

## GO FOR BROKE!

*A workshop about risk-taking. Workshop duration 100 – 110 minutes*

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### [0:00] Video clip

> **SLIDE** > **Play video: Gever Tulley**<sup>1</sup> (3.5 mins) – *on the benefits of risk-taking for children's development*

*Transcript:*

GUY RAZ, HOST: It's called Tinkering School. And on a recent day there, you could find 6-year-olds...

UNIDENTIFIED CHILD 3: Here's another bucket...

RAZ: ...Making go-carts.

CHILD 3: ...And any nails. I got some...

RAZ: ...With a little help.

CHILD 3: Two and a half.

UNIDENTIFIED COUNSELLOR: Two and a half - that's thin, right? ...

RAZ: One thing Gever says is really important about Tinkering School is that kids are allowed, even encouraged, to do dangerous things, which is why the first building kids enter there is this huge barn. And on one side...

TULLEY: Is a wall of tools - hand drills, saws of various sorts, you know, rulers, tape measures, levels and...

RAZ: On the other side of the room.

TULLEY: Is a wall of materials which includes lumber, screws of every sort of length, nuts and bolts, pulleys, wheels...

TULLEY: The truth is in an environment where the children realise, like, this is the opposite of being overprotected, we suddenly see the children take much more responsibility for themselves.

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<sup>1</sup> Audio excerpted from NPR/TED staff (1/8/2014), What Can Kids Learn By Doing Dangerous Things? Interview with Gever Tulley. *WBUR (NPR news)*. <https://www.wbur.org/npr/335303653/what-can-kids-learn-by-doing-dangerous-things>

(SOUNDBITE OF TED TALK)

TULLEY: You know, we live in a world that's subjected to ever more stringent child safety regulations. ... As the boundaries of what we determine as the safety zone grow ever smaller, we cut off our children from valuable opportunities to learn how to interact with the world around them. ... Some simple things that we can do to raise our kids to be creative, confident and in control of the environment around them: Thing number one - play with fire... Number two, own a pocketknife. Number three, throw a spear. Number four, deconstruct an appliance from your house. Number five, drive a car.

RAZ: All right, cool. That's – I love it.

TULLEY: And when we talk about driving a car, let's make clear that it's sit on your parents lap and steer. But the real goal there is they develop an appreciation and a kind of intuition about what's involved ... That process builds all those proprioceptive skills that we would love children to have, that sense of where the parts of their body are ...

RAZ: Or how about playing with fire? Well, actually, when kids roast marshmallows or burn sticks...

TULLEY: They're doing perfect science. They have a question - what will happen when I put this in the fire? They observe, and then immediately a follow-on question is asked. And suddenly we see them put an orange peel in the fire. But I think that kind of is the foundation of inquiry, and getting a chance to satisfy that question only builds the impulse to ask more and deeper questions over time.

RAZ: But, I mean, what would happen, like, if you didn't let your kids do those things? Like, you produce, like, a boring and dull child?

TULLEY: A boring and dull child who is a consumer rather than a creator in their lives because injuries are going to happen. Let's not let that fear prevent us from having children have real and meaningful self-directed experiences. So the fact that one child at a school has a pocketknife and another child isn't ready, we immediately denigrate that positive benefit which is so hard to measure, which is I've empowered my child, and he feels like I trust him with this sharp tool. That's a bond between parent and child that's hard to build without actually giving them responsibility for something that has a little bit of danger.

#### [0:05] Narrative

The importance of risk-taking isn't confined to the context of child development. Dr Julian Hughes, an ethicist who specialises in dementia care, has written a paper for Alzheimer's Australia where he says (*quote*):

Taking risks is an inherent part of our every day lives; a life without any form of risk would be unimaginable... minimising risk often means foregoing benefits and restricting freedom, which in turn may be highly detrimental both to the person's sense of autonomy, and to their overall wellbeing.<sup>2</sup>

So we've heard various arguments in favour of risk-taking.

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<sup>2</sup> Julian Hughes (June 2010), Ethical issues and decision-making in dementia care. Alzheimer's Australia, Paper 20.

