

the Optimalists

a preemptive manifesto for (extra) ordinary living

THE OPTIMAL QUESTIONNAIRE | Alpinist Adrian Ballinger

by GIANPAOLO PIETRI on 12/26/2009



| Everest Base Camp, April 10, 2009 |

Recently, I had the good fortune of crossing paths with world-class alpinist and Everest guide, Adrian Ballinger, and arranged an interview on the optimalists.com. As you will see, Adrian has been living his dream as a climber, skier, and high-altitude alpine guide for over 15 years. He climbed Everest for the first time in April of this year, and the experience will be featured during the next week on the Discovery Channel's show, [Everest: Beyond the Limit](#). He runs a successful business making others' dreams of summiting some of the world's most dangerous peaks come true. We've asked Adrian about what inspires him, what scares him, and what motivates him to continue his quest to push the limit, to define new boundaries, and discover the truth within himself. We not only admire men like Adrian, we cherish the contributions he offers us with every climb, every journey,

and every summit. Adrian teaches us that we can always climb higher, dream bigger, and go farther than we ever thought we could. And that is what we are all about. Here is what he has to say.

1. Who is Adrian Ballinger? What moves you and has shaped you?

A mostly homeless mountain guide with a passion for climbing and skiing big mountains, and enabling others to share in the experience. The last 15 years of my life have been focused on finding ways to visit big peaks throughout the world. I love rock climbing, ice climbing, alpine high altitude climbing, and skiing – as long as it is in the mountains, I try to excel at it.

2. Where do you come from (origins) and what influence has that place had on your life?

My family started off in England and I lived there until I was six. From there we moved to New England, and that is where hiking, climbing, skiing and mountaineering started for me. My first trips were backpacking in the White Mountains with my father. This quickly went to the next level of technical rock climbing and mountaineering with my best friend growing up, Greg Childs. He was like my brother (I spent summers and many winter snow days living with his family) and my hero – he already climbed and skied when I met him, and I spent the all of my teenage years just trying to keep up with him (unsuccessfully for the most part).

3. When did you discover you were born to climb?

I loved climbing from the very beginning – hiking as a kid and then climbing and skiing as a teenager. But I was never very good at any of it. I think that is a big part of where my passion came from. I was really average at all of this stuff as a kid. I just kept at it, coming back beaten up, scraped and bruised after every day in the mountains. But I knew it was something special for me. It challenged me way more than school or traditional sports.

And it just kept going from there. When I was 17 I had the opportunity to climb my first high altitude peaks, in Ecuador. I summited [Cotopaxi](#) (19,347 feet) and [Chimborazo](#) (20,565 feet). On Cotopaxi I got really serious altitude sickness, vomiting and hallucinating most of the way up, and needing some serious help from my teammates to get back down. I swore I would never do it again. Five days later I found myself back up high on Chimborazo and loving every minute. My body broke through whatever barrier it had to the whole thing and felt so strong. And that was it. I knew I needed to keep doing these big peaks, preferably by more and more technical routes. That was 15 years ago and I've been climbing full time ever since.

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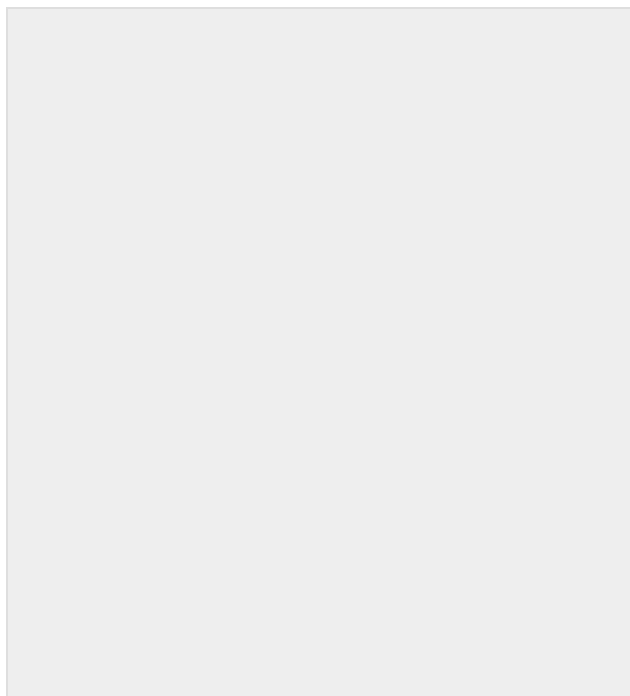
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Lowering clients into a couloir we wanted to ski in La Grave, France

4. Why do you climb? What drives the need? When you hit the wall, and it seems you cannot go any further, what keeps you going? Does that keep you going in life too?

