

LET'S START THE ADVENTURE!

Foreword by Karen Darke

This book is a collection of stories from people who have dreamed, and who apply passion, commitment and effort to turn those dreams into reality. I am privileged to be writing this foreword, to have the opportunity to inspire you with the essence of the stories that lie ahead: a sense of limitlessness. The biggest obstacles to us achieving incredible things together in this world are the limits we impose with our own minds. Our thoughts create our reality, and the more we work to weed out the unhelpful, disempowering and limiting thoughts and to nurture the expansive, blooming colors of possibility, the more surprising our lives can be.

Becoming paralysed at a young age taught me early in life to focus on our strengths and the things we are fortunate to have, and to pay no energy to what we struggle to do or don't have. Without that approach little of what has been lived through these stories would have been possible. At the root of this is a sense of curiosity and gratitude. Pursuing learning and growth, and taking time to reflect and appreciate sit in the heart of all of the people and their experiences that you will read about within these pages.

Very few people are born with a natural talent, but yet so many of us achieve surprising things by having courage to begin a path toward a vision, by caring enough to put in the hard work, and through facing fear and failure with a resilience that allows success to flourish.

A journey towards new possibilities inevitably involves obstacles and challenges. It is through navigating these that we recognize patterns in ourselves that in pursuit of our goals we will likely need to change. The obstacles life presents us with are an opportunity to drop old ways of thinking, break unhelpful habits and ways of being and open up to new possibilities for ourselves and the world we live in. The challenges of life offer us a gift: to discover how we can change ourselves inside, in order to change our world outside.

As you read these wonderful stories of ordinary people who have done some extraordinary things with their lives, I believe you will connect deeper with your own dreams and strengths. You will perhaps learn some tips on how to grow resilience and adaptability. Perhaps it will remind you to live in the moment and let go of fear about the future. I hope these stories will remind you that we can find freedom and peace in the fact that things are changing and unfolding, encouraging you to let go of futile worry about what will happen tomorrow. The people in this book have had to trust and rely on their team, a reminder of

the importance of trust and being united together in the world. This needs to begin with ourselves: being committed to a cause or goal sufficiently to trust ourselves to work steadily towards it, and also relying on and supporting our teams, loved ones and the communities we live in. The 'we are in this together and we will get through this together' approach is a powerful force for action, change, and success.

These stories remind us that perception is an illusion. We all filter the world in different ways, and so what seems impossible to one person at a certain time, isn't even a grain of sand in the shoe to another. Our versions of what is possible are largely dictated by what we have become trained to believe: based on our childhood, our life experiences, our social and cultural environments and so on. From sport to business, the pattern is the same. Climbing the local hill to the supermarket is a version of Everest to some. Losing a few million in a bad business decision then gaining it all and more back again might be some people's version of a 'regular day in the office' but way beyond conceivable imagination to others.

When we are open to embrace a mode of curiosity, then we enter a zone of unknown possibilities. In my experience, we always learn and discover something new, and find the opportunity to change our world. Instead of allowing our left-brain logical mind to censor possibility and introduce all the reasons why things may not be possible, it is helpful to play with the question "How can we make that possible?", or "What else might be possible?". Life experiences combined with my fascination with the mind and how to use it to our advantage has led me to learn ways to strengthen myself to negative emotion. I use techniques to flick switches in my mind to imbue positivity, keep motivated and focused on creating and bringing dreams alive. Living a life with this 'possibility principle' approach seems to hold enormous power.

My first Paralympic Games was London 2012, for which the English artist Tracey Emin created a poster with these four words: Courage, Inspiration, Sweat, Love. I see these as vital ingredients for life and pursuing our dreams, and ingredients that are woven amongst the stories you will read here.

(1) **COURAGE:** We have to be bold and brave in facing new horizons, and willing to embrace the unknown, to face what feels like disaster or trauma but trust that ultimately we will arrive in a better place.

(2) **INSPIRATION:** We can be inspired by the experience of others, often by those who have lived through trauma or difficult times and have grown experience in resilience.

(3) SWEAT: We have to work hard to stay mentally, physically, emotionally and economically sane and healthy. If we want to create change, craft a desired future, then we have to put in the effort to stand for what we believe in or feel passionate about.

(4) LOVE: Connecting on a non-superficial level: seeking deeper, heart-level relationships with other amazing humans, and supporting each other through our challenges is the way that we will overcome things. When we pull together, surprising things will be possible.

