



With Vulnerability Comes Strength

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We sometimes strive to be as independent as possible, show no vulnerability and are reluctant to rely on others lest we are let down.

I want you to know that allowing yourself to be supported by those who love you is a tremendous gift you give to them. By sharing your adventures, experiences and challenges with loved ones, you can discover new parts of yourself. Being open to receiving love is a powerful way to live and does not diminish you or your independence; it strengthens you.

“Just one more step,” I told myself, the words swirling in my mind. “You’re almost there. You can do this.” For four hours, these words had been the only thing keeping me upright as I inched towards the peak of Mount Kilimanjaro.

The neck of my jacket chafed against my skin, the gap between letting cold air slowly find its way underneath and making my body shiver with the chill. It was 4AM, six hours since we’d departed the camp. “Let’s rest here,” I heard the guide call out. A wave of relief swept over me as I took in these rare but delicious words. I paused but didn’t give myself permission to sit, frightened I would not have the strength to stand again. Standing close to my side was Troy, my partner and fellow adventurer. Our breaths were shorter now and we knew it was best to save them for breathing, not talking. “You’re doing great, Al,” his bright blue eyes said to me when I glanced at him. “You too,” I silently smiled back at him.

I recall the first time I had ‘itchy feet’ and felt a desire to be out in the world. I was 11, swinging on a home-made timber swing, its weathered seat worn smooth. Swinging upwards, my toes almost reached the tops of the tall elephant-ear shaped plants bordering the tiny creek that trickled along one side of my backyard. As I swung and looked skyward, I remember wondering, “What is out there for ME to see and discover?”

I can remember as a kid being crowded in our family’s tent, squashed between my five siblings as we slept with the smell of freshly cooked popcorn from the camp stove and the sound of waves surfing their way onto the shore. Travel, for my family of eight, consisted of camping at a beach during school vacation and my favorite childhood memories are from these trips. I was comfortable at home; it was a safe harbor to be anchored in. However, I knew it wasn’t where I could stay. I was seeking awe, wonder, mystery, adventure and most of all, diversity. People who were different than me and places that immersed me in sights and sounds unlike those I had experienced growing up in Australia.

I knew something of the world, with my limited knowledge being gained through three things: an enormous tabletop world atlas that needed two children to turn a page, National Geographic magazines my parents brought home, and pictures in travel brochures. Every week, on my way home from school, I would dig through the “Take One” box outside the local travel agency, looking for brochures displaying colorful images of exotic locations. I discovered Hawaii, Egypt, Peru, Canada, China and Vietnam. Each week I would add my new ‘treasures’ to my own cardboard box in the bottom of the wardrobe and feel my excitement grow when given a homework task involving anything geographical. It meant I had a valid excuse to look through them again. When a sibling asked to borrow a travel brochure for their homework project, I would carefully curate the pile and offer them only the ones I was willing to sacrifice. One of my proudest moments in Grade 8 was cutting out images of South East Asia for a school project and researching the

region so thoroughly that the teacher told me I had handed in three times as many pages as required. I interpreted this as high praise. My longing to travel and explore, my desire to see these places for myself was Ignited.

Starting university felt like a ticket to launch my life. I can remember walking into my first class and feeling the excitement of not quite knowing where this would lead me, but knowing that it was a step in the right direction... a step towards Adventure! I studied mining engineering and this presented opportunities to work in remote out-back towns, something vastly different to an office in my hometown of Sydney. After graduating, I embarked on a four-year cross continent career path during which I called the tiny, mining towns 'home.' The more isolated the town, the braver I felt and after work the possibilities for outback adventures were limitless.

At work, I was surrounded by men. I was usually the only woman working in the underground mine: operating the drilling rigs, driving the trucks and loaders, or loading explosives into pre-drilled holes. Earning your stripes 'working on the tools' was a rite of passage for engineers prior to being considered for a supervisory role. It was exciting knowing I was a rarity and forging a new path for other women. At the same time, it was a burden. As with anything rare, anonymity doesn't exist. My expectation and hope was that I be treated like every other engineer, but that wasn't always the case.

The unofficial spotlight placed on female engineers in this era made us a target for skepticism, rumor-mongering and sometimes bullying. It made me feel uneasy and propelled

me further into wanting to appear professional and fiercely independent at all times.