I don't know exactly why I climb. I know it combines a really huge physical challenge, with a big mental piece (making good decisions in dangerous circumstances with incomplete information) with an emotional side (figuring out how to motivate our bodies when we should shut down from exhaustion or fear). I haven't found anything else in my life that is so "holistic". When I am in the mountains I am completely focused, and every part of me is challenged to its limits. I thrive on that sensation and can't imagine living without it.





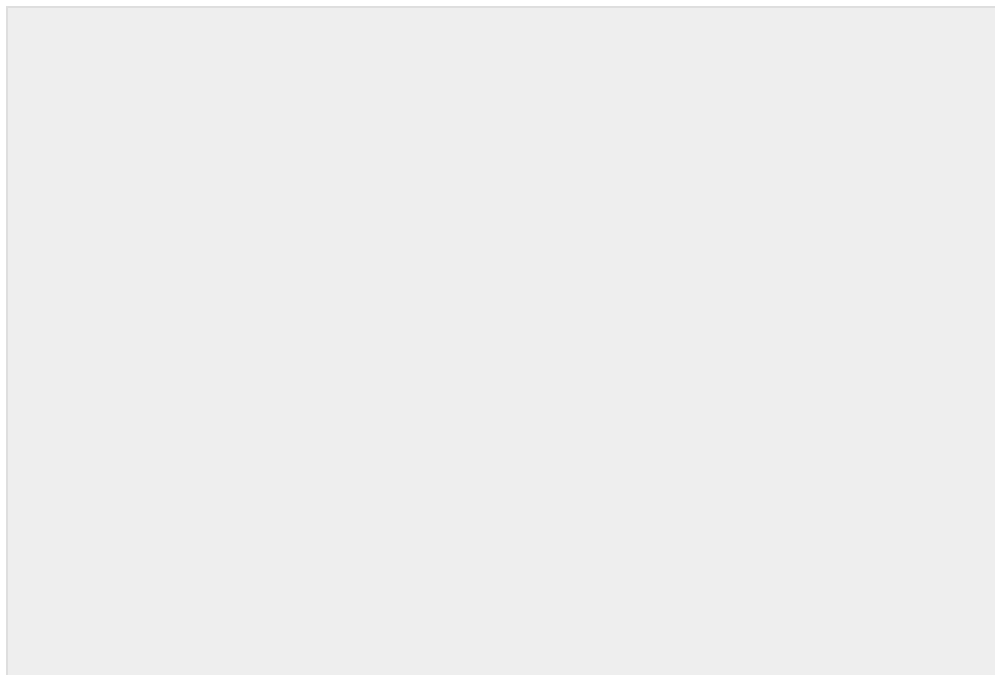
Climbing a steep skiing line in Chamonix, France

5. What inspiration do you draw from these climbs?

Climbing obviously feeds me in a really powerful way. I love the movement, the challenge, the possibility of failure, and the constant management of risk. I try to take the same approach with the rest of my life, with mixed results! I am also really inspired by the people I climb with. Many of my clients put a lot on the line to climb big peaks. They make huge sacrifices in the rest of their lives. I think not doing this professionally or "full-time", and then still needing to put out maximum effort come summit push, is really difficult. People suffer super-hard out there sometimes, and often they succeed and pull off a climb not even they knew they could. Being a part of that is the best. I cherish it equally with my own climbing accomplishments.

6. Are you constantly looking ahead to the next climb? DO you live in the "Now" or only when you're climbing?

I hope I live the rest of my life as fully as I do my climbing. I love coming home, seeing friends, eating and regaining weight I've lost, kitesurfing and hanging on tropical beaches, and so many other things. But the climbing life is definitely one of high's and low's, no pun intended. Sometimes the day-to-day drags on me a bit, and I start to crave the adventure again. But I would guess that's true with most of us. Running errands, getting stuck in traffic, endless paperwork – we all have to do it and it can't be fun all the time.





