

Faith on a Long Walk

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My Father once told me that I was obsessive compulsive. At first I took offence to it. It sounded like some type of disease. Thinking about it now, though, I realize he was right. Any idea that I had – any thought of giving something a go or experiencing something new really excited me, and I couldn't relax until it was done. Not only that, but I had to do it well, and straight away. I strived to succeed at whatever I set my mind on, at whatever I thought was important that I did at the time.

These experiences were mostly relating to sport, music and travel - yet as a result, I took swimming lessons that lead to diving lessons, took up tennis, became an Irish dancer after I became bored of tap dancing, played the usual – competition basketball, netball...

Now I just walk. Seems like a bit of a let down when I put it like that, but really for me, walking is working. It is how I organize my day, it is how I come up with the best ideas, it is how I solve problems and I've learnt that it is a good way to make a statement on things that I think people should be more aware of in their lives.

I have played the piano since I was in year two, about 15 years now. But during that time, it became *very* important that I knew how to play the drums, tuba and trumpet. When I discovered the trombone, I thought I'd found my true calling... It wasn't long before I realized I needed a new challenge, though.

The first time I traveled properly was with my siblings in Bali. The year after, with pretty much the same group traveled Malaysia and nearby islands. As I was still far from satisfied, my sister and I then traveled again, backpacking over many countries, trying to do as much as time and funds would allow. Traveling certainly opened my eyes and encouraged consideration as to what I would do when I got home.

I began my theology / social work degree and applied for work as a carer at a youth refuge pretty much as soon as I came back from that last trip away. It was the beginning of the path I knew I wanted to take, and it has certainly developed me in many ways. I knew studying would be important, but I was keen to get real, hands on experience.

I have always known that the refuge was another stepping stone in my path. But I needed more; I wanted a challenge – a good, hard goal that I could set and achieve – just for the sake of it.

So around June last year, I set a challenge to myself to walk from Canberra to Brisbane in my 7 week university break in 2006. I had a year to plan for it, to get a group of people to come with me, and of course to train. As you now know, I have always been playing one sport or the other, so I wasn't starting my training from scratch – it was just a different type of training – with no ball of any size, no bat or racquet, and certainly no subs – just me and my legs, on foot after the other.

... I just happened to be at the same place at the same time the night a 21 year old girl sustained catastrophic injuries as a result of being struck by a car traveling at very high speeds. As I knelt down next to her, I was almost overwhelmed by contradictory impulses. I felt compelled to pick her up but concerned about touching her for fear of inflicting further injury. I simply made sure she was warm, spoke to her in an effort to comfort her and did what I could to offer 1st aid.

Within a very short period of time, it was known that she would not survive and if she did, she would have had irreversible damage to the brain.

This was a turning point in my life in that I was suddenly thrown into a whole new world it seemed. I was learning things I had no idea about, I was becoming passionate about something that is currently affecting over 340 thousand individuals around Australia, before you start counting their friends, families, carers and communities.

One of the most important issues that I learnt was about carers. Caring for a brain injured person may consume the carer's life, leaving them feeling that they have no life of their own and are isolated from the community. Carers commonly feel anger, fear, stress and depression as a result of their new situation.

The outcome of my education, interest and support of the issues surrounded my Acquired Brain Injury turned my personal challenge walk from Canberra to Brisbane, an event, called Walk With a Rose that was to encourage conversation on a topic that was rarely spoken about, rarely recognized and rarely given support to.

I established a committee under the auspices of the National Brain Injury Foundation with a board of directors and formed both in-kind and commercial sponsorship agreements with major corporations both in Canberra and Sydney including ActewAGL, Cre8ive, Mallesons Lawyers, Dairy Farmers, Hi- Tec Footwear, Watts communications, Wilderness Wear Australia, The Australian Hotels Association, The Australian Catholic University and The University of Canberra.

By this stage my training consisted of walking between 20 and 30 k's a day, whilst continuing to study full time and work at the refuge. This meant starting my day at around 4:30 or 5am to walk for 3 hours before uni. It also meant no more wine, a strict diet and bedtimes. I can admit I became obsessive compulsive about training, too, but I knew it was all going to be worthwhile.

