

A New Angle
MTPR Episode 23
Rick Ridgeway

Justin Angle This is A New Angle, a show about cool people doing awesome things in and around Montana Tech. I'm your host, Justin Angle. This show is supported by First Security Bank, Blackfoot Communications and the University of Montana College of Business.

Hey, folks, welcome back and thanks for tuning in. Today's guest is Rick Ridgeway, legendary Alpinist, adventurer, activist and writer.

Rick Ridgeway I've learned that paying attention is one of the deepest and most profound ways to really connect, and if there's any secret sauce, it's that one.

Justin Angle Rick's new book, Life Lived Wild, is a fantastic collection of adventure essays told with a focus on the amazing relationships he forged through shared objectives and deep experiences. Rick will be in Bozeman on December 16 for an event with Conrad Anker at the Emerson Center. Rick, thanks for coming on the show today.

Rick Ridgeway Yeah, my pleasure to join you guys. Justin, great to be here. Yeah.

Justin Angle So tell us, where did you grow up and what did your parents do?

Rick Ridgeway Well, I grew up in California in a small, rural part of Orange County when Orange County near Los Angeles was still rural. It was a formative time for me. We were next to the Santa Ana river bed. It was in those years, in the late fifties, early sixties, still undeveloped. And you know, I just it resonated with me. I spent a lot of time in the groves. In the river with my buddy was my single shot, 22 hunting for rabbits. Then my parents divorced, and I followed my father up to Northern California for a couple of years and returned to

Southern California to rejoin my mother. And just in those three short years, the whole place had changed. The riverbed was channeled, the groves were plowed under. There were housing tracts everywhere. It was just exploding in development. And I retreated to the hills around the Los Angeles basin. I went there at first for solace, but then I just fell in love with the wildness of it. And it was what it was missing. And that's where it all started. That's where my connection to wild places and undeveloped lands and mountains. It all had its origins there.

Justin Angle You know, one of the things that in your most recent book, *Life Lived Wild*, that that stands out as this kind of question about distinguishing between matters of consequence in matters of inconsequence. And that seems to be a big theme of your writing. Big theme of your work in general. Let's start there. What have you learned about the difference between those two things?

Rick Ridgeway Well, the distinction between those two things is connected directly to climbing experiences, mountaineering experiences. Especially one when I was 30 and I had an opportunity to join the team of climbers close buddies, including a Yvon Chouinard, the founder of Patagonia, to attempt the twenty five thousand foot peak in a remote section of eastern Tibet in the first year that the People's Republic of China open to outside mountaineers. And coming down from having established a camp at the 20000 foot level on this remote mountain, four of us, including Yvon and another close friend of mine, Jonathan Wright, we triggered an avalanche. And we were swept down the side of the mountain 1500 vertical feet. And you know, I have to kind of guess how long we were in that avalanche. But I think Justin had to be at least 60 seconds and I thought I was dead the whole time. I didn't think there was any way I was going to get out of it alive. But the avalanche slowed and I was only partially buried when it stopped and I was still alive even though I was injured. But I soon realized not as seriously as my colleagues, and I soon realized that of the four of us, Jonathan was the most grievously injured and I tried to keep him alive, giving him mouth to mouth and holding in my arms for about a half hour until he died. And and I went home and went in to do a deep introspection whether whatever the rewards, I was getting out of this life as a mountaineer were worth the

risks that were so palpably real to me? They were risks that had taken one of my best friend's life and really taken my own.

Jonathan and I were more than just close friends. We were also professional partners. We were a writer, photographer, team. He was the photographer. I was the writer. We had a couple of projects in development at National Geographic and one of them was an article on that, then just recently established Mount Everest National Park in Nepal. And Jonathan's widow, his mother and father, asked me to go back to Nepal and finish that story for them. And I was in Kathmandu on my way to the Everest region, and I saw this beautiful woman in the hotel lobby and I had the waiter send her a drink and we started chatting. We hit it off. I took her out to dinner, and that night I confessed to her that I was in this introspection trying to figure out what I was going to do with my life. And I told her about Jonathan, the avalanche, his death, and she started crying and sat and said it was so close to an experience she had.

She was sailing with her husband, who was an adventurer like me, off the coast of New Guinea, when unbeknownst to them, an earthquake triggered a big tidal wave and it swept across the bay, they were crossing in and demolish their boat. And there were 13 people on board and of those 13, only two left. The other survivor was not her husband, and we we had made a deep connection. It wasn't that many months later that we got married and we were married because through our mutual experiences facing the near-death of ourselves and the death of people so close to us, we realized that both of us had kind of started to realize what in life is really most important and what we can just let go of what we can laugh at. The things that commonly frustrate people were already seeming to frustrate us less than other people around us. And shortly after we married, I was reading two or one of my favorite books, *The Little Prince* by Antoine de Saint-Exupery, the French writer. And in there, there was a section where the little prince is arguing with the airline pilot who's crashed in the Sahara. You know, he's he's telling a story about it, or he's asking a question about why some flowers have thorns on them. And the pilot, who, of course, is Saint-Exupery himself, who was a famous airline pilot, says, 'don't bother me, I'm trying to fix my airplane.'