Summit of Everest, May 21, 2009

7. Can u tell us about your experience climbing/surviving Everest? We heard you just got back recently? And filmed it for a show? If so, when and where will we see it?

My summit day should be featured on December 30 from 9-10pm. But we haven't gotten any previews of what's in the shows. Hopefully the editors decided I was a good guy and cut out all my embarrassing moments! No seriously, having a film crew there was pretty intense. This was my first season climbing and guiding Everest, and I was working for the most high profile guide service on the mountain ([Russell Brice – Himalayan Experience](#)). I was the only guide working for him that hadn't summited Everest multiple times before. And I was the only American guide. So I was already pretty focused and feeling some self-created pressure. Having cameras on 24/7 definitely added to this at first. But then you just settle down and do your job, and almost forget the cameras are there. The trip was almost 3 months long, so there is plenty of time to get comfortable with the cameras and the crew.

My Everest team is one of two teams being featured this year on the Discovery Channel's show, Everest: Beyond the Limit, Season 3. The show premieres this holiday season: December 27 – Shows 1-3 from 8-11pm EST and then December 30 – Shows 4-5 from 9-11pm EST. It will get a lot of airtime in the weeks following the premieres as well.

8. What has been your most challenging climb to date and why? Once you got going, have you ever bailed out on a climb because of the risks?

I've summited a lot of challenging climbs, and I've bailed almost equally as often. When I am climbing personally I am usually attempting something at or possibly beyond my limit. Sometimes it goes, sometimes it doesn't. I've probably failed on more than 1/3 of the big climbs I've personally attempted over the years. So yes, I have definitely bailed because of the risks. I don't like the moniker climbers often get of being adrenaline junkies or risk takers. I think one of the things I love most about climbing is the constant need to identify, analyze, and mitigate risk. That's where a big part of the challenge of high altitude mountaineering is. And sometimes, it means turning around even when you really want to succeed.

As for my most challenging climb, two years ago on [Manaslu](#) (26, 759 feet) was high on the list. I was actually guiding, and it was the first time this peak, the eighth tallest in the world, had been commercially guided. In the fifty years between its first ascent and our climb, fewer than 200 people had summited, and the mountain had had 35 or so deaths. So we knew the peak was going to be super challenging to guide, and dangerous. In one storm during our first month on the mountain, we got over 15 feet of fresh snow. We lost almost 30 tents with all of our equipment inside to the snowfall and subsequent avalanches. It was epic. And all the work we had done over the previous month, putting in fixed lines, setting camps, and making a route, was all gone. After collecting new gear from loads of sources we went back up, and in the course of a week replaced all the camps, set 9,000 feet of new fixed rope, and broke trail through miles of waist-deep or deeper snow. And all this was combined with really high avalanche danger and high altitude. It was scary a lot of the time and I felt completely at my limit physically and mentally. Most of the decisions up high fell to me, and the avalanche danger was off the charts a lot of the time. But it worked – our team was the first (and one of the only) teams to make it to the summit in 2008. We were psyched!



9. We hear of fellow climbers and alpinists dying frequently, how do you deal with death? Are you afraid of it, or do you become more desensitized?

I'm definitely afraid of death, and I try to make really conservative decisions, especially when I'm guiding. I love this life! I want to live it for a long time to come. At the same time I recognize you can make the right calls in the mountains and still get unlucky. That happened on Everest this year (one sherpa from another team was killed by an avalanche going through the icefall) and it is a part of what we do. I've lost really good friends in the mountains, and I've come closer than I would like. And in the Himalaya we deal with deaths on other teams with depressing frequency. It's part of what we do. I don't think I will ever become desensitized. But when there is a rescue or a body recovery to do, it is our job to be professionals, to use our skills to do the best thing for the team and the family, while also keeping our teammates and clients in mind. Sometimes this last part (maintaining a focus on our team's needs) looks selfish or "desensitized". But we are still being affected by the death that occurred. It just can't be our only focus. We have to do our job, and then deal with the emotional side.

10. Do you feel out of place in life when you're on the ground? How has your lifestyle affected freindships, relationships and family.

That's a tough question. Yes, sometimes, I feel totally out of place back in "normal" life. I think that's why so many climbers seek out mountain enclaves – my two hometowns right now are Chamonix, France and Squaw, California. Both places are filled with professional and semi-professional athletes and lots of ski/climbing bums. Lots of people who have made huge sacrifices in other realms of their life in order to excel at skiing and climbing. I think it is often difficult to explain our choices to people who don't share our passion. Our choices seem too selfish.

