

**Ep #354: Alastair Macdonald – Dropping Fences on Possibility (Part 1)**



**Full Episode Transcript**

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**Dr. David Phelps**

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Welcome to the Dentist Freedom Blueprint, a podcast about freedom—freedom from expectations of society and the traditional path to success that has been ingrained in us from our early years, I'm joined by mavericks, renegades, and non-conformers to discuss an anti-traditional path to financial freedom, freedom of time, relationships, health, and ultimately freedom of purpose. My name is Dr. David Phelps. Let's get started.

David Phelps: Hi. It's David here. This week, I'm going to take you back inside our Freedom Founders Mastermind with a presentation that I did recently, or a conversation I had with good friend, mentor, Mr. Alastair MacDonald. Alastair is a very thoughtful person in looking at his life, his business, his family. I thought it would be interesting for you to have a chance to listen in on this conversation. Breaking it up into two segments, week one, this week, and then next week we'll have the followup.

This week, we'll talk a little bit about uncertainty, seeking guidance. We all want familiarity and certainty in our life, yet we are filled with voids of uncertainty today and a lot of that comes from the fact that we simply just don't trust ourselves. We talked a little bit about risk and the fact that risk is non-negotiable. We have to deal with risk. Risk is part of our lives, yet again, we want to mitigate risk. So how do we balance that with looking at new frontiers and new opportunities to live our lives in a way that perhaps we're not living today?

Groupthink, yielding our sovereignty to others. It's a bad, bad mantra to be following the herd mentality. I talk about it all the time. And this is one thing that Alastair and I...

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One of the many things we agree on is just staying away from that groupthink mentality. Alastair mentions a metaphor. He calls it twisting the kaleidoscope, looking at the lens and twisting it and having a whole new perspective on the opportunities ahead. And then we sum things up this week talking about a disconnect from all of the noise out there, the podcasts, the Facebooks, and social media and news and whatever it is that sucks us in every week and taking a week off, at least one week off every quarter, calling it the week of integration. I know you'll enjoy this episode. Catch this one and catch us back next week for the second half of my conversation with Mr. Alastair MacDonald.

I'm particularly excited and honored to have our next guest with us. So he's a gentleman that I was blessed to... I won't say introduced to. Well, like a lot of us, I'm always on the look. I'm always on the hunt. Aren't we all? Aren't we on the hunt for wisdom and experience and really like guides? We all need them. And I was thinking last night that Alastair is someone that I've... Candice and I, not just me, but Candice and I have welcomed into our lives and somebody that I just thoroughly enjoy the conversations that we get to have and he gifts to us. They're just wonderful. And so you're going to get a chance this morning to get some snippets of things that we talked about.

I've got probably five days' worth of material. We have an hour to squeeze this in. So let me give you just a little bit of background. My good friend, Alastair MacDonald in his reasonably short time here on earth, he's experienced five recessions, one national currency implosion, three global pricing bubbles, plus the greatest hyperinflation in history,

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the largest asset deflation in history and violent political and social upheaval. As a business owner, employer, husband, dad, and sovereign entrepreneur, he's owned service businesses, he's managed money. He's invested well and badly. He's owned a dental clinic and a vet hospital. Had partnerships implode, others thrive. In all this, if there's one skill that he would encourage every business owner, regardless of their industry, to learn, it's how to build, maintain, and grow a business through what he would call the complete full market cycle. He's also a black belt in jiu-jitsu and ex-safari leader and National Geographic Expedition leader. Would you please welcome my good friend, Mr. Alastair MacDonald.

Come on up with me.

Alastair Macdonald: You get to pick a side?

David Phelps: Pick a side. Does this music do anything for you?

Alastair Macdonald: It's very—yeah.

David Phelps: But no, seriously. I mean seriously, what is this?

Alastair Macdonald: This is Bach through Yo-Yo Ma's eighth movement.

David Phelps: We chose that just for you.

Alastair Macdonald: Yeah. Well, I appreciate it.

David Phelps: Just to set the mood.

Alastair Macdonald: This is one of my favorite pieces of music and there's clearly some sabotage in my organization that information is being traded.

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David Phelps: You might want to tighten things up just a touch.

Alastair Macdonald: Yeah. Didn't realize that my assistant could even see my playlist. That's dangerous. It's like somebody having access to your browsing history, which by the way, is the best predictor of your future.