Maintaining my professionalism was important to me, even in social settings. There was a fine balance to be held between being a leader at work and socializing with the crew on the weekends. I had an internal struggle around this. The times when I let my guard down and shared something personal, I would hear versions of it on the rumor mill next week at work. This feeling of having trusted someone with something personal only to learn they'd shared it with others was so disappointing and drove me further towards always keeping up my guard. Having no role models in this arena, I was never sure if I was doing it right. Holding this balance was lonely at times and I sorely missed the sense of belonging and warmth I felt with my family.

My time in each town was limited and I was reluctant to put down any roots and develop deeper connections. I knew I'd be leaving at the end of my 12-month posting in pursuit of promotions and a successful career. This didn't bother me. I was independent and needed no-one. Convinced that standing alone was the best way to be but still wanting to have fun, I joined in on all the social activities I could find. By ignoring the aloneness and deflecting the discomfort of feeling unfulfilled, I didn't have to show vulnerability.

A job opportunity eventually took me back to Sydney, but within six months I grew restless. I was seeking a connection with nature and adventure outdoors. I wanted out of the city and felt the pull towards something bigger than me and decided to plan a challenging wilderness trek in Nepal.

With my backpack on three months later, I breathed in the freedom of wandering along skinny mountain paths and absorbing the vistas laid out before me in the Annapurna region. I would stare, trance-like, at the intense solitude of the valleys and mountain peaks until they were photographed on my mind. I recall having hiked so high that one day, when looking down, I could see mountain peaks poking up through a white ribbon of cloud. “How am I so fortunate to be having this experience?” I thought. I was mesmerized. I felt dwarfed yet embraced by something so extraordinarily grand, an undeniably incredible creation.

My love of hiking and exploring landscapes deepened on this journey, as did my compassion and love for the people who I connected with in the villages. Partaking in meals and ceremonies with those people gave me an awareness of the beauty of connections and the deep sense of belonging and love in their families. I felt pure joy and a sense of peace there. I vowed I would come back.

A year later, I met Troy. When I first saw him, it was at work. I was drawn to his smiling eyes and felt his warmth, but I didn’t want to feel it. The second time I saw him, in a social setting, I felt gravitationally pulled towards him, but I tried to ignore it. The third time, I succumbed to his playful nature and we wrapped our arms around each other and it felt like home.

We very quickly discovered we shared a love of physical challenges and adventures in nature. It was exciting to be venturing out with someone who wanted to share fun experiences and be spontaneous. Troy and I were an

unshakeable team spending weekends hiking and discovering new trails, and mountain biking in the nearby hills. During those adventures, we dreamed about and planned our trek to Mount Kilimanjaro, in Tanzania.

That climb was the highest we had done together and we held our breath with excited anticipation while planning it, but the reality of it was something else altogether.

Clambering over boulders to wrestle my way up a rocky slope, I felt exhilarated. My energy was so high I was springing over large rocks while others walked around them. Three days into the climb, my muscles should have been tired and meagre, but they were full of bounce. I wondered where this energy came from. Perhaps it was adrenaline or the mountain air, or maybe the fitness training I did leading up to the trek; most likely a combination of all three. Either way, my body was strong and keeping me on target to reach the 5,895-meter summit. It was as though something that I didn’t recognize was inside me; I was powered by something that I had not felt before. It was almost spiritual. The best part was, altitude sickness hadn’t affected me to that point, and I saw this as further reinforcement that my goal was a reality. I was determined to reach the summit. I was convinced I’d be there, witnessing the sunrise and capturing it on camera. It was galvanized in my mind.

As the afternoon sunlight bathed the surrounding peaks in gold, we paused at our final camp before our push to the summit. Here, we would sleep for a few

hours until it was time to complete the last part of the climb. This final push would happen in the darkest and coldest reaches of the night, designed to ensure we reached the top in time for the sunrise.

Waking after a four-hour nap, we fitted our headlamps, pulled on our boots and checked our water supplies. I had slept in all my clothes, too cold to leave any item unused and didn't regret it for a moment. Although I wasn't completely rested after those few hours, I felt energized and eager to start walking. In that frame of mind, we departed camp.

