

## The Learning Project

by Lincoln Stoller

### Lynn Hill, Rock Climber, Entrepreneur, “Ambassador” for Patagonia

Interviewed in New Paltz, New York. October 22nd, 2006.

Born: 1961 in Detroit, Michigan

*“Until one is committed, there is hesitancy, the chance to draw back, always ineffectiveness. Concerning all acts of initiative (and creation), there is one elementary truth the ignorance of which kills countless ideas and splendid plans: that the moment one definitely commits oneself, the providence moves too. A whole stream of events issues from the decision, raising in one's favor all manner of unforeseen incidents, meetings and material assistance, which no man could have dreamt would have come his way.”*

— Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

*“To make any kind of gain in life -- a gain of wealth, personal stature, whatever you define as "gain" -- you must place some of your material and/or emotional capital at risk. That is the law of the universe. Except by blind chance, it cannot be circumvented. No creature on earth is excused from obedience to this pitiless law. To become a butterfly, a caterpillar must grow fat; and to grow fat, it must venture out where birds are. There are no appeals. It is the law.”*

— Franz Heinrich, as quoted in “The Zurich Axioms” by Max Gunther, 1985, p.2

**LS:**

*Tell me what you think about the alternatives available to people just getting out of school, besides those opportunities that are offered to them?*

**LH:**

The responsibility is yours. That's all I have to say about that!

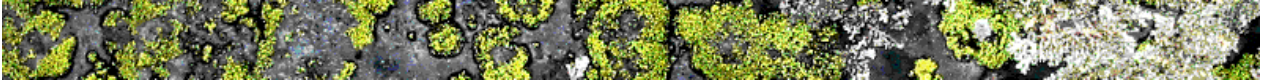
There's a million ways to make it work in this world, one route would be education through traditional means: college education, trade schools, self-taught. But you still have to provide a service that somebody's willing to pay for. That's what work is, and we get paid for providing a service or product. That's why you get money; it doesn't come off of trees obviously. You're not going to earn very much money unless you have skills that people want.

**LS:**

*When did you start thinking of your future this way?*

**LH:**

I come from a large family. I learned to be responsible for myself from the beginning because I had to be. I couldn't rely on supervision from my parents, so I figured it out for myself.



I grew up in Southern California, near Los Angeles. California has 1/8<sup>th</sup> of the nation's population so it's crowded and expensive. Actually, I grew up in Orange County, which has an even more of an exaggerated view on things. People are really into making money, usually through traditional means, either through nepotism — giving their kid a job in the family company — or in business: doctor, lawyer, that kind of thing.

In Orange County there's a huge difference between the have's and the have-not's. When I was young immigrants from Mexico were just starting to come over in large numbers. A lot of them were illegal aliens. They were the ones getting the low-end jobs.

Those people were competing for the jobs that I might have unless I had some skill or education, so I went to college, several colleges because, like I said, coming from a large family I didn't get much support. I got a few hundred dollars from my parents for my entire college education. It was at a time when I was supporting my boy friend (laughs)...

I went to four different colleges eventually graduating from here, SUNY (State University of New York) New Paltz. I got a degree in biology because I thought "I can't really decide exactly what I want to do", but I knew it's going to be in the health-related fields because I'm so passionate — about climbing obviously — but also just about how the body works. I read an anatomy and physiology text book cover-to-cover without even taking the class just because I wanted to know more.

I'm a curious person. That, I think, is a quality that's necessary for education: if you're not curious then you're not interested, and if you're not interested then you're not going to learn. I got an education in biology so I could go into physical therapy — that was the original idea — or become a doctor. But I figured that doctors had to work too much.

I like to work in my particular profession, which is fun, and is climbing-related. Actually no one pays me to climb... my work is related to climbing. In any case I like my work, but I don't want to let my work make my life unbalanced, to take away from my enjoyment of life. That's the tough part: figuring out how to balance your work, your passions for other things — like climbing or whatever it is — and family life.

People usually have something going on other than work, hopefully. In my case it feels like I have three or four things that I'm juggling: climbing, traveling, Owen (her son), and the work that I do in relation to all that stuff.

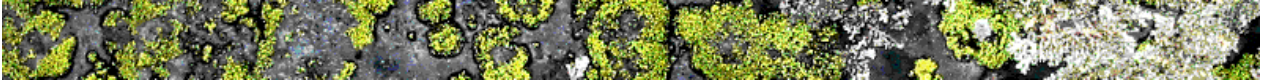
Some of the travel is related to work, like this trip. Other times I travel just for myself, like my trip to Thailand to go climbing. People expect me to climb at a high level, that's my image. It's not that I feel I have to climb, but I feel that climbing is so much a part of my well-being that if I don't do it, I don't feel as good. I'm lucky that my work, my passion, and my lifestyle all fit together.

**LS:**

*What is your work?*

**LH:**

I'm an ambassador for Patagonia (the outdoor clothing company). That means that I'm an environmental activist, in part, and it involves a certain amount of public relations for them. They don't even know what I do, sometimes.



