



the quest: a personal perspective

by Janine Shepherd

When we try to define 'knowledge', it is easy to get carried away into the crowd of dictionary entries. Marry 'knowledge' and 'management', and the result is invariably a swirl of concepts and theories, which often exist only for and by themselves. But what form of knowledge, and indeed of management, can come before that which governs the most fundamental unit of our world—our 'self'? In this potentially life-altering article, a champion Olympian tells us what self-knowledge and self-management can do, against the heavy odds conventional wisdom pits us against. Especially when the wise tell you your future life will only be a little better than death.



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the hero's journey as depicted in myth, literature and art gives us a model to help guide us in our own lives. It is an ancient pattern that lies behind every story ever told and gives us the analytical tools to delve into the human condition, providing a map of the psyche.

The journey details the path of the young challenger who must take leave from the kingdom, now a wasteland, in search of the hidden treasure, the Holy Grail. The journey is replete with danger and pitfalls and he must face his inner demons,

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the dragons he must slay if he is to succeed in his quest.

Victorious in his conquest, the young challenger returns with knowledge and wisdom that transforms the kingdom. The once parched ground is now ripe and fertile with new rain, crops prosper, babies are born and the land is once again rich and bountiful.

The real treasure of course is nothing tangible. It is the inner quest that we all seek, the journey of self-understanding; the treasure is finding our true self. What we have in common is that we are all heroes of our own story, and the dragons we must slay are the problems and challenges we encounter on the path.

At the deepest level we all have a yearning for answers to the most fundamental questions such as ‘Who am I and what is my purpose in life?’

This need to find our mission in life, our place in the world is one that ultimately must be traveled alone. The call to the quest is not an optional one, although the timing to do so is. By the mere fact of our humanity, it is required learning.

It takes great courage and vision to step out of the comfort zone of our existing lives and step into an unknown world, to face the fear of uncertainty. And as is often the case, it is adversity in life that propels us on our journey.

There are times, however, when you can have your life so well planned—and then something comes along that rocks it to its very core. It could be something small and seemingly insignificant that nags at the very heart of your soul, or something profound

like an accident, illness, separation or bereavement.

Whatever it is, you now stand at the crossroad, and there is no going back.

Scholar and mythologist Joseph Campbell states, “We have to give up the life we have planned, to get the life that is waiting for us.” The challenge of course, is to loosen our grip on life, to step out in faith and trust that we have everything we need for the journey.

In 1986, I was a member of the Australian ski team and was in training for the Winter Olympics in Calgary in 1988. Having returned from Europe with an invitation to join the Canadian team in the lead-up to the Games, I was on top of the world. This was everything I had worked for in my life and nothing was going to stop me from achieving my dream.

My goal was not just to represent my country at the Olympic Games—every athlete’s dream—but also to put Australia on the map as a force to be reckoned with, to show the world that we could be the best at winter sports.

Then one warm autumn day, I set out on a training bike ride with my fellow teammates. It was a six-hour ride up through the hills to the Blue Mountains, east of Sydney. It was a tough ride. I had done it many times before, and although tired from a heavy training schedule, I wasn’t going to miss this one. I loved to train hard. I loved the hills!

A split second is all it takes to turn a life around forever. I was never again to return to that home.

We had been on our bikes for almost six hours when we approached the toughest part of the ride, the final summit to our destination. I put my head down and started pumping my legs; I could feel the cold mountain air burning my lungs. I got out of my seat, lifted my head to feel the sun in my face, and then everything went black.

Where was I? What was happening? I tried to call out, but there was no one there.

A speeding utility truck slammed into the back of my bike, hurtling me into the air and onto the rocks that bordered the road, shattering my body and my dreams.



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Broken neck and back in six places, broken collarbone, five broken ribs, broken arm, broken bones in my feet, head injuries, internal injuries, massive blood loss.

The doctors and helicopter crew that airlifted me to the large spinal unit in Sydney did not expect me to survive the flight, the injuries were so horrendous. By the time they arrived at Prince Henry hospital, my blood pressure was forty over nothing. There didn't seem to be much hope and my parents were called with the news that every parent dreads: that their child had been involved in a tragic accident and was not expected to survive.

