Wonder Beyond

An outdoor zine - Volume 1

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Fear as Transcendence

Jonny West

While winter climbing earlier this year, I found myself being captured by fear. While I recognised the feeling from sport climbing, in this isolated location, there was no simple down climb. The Elvis legs were threatening, my hand gripped tightened, my indecision increased. Yet, the panic never took over. Drawing from some ethereal reserve, I was able to take control and manage my fear. While my inexperience and lack of confidence certainly magnified my perception of the risk, the effects of being captured by panic would still have been very real. Overcoming my fear felt like a decisive and transformational moment. And it has led me to reflect on the value of embracing fear.

For much of my life, I've had a bashful personability. In group situations, I'm shy, self-conscious and excessively agreeable – partially explaining the appeal of stimulants to me. When asked for my preference for a restaurant, I'd say, "Oh, I don't mind, whatever you want." Though sometimes cute, the delegation for the decision reflected an unwillingness to take responsibility – a form of passive decision-making. This example was symptomatic of my disposition. I avoided unfamiliar situations due to the inherent uncertainty or perceived risk. By delegating or hesitating until a decision was made for me, I avoided challenging myself – and the more I avoided

confronting fear, the more engrained the belief that I couldn't confront my fears became.

Yet, as fear began to capture me in that Scottish gully, I found that my relationship to fear had begun to transform. Reflecting on this pattern now, two experiences stand as milestones in this transformational process.

The first experience came during my cycle tour around South Korea. Leaving central Seoul in the late evening, I had cycled through the night following the Hangang, happy to keep cycling rather than make camp. As I turned away from the Hangang to head east up a tributary river, the day's first light washed over the hills, flooding me with a sense of euphoria. I wanted to embrace the sun, fist punch the sky, cry, laugh and sing. My movement felt effortless. I was floating along beside the river.

All my anxieties and self-doubts about touring in an unfamiliar country receded with the retreating darkness. It wasn't as though this was a beautiful location, but that didn't matter. I had no purpose other than to move forward one pedal after another. For the rest of that morning, I cycled with the sensation that every element in my universe was perfectly aligned. Of course, this moment was temporarily forgotten by the following week, as I struggled against the monsoon rains, humidity and dehydration. Nevertheless, it had

existed and even now I can reach back to that memory to draw resolve when confronting the unfamiliar.

One significant realisation I took from that the decisions that led up to that moment was 7that for many of the decisions that I make, the particular decision matters less than the perceived voluntary nature of the decision, as the voluntary aspect of decision-making ensures responsibility and demonstrates agency. Having chanced on this realisation, I found myself increasingly willing to embrace unfamiliar and uncomfortable situations in other areas of my life.

My second transformational experience came two years later while cycling through the Pamirs in late October. As a severe snowstorm had already passed through the Pamirs, I and another cycle tourist that I'd partnered with a week earlier had chosen to take a shorter, but more remote route through the Pamirs. Leaving the M41 (the Pamir Highway) at Rushon, we followed the Bartang Valley upstream, aiming for Kök Jar, a 3,807m pass, which would take us onto a plateau and across to Karakul. However, as we reached Savnob, the penultimate village before Kök Jar, a second snowstorm descended. Arriving in the dark, wet and cold, and in manic spirits, the situation felt desperate. Though around 130km from Karakul, we had no idea how many days it would take us to reach Karakul. Daylight was less than eight hours and temperatures in the shadows were double-digits below zero even at around 3000m, and my second-hand equipment was untested. Moreover, no one could offer first-hand information

concerning the snow condition beyond the last village, although everyone speculatively told us that the pass was already closed by snow. Worryingly, we had no idea when a third snowstorm would hit. Pinned down in a one-room homestay for four days, our host spent constantly insisted that our only way over the plateau was for his friend to drive us in a 4x4 vehicle for $300. Then, just to add a little extra spice, I came face-to-face with two wolves while going to the toilet during the night.

The uncertainty of the situation permeated every aspect of my thinking. I had made substantial compromises during the previous four months traveling to cycle through the Pamirs. Yet, everything now hung by a thread. As the days ticked by, it became increasingly clear that responsibility for the decision had been delegated to me. The situation felt extremely intense.