For example, tomorrow I'm going to do an interview for Forbes magazine, for Forbes TV, I don't know how it all works but they do some kind of video stuff. Patagonia gives me a certain amount of freedom because I'm self-motivated and responsible. So I said to Forbes "OK, I'll come and do that."

I'm a spokesperson, I do photo shoots, video shoots, a little bit of writing for their web site and for mine. I have a web site and a blog, which I don't keep up as much as bloggers are expected to, but that's not my kind of thing. It's just not me to sit there and catalog my life. It takes too much time.

What else do I do: lots of presentations. I've done that for 25 years. I became a professional in 1988 and did 30 slide shows that year.

**LS:**

*Is that how you started making money from your climbing activities?*

**LH:**

I rarely charge for the slide shows. That wasn't my income per se. I worked for Chouinard Equipment, which became Black Diamond (the climbing equipment company) and they were importing Scarpa climbing shoes. They wanted a vehicle for advertising, which I was. If you had to characterize what I do you'd say it was marketing and advertising.

**LS:**

*If you think about a young person making decisions about his or her future, what kind of problems do you think he or she might run in to? How have you overcome these problems in your life?*

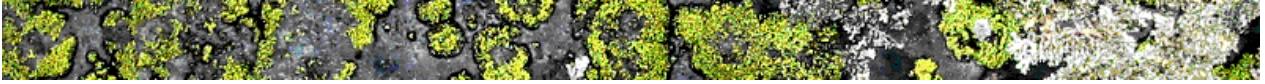
**LH:**

I think for young people it's really hard to decide specifically what they want to do. But you have to choose something, even if it's not exactly what you're going to end up doing. It's a step in that direction.

Maybe you'll have a general idea, like I did: biology. It was a generally appropriate area, but the specifics weren't there at all. I refined it when the time came to make those decisions. I think the hardest question is "What do I do?", and "What am I good at?" You don't know unless you try... something.

Some people have problems with traditional learning: sitting still, listening to a lecture, taking notes. There's visual learning, there's kinesthetic learning. Maybe traditional college education or academic study is not the right path.

Maybe a person is good with their hands, or can see things in three dimensions, that would fit in with some aspect of traditional college, like engineering. At the same time they may have to be disciplined in order to overcome something they lack, or find support on the academic side in order to exploit their strengths.



You have to develop some sort of service or else you're going to end up having a job that doesn't bring the satisfaction and money you need. If you don't have a skill, then minimal wage is pretty minimal. And then you get stuck in a vicious cycle where you can't go out and do anything different because you don't have the time, you're too busy working in order to earn a living. That's something serious to consider.

**LS:**

*Your profession isn't traditional, and it doesn't seem to draw specifically on your college experiences; marketing and ambassadorship weren't part of your college curriculum. Did you look for opportunities outside of your intended area study, or did you see yourself on a kind of dual track?*

**LH:**

Professional climbing didn't exist at that time. I was making money through occasional TV jobs, competing on the "Survival of the Fittest" TV series that I won four years in a row. That's what paid for my college education. I was lucky that I didn't have to have a job and go to school for very long. I did work at an outdoor shop and I started a guiding service when I lived here in New Paltz. I took people climbing. That was at the end of my college studies.

In my last year of college I didn't work at all. I took a loan out, the only loan I've ever taken other than to buy my house. I paid it back through the income I got from my guiding company that I'd started just after I graduated.

**LS:**

*You live an interesting life. Did you have to work at making this happen? I mean if you're worried about being stuck working for minimum wage, then winning extreme sports competitions is not the highway to high wages — economic security being somewhat lacking!*

**LH:**

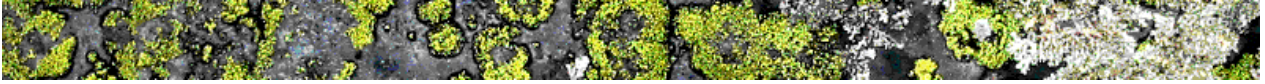
(Laughs) At the time it was fast money. No, it wasn't really part of my thinking. I wasn't putting those two ideas together. I was pursuing a college education so that I could have a profession. The things that came along were just bonuses.

When I got a regular job it was working for minimal wage in an outdoor store that sold climbing equipment. But it drew upon things I knew, and I was interested in the activities that people were asking about. What came through for me in the end was following my passion — doing what I really wanted to do — versus doing what I was told would be the key to success.

**LS:**

*Since we've done some similar things I have my own ideas of what resources you drew upon to get where you are. The idea of "determination" comes to mind. Do you think you were using your determination to make things happen for you, or do you think you were opportunistic in making sure you got the most out of everything?*

**LH:**



I'm not an opportunistic person so I would have to disagree with that. When somebody is passionate about something they create their own reality. Your positive thoughts about whatever you do brings the opportunity, it attracts the opportunity. I wasn't even conscious of that at the time but that's what I believe now. You have more power than you're aware of just by virtue of what you think. It's an aura that you create.

