

# Dicing with death helps you appreciate the true value of life

**N**ews of promising young people killed in the prime of life can only touch a nerve, particularly when their death is caused by an activity that appeared to be undertaken out of innocent fun.

And more particularly when you suspect that that death could have been prevented. Dino Yankov, of the Oxford Stunt Society, had a passion for the activity that put his life in the balance, but that doesn't detract from the tragedy of his death on Sunday, when he fell short of a safety net after being fired out of a catapult.

Four and half years ago, as part of a British Everest expedition, I saw a lot of experienced climbers taking risks – often irrational, altitude-induced risks – in their hunger for the summit. Some had left office jobs and big salaries, some had children and husbands or wives waiting for news of their progress, some had dedicated their entire lives to mountaineering.

My feelings for Dino Yankov are very similar to my feelings at news of fellow climbers who died on the North Face during our time. What a waste. It was made more poignant because I almost died myself, when a layer of ice over a crevasse gave way, and later when my oxygen supply ran out on the way down from the summit.

Life is fragile and it felt humbling to have lived. All of us

together on the mountain, waiting for the weather to turn, shared the same urge: to use our instincts, partly to be successful, but much more importantly to survive.

Risk-taking has been turned into business. People pay thousands to attempt big climbs, or to parascond from cliffs or to throw themselves from bridges. There's a lot of talk about adrenaline junkies, and the adrenaline rush, but what drives people to force themselves to go against their better judgment is about more than just a quick fix.

Whether you're launching yourself from a mountainside, or watching snow tumble down it where 10 minutes before you were checking your oxygen tank, the function is the same: relying on our survival instincts, testing your physical and mental stamina to its limits. When you're on a mountain for three and half months, adrenaline alone cannot sustain you. It requires something more.

More times than I can remember, I have been asked, when lecturing on my time on Everest: Why? Giving a direct answer never gets any easier, because I still cannot point precisely to any one explanation.

I can say that the answer is deeply rooted. Human instincts – to reproduce, to compete, or to survive – are embedded in the soul. When we push ourselves into dangerous situations, we are tap-

**Bear Grylls, who at 23 became the youngest Briton to climb Everest, explains what motivated the Oxford student who died during a stunt**



ping into areas of our being that the safety of campus life, or a well-salaried job, or a package holiday will never stimulate.

What I do tell people is that, when you are drawn together with others and your lives are in the balance, the intimacy of relationships soars. Friendships with the people in our team, including Neil Laughton and my oldest mate, Mick Crosthwaite, were strengthened by the mutual respect and love that is borne out of shared fear.

What I experienced with them on that extraordinary mountain was similar to the closeness I felt with my late father, when learning to

climb as a boy. Those feelings are precious.

Four and a half years after standing on the summit of Everest, I am planning the next expedition with Mick: a transatlantic arctic crossing in an open rigid inflatable boat, in aid of the Prince's Trust.

My attitude is very different from my attitude when preparing for Everest. It's maybe less gung-ho, less desperate to conquer – more a sense of doing what has to be done, working not so much for "success", but for survival.

I'm approaching it all with a little more rationale (I hope), and a little more fear. Partly this is because my personal circumstances have changed. In February 1998, I said goodbye to my parents and my girlfriend, Shara. In July 2003, I will be saying goodbye to my wife, Shara, and (God willing) a six-week-old child. This time round, there is so much more at stake.

I can see that what I am doing is hard on my family, perhaps selfish. And sometimes I'm not even sure whether I'm really brave enough any longer to undertake this next adventure.

But the urge to be back in those extremes will not leave me alone. Maybe I can blame my upbringing: my father taught me to believe that the only real danger in life is to risk nothing. A risk-free life has a ugly habit of drying up passion and character. Like ships left to rot in harbour, we diminish when not

stretched. Maybe it would be equally selfish to let those adventurous parts of me close down.

To have Mick joining me on this next expedition means so much. The strength of our post-Everest relationship will be put to the test again in rough sea and sub-zero temperatures. But there are few other people I could trust in quite the same way.

I am also aware that I will be leading others who are risking their lives. This adds a certain pressure, yet those other members are chosen for their kindness and strength when it matters; I believe that the experience will enrich them.

Throughout the crossing, two thoughts will be with me at all times. First, the memory of my father and his belief in having dreams: what he taught me will be my mainstay in the inevitable times of doubt. Secondly, Shara: of all the incentives to return home safely, her love will be the strongest. She is, as always, my greatest reason for coming home.

Risk-taking enriches. It drives us to use our gifts to the fullest. It can help us to appreciate the true value of our lives. My heart goes out to friends and family of Dino Yankov. But at the same time, I maintain that we should not let safety blank out the possibility for true adventure.

*For more information on the author's planned expedition, see [www.arctic2003.com](http://www.arctic2003.com)*