Someone once told me, “ability is a state of mind not a state of body”, and I believe that’s true. Through my own journey, I’ve discovered the incredible power we have within us to change our thoughts, our emotions, and our energy. We can all learn to be our own alchemist, to transform unwanted emotions or experiences into gold, be creators of our reality and in doing so change our performance, our wellbeing, our world.

There Are No Special People; There Are Only People Who Work Extremely Hard

***MICHELE GRAGLIA** is a professional ultrarunner. He won the Badwater 135, the Ultra Milano-San Remo, the Yukon Arctic 100, and the Moab 240, amongst others. He is also the World Record Holder for the fastest crossing of the Gobi Desert (1703 km in 23 days, 8 hours, 47 min) and Atacama Desert (925 km in 8 days, 12 hours, 46 min).*

“One day in the library I stumbled upon the book ‘Ultramarathon Man,’ written by the legendary Dean Karnazes. I read a couple of pages and it blew my mind . . . since that moment Ultra Running became the central pillar in my life.”

The Italian Dream

I grew up in a little village in the North-West of Italy, close to San Remo. My parents instilled in my younger sister and I a deep appreciation for nature from a very young age; in winter they took us skiing in the Alps, in summer we went hiking in the Dolomites. We also had a business in the export of flowers and traveled for work in other European countries like Scandinavia, Germany, and Scotland. As a kid I loved to get to know new cultures, to meet new people.

I was a very active kid, I spent countless hours playing at the beach with my friends. Though it wasn't until the end of elementary school that I started doing sports within a team; namely track and field. Track and field was a particular choice for an Italian guy, because soccer is our national sport. When you're 12-13 years old, you have to be very dedicated and committed if you want to be a good runner, because you have to spend many hours training alone while your friends are having fun at the soccer field. At that time my drive was not big enough, so when I was 15 I shifted from track and field to soccer. I played in a regional team for three years until I went to university.

I went to study Law in Italy, but pretty soon I dropped out. One, because I didn't like it. Two, because my father gave me the opportunity to come work for his business. I took the

opportunity, had my first successes early on, and steadily grew as a salesman and entrepreneur. By the time I was 24, I had a decent income, a nice car, and a beautiful house. But then my long-term girlfriend broke up with me. I got over the break-up rapidly and said to myself that, now that I wasn't bound to a relationship anymore, it was the perfect moment to take another step in my personal development and to listen to the call for adventure I felt inside me. I said to my father that I wanted to go overseas, to Miami, to enrich myself and expand our business. He was very supportive, encouraging me to step into the unknown as he had done as a young man himself. If things wouldn't work out, he told me, I could always come back and join the business in Italy.

So only a couple of months after my break-up, I arrived in the United States. When I arrived, I stayed on the couch of a friend of mine, the time to find an apartment for myself. One day when I was visiting properties, a heavy rainfall hit. I quickly entered the first restaurant I could find to shelter. It was a Johnny Rockets restaurant and while I was sipping from my *Coca-Cola*, I noticed an elderly, graceful woman gazing at me. After a couple of minutes, she stood up and walked up to me. She presented herself as Irene Marie, CEO of *Marilou*, one of the most famous model agencies at the time. She invited me right on the spot to her office and that same day I signed a modeling contract that would completely change my life.

Ultramarathon Man

When I entered the model world, I felt like the king of the world. I got a big paycheck, I was welcome at the most exquisite parties, and I was surrounded by beautiful women. It was a world of sex, drugs, and alcohol which you can only truly understand once you have been in it. Nevertheless, I slowly got to understand that it wasn't my world. Having pictures taken of me half-naked didn't give me fulfillment, there was no sense of purpose.

I remember one particular night being paramount for me. I got invited to a private party in a giant mansion in Miami. We spent a wild night partying and I decided to stay there overnight. The following morning, I went to the bathroom and noticed the owner of the mansion lying in his puke, crying, completely destroyed. This man had a giant mansion, millions of dollars in his bank account, several sports cars . . . he met the picture of what people believe is ultimate success and achievement, yet he was miserable. I asked myself: "Do I want to find myself in his position in 20-30 years, or do I want to be truly happy?" At that point, I decided that I had to make a big transition in my life.