≥ **SLIDE: [Child]**

In the video, we heard Gever Tulley's arguments that risk-taking is important for children becoming inquiring, self-directed, creative, imaginative, confident, and responsible problems-solvers who are in control of their environment, and it's also important for fostering parent-child relationships where children know they are trusted them with dangerous tools.

> **SLIDE: [Elderly woman]**

And from Julian Hughes we heard that risk-taking is important for people with dementia retaining freedom, autonomy and wellbeing.

**Discussion**

Should *everyone* be encouraged to take risks, *all* the time? Are *all* risk-taking behaviours to be celebrated? (*Pair talk*)

Under what circumstances should we support risk-taking? What makes a risk reasonable, and what makes a risk reckless? (*Pair talk and report back; scribe in columns 'reasonable' and 'reckless'*)

Is risk-taking ethical?

**[0:15] Introduction & video clip**

This next video is about the sport of 'free-soloing': rock climbing alone without ropes or other equipment.

≥ **SLIDE > Play video: Alex Honnold**<sup>3</sup> (4.5 mins) – *the sport of free soloing, dealing with fear, and visualising death*

*Transcript:*

"The sport of free soloing is easy to understand. He went up this giant face without a rope. If he falls, he dies."

"I'd heard about it years ago, it was like the hard man route down here. The big hard multi-pitch that was like the test piece. I mean it's always just represented that next step in technical climbing to me. It may be too scary, but I'm going to put a bunch of work into it and figure out whether or not it's even possible."

"I mean just kind of weird helping your friend do something you know could potentially lead to his death."

"Update - cleaning the route a little bit, pulling off some of the vegetation and just sort of sussing it out a little bit."

"Kept on picturing myself without a rope and then I'd get really scared."

"How's the condition the the route currently for soloing?"

"Quite damp; it's sub-optimal."

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<sup>3</sup> This video clip is adapted from the North Face short documentary 'El Sendero Luminoso ft. Alex Honnold'. It also includes some audio excerpted from Climbing Grief Fund ('Alex Honnold - full interview') and Graham Bensinger ('Alex Honnold - I visualize my death to stay alive').

"I mean, all it takes is you grab one small hold and it pops off the wall and you fall to your death, you know? So when I was cleaning the wall for Alex I was cleaning every little thing, like anything that looked loose or any piece of dirt I was trying to clean it off the wall because I obviously want my buddy to live."

"I feel like you're slipping a little. It's a little bit of a 'thank God' moment right?"

"A little bit."

"At some point during the day while I was up there with Cedar, I was just like 'I'm ready, like I'm sick of hanging around here on ropes. It went from like being an intimidating idea to just being like 'I'm kind of excited to do this.'"

"Now we're gonna see – see what happens up there, but..."

"It's important to avoid any kind of major fear response just because you have physiological changes: your vision narrows, your breathing accelerates, you overgrip..."

If the idea of falling to my death is insurmountable, like if I can't get past that fear, then I probably should be up there. You can't just suppress that. You have to accept the whole experience...

Overcoming that fear is something that you go through beforehand, like before soloing hopefully. You visualise, you deal with all those things. I think it's important to actually think it all the way through...

I've climbed day in, day out, for five or six days a week for twenty years. You know, every once in a while a crazy accident happens. But that's climbing, you know? I don't know, I mean... I think that I weigh that against the cumulative joy of twenty years of being outside, having great climbing experiences...

You've just got to go try it."

[0:20]

**> SLIDE: Alex Honnold (still image)**

**Discussion**

Does Alex Honnold have a reckless disregard for his own life?

*Consider that he takes an extremely measured, rational approach to risk. He only attempts a climb without ropes after extensive and detailed training and practice, by which point he is almost certain he won't fail.*

Is it ethical for people like Alex Honnold to pursue activities that have the potential to endanger their lives, especially given the potential impact on loved ones?

What are the limits to personal freedom in this context?

### [0:25] Introductory narrative

Extreme sports are leisure activities in which a mismanaged mistake or accident would most likely result in death. Typical activities include surfing big waves over 20 metres tall; climbing difficult routes on mountains and cliffs without the aid of ropes or other protection; skiing sheer cliffs; kayaking over waterfalls more than 30 metres high; and jumping from bridges, cliffs and buildings with only a parachute (known as B.A.S.E. jumping).