David Phelps: Well, that's a lot of wisdom right there. So let's start with this. As a guide, as an entrepreneur, age 18, and we'll get some of the back history in Zimbabwe because I think there's a lot to be said, but the thing that I alluded to already is that you started out early in life as an entrepreneur. You're fourth generation in Zimbabwe. Your forefathers, your father, and your grandfather, all entrepreneurs. So it's built into your DNA and at age 18, you start a safari business, which means you're guiding people at a young age. I'm just curious, people that would come to you for these guides, for these expeditions, would be all kinds of people across the board from different walks of life. What are they looking for? Experience? Change? I'm just curious. What are these people looking for that you would guide?

Alastair Macdonald: I think two things. The first is novelty and the second is confidence to draft off of. So novelty of experience, novelty of adventure and richness, but it had to be couched in some sense of confidence from somebody that had been there before. And I realized that when I got a... I was very young, I was 21 and I got a contract with National Geographic to do a six-month source-to-sea trip of the Zambezi River. And this meant that I would be going to parts of Africa, Southern Malawi, the Shire River, et cetera, areas that I would be guiding.

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If you know who Paul Theroux is; Paul Theroux is one of the most famous travel writers in the world. He wrote Mosquito Coast, et cetera. Paul and I have now been friends for 20 something years. He was the person who was writing the article. So Paul was not only 30 years older than me, but he had more experience in parts of this area of Africa than I had. And this has been the case for me so many times in my life where, how could I possibly be qualified to guide Paul Theroux or National Geographic as a 21-year-old? And I think it's the same question we get to ask ourselves as parents, as business leaders.

And I think it really comes down to a familiarity and a confidence in uncertainty. I didn't need to know everything that would possibly happen, I just needed to trust myself to navigate whatever comes up. And that ended up yielding a multi-decade friendship and a cover story for the magazine. And it was a spectacular experience, but I think that's what people are looking for, is novelty and a sense of, we talk about this all the time, staying on your own frontier.

I have that same conversation with other friends, Christie, Amid, Brian, people in the room, but some sense of, somebody that doesn't have to be, they don't have to have done it before. When we went in to do this tributary section of the Shire River, it's a tributary to the Zambezi in Southern Malawi, the actual maps just had big blank areas. All we knew was the river came in here and it came out there and the last time it had been traveled was 36 years prior. So the beauty there is I knew just as little as Paul did, and that was quite an adventure.

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David Phelps: So we typically don't like to have big blanks on the map, right? Do we ladies and gentlemen? No, that's not our training, Alastair, and you know that. So there's a part of us that likes to live vicariously through someone like you, but we still want to be part of that adventure. And so we talk a lot about the fact that all of us have this in us where many times we just don't trust ourselves. We don't trust ourselves to make decisions. Now having a guide who has confidence, at least confidence in realizing that you don't have to know everything, you can't know everything, but you're able to be nimble, adaptable, and iterating as you need to course.

Again, taking your experience as a guide over so many years and you continue to be a guide in your own frontier and helping people, others, what additional wisdom could you provide for, again, knowing who we are, most of us have not lived the life you have on that kind of experience, but we still want more. And yet there's this part of us that says, man, but no, I better stay the course. I better stay with what I know or what everybody says I should do. I don't want to risk a change that... It could be better over there. It looks exciting, but I don't know. It looks better not to.

Alastair Macdonald: Yeah. It's funny. Risk, I think, is a lot like money. It's non-negotiable. Money is non-negotiable. You'll meet somebody who'll say, "Hey, I just want to live on the commune and gift back to the community." And that's all wonderful, but at some point, money is not a negotiable thing. It has to be a part of your life and I think risk is the same thing. It's funny you mentioned, not everybody has lived my life. Hearing what you read, it has like all these recessions and disasters. And I'm like, I don't know how

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lucky I actually have been. I've got struck by lightning when I was 19. And I was telling a friend of mine months later, it took a while to recover from and he said, "Oh, you're amazing. You were struck by lightning." He's like, "And you lived. You're so lucky." I'm like, "Eh, I think luck probably would've not been struck by lightning."

I think that it's super important. One of the drums that I try to beat all the time and especially, and it's so perfect, can I just pause and just say how excited I am to be here. I'm so happy to be here with other weird people, that we get to talk about-

David Phelps:     Somebody's alluded to us as a cult.

Alastair Macdonald:     All that's missing is the language and secret handshakes, fully deployed. We've got the language. But I say that because it's so rare to get an opportunity to kind of fall into a little pocket of society that is interested in talking about things that are kind of from the physical to the financial to the metaphysical. And it's just a pleasure for me to be here and I have you to thank for that. It's my pleasure.