While they pumped blood into my body to keep me alive, I drifted between two worlds, that of life and death. And while my life hung in the balance for over a week, my parents and family maintained a bedside vigil, a lifeline to the world I once knew.

When I finally regained consciousness in the hospital, the full realization of my injuries left me in a dreamlike state of disbelief. How could this be my life? One minute I was an elite athlete on my way to the Olympics, and the next I was lying paralyzed in a spinal ward.

The doctors informed us that although the neck break was stable, the vertebrae in my back were completely crushed, and the only hope was to operate. They would remove my broken ribs to fuse my back together and if successful, I had a small chance of walking again. Without the surgery, I would be in a wheelchair for the rest of my life.

Although the surgery was deemed a success—they had removed as much bone

as they could that had lodged in my spinal cord—the damage, they said, was permanent. It was the central nervous system, and there is no cure. If I walked again it would be with calipers and a walking frame. I would have little feeling from the waist down and would need to use a catheter for the rest of my life.

“You are what we call a partial paraplegic,” the doctor informed me, “and you will have to rethink everything you do in your life, because you will never be able to do the things you did before.”

I stared at the ceiling as I tried to put everything in a wider context. If I couldn't ski again, what would I do with my life? I was an athlete, that was my life and now I faced one with permanent disability. I began to ask the inevitable questions. ‘Why? Why has this happened? And why me? And for what reason—if there was one? What good could possibly come out of this?’

After almost six months in the spinal ward, I returned to my home in a wheelchair and a plaster body cast to protect my back. My only thought was of learning to walk again and regaining some sense of life. However, reality is a cruel reminder, and I quickly slipped into a deep depression and despair.

Ashamed of my body, I felt utterly worthless. I went on an emotional roller coaster between depression and bitterness. There were days that I didn't want to get out of bed, and there were days that I just didn't.

Finally, I realized this accident controlled every part of my life—every single moment. And as much as I wanted to give up, there was something inside me that reminded me that I had always loved the hills. ‘What are you going to do?’ I asked myself. ‘Do I sit here and continue to see myself as a victim—or do I decide to get up and get on with the rest of my life? Am I going to continue to say no to life, or do I roll up my sleeves and say yes? Do I accept that this is as good as it gets, or am I going to make it better?’

This was just another hill, I reminded myself. And I was going to use the same technique in my recovery that I used when I ran or rode my bike up a hill—put my head down and

despite my physical CHALLENGES, the greatest BATTLE was the ONE going on in my HEAD

just focus on the next step or the next pedal push until I was at the top.

With that shift in attitude sometime later, I was sitting outside in my wheelchair when an airplane flew overhead.

‘That’s it’, I thought, ‘if I can’t walk, then I’ll fly!’

As ridiculous as it seemed, the seed was planted and this became my driving passion. I rang a flying school and enquired about a test flight, a TIF as they called it, a trial instructional flight.

Weeks later, mum and another friend drove me out to Bankstown airport and carried me into the flying school. I did not look like the ideal candidate to get a pilot’s license! Still covered in a plaster body cast, I was lifted into the aircraft for the first flight.

Although I couldn’t use my legs, I could use my arms. Once airborne, the instructor told me to take the controls and head towards the mountain in the distance. I took the controls, and I was flying; and I was a long, long way from the spinal ward. I knew right then that I was going to be a pilot. I didn’t know how on earth I would ever pass a medical, but that didn’t matter, because now I had a dream and nothing was going to stop me.

I planned, I focused, I was dedicated—I strived for excellence, whatever that meant for me. At one point it was just to use a catheter or maybe taking my first step or walk unaided. At first all I could do was to lie on the ground and lift my leg just a few inches—it took all my strength just to do that. It wasn’t much but it was better than nothing. I couldn’t look back; all I could do

was to look forward. And I kept reminding myself, inch by inch, it’s a cinch.

While the doctors continued to put my body back together again, I lost count of how many operations I had and the setbacks I encountered along the way. At one point it seemed to be one step forward, two steps back—just when I would gain some ground, I would find myself back in hospital with a complication or infection of some sort. The paradox, however, was that despite my physical challenges, the greatest battle was the one going on in my head.