### > SLIDE: Deviant personality...

Historically, psychologists have theorised that there's something *wrong* with people who engage in these kinds of extreme sports. Extreme sports participants are described in various psychological models as 'sensation-seeking', being ruled by 'unconscious motivation', or having a 'thrill-seeking personality type'. These psychological models assume that participating in extreme sports is motivated by a need to take risks or pursue an 'adrenaline buzz'. Extreme sports are seen as deviant activities in which participants lack the capacity to regulate their emotions and behaviours in a socially acceptable way. Some researchers speculate that extreme sports athletes have personality deficits and a pathological addiction to extreme risk seeking.<sup>4</sup>

But there's a more sympathetic way of viewing the participation in extreme sports, a view often taken by the participants themselves. Extreme sports can be viewed as a source of 'peak experiences', a term introduced by American psychologist Abraham Maslow to refer to the most fulfilling and meaningful experiences that a person can ever have in their life.

### > SLIDE: Maslow's hierarchy of needs

According to Maslow, peak experiences play a crucial role in a person attaining 'self-actualisation', that is, realising their full potential. (*You may wish to elaborate on Maslow's hierarchy of needs.*)

Peak experiences can take many forms, from participation in extreme sports (which is what we're focussing on today), to moments of artistic creation, deep interpersonal connections, profound insights, and experiences in nature. All these different kinds of experience are united by certain qualities that Maslow identified as *characteristic* of peak experiences.

### Concept activity

In the activity we're about to do, you'll be working in small groups to consider some of the characteristics of peak experiences, and how the experiences of extreme sportspeople, as described in their own words, map onto these characteristics.

I'll be handing out some quotes by participants in extreme sports, and I want you to work together to match these quotes with the relevant characteristic of peak experiences.

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<sup>4</sup> The first two paragraphs of this introductory narrative are lightly edited excerpts the following article: Brymer, E., & Schweitzer, R.D. (January 2017). Evoking the Ineffable: The phenomenology of extreme sports. *Psychology of Consciousness: Theory, research and practice* 4(1), 63–74.

Divide students into four pairs/small groups: Groups A, B, C, D.

- Groups A and B will match each of their quotes to one of the following four categories: total attention; loss of fear; a feeling of integration within oneself; the experience is intrinsically perfect.
- Groups C and D will match each of their quotes to one of the following four categories: rich perception; the person merges with the experience in total harmony; awe or reverence; feeling God-like (fullest potential/total control).

Hand out quotes by extreme sportspeople, noting that a different set of quotes has been designated for each of the four groups.<sup>5</sup>

See summary of quotes overleaf; printable versions are supplied separately.

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**Groups A and B use the following categories:**

- **TOTAL ATTENTION**
- **LOSS OF FEAR**
- **A FEELING OF INTEGRATION WITHIN ONE'S SELF (You experience the totality of your self)**
- **THE EXPERIENCE IS INTRINSICALLY PERFECT**

Quotes for group A in randomised order:

"It's an opportunity to experience places and a way of looking at things that we can't normally do because we're too restricted by ... our own fear." (B.A.S.E. jumper)

"When you're free-soloing [mountain climbing without ropes], you can't afford to be distracted. You concentrate on the flow from move to move. You exist only in the present" (Mike, free solo climber)

"In meditation the aim is to ... go underneath your conscious mind and ... find a place that is infinitely calm... but you can also experience the same awareness through B.A.S.E. jumping and ... [occasionally] in

climbing" (Extreme sports person)

"The real... reward of doing something like B.A.S.E. jumping ... is ...[the] elation... this incredibly exhilarating experience, this absolute... celebration of... living" (B.A.S.E. jumper)

"I can only compare myself now with what I used to be when I was not an adventurer and was a more ... unbalanced person and you know the worst part was I didn't even know I was unbalanced." (Extreme mountaineer)

"Everything seems to be in a time warp. Everything slows down. It's total concentration. To me it's completely relaxed because everything else is off your mind." (Skydiver)

"The trick I think is to be able to control the fears and then... you don't feel hyped up with adrenalin but ... you are feeling relaxed." (Extreme sports person)

"Pushing yourself physically... and then to be able to stand at the top with...one single parachute... All of a sudden ...well, you're not this body, you're not these thoughts, and you're not [that] part of you that's constantly chattering away about the things you can't do

<sup>5</sup> **References**

This concept activity was developed using Maslow's concept of peak experience, adapted by Neil Lipscombe in the paper Lipscombe, N. (1999), The relevance of the peak experience to continued skydiving participation: A qualitative approach to assessing motivations. *Leisure Studies*, 18(4). 267-288.