Justin Angle Hmm.

Rick Ridgeway 'Don't you know, this is a matter of consequence?' And the little prince looks at him and goes. Matter of consequence. You don't think that trying to figure out why some flowers have thorns is not a matter of consequence. And that became Jennifer's and my shorthand. We use that whenever we were trying to ourselves decide whether something was important or not.

Justin Angle Yeah.

Rick Ridgeway We would look at each other and say, 'do you think that's a matter of consequence?'

Justin Angle Indeed, I mean, it seems like the pursuit of mountain objectives helps you kind of distinguish between those two things what is important to my objective to moving forward? Why do you think it's so hard for human beings to to sort of navigate that distinction of what matters and what doesn't?

Rick Ridgeway I think the biggest culprit is the distractions that all of us have in our daily lives. You know, I'm just sitting here looking at my computer at the bottom of my screen, as you know, all my apps for my emails and my messages and and my calendar. All the things in our lives that can distract us from really recognizing and thinking about things in our daily lives that are consequential and things that are not. You know, and in addition to trying to take the lessons from those experiences, too, as I just explained, distinguished matters of consequence from inconsequence, I I've also tried in my life to learn how to really pay attention to what's going on around me, too. The little things that may just otherwise go unnoticed and in our lives. And I've learned that paying attention is one of the deepest and most profound ways to

really connect on a daily basis to our lives in a way that allows us to live our lives more in the moment than in the past or in the future. And if there's any secret sauce, it's that one.

Justin Angle Yeah. Do you think that that sort of ability to be observant to be present in the moment is maybe a piece of your longevity in the mountains and being able to to not only engage in these expeditions, be a good partner, but also come home safely?

Rick Ridgeway Yeah, absolutely. When I give my talk in Bozeman, in your hometown soon, Conrad Anker is going to be there to introduce me, and he's one of my closest friends and I've learned so much from him. I hope I've been able to pass a few lessons in return. But one thing we have in common with all older climbers that I know who have been in the game for a long time is that ability to really focus. To really pay attention, to manage the risks. And I talk about that in the book as well. And that's definitely a form, of course, of paying attention.

Justin Angle Absolutely.

Rick Ridgeway It's an essential part of being a mountaineer and a climber. If you're going to survive as a mountaineer.

Justin Angle Right, and you mentioned Conrad, there, and he features prominently in the book and in your life. You have an account of an expedition you two were on in Queen Maud Land and the passage where you said that your expedition with Conrad was your first expedition experience with quote, "not a word of contention" and that stood out to me. Tell us, tell me about Conrad and why he was so he's so special as a partner in the mountains and in life.

Rick Ridgeway Well, certainly it was and still is his skill as an alpinist. And on on that climb in Antarctica, I was along as a kind of a hanger on. I was directing and producing a television show for National Geographic that we made of the climb there. And it was the first experience in my life on an expedition with more than two people wear for the full length of the trip, we

never had a cross word the whole time. It was extraordinary. Later, I had another expedition with Conrad following on foot the an endangered species of goat antelope called Chiru across an uninhabited section in Northwest Tibet, where we were following the migration in the southern part of their range. The animals were being poached for their underworld, which was being woven into women's shawls that had become a fashion hit in Milan and Paris and New York. And the wildlife biologists were concerned that if the calving grounds weren't discovered and if the poachers were to get there first, that it might be game over for this already very endangered species. So they had never been able to find those calving grounds because so remote they couldn't get there.

Justin Angle Sure.

Rick Ridgeway So I had this idea to follow the animals on foot. There was no way to resupply a trip like we proposed to do, and I had this idea to pull rickshaws. So I tell the story because it's another example of a trip that was so enjoyable because all of us got along so well. For all of us, that trip turned out to be one of the most fulfilling and enjoyable of our lives because it wasn't about us. It wasn't about us trying to get to the top of some peak. It was about us trying to use our skills to help a species that was heading in the wrong way. And it worked. That, to me, still remains one of the most inspiring experiences in my career, and I hope it is for anybody that reads the book because it really shows you what you can do when you collaborate, when you have a good strategy, when you are focused, when you keep going and never give up and and it can work.

Justin Angle We'll be back to my conversation with Rick Ridgeway after this short break.

