

FINDING ONE'S TRUE NORTH

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"There is no occasion for women to consider themselves subordinate or inferior to men."
–Mohandas Gandhi

The quote above is particularly poignant to my story because the message it conveys is relevant to the course of my own life. We all begin with childhood fantasies rarely realizing that little dreams lead to larger ones and that personal goals turn to lofty pursuits.

Imagine an 8-year old girl sitting on the edge of her bed, her eyes engrossed in the story about Robert E. Peary and of how he claimed the North Pole in April, 1909, while her classmates consumed "Black Beauty" and Nancy Drew books. Somehow she found the lives of explorers such as Shackleton, Admiral Byrd, and Nansen much more compelling. The more about their adventures she read, the more she wanted to become one of them making a promise to herself to one day stand at the geographic North Pole itself - thereby becoming a member of that distinguished community. Her gender was irrelevant even though most every one of those explorers had been a man. What difference would or could gender make in an achievement which was much more mental than physical?

I was that 8-year old girl.

As I matured, my dreams were eclipsed by life's more conventional ways and ensuing adulthood responsibilities, but the hopes of my youth remained. All the while, I lived vicariously through any news I could find of today's polar explorers who were attempting to conquer new frontiers and pursuing goals which had not yet been attained. Eventually, I made the decision to finally follow my aspirations to claim the North Pole for myself.

Even the daunting logistics and the dangers I could possibly face did not derail me from my ultimate endeavour. However, I questioned whether I even could do something so potentially arduous because this was predominantly a male pursuit in a mostly male realm. But I knew I had the stamina and the presence of mind which were the only traits truly necessary to carry out objectives of such caliber.

Then came THE opportunity: an opening on an expedition to the North Pole via Svalbard and the Borneo Ice Base at degree 89N. On April 13th, 2003, I found myself sitting on an airplane looking down through the window at an expanse of white infinity that is the frozen Arctic Ocean - that window a portal to the consummation of my childhood's visions. There was no fear; there was only anticipation and hope for personal conquest.

It was on April 16th that my Antonov-74 cargo plane landed hard upon the 2-meter thick surface of Arctic ice near the Russian Base which would be my basecamp for the next

few days. Temperature: 23F degrees below zero. There, of the 40 or so polar tent inhabitants, I found myself in the company of men, many of whom seemed somewhat perplexed that there was at least one woman who would brave the elements most would not dare, but because of my determination, I was readily accepted – a Ukrainian among Russians who are the sole proprietors of that temporary tent city.

On April 18th (Moscow time), 2003, I stepped foot on the North Pole, degree 90-North. I stood there for a brief eternity..... alone..... in my solitude, in my dream of dreams, in my moment of what I call “polar nirvana”. As I pulled a small package out of my parka and unfurled the flag that the bundle contained, a man who had been the Taymir helicopter pilot walked up to inform me that he was from Kremenchuk, Ukraine, his name: Yuri Kuzmenko. There I was, the first woman of Ukrainian descent to hold up the azure blue and yellow flag of Ukraine at the North Pole, with Yura alongside of me reveling in the “kodak” moment himself. Who could have imagined the probability of running into another Ukrainian there at the very top of the planet, but this was the moment I will remember until my last breath.....

Days later, during my flight back to Oslo, it occurred to me that I was returning a permanently changed woman having experienced the true grandeur of our planet. The most significant awareness came with the realization that I, as diminutive as I seem, do have an effect on it.

At one point or another, each of us chooses a path in life to follow. Sadly, many of us become disoriented and distracted, our objectives undermined, our perseverance weakened, and we put our life’s compasses away thereby losing our direction. But that True North still exists inside each of us as it did inside my own heart when I was first learning about the feats of polar explorers. Each of them had a lofty and seemingly unattainable goal. Each had a noble cause to pursue. Some succeeded, some did not, but they all followed their hearts. Up there at 90-North, I discovered my own True North, and since then have shifted my energy to the preservation and conservation of all polar regions from both ecological as well as anthropological perspectives.

I have spent time with the Saami tribes in Lapland of Sweden whose nomadic lifestyle depends mainly on the caribou they raise and follow. I have learned about the Siberian Dolgans and the many other Inuit indigenous peoples of Greenland to Nunavut to Alaska whose very cultures and subsistent existences depend on Arctic wildlife. If the animals themselves are threatened by climate changes, so are the people.

2007-2008 has been declared International Polar Year (IPY) by the International Council for Science in conjunction with the World Meteorological Organization, supported by the commitments of over 50 nations to pioneer new polar studies of human-natural systems that are critical to societal, economical and strategic global interests. One of the main goals for IPY is to engage and involve the public by pointing out the impact the polar regions have on our global climate system.

My last two years have been spent developing an outreach educational program under the name of 90-north that I bring into the 3rd, 4th and 5th grade classroom which supports that IPY objective. Similar educational programs are already in place for high school and college students, but my conviction is that it is the younger student who can take the messages I teach even further. I am able to stimulate their curiosity and hopefully inspire them to become explorers themselves, to stand at the Pole in their imaginations, to understand how polar bears hunt, to live like the Inuit.

I invite the students to “GET POLARIZED” and to increase their understanding by touching, holding, and feeling the polar artifacts I bring along which they would otherwise only view through glass at a museum. I am a witness to the children’s sense of awe and wonder, and I have received many letters from the students asking a thousand more questions. They are easily motivated, and my goal is to encourage them to become ambassadors of environmental conservation and conscientious stewards of our planet’s future.

As a UN/DPI representative of the World Federation of Ukrainian Women’s Organizations NGO, I am proud to have been elected to participate in the planning of this coming September’s United Nations conference on “Climate Change”. This topic has taken on increased urgency and must follow the resolution according to the UN’s Rio Declaration on Environment and Development: "Our challenge is to accelerate the needed change in thinking about our relationship to the environment in order to shift the pattern of our civilization to a new equilibrium -- before the world's ecological system loses its current one."

My past involvement in various environmental and ecological endeavours such as those whose missions strive to mitigate the consequences of the Chernobyl explosion, provides me with the necessary expertise which I can hopefully bring to the table. The sub-committee I am currently working with will provide the networking for various groups around the world whose voices and particular issues may not otherwise be heard. It is important for everyone in the global community to be made aware of how climate change affects the lives of even the smallest of ethnic groups, be it on the Siberian plains or the mountains of Peru or the smaller islands around Sumatra. This can only be accomplished through education and the dissemination of information which the NGO/DPI conference will hopefully help facilitate by bringing to our attention various dynamic solutions for conservation of global diversity and promoting environmental sustainability. I intend to do my part with as much focus as it took to finally realize my dream of reaching the North Pole. And here on the floor of the United Nations, the magnetic pull of my True North’s ideals thrives.

I end with a quote by Robert Schuller which encapsulates my personal philosophy:

“I’d rather attempt to do something great and fail than to attempt to do nothing and succeed.”