Quotes used in this concept activity come from extreme sports participants and commentators. With the exception of the six specific quotes referenced below, all quotes were collected by Eric Brymer in his interviews with extreme sports people and cited in the following two publications:

Brymer, E. (2005). *Extreme dude: The phenomenology of the extreme sport experience*. Doctoral thesis, University of Wollongong.

Brymer, E., & Schweitzer, R. D. (2017). Evoking the ineffable: The phenomenology of extreme sports. *Psychology of Consciousness: Theory, Research, and Practice*, 4(1), 63-74.

- The quote from Andrea Binning is cited in K. McCallum (2001), Interview with an extreme skier. Personal communication with Eric Brymer.
- The quote from Midol & Broyer comes from Midol, N. & Broyer, G. (1995). Towards an anthropological analysis of new sport cultures: The case of whiz sports in France. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 12, p. 208.
- The quote from Schultheis comes from Schultheis, R. (1996). *Bone Games: Extreme sports, shamanism, Zena and the search for transcendence*. Breakaway Books, pp. 11-12.
- The quote from 'Mike' was by Mike Pont, cited in Soden, G. (2003). *Falling: How our greatest fear became our greatest thrill: A history*. W.W. Norton & Co., p. 255.
- The quote from Bobby comes from Bobby Stoddard (2021, January 26), 'Flight'. Story from podcast episode 'Ski, Poe, Spa, and Towers', *The Moth Radio Hour*, PRX.
- The quote from Cathy Cush is cited in Terwilliger, C. (1998, March 28). *Type 'T' personality*. The Denver Post, p. 3.

– you're none of those things, you're so much more."  
(B.A.S.E. jumper)

"In a sport like ours it's a question of survival. If you're not perfectly in the present moment, if you're not ultra-connected with your environment, like an animal who's hunting, you take many more risks." (Steve, wingsuit flier)

"Because you were so focused on doing what you were doing, everything else goes away." (Cathy Cush, deep diver)

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*Quotes for group B in randomised order:*

"you're just literally flying along the wave with the air ...under your board ... almost making you weightless ... it's just a sense of *being*, and you don't want to do anything." (Big-wave surfer)

"if something goes wrong in a B.A.S.E. jump you have to do something about it extremely quickly so you're at this level of alertness that you're not in a normal life ... you've got every central nervous system receptor ready to fire in case you've got to deal with a malfunction and in dealing with a malfunction you've only got seconds to sort it out or you die." (B.A.S.E. jumper)

"You're dealing with ... primal forces within yourself ... so to go mountaineering is to reinvigorate... a really fundamental core part of your being... [It] gives you so much more of an insight into ... your potential and your capacity." (Extreme mountaineer)

"To get there you have to push yourself very hard physically and then to step off you have to let go for an instant of your attachment to everything, your attachment to your life, your attachment to things, you just have to let go of that." (Extreme sports person)

"The stresses of high-altitude climbing reveal your true character; they unmask who you really are." (David Breashears, mountaineer)

"40 seconds of pure happiness... I am engulfed with optimism, screaming with the feelings of freedom." (Skydiver)

"Everything else is stripped away so we don't have any of the things that distract us." (B.A.S.E. jumper)

"The sport, flying, has taught me to know myself. I have come to know myself physically and mentally; my own patterns of reaction. I know myself all the way out to my fingertips, all these tiny movements. Or, I am aware of my own reactions when I am full of adrenaline and happiness, or full of fear." (Adam, wingsuit proximity flier)

"You're like in a tunnel... you are super sharp in your senses... it's optimal focus with letting go of everything. Because you have to be in the present moment. There is no way you can multitask in such a survival-based situation." (Steve, wingsuit flier)

"When I finally look up, ready to take that first stroke, [the fear] simply vanishes. It must be gone so that the body is loose and can function efficiently, quickly and naturally." (Corran Addison, extreme kayaker)