Welcome back to A New Angle. I'm speaking with legendary Alpinist and activist Rick Ridgeway about his new book Life Lived Wild.

Yeah, and those attributes certainly would apply to your experience in Patagonia, working in environmental affairs for fifteen plus years. I mean, talk about that organization and talk about the the sort of relentless focus on working to solve the environmental problems of our age.

Rick Ridgeway Well, it's probably most people listening to this know, Patagonia is in business to use its business as a agent for environmental protection. And that commitment to its mission, which very succinctly is to save our home planet. That commitment comes directly from Yvon Chouinard's experience as a climber in wilderness and wildness. That same experience over my life, often with him in those wild places, informed the way that I went about my business life. You know, as well as my home life.

So Patagonia's commitment to protect nature, to protect the environment, protect our home planet comes directly from the love of the home planet that is connected directly to having spent so much time in nature. And a lot of the operating principles of Patagonia are also rooted directly in the company. Of course, as most listeners know, has a policy that's part of its actual articles of incorporation to tithe one percent of its sales back to environmental NGOs working to conserve and safeguard our home planet

Justin Angle And we should, note, Rick, it's one percent of sales, not one percent of profits. Right.

Rick Ridgeway That's right.

Justin Angle So it comes off that off the top line, no matter what happens in terms of overall performance.

Rick Ridgeway Exactly, Justin. And to date, it's way north of \$100 million that we've given back or the company's given back to environmental groups.

Justin Angle You know, so Patagonia comes up a lot in class and oftentimes students sort of they think of it as a bit of a unicorn. Like, doing its own thing and operating by its own rules. And you're one of the key distinctions that I think propels a lot of its ability to do the things that you just enumerated is the fact that it's privately owned and the leaders are not beholden to shareholders. They're beholden to themselves and they're accountable to the employees and the customers, and it's been able to become a tremendously successful business. But kind of following a bit of a different ownership model. I know that growth has been both, you know, been something that's hotly debated within the company. Talk about that ability to kind of control its own destiny and set its own metrics for success and failure.

Rick Ridgeway Well, you're right. Because it's a private company, as Yvon has famously said, that that means we get to do whatever we wanted.

Justin Angle Yeah, yeah.

Rick Ridgeway But we want to do is use the business to save our home planet. That's that's his commitment. So you're right, but there are some very important nuances to that. And I might tell another story to illustrate my own opinion on that, that happened right after I joined the company. Within the first few weeks of becoming a full time employee there in the early aughts, I inherited a proposal that was already underway between Patagonia and, of all people, the Ford Motor Company. When Ford had come to Patagonia with the idea that they would take a hybrid that they had in development, then called the escape and they would brand it Patagonia. And then in turn, they would give Patagonia all this marketing for its environmental commitments. But clearly, they wanted to do that because, you know, they wanted to get on Patagonia coattails. And I would have just assumed when I joined the company that the person I replaced in marketing would have just said no to that immediately. I thought about it a little bit and then I had an idea. And this is the idea took Yvon. I said, Hey, man, you know this Ford thing? And you goes, 'Oh God, I heard about that', he says. 'Why didn't we just tell those guys to forget in the first place?' And I said, Yeah, I know that's the

obvious response. But I had another idea. What if we went to Ford and we said, listen, we'll do this, we'll we'll co-brand with you on this, on this hybrid vehicle. But you got to you got to join one percent for the planet. You have to give one percent of your sales, not just for the hybrid, but for the whole bloody works. Back to the planet. And if you want to be green, then this is the way you're going to be green.

Justin Angle It's what it takes.

Rick Ridgeway And Yvon smiled that he said 'go for it'. So I did. I went back to a high level executive that reported directly to the board. I pitched it to him. He took it to the board, and the board just said, 'No way. Are you crazy?' And laughed it off. And of course, I knew and Yvon knew that would be the reaction. Now I'm telling you this story because I thought it through a little more. And I asked myself, Why did the board say no? Well, the obvious answer is that one percent of their sales would have come right off of their bottom line, and it would have been contrary to the fiduciary responsibility of all the board members. So I thought that through a little more and I realized that what if they had said yes and because they had said yes, a very significant cohort of citizens and consumers started buying that car right because they were giving one percent of its sales back to the environment and not just that car, but all Fords, so that consequently the company would have been incentivized to maybe convert the entire fleet to hybrids.

I realized that when you think through these things and you look down into the well, if you want to use that metaphor, there was a mirror down there at the bottom of it. And in that mirror was the reflection of me and everybody else - all of us in our roles as consumers - that if we rallied to change our purchasing habits and supported the companies that were more environmentally responsible, just like Patagonia's customers do, then Patagonia's commitment to environmental protection would scale very, very fast. Once you recognize that, then you also realize that the solution to that dilemma is really up to governments. That they have to pass policies that reward companies that are reducing the environmental footprint of their products

and services. I think the most important policy any country in the world can make right now is introducing a price on carbon.