Day one, the 1st on June 2006. Standing outside the Princess Alexandra Hospital with 5 mins to go before our live cross with the Today Show and the message comes through that they couldn't get a signal where we were standing so we had to go to the other side of the hospital. Okay, no problems. I figured it would be easier to get the lift to level two and out to the proposed balcony, then run up the stairs. Wrong... The lift got stuck on level one... For 25 minutes. Not only did we miss the live cross, we also had to start walking, on the first day from Brisbane to Ipswich, later than planned. Although it was disappointing for all concerned, it really did cement the great team spirit that had begun to form. I saw this as just *so* necessary in the demanding project that had just gotten underway.

The first week of the journey went without a hitch. We remained on schedule and in high spirits. It was certainly not going to always be fun and exciting, though. I knew in my mind that I had planned for more bad days than good.

There were the challenges that I knew were going to pop up, like they do on any long journey, like for example –

- Some days I was walking in minus 10 degree temperatures
- Some days it was pouring with rain
- Some nights we didn't have any pillows or blankets
- The bus broke down twice and we managed to get a flat in an area with no reception
- Had to sleep in a haunted hotel

And usually when these things happened, we had people filming us and we were wired so that whatever we said was being recorded.

And, of course, the fact that my obsessive compulsiveness was evident through the expressed importance of having to walk every step of the way. And I mean EVERY step. I had to start at the EXACT point I had finished the previous day at, and if the road was so bad that it became impossible to walk on for a few k's, I would make up the distance my walking around the town the next town we came to. Unfortunately for some, the second half of the journey then included having to stop and check every kangaroo for a Joey. Keeping in mind, they are a typical occurrence on highways.

And then there were the challenges that, to be honest, I didn't really see coming. These were the challenges that could not be laughed at, that could not be ignored and would not go away. Such challenges included conflict amongst the team, coming to terms with the possibility that one of your team members may have wanted to cause the event to fail, and learning the hard way about how some journalists work, being accused of having ulterior motives and occasionally wondering whether what we were doing was making any impact at all, whether it was really worth it..

I learnt a very important lesson through experiencing moments like these. I learnt that I really am a strong believer in intuition. Whether we prefer to call them gut feelings or dreams, I believe that an individual's intuition is a voice of knowledge that guides us to make particular decisions.

Some of the decisions I made on the walk were made as a pure result of what my intuition was telling me to do. At times it was pretty scary. Taking action because of a hunch, because of a sense that is actually free of any reasoning process is not a normal thing to do. But intuition that is acted upon and has produced a positive outcome is proof that it is worthy of trust.

My journey of Faith whilst planning an event and then embarking on a walk from Brisbane to Canberra consisted of many elements coming together that kept me going, that kept me inspired and that ensured the success of the walk. Such elements included my faith in

- My team, that we would be able to work together to reach the same goal
- My faith in People with brain injuries that through the supply of respite care they are able to grow and improve
- My Faith in The ability to raise awareness for people with Acquired Brain injuries within the many communities which we passed.
- And of course, and most importantly, my faith in Myself, that I would be able to overcome any challenges that came my way and make the event a success.

The 6 weeks we spent on the road was filled with moments that will stay in our hearts forever, ones that I always think back upon. Within these moments my faith developed, I felt God's presence and I was inspired. The moments I speak of are; watching an acquired brain injury sufferer nervously laugh as he gets to hold his favorite football star's hand as we all walk together with camera's flashing, or through the smiles on the faces of mothers who have been caring for their sons and daughters for years upon years, as they come out to us to offer a banana or sandwich, sometimes just a hug. I was touched by the number of times we were welcomed into people's homes for a meal, for a bed or just for a conversation. Moments like these were telling me that someone up there was looking after us and doing so through the kindness and generosity of the people we met and through the special times we shared with brain injury sufferers and their families that renewed our enthusiasm and energy.

I once bought a small book from an airport in Melbourne that I referred to often throughout the walk. The book was called the 10 Paradoxical Commandments and caught my eye as the 10 principals that it was based upon were written on a piece of paper that was up in my room at home. The piece of paper was given to me from a young girl who had been at the refuge for a few months at the time, and who I had developed a good relationship with. I knew the words on the piece of paper could not have been written by the girl herself, but it was obvious that wherever she found them, she somehow connected with the messages they gave out and wanted to share them with me.

What I admire about each action is that there is no focus on success through earnings of wealth, power or fame. They instead focus on the enhancement of personal meaning in life. This is the type of meaning that is understood you do things for the benefit of others, when you are honest, when you think big, when you fight for underdogs and when you give the world the best you've got.