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**Groups C & D use the following categories:**

- **RICH PERCEPTION**
- **THE PERSON MERGES WITH THE EXPERIENCE IN TOTAL HARMONY**
- **AWE OR REVERENCE**
- **FEELING GOD-LIKE (You attain your fullest potential or experience total control)**

*Quotes for group C in randomised order:*

"Dropping one's defences, feeling the harmony, becoming the snow field, becoming one with the scenery – that is the 'kick'." (Midol & Broyer's commentary on extreme skiing/snowboarding)

"What motivates me is the state I enter into. There is a real clarity and heightened senses – both physically and of mind...All my senses just feed in." (Extreme kayaker)

"Being out there in the mountains. It's awesome. You feel like you're floating. You're kind of weightless. You feel like you can do anything, [you're] indestructible." (Andrea Binning, extreme skier)

"On a B.A.S.E. jump off a beautiful cliff... it's very still, very quiet, so ... you can take a few moments to become one with the environment ... it's easy to be peaceful." (B.A.S.E. jumper)

"the first time I B.A.S.E. jumped ...it was one of those experiences that shatters the way that you looked at things in the past because ...[in ordinary life] you're constantly filtering and judging, and an experience like B.A.S.E. jumping helps you shatter all of those things." (B.A.S.E. jumper)

"With B.A.S.E. jumping you can ...stand on the edge of these huge cliffs and ... put your arms in the air and you're totally vulnerable and totally part of the environment." (B.A.S.E. jumper)

"Things reel in slow motion and certainly my senses are never anything like a sharp as they are in those situations ... you see things with incredible clarity and all your senses have an awareness an alertness ... you realise that your senses are not working to their full capacity or even coming close to it until you are in such a situation." (Solo expeditioner)

"[Altered states are] very intoxicating ... and it's also important in ... becoming more aware that we are not what we are in our everyday life; in our everyday life we are not particularly challenged ... [it's] uncomfortable



to get [to the extreme sport experience] but infinitely worthwhile” (Mountaineer)

“As I down-climbed Neva’s lethal slopes... I climbed with the impeccable sureness of a snow leopard, a mountain goat. I crossed disintegrating chutes of rock holds vanishing from under my hands and feet as I moved, a dance in which a single missed beat would have been fatal. I used bits of rime (ice) clinging to the granite as finger holds. They rattled away into space but I was already gone, away...[I was] the best possible version of myself.” (Rob Schultheis)

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*Quotes for group D in randomised order:*

“I became aware of the total correlation of man, surfboard and wave.” (Laird Hamilton, big-wave surfer)

“You can go really incredibly special places B.A.S.E. jumping ...if they happen to be special wilderness places well that’s all the more awesome.” (B.A.S.E. jumper)

“My whole world just goes into slow motion and all of my senses become amplified. My sense of smell and taste and hearing are just electrified.” (Bobby, skier)

“Your possibilities are bigger because ... those absolutes that you were putting on yourself ...were just false... we think we’re bound by a particular area and we’re not really” (B.A.S.E. jumper)

“if there’s avalanches coming down around you ... but then you still manage to get your head together... it’s very empowering ... to just feel so .. in control of my life despite all these out of control things that were

going on around me.” (Extreme mountaineer)

“You’re totally connected to the environment so you’re no longer... bound by the constraints of a physical body anymore... it’s a life-altering insight.” (B.A.S.E. jumper and mountain climber)

“It’s a complete sense of belonging. Like, ‘Ah, this is me. I remember now. I am from this, this is my home’ ... there’s a sense of being stripped back, brought back, returned to the world. I think that ...the intelligence that exists within nature – that is nature – is that which makes me possible. I experience a feeling of being kindred with nature.” (Hannah, extreme athlete)

“on every B.A.S.E. jump ... your awareness of one second expands enormously so what we would normally perceive in one second is very little compared to what you perceive in one second on a B.A.S.E. jump .. it feels like it’s in slow motion ...you can see the tiny little creases in the rock and different colours in the sky and you’re totally aware of where your body is in space and how its moving and ... its very surreal.” (B.A.S.E. jumper)

