yourself shivering in -18 degrees Celsius temperatures, feeling nauseous and battling a crashing headache from the altitude. You're gasping for air and hyperventilating. Then you see crosses where others have perished. I'd completed full marathons but never remember feeling as simultaneously elated and exhausted as I did during the final ascent of Kilimanjaro. Maybe it had something to do with the no pain-no gain theory.

We commenced the final climb the middle of the night. The guide said that was to avoid avalanche danger when the sun hit the snow. But, I think the real reason he woke us up in the middle of the night, was because if we'd seen the full extent of what we had to do during daylight, we might not have done it! Isn't that the same with many projects we take on at work? If we knew how hard it might be, maybe we wouldn't volunteer. However, those who achieve more than others, always do so!

It was sheer shale all the way up the mountain. It seemed that we took three steps forward and two steps back; three forward and two back; three forward and two back. Isn't it a bit like that at work as well? In fact, isn't it a bit like that in life? Just when we feel we're making progress, we sometimes slip back. But, again what separates winners from losers is that winners keep going forward and keep focused on their goal, even when they have temporary setbacks along the way.

Although I couldn't actually see the top of the mountain, I could picture it in my mind's eye and knew that's where I wanted to be. Yes, there were times during the night when I felt like giving up and turning back but kept visualizing my goal and reminding myself that I hadn't come this far to quit, when I was so near but so far away.

It would have been more tempting to turn around if I'd succumbed to the feelings of doubt and the menacing avalanche of negativity that we so often let creep into our everyday lives. Often at work, I've felt that the learning curve was so steep that I should have had on safety ropes and admittedly, there have been times when I didn't complete the project on the ground for whatever justification I could conjure up at the time. But, I'm pleased that I never lost sight of my goal when climbing Mt. Kilimanjaro, by clearly keeping my focus on reaching the top.

Shortly after, I had the privilege of meeting Sir Edmund Hillary at his home in New Zealand. I was in awe of the tall, well built man, a childhood hero of mine. Although then well into his seventies, he had a larger than life presence and for an international icon, the first man on top of Everest, he was one of the most down-to-earth men I'd ever met.

'Just call me Ed,' the former bee keeper encouraged as I asked if he had visualized and always known he would be the first man on top of the world.

'No,' he replied. 'Of course I had a goal. I wasn't just tramping around and found myself on top of Everest. However, I didn't know I would make it because there were so many uncertainties. But, what's the point of having a goal if you know you're going to make it? What's the challenge in that?'

Thinking about that question, I realized the wisdom behind it. I also realized that we often don't set our personal goals high enough, settling instead for mediocrity. Around this time, I received a fax from Queensland mountaineer Michael Groom, indicating that one of his climbing partners, Tenzing's grandson, was interested in putting the first Australian female on top of Everest and would I be interested? Would I be interested! But, I also realized that as important as it is to set high goals for oneself, it's also important to feel that you're in as strong a position as possible to achieve them. I'd broken my sacrum only eight months earlier and doubted whether I could attain the required fitness and finance, soon enough. I reluctantly reached this decision after exchanging more faxes and speaking with the New Zealand expedition leader, Rob Hall.

I intuitively didn't believe I had very good odds of succeeding on this occasion, and it was agreed that I would start training for the following expedition. Disappointed as I was, I had no idea that my earlier injury had been a blessing in disguise and was shocked and devastated to learn that Rob Hall and eleven others had perished in a freak storm on Everest on May 10, 1996.

His last words were to his wife in New Zealand, from a mobile phone at the summit. Mountaineering technology had certainly changed since Sir Edmund's ascent in 1953 but the determination of the individual to succeed against the unpredictability of the elements, had not.

Technology continues to embrace new frontiers and there are always those pioneers at the forefront of discovery. Less than fourteen months after that fateful expedition, volcanoes were discovered on Mars-volcanoes that are three times the height of Everest!

About two weeks after Rob Hall perished; I received a postcard he had previously sent from base camp. As the world media analyzed and debated the pros and cons of commercial expeditions, I just kept looking at his simple signature on the card and wondering how often we make mountains out of molehills, with relatively minor problems we encounter along the way in our everyday lives? I then realized that my broken sacrum, which was admittedly painful and debilitating, was only a molehill. It was a challenge that I certainly hadn't set for myself but one that I nevertheless had to overcome at the time, with the help of doctors and friends.

I also realized that most people would never have any desire to risk their lives climbing a mountain but we all have those figurative mountains in our everyday lives; sometimes seeming like insurmountable challenges looming large above us at the time. But, whether we're on a mountain or off, we still need to tackle those challenges in the same manner one climbs a mountain...one step at a time. When I'd climbed Kilimanjaro for my 40th birthday, I also realized that unlike the cliché, life does not begin at 40. It begins the day we're born and it's not as important that we celebrate our actual birth dates than it is to take the time to celebrate the miracle of each and every day in between. Even on those days when we're trying to climb out of the depths of despair, Sir Edmund Hillary's words still ring true to those who never have any desire to climb a mountain because:

'It's not the mountain we conquer, but ourselves.'

Catherine DeVrye, Australian Executive Woman of the Year, is a #1 best selling author and global speaker on service quality and change. This is an extract from her book *'Hot Lemon & Honey-Reflections for Success in Times of Change'*.