As I've reflected on these experiences, I see that they have nurtured my willingness to assume risk and endure hardship – something that I am privileged to rarely experience in daily life – which in turn has fostered my resilience and strengthened my responsibility.
We each maintain a narrative about ourselves. It is built on our reflections of past behaviour and experiences, and reinforced by how other people respond to us. This narrative is essential to our well-being. It is the well pool from which we give form to our existence, and draw resilience, resolve and purpose. In its better moments, it offers coherence and comprehension of events.

However, in its less generous moments, it is excessively rigid and severely restricts what we believe we are capable of. As our narratives are largely informed by past experiences and other people's responses to us, we struggle to adapt to unfamiliar and uncomfortable situations. Yet, without revision and nurture, these narratives of self can stagnate and solidify.

If we don't challenge ourselves, stretch the boundaries of our potential, our narratives can stagnate and solidify. Our thinking becomes captured in loops of negative self-reflection. If I tell myself I can't speak a second language, I won't fully commit. Then, as people respond poorly to my half-hearted attempts, my negative self-image is reinforced.

However, some notes of caution are necessary. There is the risk that the process of self-transformation can become an obsession or be commodified in which case we lose our control over the process, which appears to be the critical empowering element. Second, confronting fear needn't involve danger, it could involve speaking attempting to speak a second language or approach a stranger. While overcoming greater uncertainty or risk appears to be associated with more profound transformations, I'm slowly learning to value the process of becoming over the state of being, and the associated preference for incremental over wholesale change. Finally, overcoming fear doesn't necessarily mean pushing head-long into

fear, it simply means embracing fear, which could result in backing down while retaining control.

After successfully crossing the plateau to reach Karakul and rejoin the M41, I turned north toward Sary Tash, the first town in Kyrgyzstan after the Tajik-Kyrgyz border. With a modest climb to 4250m, the road descended to 3163m over 40km. However, I had not accounted for conditions on the north-facing aspect. As I reached the pass, I found the road on the north aspect covered under solid ice with knee deep snow on either side. For six hours, I attempted to hike my bicycle down the steep, exposed switchbacks, falling over eight times. What I'd anticipated would take me a day, now appeared to be a three-day hike-a-bike feat. With darkness having descended on my painfully slow ice slide, and contemplating three days with little food left and mentally fatigued, I made a decision to take the taxi off the mountain. Naturally, the driver found space for my bicycle among the multitude of bags and a sheep that filled the back, and I took the last seat in the vehicle. I was and remain disappointed that I finished my cycle by taking a taxi out of the Pamirs. However, I know that my disappointment doesn't reflect a bad decision, but rather poor planning and mental fatigue – knowing that sets me up better to succeed next time.

At core, the individual that embraces and transcends fear gains a "negative capability", that is the ability to exist amind uncertainties, mysteries and doubt without reaching for self-deceiving comforts.

And ability to live with and accept the fundamental essence of insecurity.

At the core of the transformation, is a question: do I trust and respect myself?

Climbing Suilven

Norman MacCaig

I nod and nod to my own shadow and thrust
A mountain down and down.
Between my feet a lock shines in the brown,
Its silver paper crinked and edged with rust.
My lungs say No;
But down and down this treadmill hill must go.

Parishes dwindle. But my parish is
This stone, that tuft, this stone
And the cramped quarters of my flesh and bone.
I claw that tall horizon down to this;
And suddenly
My shadow jumps huge miles away from me.

A Fortunate Failure

John Swain

It's interesting to consider how the failures of one party can lead to the salvation of another, when a perceived bad outcome can unarguably become a good thing, which poses the question, does failure always result in a bad outcome?

It was early February. I was studying at Bangor University, full of delusions of grandeur that 3 years in Snowdonia would turn me from a fluffy haired, southern weekend warrior into a hardened mountain god.

The winter started with a bang and amazing early season conditions across the whole country, especially in North Wales. I had met Tom Ripley in the French Alps the previous summer and it didn't take much to persuade him to hitch down from the Lake District for a weekend of winter climbing. Another chance meeting on Beinn Eighe the previous winter had led to me climbing with Hamish Dunn, and – following a quick phone call - his axes were in his car and he was blasting up the M6 from Nottingham. In all my excitement, I had forgotten to mention to the guys that we'd be climbing as a three. So, it came as a shock to them when they both arrived at my halls of residence late on the Friday night. After the awkward introductions,

they seemed to get on and the three of us crammed into my single room, surrounded by a mountain of kit.