“For me [being at the top of the waterfall waiting to descend] feels like being in another world and ...the only way back to [the] real world ...is to drop over the fall... I often dream that I’m able to take somebody else’s being and put it inside my body just to let them look out through my eyes because it’s such an amazing situation to be in. There’s no way they could possibly understand the feelings, to feel what I’m feeling and to see what I’m seeing because you never get to see those things. It feels like being in another world.” (Tim, extreme kayaker)

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## [0:40] Report back

*Each group shares a quote that they found most provocative or most interesting to discuss.*

*The facilitator could perhaps connect the ‘awe and reverence’ characteristic of peak experiences with the concept of **the philosophical sublime**: an aesthetic quality that inspires awe, wonder, or reverence in the face of something grand, beautiful or powerful. Outdoor adventure is particularly likely to evoke a sense of the sublime, because the sublime experience of confronting danger and uncertainty intersects with other sublime experiences, such as the beauty of pristine wilderness, the breathtaking experience of vast and timeless landscapes, a feeling of interconnectedness with nature, and an awareness of the fragility of the ecological balance.*

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## [0:50] Three-minute break

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**[0:53] Video clip**

**> SLIDE > [Play Forrest Fenn treasure hunt - clip 1](#) (3 mins)**

*Transcript:*

"We're going to go in, and get this treasure. Mark my words."

Here's some background on the Forrest Fenn treasure.

"What if we told you there was a treasure chest full of gold and jewels, waiting to be found somewhere in the mountains north of Santa Fe."

"Forrest Fenn is an 87 year old former fighter pilot who made his fortune selling art and antiques. He says that in 2010 he hid a treasure chest somewhere in the Rocky Mountains."

You can think of this whole thing as a kind of game. Forrest Fenn simply created it and set the rules. And he did this by filling a chest with gold coins, jewels, trinkets and nuggets from his personal collection. And then he hid it in one of four states: Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, or New Mexico.

The only clues to the treasure: hidden in a 24-line poem from Fenn's autobiography 'The Thrill of the Chase':

As I have gone along in there  
And with my treasures bold,  
I can keep my secret where,  
And hit of riches new and old

There are nine clues in the poem. But no-one knows which lines are the clues.

Begin it where warm waters halt  
And take it in the canyon down,  
Not far, but but too far walk.  
Put in below the home of Brown.

"I think this is the greatest treasure hunt in American history. The richness of this chase, and the way that Forrest designed it, I just don't see how it can be rivalled."

This was the kind of quirky riddle tailor-made for social media and internet forums. It seems like it made the rounds every 18 months. And each time it did, it was like a new cohort of people started scheming, going down the rabbit hole on a puzzle that would only ever have one solver, or none.

Even with \$1 million at the end of it, for a lot of hunters, it wasn't really about the money, but proving themselves.

"It really was life for me. It was all coming together. Just something I really wanted to do. It involved researching something, developing it, and then taking this arduous trip. I mean it's just a constant - your mind is just racing."

How is this hunting for the treasure different than, like, gambling?

"Not a damn thing different. Something that you enjoy, that your mind and your body enjoys: no different whatsoever. No different. You're hiding it from the people who care about you, you're having to decoy it, you're having to lie about it. It consumes you when you're asleep, when you're awake. You want to talk about it, you want to – but you can't. There's guilt, there's happiness, there's lows – I mean, there's nothing different."

[0:56] Discussion

> SLIDE: “I think a lot of people...”

Commenting on the Fenn treasure hunters, a journalist, Dan Barbarisi, has said: “I think a lot of people really wanted to be part of something bigger than themselves ... maybe there was something missing in their lives.”<sup>6</sup> This makes me think of existentialist philosophy, which suggests that people are compelled to grapple with the inherent absurdity or meaninglessness of life, and to create their own sense of purpose.

In your view, can something like Fenn’s treasure hunt provide seekers with the kind of ‘sense of purpose’ that truly gives meaning to life? Could *anything* be a source of life purpose – and if not, what criteria need to be fulfilled for something to be a legitimate source of purpose?

The final speaker spoke about treasure hunting being no different to gambling. When does dedication to a goal (such as treasure hunting) segue into obsessiveness or addiction?