But I also really enjoy people outside of these circles. At a certain point it gets a bit old discussing which ski wax we used today, which camming unit holds best, or what we did at the crux move of some local climb. There is so much more out there beyond climbing and skiing, and I am constantly reveling in new people I meet that have nothing to do with the big mountain life.

As for friendships, family, and relationships, it's a constant challenge. The people that have stuck with me through the years understand I would not be the person they love if I stopped playing in the mountains. And they believe (I hope) that what I do professionally affects people profoundly, and those experiences are worth a lot of personal sacrifice. A part of me hates being away from friends and family 7 months a year. But an equal (?) part can't imagine my life without those 7 months.... It's a balance I am still trying to figure out. Every year it shifts, so perhaps its a question worth asking me again next year!



11. What part of your lifestyle and lessons learned through climbing is missing in us sea-level dwellers? What have you discovered through experience that would make us better?

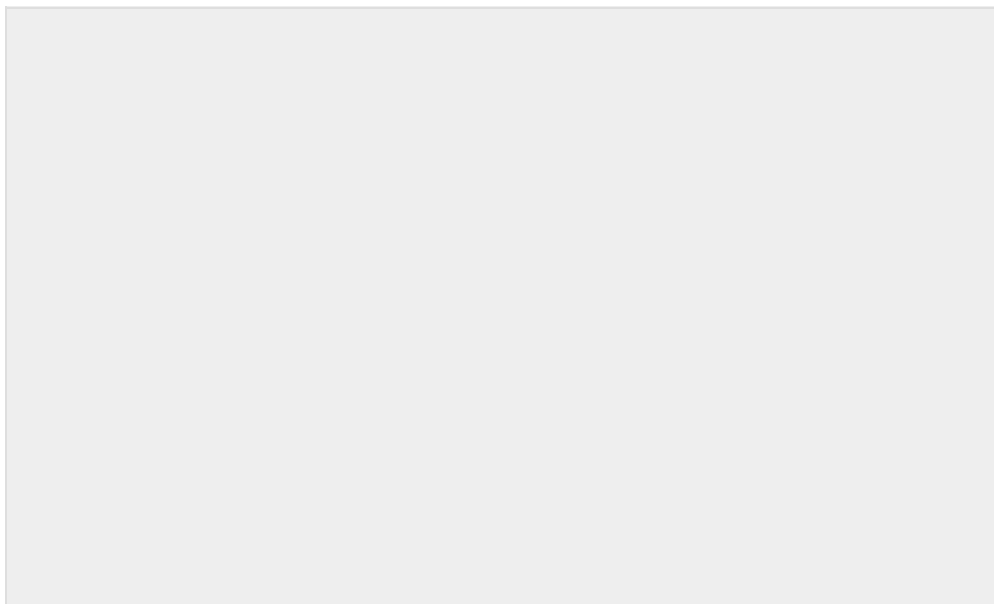
I don't believe anything is missing. The lessons I learn and put into practice in climbing, someone else will discover through their own passion. That's the key for me – when I meet someone I always want to figure out what their passion is. It doesn't matter whether it's climbing, surfing, relationships with family and friends, or knitting. I think we all need something that drives us and keeps us striving. For me, that's the big mountains.

If I had to pick one thing that is often "missing" in new climbers, it's being comfortable with discomfort. We are so fortunate in the States, I think we sometimes forget what we are capable of enduring. And that shows a lot in big mountain climbing. We have to endure a lot – the cold, storms, exhaustion, not sleeping, unusual food, high altitude sickness, nasty developing-world bathrooms, and so much more. I'm not doing a very good job of selling my company's trips, am I? But seriously, climbers are always blown away by the strength of the local people we work with. This is true of the Sherpa in Nepal, the porters in Peru, and the mountain guides in every country we work in. But most of these guys, they're no different physiologically than you or me. They've just learned how far they can push their bodies, and how to smile and laugh while they are doing it. Any one of us can get to that same point. It just hurts a bit getting there!

What's the best climber joke you ever heard? Is it true to life?

Hmmm, I'll keep it clean – What's the difference between a mountain guide and a large pepperoni pizza? The pepperoni pizza can feed a family of four.

