



A voice in the wilderness

It is day 4 of Beyond the Desert Edge Expedition and I am strangely tired. I'm suffering from quite a serious, lingering sinusitis (not what you want on an expedition) and a small dose of sleep deprivation, which I usually have no problem with. The worst issue, however, is the nagging pain (excuse the pun) in my buttocks. Literally.

There is this little voice in my head that is constantly speaking to me. We all know the voice. Every time I press down on my Giant Anthem's pedals, the pain that shoots into my groin gets that voice going again. It's a voice that I've heard many times before and I know I need to ignore it.

"It's physically impossible to do another 11 hours on the saddle today! Will you be able to continue if this injury gets worse? Have you actually done enough training to complete the expedition? Is the equipment you are using the best suited for you?"

If you feel like this now, can you imagine how it will be tomorrow?"

I started asking myself serious questions and my mind is playing games with me. I think that, for countless reasons, many of us have capped what we think our abilities are, both

professionally and personally. These are self-imposed mental limitations often brought on by this 'little voice'.

We need to feed the right wolf!

According to Cherokee legend, there is an ongoing battle within our minds between two wolves, one representing the good in us, the other the bad. We need to be mindful, disciplined and resolute to steer clear of the negative emotions that feed the bad wolf. This is that legend.

An old chief passes on words of wisdom to his grandson. "My boy," he says, "There is a battle between two wolves inside us all. One is evil. It is anger, jealousy, greed, fear, resentment,

inferiority, lies and ego. The other is good. It is joy, peace, love, hope, humility, kindness, empathy and truth.”The boy thought about it for a while and asked, “Grandfather, which wolf wins?”The old man quietly replied, “The one you feed.”

The Dunlop Beyond the Desert Edge Expedition was a phenomenal 1 200km world-first mountain biking expedition from southern Angola to southern Namibia on the edge of the world-famous inhospitable and exquisite Namib Desert. The route took the team from Serra Cafema, near the mouth of the Cunene River, to Swakopmund and into proper ‘terra incognita’. The expedition team members included the indomitable photographer and author, Jacques Marias, who would join me from time to time on his bike and captured the magic of the expedition through his lenses, and brothers Peter and Graham Kirk. ‘Pistol Pete’ was our videographer while Graham kept all the logistics running smoothly. There are obviously some phenomenal stories to tell—a much-too-close encounter with desert lions being one of the many. The main purpose of the expedition, besides just really wanting to do the ride, was to raise funds for and awareness of ‘Children in the Wilderness’, an NPO that deals with children who are born in wilderness areas that have to coexist with dangerous game. There is massive human/wildlife conflict in these areas and CITW teaches these children sustainable symbiotic solutions for conservation. They also focus on teaching the children to love their natural environment. We only conserve the things we love.

For me, the most difficult part of any expedition is leaving home and my family. The details may differ slightly from trip to trip but the thoughts and emotions are essentially the same. I will never forget reversing out of the driveway of our house on the way to the airport in 2007 to fly out to the Canary Islands for my first really big expedition, the Woodvale Atlantic Rowing Race.

I live just north of East London, South Africa’s business mega-centre, in a village called Sunrise-on-Sea. Our home is right on the beach in a nature reserve. It’s a beautiful place. As I reversed my bakkie out of the driveway, I paused for a moment. Kim was sitting next to me and my daughter Hannah was in the back, strapped into her car seat. I looked at my family, our home, the garden, the cat, and drank them all in. Two things went through my mind.

The first thought, a fleeting one, I kept to myself. I wondered if I would ever see my home and family or this beautiful place again. Crossing the Atlantic Ocean in a rowing boat entails a very real element of risk. But the dangers had been weighed and the decisions made many months before. There was no point in dwelling on doubts or fears.

I was more open to my second thought. Feeling a surge of excitement and expectation, I turned to Kim. “Isn’t this the most amazing thing?” I asked. “In four months’ time, the very next time we drive back into this driveway together, there is going to be a story that needs to be told... and I wonder what that story’s going to be?”

I knew that the story would be filled with hardships beyond my best planning and that I was going to be tested physically, emotionally and spiritually beyond the limits of my imagination. That is the nature of extreme expeditions. I knew, too, that I would experience incredible things. Rowing across a vast blue ocean and interacting with nature in a true wilderness would be a privilege. The sunrises and sunsets. The squalls and storms. The victories and failures. I couldn’t wait for the anticipation to be over and the story to begin.

Together, Kim and I chose to focus on these positive thoughts as we drove towards the airport (and the dreaded goodbyes). We consciously chose to feed the good wolf.

Months later, when I returned home, there was indeed a story to tell—and there would be more to come in my subsequent adventures.

I find myself in the same position now, except I am on a mountain bike on the edge of the Namib Desert and not on a rowing boat in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. I have to focus on feeding the good wolf. I know that today will soon come to an end, that this expedition will just take one day at a time and that in amongst all the tough bits, there will be amazing stories that will unfold.

As you read this, I would like you to think about your own life story. What is the story you will tell your friends and your grandchildren one day? What is the legacy that you wish to leave behind? Is it one of daring, of making a difference, of success and significance? If you had to fast-forward your life by a year, or perhaps a decade, do you think you’d have a compelling story to tell at the end of that time? Do you wonder about your story?

While life is full of the mystery of the unexpected, with no guarantees for even the best-laid plans, I believe there is a path to success and significance, and I have put a process in place in my life to achieve them both. This starts with focusing on the good wolf and then relentlessly pursuing the passion that allows me to achieve the vision I have set out for my life

Each and every one of us is wired differently. This passion could be any number of things that energise your soul: writing an article or book or travelling or playing a musical instrument or painting or surfing or cooking a gourmet meal or solving a complex set of problems. I’m a firm believer that God has planted a deep desire and passion for something in all of our hearts.

Sadly, many sensible adults have forgotten what recharges their batteries and makes them feel most alive. Or, worse still, they think its shopping or watching sport on TV or their first drink of the day. As the great theologian and Nobel Prize winner, Albert Schweitzer put it, “The tragedy of life is what dies inside a person while they still live.”

When we make the big decisions about how we spend our time and resources, it is so important that we ask ourselves what makes us come alive (rather than what is sensible or secure or expected of us). And then we need to go out into the world and devote our time to doing exactly that, because what the world needs more than anything are vital, passionate men and women doing what they were created to do—men and women who have truly come alive.

We don’t all have the privilege of making our passions our livelihood but that is no excuse to give them up. It is our duty to rediscover these passions and use them to re-charge our batteries and fulfill our purpose and, in so doing, help others whenever we can. There is something about tapping into your passion regularly that makes the rest of your life fall into place. Our passions are always a clue to our dreams and, ultimately, our real purpose, and this little voice we have is the one that feeds this passion.

I hope that my story will challenge you to feed your positive wolf, to dream and to rediscover that thing that makes you feel most alive. It has been planted inside you for a purpose. Let’s not just climb the ordinary mountains. Let’s seek out the extraordinary ones and conquer them with significance. ▲

Peter van Kets, Adventurer