[1:04] Audio clip

We’re going to listen to a continuation of the Forrest Fenn narrative. This clip is exclusively audio.

> SLIDE > Play Forrest Fenn treasure hunt - clip 2 (audio only) (3 mins) – *obsessiveness, danger to the public, risk tolerance*

*Transcript:*

If his goal in all of this was to bring together a tribe of seekers, and promote the thrill of discovery for better or worse, he succeeded.

“Do you feel a little bit like the hunt is in control now?”

Forrest Fenn: “Yeah. It’s not good to take it to an extreme.”

When you’re the mastermind of a \$1 million treasure hunt, you keep tabs on the people who take your hunt too far; get themselves in trouble.

“Well, there’s some people thrown in jail in Yellowstone for digging holes. People have been hurt swimming rivers and almost drowned, and boats collapsing... And I don’t blame ‘em: it’s a monster that I created with my story.”

Fenn’s monster – it’s emptied bank accounts and strained marriages. Put people in situations they shouldn’t have been in.

“There came a lot of calls from authority figures, governmental figures, for Fenn to end the hunt. And it was a real legitimate question for a time.

Newsreader: “State Police Chief Pete Kassetas is calling on Forrest Fenn to end his treasure hunt before someone else dies looking for it.”

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<sup>6</sup> Barbarisi was speaking to Tony Dokoupil (co-host of *CBS This Morning*) who wrote about this in a 2012 [article for Newsweek magazine](#).

"This thing went from, I think, universally looked upon as a sort of lark, a happy public good, to 'oh no this could be a problem, this could be a danger to the public. Maybe we shouldn't let this thing continue. Maybe this needs to be stopped.'"

Madalina Taylor from Lynchburg Virginia thought the treasure was near Cody, Wyoming. And the County's search and rescue team had to look for her three times in four years.

Then there was Robert Miller who thought the treasure was at Fenn's house, and was arrested on the property.

"I thought the poem directed me into here, I thought it said, yeah the treasure map, the treasure hunt, you know."

"Here's the thing man, that's a burglary, dude."

David Christensen thought the treasure was at the bottom of Yellowstone Canyon, and tried to rappel down to it from a scenic overlook. But he brought a 300 ft rope to an 800 ft canyon.

"It took six hours to complete the rescue."

Rodrick Craythorn thought the treasure was in the cemetery of Fort Yellowstone. He dug 17 holes looking for it, and damaged a grave.

So the typical treasure hunter... there was one personality factor that does help explain what happened.

"The one difference that was very substantial was risk taking. And [in] this sample, the men were much much higher as risk takers than the general population."

Of committed searchers about 20% of the men were in the 93rd percentile for risk tolerance. And three quarters of the Fenn treasure hunters were male.

## [1:07] Introduction

A journalist<sup>7</sup> reported that Forrest Fenn "didn't like the idea that anyone would tell him to bring his hunt to an end because of a few deaths". He added that Fenn had "said that if somebody was *murdered* because of the hunt, that would probably be too much."

### > SLIDE: Should Forrest Fenn...

#### Discussion

Should Fenn have ended the treasure hunt once people started dying on the quest?

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<sup>7</sup> The journalist is Dan Barbarisi, quoted in La Rosa, P. & Goldstein, D. (25/12/2021). 'One chest of gold, five deaths: The search for Forrest Fenn's treasure'. CBS News.

**[1:12] Video clip**

> **SLIDE > Play Forrest Fenn treasure hunt - clip 3** (1.5 mins) – *responsibility for harms; ending the hunt by finding the treasure conceived as a moral duty*

*Transcript:*

What did Forrest Fenn unleash on the world when he hid a chest, and wrote a poem?

Fenn inadvertently unleashed about 64,000 of the most risky people in America on the forests, rivers and canyons of the Rocky Mountains. But Fenn says all that stuff is not his fault.

Fenn: "If there are people that are saying that I'm taking them into places where they should not be, then I don't know how to respond to that. It's not my job to explain the law to these people that want to go looking for the treasure chest. If they don't know the difference between right and wrong, they should stay at home."

In fact, Fenn keeps insisting that the people who get themselves in trouble – they aren't on the right track. The treasure isn't in a dangerous location. Don't go anywhere an 80 year old man couldn't go.