Justin Angle Yeah.

Rick Ridgeway If carbon were priced, then. All companies making products and services would have the same level playing field and would incentivize them to reduce the carbon emissions in their entire supply chain and value chain. And what would happen? Well, then when you went to Wal-Mart to get a t shirt, the t shirt that was made with the lowest footprint on the environment would cost less than the T-shirt that was more harmful.

Justin Angle Yeah.

Rick Ridgeway And if everybody would buy that. Now governments are only going to do that in turn if their civil societies force them to. Because that's not immediately in the interest of the shareholders who are probably funding the government, at least in our system they are.

Justin Angle Rick, in our time remaining I'd love to just touch on a couple other things, if you're willing. You know your commitment to climate change goes well beyond. Well, it's it's it just manifests in so many areas you are actively engaged in the One Earth organization. Tell us about that organization. Why it's important to you.

Rick Ridgeway I am the chair of a group called One Earth. One Earth dot org is our URL. And it's an NGO that has raised money to fund scientists to go deep and in detail on how much of our energy production needs to convert from fossil fuel to renewable. How much of our natural landscapes on planet Earth need to be protected or restored so that they are carbon sinks, either preventing more emissions or under restoration, taking carbon already emitted in the air and pulling it back into trees and soil. And thirdly, how much we need to convert our food production system from industrial agriculture to regenerative protocols. To keep the planet to

1.5 degrees. And we've nearly completed that science. And the answer is that we can do this. The answer is that we already have all the tools in our box, and all we have to do is scale the use of those tools to solve climate change. It's right in front of us. It's just a matter of taking what we already know how to do and do it more and do it better.

Justin Angle It does seem like that execution, you know, it's one of the things that kind of, you know, and I've heard this from scientists, from activists, from communicators that that it's less a question of if we can, it's more a question of will we right? Will we execute on on the solutions that are that are available?

Rick Ridgeway And one thing we don't need to do, Justin, is go to Mars. You know, I can't believe Bezos and Musk. I mean, what are those guys coming from? Well, the answer to my own question is that wherever it is they're coming from did not include any time and nature because neither of them seem to have any sense about how natural systems actually work. And because they don't have any understanding of that that they have no appreciation for. And it doesn't, in return, inform how they think about their own businesses and their businesses relationship to nature. It just astounds me that people that are that bright who have the skills to create some of the highest functioning, most successful businesses on the planet don't understand that without a healthy planet that's providing healthy resources to their businesses, including clean air and clean water, they're not going to have a business.

As our mentor David Brower said, there is no business on a dead planet. But I'm not going to give up. We just none of us can. We just have to keep the mantra going. I just hope someday I can get on stage with those guys because I'd love to look them in the face and say, 'you know what, buddies? It's pretty easy following the tracks that you guys are on to turn Earth into Mars. But you know what? We're never going to turn Mars into Earth'.

Justin Angle Right, right. In our time remaining, Rick, just tell us, you know, what's kind of next for you? You've got this book out. You're, you know, you're still playing around in the mountains and engaging in these important topics. What's next? What do you want to do next?

Rick Ridgeway Well, one thing I want to do is is not travel as much as I used to. Yeah, pre-COVID, COVID has been had a remarkable silver lining for me in that it forced me to stay home and pay attention to my own backyard. Just do more hiking and go on more excursions into the backcountry and Southern California where I live. And it's been a terrific, revelatory experience for me. Every time, every day this morning, I was out early tramping around and I got to see bird movements and I picked up on a few things going on in my own backyard that that I that I hadn't even noticed before. So every every day is an opportunity for discovery, and I'm going to be doing more of that.

Justin Angle Well, I hope you enjoy every moment of it. You do have some travel on the horizon. You will be in Bozeman for an event with Conrad Anker at the Emerson Center on the 16th. Tickets are available and for listeners as well, check out Life Lived Wild. It's on shelves now, both actual and virtual. Buy it on an actual shelf, you know, go out there to an actual bookstore and get your copy. Rick, it's been a pleasure reconnecting with you, learning more about your work and your sensibility, and you know, I encourage everybody to not only read your latest book, but get more in touch with your work because it's a message that that folks need to hear.

Rick Ridgeway Well, it was my pleasure, Justin. Thank you so much.

Justin Angle Thanks for listening to A New Angle. We really appreciate it. And we're coming to you from Studio 49, a generous gift from University of Montana alums Michelle and Loren Hansen.

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