Coming to terms with my shattered Olympic dreams and refusing to believe what expert medical staff had told me about my chances of any kind of recovery, I had to focus every sinew of my being on not only healing my broken body but my crushed morale also. Everything had shifted from my outer life to all my inner victories.

The accident had happened, I couldn’t change that, but what I could change was the way I chose to see my future. With my personal mantra of loving the hills, I kept reminding myself that this was all part of something bigger and I decided that I was responsible for whatever was to happen in the future. My destiny was a matter of choice not chance.

As author Stephen Covey says, “When you pick up one end of the stick, you automatically pick up the other end. So when you decide to take responsibility for your life, you automatically tap into the power to change it.”

Although I would not be alive if it had not been for the excellent medical help I received, I realized that it could only take me so far. Nobody was going to do the hard work for me; I had to do it myself. As the adage says, ‘If it’s going to be, it’s up to me’, and I was now in control. My doctors gave me the aircraft to fly, but I was the pilot and this was my journey to navigate.

I saw each hill, each challenge as a lesson, which was here to teach me more about myself and my mission in life. This was the paradigm shift that enabled me to move forward and explore deeper aspects of myself than I had before. I realized that although life may not be perfect, the circumstances of the



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present moment are. I discovered strengths deep within that I never knew existed and built upon each challenge with the skills that I learned along the way.

It was the seemingly intangible qualities, the mental attributes I had developed over my lifetime as an athlete that gave me the resilience and fortitude to hang in there despite overwhelming odds against me. Courage, determination, commitment, responsibility, self-sacrifice, perseverance and gratitude to name a few—these were my tools, my weapons of battle that have become part of my arsenal to this day.

This journey wasn't a linear or circular one. Like climbing a ladder I would keep spiraling upwards to discover new dimensions of self and the world I lived in. With this, I discovered a greater sense of fulfillment and joy in my life than I could ever have imagined.

This was my treasure, a new life-affirming perspective.

Confounding doctors, and despite remaining a partial paraplegic, I did eventually learn to walk again. And I did learn to fly. I went on to gain my private pilot's license, my commercial pilot's license, my instructor rating and my aerobatic rating. I then went on to work as an aerobatics flying instructor, teaching people how to fly upside-down!

I could not believe my life, and in fact if someone had told me years earlier that I would have to give up the life of an athlete to become a commercial pilot, an aerobatics flying instructor, I would have thought they were totally crazy.

But my story is not about learning to walk again, or even learning to fly: it is about

learning to live again. It isn't so much about what you do in life, but how you do it that is important.

When I decided to write a book about my story, I decided to call it, 'Never Tell Me Never,' which seemed an apt title, as everyone kept telling me about the things I would never do. Not listening to them and not letting anyone define my life for me has been life altering.

Never Tell Me Never was an instant bestseller, which was then made into a movie by the same name. It launched a career on the speaking circuit as a professional speaker, which is where I find myself today, traveling the world and sharing my message with others. I have been on the speaking circuit for over ten years now and I have loved every moment, every opportunity to share what I have learnt from my journey. In return, I have been given so much, and now truly understand nature's law: that in order to have something, you first have to give it away.

Howard Thurman, the late theologian, mystic and Harvard professor said that there are two questions we need to ask ourselves. The first is, 'Where am I going?' and the second is, 'Who is going with me?' If you get these questions in the wrong order, you are in trouble.

I help people get these questions in the right order, to find their own inner compass. To step outside old paradigms and to discover their real potential or who they truly are. To see the old patterns in their lives that no longer serve them and become their own 'agents of change'.

Recognizing the patterns that shape our lives helps us to claim the hero that lies within us all. That is our common humanity and we can all awaken that potential within. No matter what dragons we must slay on the path, what obstacles we encounter, we know that we have everything we need to rise to the challenge. We will take any situation in life and not only survive, but thrive.

The important thing in life is to realize that we must not only take on the hills but also learn to love them, because when you do that...anything is possible. ■