My heart was telling me adventure was the direction I had to follow. So I made use of every second of free time – time I wasn't on a photoshoot or in the gym – to research adventurers. I read dozens of books about ocean rowers, long-distance swimmers, explorers . . . and although these were very interesting stories, it didn't feel like what I was looking for. One day, by chance, I stumbled upon a book titled 'Ultramarathon Man' in the library. On the

cover was a picture of Dean Karnazes and it appealed to me immediately. I grabbed it out of the shelf, read a couple of pages and it blew my mind . . . I knew that ultrarunning was the thing I was longing for, and ever since that moment it became a central pillar in my life.

The transition that followed wasn't easy. Giving up everything you have to chase a dream that has no guaranteed success is a scary thing to do. From 2010 to 2013, I juggled my career as a model with my revealed ambitions as an ultra marathon runner. In this time period, I already managed to win several races. 2014 was a magnificent year with a lot of very good results, the victory in the Ultra Milano-San Remo being the icing on the cake. Winning a renowned ultra race at my front door caused me to burst into tears of happiness at the finish line. The successes of that year got the ball rolling in terms of sponsorship and in 2015 I became an athlete in *La Sportiva's Ultra Team*, which allowed me to make a living as a pro athlete.

A Winning Lifestyle

On a normal day, I put my feet on the ground around 7-7:30 in the morning. Mostly I skip breakfast and go for a 20-25 km run. Next, I eat, work or read a bit, and do a stretching or yoga session. This is followed by a second run in the afternoon which takes an hour to an hour and a half. This is my schedule from Monday to Friday; during one of these days, I integrate some speedwork, most often in the form of a fartlek training. On Saturdays and Sundays I go out for long runs; in general 50 to 70 km a day, however, this can add up to 100 km.

I consider my nutrition just as important as my training. I've cut out all wheat in my diet and mostly rely on healthy fats, I'm probably the only Italian who doesn't eat pasta (laughs). I've relied on the work of Peter Defty regarding *Optimized Fat Metabolism (OFM)*. This is based on the understanding of the evolutionary process of humans. For the big majority of our history, fats were our major source of energy and the reason is that fats give us limitless energy. I like to compare carbohydrates with putting paper on a fire; if you do this you'll see a short, powerful spark arising. That's what carbs do in the body: they give you a short spark in energy. Fats, on the other hand, are like big blocks of wood on a fire: they can keep burning and burning endlessly. Besides choosing fat as my source of fuel, I've also asked myself the question of which micro-nutrients nourish and which ones damage the cells. This way, my diet has become more and more plant-based throughout the years, and I'm almost fully vegan right now. I eat a lot of vegetables, seeds, and nuts. The micronutrients in these foods nourish the cells, counteract inflammation, and improve my recovery.

Another thing I do in order to increase my body's efficiency is intermittent fasting. I skip breakfast most of the days and once a week I don't eat for 20-24 hours. Once every couple of months I do a 48h to 72h fast as a sort of big reset. Because my body is so used to

burning fats nowadays, I'm not even hungry during those longer fasts anymore. Making the energy consumption of my body as efficient as possible has been a fascinating discovery. It's almost like discovering a new horizon. It has given me an edge over my competitors because I can keep on running even without food. If you rely on carbs, the moment you stop eating in an ultra, you bonk and you can't progress anymore. Besides, relying on carbs comes with a lot of gastrointestinal problems. The last advantage of my dietary shift has been that I rediscovered my taste buds; I can really appreciate the taste of a simple carrot or a piece of celery again.

Meditation: a Necessary Art to Learn

Another thing I'm doing almost on a daily basis is meditation. I see meditation as a necessary part of what I do. By meditation you learn to transcend the body, the focus goes within. That's a fundamental skill to be able to run for a very long time. Ultrarunning is a real battle with the mind. One of my favorite quotes is: "The brain is a great servant but a terrible master." What I mean by that, is that thanks to our minds, humans have amazing capacities. But at the same time, it's our mind that holds us back way too often. The brain dictates us to take the easy way out by inflicting fears on us and by making negative anticipations about the future. But actually, fear and thoughts about the future are not real, they aren't tangible, they are constructs we make up in our head. *The only thing that is real is the present moment.* Meditation helps me to be present. I think it's a necessary art to learn because it can free us from our brain and as a result override the fear that stops us from realizing our dreams.

My wife and I are now building a yoga and meditation retreat. For the last couple of years, I worked in such a retreat in Malibu for certain times of the year. It was an elite retreat. We would welcome famous film producers, celebrities, and entrepreneurs. All of them successful, yet miserable to the bone. But after seven days of spending time mastering their mind, they left us with a huge smile on their faces.