Anyway, to fall on this point of trusting ourselves, there is that human instinct to herd and to seek leadership. And it's very strange to suddenly find yourself in a position. I had a very clear experience as a young man where this terrible situation was going on and this download I got from the cosmic Google was, you're the adult. It happened in a moment. I was being charged by a wounded leopard that had been killing livestock and this leopard was approaching me and there was the download. You're the adult. You're in charge. I'll never forget it. And you're the adult and you're in charge. But

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what we want to do is yield. We want to yield our own leadership, yield our sovereignty to the expertise of others.

And so I want to remind everybody here, as I have to remind myself, you have read more books than Socrates. You have had more experience than Aristotle. You have seen more of the world than Plato, and let's just let that percolate in our mind for a moment. These are the authorities that we yield philosophy, insight, financial wisdom to. And the point being is that the difference between us, Socrates, Aristotle and Plato, is that we don't mine our own experience. The reason that they could provide the insights that they did and that we don't, is all that they had was the ability to mine their own experiences, to trust themselves. And what I found is when we do that, it's so liberating. It's so liberating.

I was talking to Sean and Dave just a minute ago. And they said, "What are you going to talk about?" I said, "I have no idea," but it's not so about me, but it's about this premise is, once we get to a point where we really trust ourselves, defenses just drop on possibility. And that's exactly what this experience represents.

David Phelps: And I know you were busy on some calls this morning. Alastair, as you might gather, he's a leader of many different areas. So you weren't here this morning when we had a panel of some of our veteran members. And just to that point, but without saying those words, would you say all five gentlemen expressed the fact that defenses have been lowered for them so that the opportunity for new frontiers as expressed by each one of them is there in front of them versus feeling very proud and kept in a

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place where everybody has to be and you have to ask permission to go outside.

I want to ask you, oh, I know I want to congratulate you because it's public knowledge now, but you just recently within the last week or so, or 10 days, a successful exit from the veterinary hospital. A six year run from starting from a very small, out of date, kind of a hippie run of that clinic that you purchased six years ago to a six doctor facility that you had the opportunity to make the exit.

Also, as I mentioned here that you also own a dental practice. Now I'm just curious, where did you do your dental and veterinary training, sir? What qualifies you to do that?

Alastair Macdonald: I can tell you exactly. It's in the Southern part of Malawi where the river enters here into a block and it just comes out-

David Phelps: So see, all those years you went to school, wrong training. Well, it's too late, but no, it's not too late. It's not too late, is it?

Alastair Macdonald: No, unfortunately that part of the map is now charted. So you're going to have to find your own. No, I'm remarkably unqualified to do most of the stuff that I start out doing. I'm not a veterinarian, not a dentist. And I did, I bought this little crazy hippie dock practice. There's a 500 square foot cabin in 2015, run by I mean, full on Hawaiian shirt, long gray hair wearing, guys show up three days a week. Everything was cool vibes, wonderful human, Dr. Todd, he ended up staying on to work for me for another eight months. And I bought it because my sense was that the veterinary industry is going to go the same way that

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human medicine is, which is toward integrative care. And it struck me as easier to buy a crazy fully Eastern medicine veterinarians' practice and integrate Western than it is the other way around.

All that he did was acupuncture and Chinese herbs, which by the way, I've been trained. I like to say herbs, but apparently that's a person in America. And it is, a lot's changed. We sold it a week ago yesterday. It's now an 8,000 square foot facility with six doctors and a support team of 30. And yeah, I ended up fortunately because of hot money. That was another anticipation I had, that watching hot money go through dentistry, it was fairly predictable that hot money was coming into the veterinary space. Everybody's looking for yield. And yeah, I just sold that practice for 24 times what I bought it for six years ago.

David Phelps: That's the Wayne Gretzky model of not following the puck, but knowing where the puck's going to go next. I mean, exactly the point I was making last night, is understanding where the trends are. Like you said the hot money, and the opportunity. So obviously there's going to be a next for you, but how do you go about figuring out... a lot of the involvement you've had with that possibility, which I know you've loved dearly. When you get to know Alistair, he's not a guy that's about the money, he's about the service and the engagement, the empowerment of other people, which meant that he had to have a great team because if a doctor got hurt or was on maternity leave, I don't think you stepped in and did surgeries, did you? Like we would do, right?