The 10 Paradoxical Commandments that I speak of are as follows:

- People are illogical, unreasonable, and self – centered...*love them anyway*
- If you do good, people will accuse you of selfish ulterior motives...*do good anyway*
- If you are successful, you will win false friends and true enemies...*succeed anyway*
- The good you do today will be forgotten tomorrow...*do good anyway*
- Honesty and frankness make you vulnerable...*Be honest and frank anyway*
- The biggest men and women with the biggest ideas can be shot down by the smallest men and women with the smallest minds...*Think big anyway*
- People favor underdogs but follow only top dogs...*Fight for a few underdogs anyway*
- What you may spend years building may be destroyed overnight...*Build anyway*
- People really need help but may attack you if you do help them...*Help people anyway*
- Give the world the best you have and you'll get kicked in the teeth...*Give the world the best you have anyway.*

I very often thought about these messages while I was walking though I *wasn't* faced with *most* of the difficulties they suggest, it was good to think about at times.

I set myself goals every day, usually a couple of times a day. On any given day, a goal could simply be to make it to the next town, it could be to make it over the hill, or it could be to reach the next little white post. Then I would set me next goal.

The importance of keeping people interested in the walk, up to date and amused, even at my expense, was evident through the web log that was updated throughout the eight week journey.

My increasing fascination in cows began to worry some people but because most of the walk was carried out on back roads and by taking the long, safer track I saw a lot of cows. Looking back over some of those entries, though, I'm not surprised they began to worry.

Keeping people amused at the risk of damage to my pride didn't really bother me. The more people that were interested in the walk meant the more people they would tell about it and the more people that would learn about the cause.

At a civic reception in Tamworth, I was asked if there was anything I wanted to do while I was in town. I mentioned an interest in yodeling and a few phone calls later the multiple Golden Guitar winner Rex Dallas was lined up to teach me. The lesson was recorded by ABC radio...and made its way to a Canberra station. I began to yodel in public and actually quite enjoyed the new challenge.

Rex performed a duet with me live at the Wallabadah pub and in fact his involvement in Walk with a Rose was characteristic of the way people had really started to get behind the project. We were receiving a lot of mail, being frequently stopped by the side of the road and cheered on as we walked in and out of towns.

By this stage, ...Walk With a Rose had become a National awareness raising event about Acquired Brain Injury and the lack of respite care available in Australia. It raised an amount of \$50,000 and was featured on Australian story, The Footy Show, The Today Show the State Focus program as well as publications in Australian rural and national newspapers.

The Walk With a Rose project has proved to me what is possible in life if you really believe in it, if your heart's in the right place and if it is for the good of others. I have formed close friendships with people of the NBIF, workers and clients alike and I will continue to maintain those friendships and support the National Brain Injury Foundation in the future. These are the people who are caring for some of the most vulnerable people in our society and for that, I will always pay tribute.

At this stage of my life and largely due to social experiences and knowledge gained through working at the refuge, I do have a lot of interests and am passionate about raising awareness for other issues around mental health. Before I even started walking on the first of June this year, I had begun thinking about what I would do the following year – how far I would walk and for what reason.

Strength to Speak will be my project for 2007. I am going to walk from Perth to Canberra, starting on the 1st August 2007, for a total of 110 days. Strength to Speak will focus on the empowerment of young people to be able to recognize signs of depression in each other and know what to say. The key information partner for Strength to Speak will be AFFIRM, as I aim to raise awareness of these issues through an awareness raising walk across the nation.

I know that I am only a small part of the overall effort by a number of people to achieve similar goals around the reduction of depression and related mental health issues but as I stressed to the halls of children in the schools from Brisbane to Canberra, I just remember that the most important thing is to never lose sight of your final objective – and if you are doing it for the good of others, any attempt at *anything* you are passionate about feels better than not even trying for the fear of failing.

It is my belief that we are all here to make a difference. One way or another. We can focus on the big problems; war, starvation, disease. One of the most important differences to make is by helping people meet their fundamental needs. People often find meaning by acting on things that affect themselves or their family but whether these issues are big or small, long term or immediate, there is great meaning to be found in helping others establish ways of meeting their fundamental needs. And being able to see this difference amongst our friends, our neighbors and within our communities is a beautiful thing.