The next two hours were spent steadily ascending the tundra, its grainy yet firm surface providing plenty of traction underfoot. It was challenging but somehow comfortable as I kept up my rapid pace from the day before. My headlamp provided me a two-meter radius and because the landscape underfoot was so barren and unchanging, I frequently looked up at the sky, seeking another perspective. The cloudless night allowed me to feel cocooned in the infinite expanse of stars. Gratefully, I rested whenever our guide advised, but only for a minute at a time. This was adequate to take in small sips of water as well as avoid having the warm sweat on my body cool in the below zero temperatures.

In the next few minutes, I heard a distinct English accent talking loudly yet with a hint of disappointment. Lifting my head up, I could make out a large shadow of a man only meters ahead of me. "I did my best," the voice said. "I'm not going on. I'm heading back down to camp. I'll be home in a few days; give my love to the kids." He was talking into a satellite phone and although I didn't know his reasons for turning back, I looked across at Troy and

panted, "Wow, imagine climbing for four days only to turn back hours before the top." I was filled with compassion for this man who had gotten himself so far but could not find it within himself to finish. I couldn't fathom this as a possibility for me.

Gradually the coarse-grained pebbles disappeared, making way for a much finer, slippery material and my pace slowed. Each step onto this fine grey volcanic ash was like walking on clouds as my foot would not stay where it landed. Instead, it would slip backwards down the slope which meant I was advancing only four or five inches each time. My breathing was heavy. The positive self-talk had stopped; how long ago, I couldn't say. I could no longer remember the words. Exhaustion weighed heavily on both my body and mind. I attempted another step, but my foot didn't move. Looking down, I willed my boot to lift up. Nothing. I couldn't reconcile why my mind saw it moving but it stayed where it was. Both feet were locked in place.

"I can't do it," I gasped, my voice barely audible. "I can't move my feet." Despair and panic rushed in as the thought of not being able to reach the summit engulfed me. Before that moment, it hadn't occurred to me that I wouldn't. Suddenly, I felt a gentle pressure in the middle of my back. "Yes, you can," I heard Troy say. "I'm right here. I've got you." He held his hand on my back and slowly pushed me forward into the next step. The tears came then and continued for many steps thereafter as I felt his hand on my back. The knowing that I could be vulnerable enough to depend on someone for support was a first for me. I dropped my guard and with surrender, came relief. vulnerable, and I knew I was going to be ok.

I didn't feel weaker in that moment. I felt stronger.

I always felt something was missing, but I buried or swept aside any desire to look for it. I wasn't comfortable being vulnerable and this eventually caused me to play small. It was safer to be tough and remain independent. I was good at it. And I convinced myself it was more exciting. The concept of interdependence was foreign to me; I just wasn't aware that I could have it all: to maintain my independence as a woman, a pioneer in my field and at the same time be in a loving relationship and lean on someone when I needed to. It wasn't a balance I knew how to do well. Instead, I thought I needed to choose one. How wrong I was and how grateful I am to have experienced all that I have.

I did reach the summit that morning and many others since.

Troy and I have traveled together many times since our trip to Mount Kilimanjaro, from weekend getaways to years living in other countries and everything in between. We've been up close to elephants in South Africa, watching from the front seat of a Mini while the herd crossed the road as though it were a family of pedestrians. We have watched bears playing while hiking in Yoho National Park in Canada. I've lain on the ground north of the Arctic circle and watched the Northern Lights dancing above me countless times. These experiences have far surpassed those childhood dreams I formed when looking through that box of travel brochures.

The gratitude I have for my early childhood is immense. It helped me become a curious, thoughtful and independent person and as a result, I've made the

conscious decision to share that curiosity and joy of adventure with my children as together we build a greater awareness of the world around us. Over the years I have become more at ease with vulnerability, and accepting support by loved ones has become easier too. That place of interdependence is now a place I relish being in. It gives me constant strength.

Independence is a wonderful trait and something you can be proud of. However, being too independent can close you off to discovering deep relationships and powerful connections. Allow yourself to be vulnerable sometimes. It can energize everyone in the relationship and lead to a profound and uplifting sense of togetherness. Your adventure begins when you allow yourself to be vulnerable and truly connect with others.