Now we had a team, we set about deciding what to climb. Though with snow down to the ground across the whole of Snowdonia the choices were seemingly endless. After furiously flicking through an old "borrowed" copy of North Wales Winter Climbing, we decided to go big – Jubilee Climb, a 5-pitch grade V on "Cloggy," Clogwyn Du'r Ardurr, one of the largest cliffs in the area and located high on Snowdon. After packing and re-packing, the three of us bedded down and tried to curtail our shared psyche for the next day's adventures. The alarm went off early. With minimal faff, the three of us were up, fed and in the car, leaving the rest of the students to their snakebite induced slumber, racing toward Llanberis in my mighty Suzuki Ignis. We parked near the Snowdon railway, shouldered our packs and – as the dawn did its very best to break through the morning clouds – started racing up the 90-minute walk to the cliffs. Shrouded by the arrogance of teenage youth, we assumed no one else would have the nerve to climb on Cloggy in winter and were taken aback as we reached the halfway station to see a team ahead of us. This only sped us up. As we ran past them with youthful enthusiasm, we were relieved to hear they were heading to a different route. Nothing could stop us now.

We arrived at the base of the route soaked in sweat and shared awkward smiles as we stared up at the seemingly blank and horribly

steep corner that forms the meat of the route. A game of rock, paper, scissors meant Tom got the first pitch. After one false start, he set off on a bold and protection-less traverse across vertical reeds and grass to the foot of the corner.

As Hamish and I joined Tom at the belay, the corner seemed to rear up even more. However, our confidence remained high, and another game of rock, paper, scissors meant it again fell to Tom to slay the beast. However, after emptying the tank, Tom admitted defeat having been quashed at the crux and returned to the belay. Following another round of rock, paper, scissors, Hamish geared up in silence for his bite at the cherry. What followed made tense viewing as Hamish picked his way upward, crampons smearing on the smooth walls, axes torqueing and hooking on whatever he could find.

"I feel physically sick!" he shouted down, panting as he reached the belay.
"We don't care," came our heartfelt reply.

This was it: we'd slain the beast, victory was ours! Although, with all our focus on the route, we'd failed to notice a change in the weather. The wind had picked up bringing with it every winter climber's mortal enemy, spindrift, and lots of it. Things also felt notably warmer than they should have considering our height. Tom followed up without fuss as the wind picked up. Then, it was my turn. As I dismantled the belay, I looked up to find the corner had become a

raging torrent of spindrift. The following 45 minutes were an exercise in persistence and holding my breath. As I leant into the corner to look for axe placements, I was put right in the spindrift's line of fire and quickly became buried. Every time I looked up to work out the next few moves, snow would race into the exposed openings in my clothing, creating a layer of snow between my skin and clothes. Thankfully, I was on the safe end of the rope. This whole process proved to be the highlight of the day for Tom and Hamish, as they laughed at me from above, nicely sheltered from the maelstrom. I got to the belay ledge a swearing ball of more snow than man and we decided to do a quick time check before we set about the final few pitches to glory.

"Shit!"

It was 4pm. How had this happened? It had taken us the whole day to climb two pitches?! But we were invincible! We looked down to the base of the cliff to see the team we had passed on the walk in strolling back to the safety of the valley and the warmth of the pub.

"But we are so much younger and fitter than them!"

We had about 30 minutes left of daylight, and with the worsening weather we decided to admit defeat and leave the route for another day. We quickly reorganised our kit and in one long abseil were safely back on the ground. Amazed that what had taken us several hours of

struggle was reversed in a little over 10 minutes. We had been well and truly put back in our place, and set off on the long walk back to the car, tails between our legs, but happy to be in one piece…

“Help!”
“What?”
“I didn’t say anything mate.”
“Help!”
“Hamish, did you here that?”
“Hear what mate?”
“Help!”
“Tom, stop a minute.”
“Why?”
“Help!”
“I definitely heard it that time, someone’s calling for help. Can you see anyone?”
“Help!”
“There, look!”

In the fading light, Hamish pointed out what looked like a person, some 150 metres above us on a broken section of cliff. I set off sprinting uphill, with Tom and Hamish shouting directions from beneath.

“Left, keep going up towards that small icefall.”
“Help!”

“Keep going, about 20 metres above you.”
“Help!”

I looked up as the shouts grew louder, heart racing, sweat running down from under my helmet, to find a man, slumped in the snow, jacket torn, shivering.

“Are you ok? What’s happened?”
“I was walking. I think I’ve fallen. My chest hurts. Have you seen my friends?”

