

## SY MONTGOMERY on Facing Fear

In my work, I travel to deserts and mountains and jungles. I've worked in a pit with 18,000 snakes. I was hunted by a tiger in India and swam with piranhas and electric eels in the Amazon. I've gotten dengue fever in Borneo, was held at gunpoint in Africa, and wandered off into the cloud forest, fuzzy-minded with altitude sickness, in Papua New Guinea. (My colleague, photographer Nic Bishop, rescued me.) People ask me, "Aren't you afraid doing this work?"

While I'm in the field, no—I am not afraid at all. (I wasn't even particularly afraid at gunpoint, just annoyed.) The scary part is when I get home and start to write.

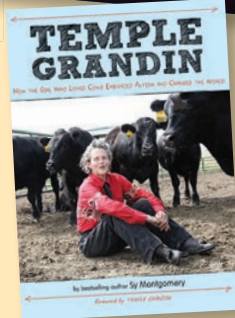
Sometimes the words flow freely. Sometimes not. But always, at some point, there's a fear, and that fear is the same one every writer encounters: fear of failing.

It's worse than fearing for my reputation (if I even have one). My fear is that I will fail my story—the wonderful treasure trove of splendid creatures, gorgeous landscapes, compelling dramas, and wise people.

I wish I could tell you that I have found a way to believe in myself. But sometimes I don't. Often I don't. There are times when I am certain that I am just not good enough.

But I *can* believe in the story that has been entrusted to me to tell. And I can believe in my teachers—teachers who have helped me in the classroom and teachers who surround me as I go into the field. Sometimes they have two legs. Sometimes four. Sometimes eight. Sometimes none.

When I can't believe in myself, I can believe in my



teachers: Mr. Clarkson, my first journalism teacher. Ricardo Pipa, a shaman I met in the Amazon. Clarabelle, the tarantula to whom I dedicated a book. Octavia, the octopus at the New England Aquarium whom I visited every Wednesday for a year, who came to know me and look me in the eye and embrace me with her hundreds of suckers. The dozens of nameless (to us) animals I've met on my travels—from red-sided garters I met in the Narcisse Snake Dens to the tiger who hunted me in India. And even the animals I didn't meet—like the snow leopards I never saw in Mongolia's Altai Mountains, but who surely saw me—and left their scats and footprints behind for me to ponder.

There's a Buddhist saying I love: When the student is ready, the teacher will appear. Teachers appear to me constantly, thank God. They are all around me, and they are all around you. Our job is to recognize them and to listen for their truths.

And that's what I would want to pass on to you and your students: Believe in yourself if you can, but if you can't, believe in your

teachers. Because teachers are always out there, ready to show you wonders, ready to help you accomplish miracles. All you have to do is see them—and trust them.

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