"But despite what he asked of these searchers, searchers didn't listen to him, and it resulted in multiple tragedies. Some people in search of the treasure were just flat-out reckless."

An idea started to pop up, once people started dying, that the hunt had run its course and needed to end – but the only way to end it, was to find the treasure. And it's a seductive idea. It turns treasure hunting into a moral duty. Find the treasure and you're not just rich: You've potentially saved some lives.

"See, I had no choice but to finish the dig to try to end this whole thing, just so that we put an end to it, so people would quit dying."

**[1:14] Discussion**

Ultimately, five people died during their quests, and plenty of other treasure hunters got into serious physical and legal trouble. Do you agree with Forrest Fenn's argument that he bears no responsibility for any of this strife, because people have to take responsibility for their own actions?

> **SLIDE: Does Forrest Fenn bear any responsibility?**

*Ask students to form two lines according to their belief: a line for 'Fenn bears no responsibility' opposite a line for 'Fenn bears some responsibility'. Face the other line and discuss with the person opposite you, giving reasoned arguments for your view and listening closely to the other position.*

*Return to the circle.*

**[1:20] Discussion** *[Optional segment – can be skipped if time is short]*

A 2021 CBS news article stated: “To some, Fenn was a hero, providing a way to instant wealth and adventure in the great outdoors through the treasure hunt. To others, he was reckless and cost lives”.

**> SLIDE: Hero or anti-hero?**

What is your view – would you describe Fenn a hero, or as an anti-hero (or neither, or both)? (Note: an anti-hero is a protagonist who is conspicuously lacking in heroic qualities.) *(Talk in small groups of 3)*

**[1:26] Introduction & discussion**

Finally, let's have a think about the argument that once a certain number of people had died, “the hunt had run its course and needed to end – but the only way to end it, was to find the treasure”? As the reporter said in the clip, this idea “turns treasure hunting into a moral duty. Find the treasure and you're not just rich: You've potentially saved some lives.”

**> SLIDE: “Treasure hunting became a moral duty...”**

Do you agree that at a certain point, engaging in the treasure hunt became a **moral duty**? *(Pair talk)*

**[1:30] Creative response time** – if time permits (otherwise the remaining workshop time can be used to complete previous discussions).

**> SLIDE: Your creative response**

*Creative response time is an opportunity for students to produce any kind of creative response to the discussions they've had today. It could be a written reflection, story, dialogue, comic, poem, drawing, mini-zine, persuasive argument, letter, or whatever other format they like.*

*If they wish, they could use one of the following stimuli to inspire their creative response:*

**> SLIDE: [Optional response stimuli]**

“You get back to the basics of life, it's about your own survival... It's not about putting yourself near death, I do everything possible to write death out of the equation – it's not the kind of liberty you get from cheating death – that's missing the point completely. It's about stripping all the crap off life and getting to the source – just being alive, only that, all of that, for a few moments. It just so happens that the purest moments in life are when you are very close to death, it's unfortunate that this is the case really, because... sure, dying is an unfortunate by-product for some people who do this sport, but when you're there, and you're in that moment with things so pure and simple and everything is about your survival and your experience it's almost...a spiritual moment.... where everything is pure. For that moment, for those few seconds, it makes everything else worthwhile.”

– B.A.S.E. jumper, cited in Brymer, E. (2001), *Birdmen: Now and Zen, over the top*.

“We have the issue upside down: what society currently calls risk-taking is actually the norm, it should not be described in ways that suggest it is unusual or labelled in a way that suggests it is something we must strive towards. It is, in other words, a normal condition for the human form of life. Losing touch with this norm is in part responsible for many of societies ills (e.g. mental health issues)... The recent interest in risk-taking has missed a really important point and instead we should be thinking about the opposite and discussing the real issue which is safety-seeking. We tend not to see it in that way, as society has ingrained the idea that the norm is to be sedentary and safe. However, if you examine the human animal across time, we have only got to where we are now because we have explored and wondered and taken action. So in actuality what we currently label as 'risk taking' is in fact the normal way of being, a way of being we once just described as 'life.'”

– Eric Brymer, personal communication.

[1:40 or 1:50] (depending on how much workshop time is available in total)

*End of workshop*