As Hamish and Tom arrived, I began checking the guy over. I’d recently done a mountain first aid course, but the man needed more help than we could offer. So, Tom called mountain rescue. We gave him our spare layers and some hot juice, and did our best to warm him up while we waited for the helicopter. As I attempted to keep the man awake and Tom remained on the phone to mountain rescue, Tom’s headlamp illuminated another body about 20 metres above us, face down in the snow, lifeless. Hamish and Tom went to help, but our help was useless – he hadn’t survived the fall. The next few hours seemed to pass like seconds, as the mountain rescue team scrambled from Llanberis joined us. Before we knew it, a helicopter arrived and took the two casualties to Bangor hospital. As the helicopter took off with the second casualty, the three of us were left sat in the darkness wondering what had just happened. How had a day climbing turned into a mountain rescue? We were then told that the helicopter would

return to take us off the hill. I initially refused, but didn't have much say in the matter and we were soon being winched into a Sea King and taken down to the valley as Cloggy flashed before our eyes.

It was a surreal moment as we climbed out of the helicopter, harnesses and crampons still on, and were taken into the mountain rescue base in Nant Peris. Statements were given, we were fed and watered, and then allowed to drive back to my halls of residence. To this day, I still couldn't tell you what time we got back. We sat and chatted, before quickly succumbing to sleep.

"Well, that was a big day."
"What shall we do tomorrow?"
"Sleep."

It feels funny writing this over 10 years down the line. The first man we found survived. We later met him again as we were all interviewed by Reader's Digest for an article on the events of that day. Though many questions persisted after that day. For example, if we had been better climbers, would we have finished the route and not heard those cries for help? Did it take us to fail for the man we found to survive? Those questions don't need answers. Yet, they remained in our heads for a while afterward. Climbing, by its nature, is often a goal-orientated pursuit and – particularly when you're new to climbing – not getting to the top often feels like failure. As time progresses and experiences accumulate, you learn from these failures

and use what you have learnt to become a better climber. The succeed-at-all-costs approach to climbing can result in a short climbing career, as the lines between risk and reward become dangerously blurred. If the opposite of failure is success, then surely the only success is to be around to climb another day?

While Tom and Hamish weren't entirely sure on each other at first, they went on to forge a strong partnership and are both well on their way to becoming British Alpine Guides. As for me? Well, I'm still a fluffy haired, southern weekend warrior – and that's just fine for me.

The Last of the Dirtbags

Tim Carne

I was back in the van in the Grampians when the restrictions on movement and closures of public places were in full swing. In the week leading up to the day I left Melbourne, I was getting increasingly anxious about getting stuck in the city. I kept putting it off though, as I wanted to finish up a few things while I still had the comfort of a room at a friend's house. I kept an eye on the news and got everything packed and ready to go just in case. I wanted to be able to make a dash for it if it looked like restrictions would come in suddenly. The thought of being stuck in Melbourne while all this was going on seemed like a nightmare to me. The means by which I could survive in that city - spending hours each day at public libraries, bouldering gyms, followed by long sessions in the spas and saunas of public swimming pools - these places had all been closed for business indefinitely. I imagined myself getting stuck in Melbourne with the longing I would feel for climbing and being in the van on my own in the bush. I imagined how miserable I would be stuck in the little room at my friend's house, hearing the traffic on the street, stuck like I would be on Youtube and Netflix, getting up late and being unproductive.

These scenes didn't come about, but when I did get to the Grampians I felt somewhat different about what I wanted to be doing. Though I was still glad not to be in Melbourne, I found after a few days of being in the van again, I was fed up with the lifestyle and my enthusiasm for climbing was low. I was just coming off the back end of a full year of dirtbagging, and had been feeling a growing need to occupy myself with something other than climbing. This was enhanced by the uncertainty of the times and it gradually became clear - as the public places, shops and businesses started to close or change their services to adhere to the social distancing rules - that it was a bad time to be on the road. More than this, I had the growing sense of a social pressure to stay put, making me feel like I shouldn't be doing what I was doing. I felt this from listening to the ABC News, and from talking with friends who seem to embrace the "self-iso" meme well before I was even aware it existed. This feeling of *doing something that you shouldn't be* is always with you to some extent living in a van, but in the current climate this feeling was tenfold. Driving up the Western Highway I was worried every time I saw patrol cars, thinking they'd see the curtains in the windows of the van and know what I was about. I had to keep reminding myself that the van really was my home and so had at least a semi-valid excuse to be on the move. Sure if I really needed to I could go back to Melbourne and stay with friends or my sister, but for over a year now the van had been the only place that was legitimately mine.