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So we got our associates and partners and multiple practices and what happens when somebody goes down, right Chris? I mean, you've got to step in, right? Couldn't do it. So a blessing and a curse there. I think more of a blessing. So what I'm trying to say is, if you want to change where you are in your life, you've got to change your thinking, your mindset about what that looks like, and then proceed forward and not get caught in the trap of well, this is just customarily the way we have to do it. But let's go back to, how do you start to look at your next? Because you're never going to be done with life. It's just, you're going to have a next. How do you know about making that exploration to your next frontier, as far as that part of your life?

Alastair Macdonald: Yeah. Experiences like this, I've been through a couple of iterations of them, admittedly, not at this degree of scale before, but that's okay because I've never been older, never been more experienced, never been more resourceful than I am right now, just like everybody here. So it's an interesting opportunity. I love the metaphor of a kaleidoscope because a kaleidoscope has all the same contents in it, but a simple twist of it and everything suddenly realigns differently. Same contents, same tube, same light, completely different viewpoint. And so this is twisting my kaleidoscope about what's next and what's possible. And I have a lot of ideas, I'm working on a very exciting project in the dental space in Canada right now, with some excellent business partners. And outside of that, taking care of my friends, that might also be clients. That's my focus for now. But I'm back into that white space of a different part of the map.

David Phelps: Yeah. It's not a bad place to be.

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Alastair Macdonald: No, it's so exciting. It's so exciting.

David Phelps: You're very strong about taking time away from the grind, the business, that always feeling like we need to be doing. The compulsion that we all feel, in particularly Western society. And you've seen the contrast, is that we just feel like we've got to be doing something all the time and making this happen, and being efficient, and yield and return and productivity per hour and all these metrics that we have just taken in and said, this is it. Again, our panel of veteran members up here showed that there are different metrics in life. So there was a question in there somewhere. But-

Alastair Macdonald: Taking time.

David Phelps: Yeah, so how do you help other people that are struggling with that compulsion to just always be doing? You talk about taking time off, the integration weeks that I know with your group, it's something you do every quarter. It's a habit. It's a discipline. Unplug, hard to do. Super hard to do, but for those who learn to do it... And a little bit of that's happening this weekend, those of you who came distances to be here, well, you had to kind of unplug, right? You had to make that happen. Why in your experience is that such a powerful discipline to integrate into one's life?

Alastair Macdonald: Yeah. So once a quarter, I'll take a week, I call it an integration week. Some of my friends here, I force it on them as well. And it is an opportunity for us to turn all the noise off. And this is something I would like to talk about more is the signal and the noise. We are so convinced in the West that it's more information that we need. That we would get X, Y, Z done if we just had more information,

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which is at its core to say that as I currently am, what I have previously experienced is not enough. It's not enough. And this sense of lack is deeply rooted in the whole notion of professionalism.

We've all been told at some point in our career that we need to be professional. We need to dress professionally. You've got to have your hair a certain way, dress a certain way, use certain language, all of that at its core, so that you look like Jim, Jill, Jamie, this is what you need to look like. They are acting professionally. And it's been my experience that if you're acting anything, you're disconnecting from reality and the people that you can really serve. So at its core, the notion of professionalism compounds this sense that you don't have enough. You are not quite enough as you are, but if you did these things, then you would be able to. And this is another way of just burying authenticity. So we end up getting disconnected from ourselves and it's my conviction beyond belief, that conviction that authenticity is big business. It's big business. It's what connects you with the patient when you're trying to present a complicated case, it's what lets your team know that you've got their back. When you confess to the mistakes you've made, the things you've gotten wrong.

And so all of that comes back to finding the space. If you're going to be authentic, you should probably know who you are. That'll be pretty useful because you know who you're not. You're all of these experts that are constantly pouring information into your ears. So stepping back from that integration week, I have a certain format that I follow.

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Again, I foisted on some friends here in the room. Novelty of experience or finding some frontier experience. Radical self-care. A complete disconnect from podcasts, news, audio books. I even tell my clients, don't even listen to me. In particular, don't listen to me, but just to step away and just turn off the noise. I think, reminded of Nietzsche's point that a man, though in my experience this is not gender specific, woman too, a man can tolerate just about anything but sitting alone with nothing but his thoughts in an empty room. And that is what we flee from. We are terrified by the prospect of sitting alone in a room without our notifications or external validation or what have you. And I think it's very important. So, once a quarter. And you know it's important because it's bloody hard to do. It's hard to do.

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