

Lily Terry The Mountain Within: Beyond the Summit

Today is more than just a celebration. Graduation marks the start of a new chapter that is both intimidating and exciting. We are preparing to step into the unknown, and as with any significant change, we are bound to encounter challenges on our new paths.

Change is daunting. I have found that the best way to face adversity in my own life is by intentionally doing difficult things to build resilience. I started hiking 14ers about a year ago for this reason.

When I stepped past the tree line of my first, Belford, I found myself in a field of wildflowers that seemed out of place at such an elevation. Besides being unexpectedly beautiful, I found that the meadow was also silent despite the well wishes of strangers and the chirps of (Pie-kuhs). The kind of silence I encountered was far more profound than that which occurs from a lack of noise. There were no distractions, I suddenly became very aware of myself and my own thoughts.

As I have grown more captivated by the world of mountains and mountaineering, I encountered a quote I want to share with you today that embodies the realization I came to on Belford, and represents graduation. Sir Edmund Hillary, one of the first men to summit Mt. Everest, said: “It is not the mountain we conquer, but ourselves.” The greatest challenges in life do not come from the world around us — they come from within.

As humans, we are prone to letting doubts, fears, and habits hold us back. Overcoming our limits starts with putting intentional effort into analyzing how we think, act, and hold ourselves back.

Too often I see people disregard this, and coast through life without a real understanding of themselves. But when you act deliberately, with intention, you begin to see a difference in both how the world responds to you and in how you see yourself.

And yet, living deliberately is not easy. Our world is a mess of noise and chaos. In a digital storm of information, notifications, and endless scrolling, it’s easy to forget about the world in front of us.

You may have heard the term “the attention economy” — the idea that human attention is a scarce and valuable commodity. It is often used in reference to advertising, but it applies more broadly to where you direct your focus in daily life.

Every choice you make is a purchase bought with your time and energy. Each purchase has a real impact on your life.

One way we give up the precious resource of attention and grow careless is through technology. Our generation is growing increasingly dependent on AI and our phones. We are outsourcing our thinking, and in doing so, we are dulling our creative instincts, our resilience, and our ability to problem-solve independently.

Technology is designed to capture your time, energy, and attention, without you noticing. Our phones, our apps, our instant logins — they streamline everything so efficiently that we act before we think. We fail to truly reflect on and question our actions and impulses.

Over-reliance isn't the only threat we face with technology usage. We are tricking our brains. Positive content creates dopamine that makes our brains think we are being productive, overcoming a challenge, or being creative. Our minds mirror what we see and hear, even when our actions don't catch up.

Eventually, we are bound to reach a point of stagnation. The digital landscape can never compare to the real world. The content keeps coming, and keeps tricking our brains, draining our energy and mental capacity.

I found myself deeply questioning how much I was consuming at a very specific point in my life. Life is overwhelming as it is, but the constant storm of information was making it difficult to focus. All the while, I was losing touch with myself, my values, and my goals. I reached a fundamental tipping point that has stuck with me to this very day.

I heard someone say that we will be the first generation to die with more memories of other people's lives than of our own.

So what is the anecdote? Silence. Silence is the deliberate second you take to pause before you act. It is the small moments you take in between conversations and events that you dedicate to understanding yourself. Silence is the key to living an intentional life.

Pause before you act. Take a second. Pausing will help you navigate through our increasingly complicated physical world, as well as your mental world.

There comes a point when you need to make a choice. As the Matrix franchise says, "You take the blue pill - the story ends, you wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe. You take the red pill - you stay in Wonderland, and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes."

Life does not come with a test run. Our actions matter — right here, right now. You need to choose what kind of life you want to live.

There's a saying: you are the sum of the closest people around you. You are the sum of what you spend the most time consuming. Social media can feel like a source of connection and inspiration, but more often than not, it is a shallow imitation of the real world. Fitting in comes at a cost: you risk losing sight of yourself, of the person you are capable of becoming.

The people you choose to interact with, the content you expose yourself to, and the experiences you prioritize shape your values, ethics, and goals. Choose them carefully.

Understanding yourself and navigating the world is difficult and intimidating. But it is also meant to be exciting. Life is a blank canvas, and you are the artist.

This unique gift of expression and exploration does come with a responsibility. Just as what you consume shapes you, what you create, speak, and share has a tremendous impact. Your presence matters. The way you show up reflects your values. Clothing, speech, and actions are powerful.

In a world where people leave the house dressed in sweatpants and pajamas, I want to encourage you to hold yourself to a higher standard.

You should take yourself seriously; the way you show up matters.

In a world that chooses convenience, make intentional choices that give you long-term benefit rather than short-term reward.

Over time, how the online landscape, our biggest influence, looks at clothing, actions, and language has changed.

We have normalized dressing casually, acting casually, and using vulgarity and slang.

Swearing helps us emotionally regulate, but it is also informal. There is a time and a place for it, and we have a tendency to use curses as filler words or in ways that carry no significant weight.

At a deeper level, it seems like my generation has lost touch with understanding the appropriate time or place to say or do certain things.

Sometimes the most powerful thing you can do is stay silent or say very little. Our actions speak for themselves, and in a world that largely acts on impulse, restraint is a form of rebellion.

Speak carefully. Show up intentionally. Because your actions, your values, and your choices are not invisible. They echo into the world.

You are about to embark on the most important and incredible project you will ever be given in your life, the creation and cultivation of your self. The final frontier is not space or the depths of our oceans. It's our own minds.

Just know that every choice you make, no matter how small, is a reflection of who you are and what you value. Each intentional act builds the foundation for the person you are becoming. And when you begin to understand and shape yourself in this way, the mountains before you no longer feel insurmountable. An unshakable foundation is what keeps structures standing.

We will encounter challenges, but just know that true success is not measured by the mountains you climb, but by the person you become while climbing them.