I had arranged to met a climbing buddy at a bush camp near Golton Gorge inside the National Park toward the end of March. The official campgrounds had already been closed but we thought we'd be alright camping in the bush, as that was allowed under normal circumstances in the Grampians. I climbed a bit but mostly belayed. In the evenings I would study an online course I'd just begun, and began to search for rentals in the surrounding local towns. There was another couple at the camp whom my buddy knew, who had just started a year of dirtbagging. I felt sorry for them having planned all this for months - doing up their van, saving up and quitting their jobs - and right when they had organised to hit the road the mania began, all the campgrounds closed and travel between states became unadvisable and eventually, except for the New South Wales-Victoria border, closed. Another Slovenian couple who were friends of mine, who had been in Tassie for the last couple of months, also came up to the bush camp so we had a bit of a crew. We all set up in different corners of the clearing and only went climbing in pairs. This went on for a couple of weeks before I got offered a flat to rent in Horsham. It turned out to be just in time as the next day a ranger rolled through the camp and told us the entire park was closing as of tomorrow.

Now with a 6 month lease I consider how I will spend my days for this period. It's approaching mid-May and the radio tells me restrictions are easing in Australia and around the world, and a national plan for a return to normalcy has commenced. I'm doubtful and, though I do tend to lean towards bleak thinking, it feels to me like (and it already

feels trite to say but...) we're in a new world now. I'd vaguely planned to travel next year, to continue the dirtbagging overseas, stopping in on some of the major climbing destinations. At the moment that seems somewhat unlikely, I imagine it'll take some time for international travel to become easy like it was again. It makes me think that perhaps there are many things that we took for granted that won't be so easy anymore. I think my dirtbagging last year might come to be some fantasy belonging it an idyllic past. Maybe not, but at least it gives me pause to consider that such experiences are perhaps worth more than memories fading like old curtains behind my eyes. I've got guaranteed welfare payments till the end of November that will easily cover my rent and living. My desire to climb is low, so it seem like a be good time to move forward in a different direction, toward something more creative. The year past - all those months in Tassie and the Bluies, and the Gramps and Arapiles toward the end - has already got that generous fog of nostalgia over it. If I force myself I can recall that even with the freedom of that time I felt stress and strain in myself, and the people I was with. I think it would be good to write it down, particularly if that bleak part of mind is true, and such experiences do become a thing of the past. Who knows, but maybe I and others I met (and didn't meet) who were living the same sort of life could end up being, at least for time, the last of the dirtbags.

Covid Diaries

Lockdown Literature

Richard West

“Make it interesting. Make it yours. That’s the point” - At their best books can articulate thoughts that have been swirling around in my head but I’ve never had the ability to communicate them and the final line of Ed Douglas’ book does just that. What’s the point of climbing? There’s as good an answer as I’ve found: “Make it yours” whether that’s a sandstone problem in an obscure Northumberland location or a visionary Himalayan quest. The essence of climbing for me is how we interpret the movement and make it interesting for our own bodies. That is why we end up grade chasing as the movements of a once impossible Font 5 now don’t provoke the same interest as the 6C.

This book caught me in a perfect moment during lockdown, Ed Douglas’s prose are readable and thought provoking. The essays are short enough to read in a one sitting which is perfect for my information addled post covid brain. In eight reflective essays that touch topics I feel I should have considered as a climber but in honesty, never have. For example, I have trekked in Nepal and yet never really paid much heed to the underlying assumptions we bring as westerners to Nepal. Or, the oversimplifications we do when we categorise say Sherpa’s as an ethnic group above others. Further, I had heard of Kurt Albert the father of the redpoint and reading Douglas’s essay I felt energised by his enthusiasm for climbing and for lifelong learning. The ethical dilemma that Ueli Steck put the judges of

the Piolet d'Or by not recording his ascent of Anapurna goes to the core of alpinism. I mean I can't imagine everyone being fine with Lance Armstrong just saying he had won all the Tours de France without anyone validating his win.

The Magician's Glass is a great read and took me on an emotional journey that climbing books rarely do - Shakespeare wrote that art should "hold a mirror up to nature" and Ed Douglas certainly achieves this. However Shakespeare only has a rating of 2.6 on goodreads so I'll leave that opinion to you.