It's truer than I would like to believe. I spend a lot of my time on a non-profit board here in the States (the Certified Guides Foundation) trying to encourage mountain guiding as a profession, and hope to see changes to salaries and benefits over time. We as a community have to embrace mountain guides' education and certification first. There have to be standards in mountain guiding.





On the Summit of Ama Dablam in Nepal with three of my strongest sherpa. Everest in background.

Anything else you would like to share with us. How can people who seek your services get in touch with you.


Check out www.alpenglowexpeditions.com. We run high altitude expeditions worldwide (from Mexico's Volcanos to Mt. Everest) as well as technical climbing and skiing trips in the USA and Europe. Almost half of our expeditions are for people with no climbing or high altitude experience! Our expeditions are always led by a fully certified mountain guide, and we keep our groups and ratios small to ensure your safety, success, and enjoyment. Check out our website and feel free to contact us anytime!

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WHEN YOU THINK THERE IS NO TIME | Make Time

by GIANPAOLO PIETRI 12.20.2009

"I would like to begin this evening with a discussion of Time. From the moment we are born, we are in the flow of it. We measure it. We mark it. But we cannot defy it. Or can we?"

| The Illusionist |

Time is relative. And it works in mysterious ways. And Einstein proved it.

When [...]

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THE OPTIMAL QUESTIONNAIRE | Achraf Kassioui

by GIANPAOLO PIETRI 12.14.2009

Tell us about yourself. Brief bio, accomplishments, passions.

Hello, my name is Achraf Kassioui. I studied fine arts during 2 years in Paris, then I went to la Sorbonne studying Philosophy during 3 years, and then one year in graduate school in cognitive science, where we were mainly introduced to theoretical computer science and cognitive [...]

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BY ALL MEANS ... DANCE

by GIANPAOLO PIETRI 12.12.2009

"When you do dance, I wish you a wave of the sea, that you might ever do nothing but that."

| William Shakespeare |

START SMALL | And Build From There


by GIANPAOLO PIETRI 12.07.2009

"Every new opinion, at its starting, is precisely in a minority of one."

| Thomas Carlyle |

We all want to climb Mount Everest. We'd all like to get straight to the

I dance, and I am not afraid to admit it. Sometimes I dance with friends, many times I dance alone. I dance in a bar, and yes, sometimes, I dance at home, when [...]

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TAMING THE FURY

by GIANPAOLO PIETRI 12.02.2009

“Beware of him that is slow to anger; for when it is long coming, it is the stronger when it comes, and the longer kept. Abused patience turns to fury.”

| Francis Quarles |

A deep and sometimes dark fury burns within me. And that is a sensation that all of us have felt at one time [...]

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THANKSGIVING FEATURE | The Gentleman Speaks About Giving Back

by THE GENTLEMAN 11.25.2009

“Waste no more time arguing what a good person should be. Be one.”

| Marcus Aurelius |

Sometimes during the holiday season, amidst all the parties and family gatherings we can lose sight of the true spirit of the holidays we are meant to be celebrating. The holiday season at the end of every year is a [...]

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POSTCARDS FROM THE EDGE | Climbing Machu Pichu

by GIANPAOLO PIETRI 11.20.2009


I wasn't always into a minimal lifestyle. And I wasn't always good at keeping things simple (not sure i am now). And this story proves it. Ten years ago, i did a semester abroad in Santiago, Chile. I really preferred to go to Sydney, Australia, or Madrid, Spain, but upon further reflection, I thought that [...]

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point, cut out the process, and accomplish our biggest goals. We wander why it all has to take so long. But when setting out on [...]


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TACKY CAKES | and other things that inspire me

by COLIN WRIGHT 11.29.2009

EDITOR'S NOTE | As part of our series on Inspiration we asked our friend Colin Wright from Exile Lifestyle to contribute his thoughts on the things that inspire him. Recently, Colin sold almost everything he had, moved to a foreign country for four months, and decides where he will live next by asking his readers [...]

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LIVE YOUR DREAM | And Make it Work for You

by GIANPAOLO PIETRI 11.22.2009

“All men and women who have achieved great things have been dreamers.”

| Orison Swett Marden |

This is probably one of the hardest things for people to realize. I know, because I am one of those people, who has trouble realizing it. The minute we start to think about our dreams, warning bells begin to go [...]

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