The last decade you've gone on an extraordinary inner journey of self-discovery which has allowed you to become who you really want to be. Do you think that everyone should go on his own inner journey?

I can't tell other people what they have to do, but I do recommend everyone to step out of their comfort zone and embark on a trajectory of self-discovery. In my opinion, too many people accept the status quo. The status quo tells us to do things that make us comfortable and safe, but the problem is that that is only a false sense of security, actual security doesn't exist and that's something that has become very clear with COVID-19. The blend of a security-seeking society and the insecurity brought by the virus resulted in the whole world freaking out.

When it comes to realizing dreams, there's a big misconception going on. People believe that only special people are able to do it, only special people can have an amazing lifestyle. Well, if there's one thing I've learned throughout the years, it is that there are no special people. The people at the top of their game are people who are working very hard and investing a tremendous amount of energy in their own development. People want to have fame and money, but that's a meaningless pursuit, it can't be the end goal. The goal should be to explore ourselves and the world around us, to venture into the unknown, and to find out what we really want. Once you have found your passion, you can work really hard and achieve excellence, and then fame and money can become the result of excellence. But on the other hand, if you have only fame and money without purpose, that's emptiness.

What's your goal in ultra races?

It has to be big enough, I'm always looking for a goal that's a bit out of my comfort zone, a goal that challenges me. The preparation for an ultra race is extremely daunting, it's very time-consuming and demands a whole lot of energy. You can only get through that hardship if your goal is big enough. I believe that it is possible to be 'just fit' by a daily training routine without a specific goal. But if you want to become 'ultra fit' you absolutely need to have a goal that pushes you to become the best version of yourself. I never race to win, I race to be the best. What I mean by that is that I don't compete to beat all the other competitors, but to be the best Michele on race day. How good the other runners will be is out of my control, so I prefer to focus my awareness within.

If given the chance, what would you put on a massive billboard in New York?

In general, people living in big cities don't give a shit about what happens elsewhere. All they want is "the good life". On a massive billboard, I would put a picture that shows them the backside of the good life, a picture about how our comfy, materialistic society is destroying our planet.

How do you think that we as a species could shift towards living more in harmony with our planet instead of exploiting it?

That's a difficult question, but it's something I like to think about because I realize it's time for us to face our demons and acknowledge that the way we live isn't sustainable. I very much support the work of fundraisers and climate campaigns, yet I think we need something stronger than that if we want to make the transition that is necessary. The only way I see us doing that is by a shift in consciousness.

The dominant way of thinking in this world is one of disparity. We talk in terms of different religions, different countries, different cultures. Travelling has taught me that every individual on this planet is part of the same family. We have to rise from the chains of society that define us as part of a certain population group and understand that we are all

bonded to each other and we are all bonded to our planet. Once we can come to that awareness, we'll understand that we have to respect and take care of each other and the planet.

If you would have the chance to go and eat a salad with three people dead or alive, who would you choose?

Sadghuru; that would be a guarantee for very deep, inspirational conversations. I would also want to reconnect with Dean Karnazes and Anton Krupicka whom I've met before. Dean stepped out of his secure, comfortable, wealthy life on his 30th birthday and became a figurehead in the sport of ultrarunning. Reading his book, I could relate a lot to his story. It made me believe that I could become a successful runner myself. Anton has also been very influential in my career, but in a different way. Anton experiences the sport in a very minimalistic way and puts a lot of value on freedom and connection with wild places. That triggered something in me, it's the way I wanted to experience ultra running too.

Recommended Books

Ultra Marathon Man, by Dean Karnazes. The book that changed my life.

The Power of Now, by Eckhart Tolle.

La fine è il mio Inizio, by Folco Terzani. The title means 'the end is my beginning', but unfortunately the book isn't translated into English. It's about an old man at the end of his life talking about what he has learned throughout his life. It made clear to me that our soul has a calling and it's up to us to take the initiative to listen.

If you could turn back time and relive one moment of your life, what would it be?

My victory in the *Badwater 135*. The feeling I had during the last 30 seconds of that race can't be put into words. As soon as I got into ultra running, *Badwater 135* represented *the* ultra, *the* challenge. I had dreamed about that moment for a decade.

What is your definition of happiness?

It's tapping into your inner child. Look at children, they are happy because they listen to their heart instead of their head. If you listen to your heart and go on the journey of self-discovery and exploration, you get to know yourself and you discover what you are capable of. It's by rising above yourself and going beyond your limits that you can find meaning and happiness.

Find out more about Michele:

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