

# A Man of Ideas

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Bangor Daily News



A conversation with Dr. Bernhoff Dahl can be exhausting, exhilarating, inspiring, motivating — oh, and add in a touch of feeling self-conscious afterward.

Anyone who talks to Dahl can't help but wonder how he seems to have the energy and drive to do all that he does. After all, there are only so many hours in the day, right?

Dahl is a multifaceted individual. He is a pathologist, entrepreneur, motivational speaker and an author trumpeting a new book, "Optimize Your Life: The One-page Strategic Planner."

His mind is a Library of Congress of inspirational quotes from Jesus to Abraham Maslow (as in "Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs") to "Cathy," the cartoon in the daily newspaper, and he has put quite a few of his favorites in his new book. Dale Carnegie once admitted he picked the brains of others, and Dahl admits, "me too."

"It adds credibility," he said during a recent interview.

Dahl's fast-paced mind doesn't seem to want to turn off at all to rest. He operates in high gear, rattling off everything from new product ideas to thank-you notes he must write to former teachers, advisers and even people who shared a personal story with him at a public event.

Dahl admits he needs help keeping up with himself. For that he relies on a couple of classroom-size Dry-Erase boards that he has hung side by side in his office at Freedom Park for Industry and Commerce in Hermon, a business center he happens to own. The boards are overpowering, taking up an entire wall, and their presence cannot be ignored.

Throw in lots of colored markers and an eraser and Dahl is set to tackle every day. He takes "giant goals" and breaks them into manageable activities. His daily "to-do" list fills up both boards. When a task is finished, it's erased and he starts on his list for the next day.

"It's mindlessly simple," he said.

Dahl's list is not filled with minor chores, such as "pick up shirts at cleaners." Rather it includes items such as "invent new shopping cart." He brags that just about every day he finishes everything on his list. Not all, but most. The whistling Frisbee idea and the soy-based snacks he has been contemplating for more than 20 years still haven't gotten off the ground. No big deal, he said, although he sounds a bit disappointed.

His life may appear to be on track, or superbly well-focused, but that doesn't mean he hasn't had his share of unexpected moments. At 65 years old, the doctor who helped found a successful pathology center in Bangor, Dahl Chase Pathology Associates, and the businessman who created Freedom Industrial Park more than 28 years ago has faced death and survived. With his wits about him, he used his cell phone to call for help when he was stranded in a whiteout with 98 mph winds for eight hours on Mount Washington a couple of years ago.

He was within five minutes of dying, according to rescuers who were about to end their search for him

when they found him. What kept him alive, Dahl said, was his scientific background.

As a pathologist, Dahl was familiar with how the body experiences a warming sensation when death is near. People stranded atop mountains get a false sense of vigor, a second-wind sort of thing, and they feel it's safe to take off their coats. The belief that the body is falling in sync with the environment often proves fatal.

"I kept my coat on," said Dahl, moving his arms to show how he wrapped his clothing and gear around him to hunker down for what could have been his last minutes alive.

Now Dahl is using that near-death experience to inspire others to be better people, and to challenge himself to be a better husband, father and friend.

"It would be a shame to have an experience like that, then enter denial and fail to discover and share its meaning," Dahl said.

Stranded on the mountain, Dahl said he made himself six promises. Actually, he made seven. One was a promise to keep the six promises that he made, a sort of oath that started with the words, "If I get out of this alive ..."

"I had eight hours to think about everything," he said. "First, about not dying, and then about dying."

His first promise was to make amends with his first wife, whom he was married to for 11 years, and to treasure his second marriage and children. On the mountain, he said, he questioned whether his workload contributed to the failure of his first marriage and whether it interfered with his second. He decided that it had, and apologized to his family shortly after he was saved.

"That happened," Dahl said. "That was good."

His second promise focused on friends. He now is networking with people in his past by writing what he calls a "legacy letter," an "expanded greeting card" that tells the intended reader what he feels about them or a situation they were involved in together. He's writing the letters even if it means apologizing for a wrong he may have committed but chose not to admit, until now.

"It's called forgiving yourself," Dahl said.

Promises three through six involved reining in emotions and dealing with property and possessions. He promised himself that he no longer would respond to negative criticism with anger, and to become disciplined and not start any new projects until he has finished the old ones.

The self-proclaimed pack rat also promised himself that he would sort through the boxes of papers, books and mementos he has accumulated over the years and toss as much as he can, thus lifting the weight of the past off his shoulders and releasing him to move forward. And he decided to sell any nonperforming real estate. The building he uses as his office at Freedom Park is for sale.

After more than 40 years as a successful businessman and doctor, Dahl now is more interested in sharing what he has learned. He said his career has spanned three stages — first, the earning-money stage, then the gathering-awards phase, and now the "pursue-a-lot-of-things-I-wanted-to-do-before" stage. He has taken writing classes in California and soon will attend a class on how to be a better motivational speaker.

"I've worked hard, and now I'm working hard and playing hard," Dahl said.

Besides climbing mountains, from Mount Washington to Mount Kilimanjaro, Dahl's idea of fun is writing books. He wants to challenge people to improve, whether in their careers or their personal lives. He suggests they follow his lead — sort and toss belongings to get rid of unnecessary baggage, surround themselves with individuals who will boost their confidence levels — a sort of "personal board of directors" — and critically and analytically review and temper what toxics may be in their lives. A "toxic" may be a bad job, he said.

Those suggestions sum up what Dahl is willing to offer in his 200-page book. That's it. So be forewarned. The rest of the book is filled with homework for the reader. Lots of it.

On the surface, Dahl's book sounds like about every other piece of business motivational prose in the heavily crowded "let-me-inspire-you" book industry. And to some readers, Dahl admits, his advice may sound repetitive.

"Some people will say, 'I know that already,'" Dahl said. "Yeah, but did you finish it?!"

That's the catch, and it's where the homework comes in. In order to improve oneself, Dahl wants the reader to travel through his or her own journey of self-actualization. To help the reader along, Dahl includes dozens of "fill-in-the-blanks" pages that are preceded with challenging questions from the author. Before they start answering the questions, Dahl gives readers permission to photocopy the pages in case a mistake is made the first time around or one's purpose in life needs to be revisited at a later date.

"Strategic planning is all about change," Dahl advises. "Read the question, then write the answer, then do it all over again," Dahl said. "This book is dedicated to you. That's not selfish. Unfortunately, selfish is a bad word. So I try to get people to use the word 'self-focused.'"

So, how sure of himself is he that his book is going to be a success? Actually, Dahl doesn't care if it's a megaseller. The publication was part of his own trek to find himself, and, if people are helped by it, all the better, he said. The book has received accolades from Mark Victor Hansen, co-author of the "Chicken Soup for the Soul" series, and from Success magazine, and is available at Mr. Paperback, BookMarc's in downtown Bangor and on Amazon.com.

"What's the chance of this becoming a hit? The chances are greater of getting hit by lightning when walking out the door," he said. "Is this stuff paying for itself? No. Why did I write the book then? Closure. To finish something off."

Now that it's done and the promotion of it is under way, Dahl is hurriedly working on completing his next book, a reflection on his near-death experience on Mount Washington, and how people — including himself — need to be prepared to die in order to live. The book is titled, "Lessons for Living from a Mt. Washington Misadventure," and will be available early next year.

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