I took advantage of the opportunities that came my way, but they came my way because of who I am and what I was doing. I didn't realize there was much value to these things; it's really hard to quantify. In the end people seem to find inspiration in the fact that through determination and focus I have been able to do things that other people haven't done.

(At this point Lynn's son Owen, who is 3 years old, comes asking for help in finding his Spider Man gloves.)

**LS:**

*Taking care of your son must take a lot of time. Do you have help taking care of him? Do you rely on your family? Do you take him everywhere?*

**LH:**

Yes and no. He goes to school three days a week, but that's pretty new. He was going to day care but now he's going to a Montessori school, which is good for him because he's got a lot of energy that needs to be directed. But it's free form and he gets to choose what he does. There's a structure but there's choice, and I think that's the way life is, really.

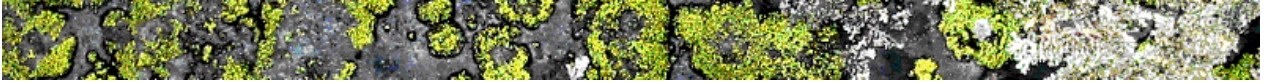
The structure is that you've got to respect others, and there's a certain rhythm to the day. There's meal time, resting time, play time, and focus time. Play they call it, but it's really learning. Play is learning, it's just unstructured learning. Play can be extremely informative and instrumental in your learning.

I rely on the school, on Owen's dad, and on babysitters but I've been traveling so much lately that I've lost touch with the rhythm of having somebody else available. I run a business, I run climbing camps, I'm an ambassador for Patagonia, I go on my own climbing trips and trips for photo shoots. Since my business is small I run every aspect of it: accounting, taxes, communications, advertising. The balance is tricky, especially being a single mother as I am.

A good friend of mine is a perfect example of what can happen if you don't consider viable career options. He rebelled against everything in High School and had a hard time growing up. He had a hard time sitting down at school. He's a smart person but doesn't do well in traditional learning situations.

He didn't develop a specific work-related skill, he didn't get an education, he didn't even graduate from High School. He lives in Boulder, Colorado, a town filled with very educated people, professionals, and athletes. He feels really insecure in this environment because he doesn't have the skills and the preparation that he could have had, had he made different choices.

He now works on cell phone towers. At least climbing provided him with a skill that pays more than minimum wage, but it's not an easy life. He doesn't have a predictable schedule and sometimes works at night when they close the cell towers. His company bids on the jobs and



sometimes they don't tell him he's needed until the day of the job, which can be a disruptive way to live.

That's a classic example of a person who didn't really understand the ramifications of the decisions he made at a critical time in his life. It's not too late to go back but now he had a kid and he has a job. How does he go back to school? He can't afford it. It's hard just surviving, much less have extra time and money to dedicate towards starting a new career.

**LS:**

*You're looking at your future with a lot of concern and attention. It reminds me of a pilot scanning the sky for air traffic, looking back and forth across all the sectors. Do you think about your future in a way that's different from other people?*

**LH:**

I'm a practical person. It's my temperament, my nature. My wellbeing depends on it. Today's generation of kids are more pampered and sheltered than I was. My parents let me go to Yosemite Valley when I was 17. I don't know many parents who would let their 17-year old kids do that. Don't know any.

**LS:**

*Did your parents give you this freedom because they were generally permissive, or because they recognized that you could handle the responsibility?*

**LH:**

Actually, my parents got divorced when I was 16. They were having epics in their own lives and probably didn't have the ability to focus on all the things their kids were doing. That was one reason.

They were also used to their kids doing a lot of different things. They couldn't really micro-manage all of that stuff. They gave us a lot of freedom. I think they recognized value in it and it was a good thing for us. I also think that the times were different then.

The 60's were a different era. There were a lot of beautiful things in the 60's that we've lost. Our society has become more materialistic and egocentric. I think something been lost. The nuclear family is more isolated and I'm not sure why. These are just things that I've seen from having traveled the world. I've seen that as Americans we don't have as much connection to our community, especially out West.

People, for whatever reason, are trying to shelter their kids but it's not doing them a service. When kids suddenly become adults they have to realize that they're responsible for their own choices, but if their parents have coveted and protected them then they don't see it coming. And it goes really fast... they turn 18, they're legal adults... and then they're 21 and maybe they've finished college, or maybe not.

And their parents are pretty much like "OK, you're done! You should be going off having a place of your own; girlfriend boyfriend whatever..." They don't think their kids are their responsibility any more, and they expect their kids just to pick it up. But it's not so easy for kids if they haven't been prepared for the responsibility. It's normal, it's natural — no matter how you're raised —



you're responsible for yourself when you become an adult. It's disabling to have that kind of overbearing parenting who teaches you the opposite.

**LS:**

*How does one's development in judging other people fit in?*

**LH:**

I think your choice of people is important in every aspect of your life. Working with people you get along with will produce better results. You have to really look at situations where you're not getting along with people and say "Am I being unreasonable, or is that other person being unreasonable, or is it a combination of the two?"

It's important to choose what's appropriate in all aspects. People are certainly the key to most businesses and most occupations.