

Conversations with the Sun and Little Men on Mini-Triceratops Dinosaurs

by Moki Kokoris

Felicity Aston is the first woman in the world to cross Antarctica... *alone*.

Only two other people had accomplished the same feat before her, both of them Norwegian men. It was on January 22, 2012, that Felicity's arrival in Hercules Inlet brought the 34-year old British explorer's 59-day, 1,744 kilometer journey to a close... a journey during which she experienced what she calls "a whole new league of aloneness."

A candy originally named "Opal Fruits," now known as "Starburst," was the reward with which Felicity's parents bribed her up Helvellyn Mountain in England's Lake District at the age of nine. With that achievement (if even tempered by misty rain) began her impressive career as an adventurer, climate scientist, physicist, polar explorer, expedition leader, public speaker and freelance writer.

After receiving a Masters Degree in Applied Meteorology from the University of Reading in the UK, Felicity accepted the position of Senior Meteorologist with the British Antarctic Survey and spent three summers and two winters consecutively at Rothera Research Station on Adelaide Island off the Antarctic Peninsula. As her biography lists: "She has also raced in the Canadian Arctic, led a team of women across the inland ice of Greenland, led a record-setting international expedition to the South Pole, searched for meteorite craters in Quebec, skied along a frozen river in Siberia, traversed the winter ice of Lake Baikal, and completed the infamous Marathon Des Sables across the Moroccan

Sahara." As of the printing of this publication, along with two teammates, Gisli Jonsson and Manu Palomeque, Felicity has embarked on a new endeavor called the "Pole of Cold: Winter Expedition"—a three-month, 3,000-kilometer journey that will chase winter across northern Europe and into Siberia toward Oymyakon (population 475) in the Sakha Republic of Russia, also known as the Pole of Cold—the coldest inhabited place in the world. The expedition can be followed on its dedicated website, <http://poleofcold.com/>

While many of Felicity Aston's experiences are described in her books (*Call of the White: Taking the World to the South Pole* [Summersdale, 2011] and *Alone in Antarctica* [Summersdale, 2013]) and in many articles in which she has been featured, *The Polar Times* recently engaged her in a Skype interview during which some less common questions were posed for her to answer. We are pleased to share portions of the interview here.



TPT: As a young elementary grade school student, when asked what you wanted to be when you grew up, what did you say?

FA: I went to a Roman Catholic school and we were taught that nuns were good people who helped others. On that basis I decided I was going to be a nun when

I grew up. I soon realized there was more to it and that I probably wasn't suited. The only other profession I remember ever catching my imagination was seeing wing-walkers at an air show—ladies propped up on the upper wing of biplanes doing aerobatics. I decided that was a pretty awesome way to make a living.

TPT: Since we must presume that some readers are first learning about you and your endeavours here, could you share with us when the first

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Felicity Aston brandishing the national flag of the United Kingdom upon her arrival at the Geographic South Pole.

thought of taking on the challenge of crossing Antarctica alone entered your mind? Was it a childhood dream?

FA: The idea of crossing Antarctica alone has been in my head for so long that I'm not sure when or where it first appeared. Every expedition I have put together has been a little more challenging than the last in some way, so perhaps it was partly a natural progression—combined with curiosity. I wanted to know what it would feel like to be in such a place completely alone, to have that vastness to myself. I was curious to know how I would react and whether I would or could cope.

TPT: After the "Alone" expedition, is the concept of solitude more or less meaningful to you? Did your sense of solitude evolve; in other words, is it now a friend or foe?

FA: I have always been very comfortable in my own company, and that hasn't changed—but I think that I now appreciate the true meaning of isolation. I know how truly terrifying it can be and that it changes the way we behave. This deeper understanding hasn't made me fear being alone necessarily, it has just made me aware of just how precious my relationships with others are and made me see clearly how we are shaped as people by those relationships and connections.

TPT: What is your proudest or most rewarding achievement to date?

FA: Wow—this question has me stumped. I have thought about it long and hard. I'm proud of each and every one of my expeditions because they have all taken so much effort and determination and belief to pull together. I'm also proud of the two books I've written—I still get a swell of pride every time I see my name on a spine in a bookshop. But perhaps what I'm most proud of is the fact that I've managed to make a living out of doing what I love. It hasn't been easy—and it's still not a given—but I'm very proud of myself for not giving up, for fighting to carve out a life for myself that is unique to me.

TPT: Did you bring a good luck charm (lucky socks) with you on your trek across Antarctica? Were there any superstitions that developed during your journey? What was your most precious item that you had with you (not counting your sat-phone connection)?

FA: Weight is so critical that I am very strict with myself in cutting out all non-essential items, including books, journals, lucky mascots and treat ... but ... I did wear a stone from New Zealand around my neck that has come with me on all my expeditions, a small locket my sister gave me as I left, and a tiny St. Christopher from my aunt.

I certainly developed plenty of superstitions during my journey. Every time I skied away from any place I had camped, I made a point of pausing to thank aloud the ground and the space for looking after me so well. Perhaps most significantly of all, I developed a very real relationship with the Sun. It started off by simply saying "good morning" to



The "Pole of Cold: Winter Expedition" team: (L to R) Gisli Jonsson, Felicity Aston and Manu Palomeque, training in Iceland with a Land Rover Defender.

the Sun as I got out of my tent at the start of each day—but this quickly developed into talking to the Sun as I skied along. The worrying part was when the Sun began to talk back, in my head. It turned out that the Sun was a rather difficult character. I began to believe that it was necessary to flatter and compliment the Sun, otherwise I risked the Sun refusing to turn up the following day!

It is difficult to decide on a single most precious item—I adored my stove, the noise it makes when you light it, that reassuring roar that tells you that you will be warm in a matter of moments—I adored my down gilet that I wore nearly all the time and the down booties that were so deliciously warm as they slid onto my weary feet at the end of each day—but above all, perhaps my most precious items were baby wipes and moisturizer. I had a daily ration of a single baby-wipe that I'd use to wipe my face free of all the grease and sweat of the day and to have a very perfunctory wash. It was psychological more than anything else—it made me feel human again!



Felicity is often an invited guest speaker at conferences and corporate functions, and it is during these talks that she lays bare her emotions that are frequently interspersed with humorous and entertaining anecdotes about her experiences. The solo Antarctic crossing not only offered her a new perspective from which to better understand the true definition and nuances and variations of the term "alone," but it revealed the tricks an alone mind can play on its possessor.

As she shares with her audiences, after days of seeing a nearly identical landscape, and starved of data by the austere surroundings and the white noise of the wind, the brain begins to fill in the gaps with hallucinations. In addition to open conversations with the Sun, there could be a distinct aroma of freshly baked bread that would accompany her skiing for hours at a time, or there was a sensation of floating as she slept. But it was the visual apparitions that seem most remarkable by comparison. Sastrugi often transformed themselves into mountain ranges, floating hands would either audibly applaud her progress or point the way forward, and perhaps most amusing of all were the visions that came

during whiteouts. On one of those vacuous days, out from the disorienting blankness, a small bald-headed man emerged from his hiding place, evidently disturbed by the cavalier passerby. No sooner was he gone

Looking at the view from her tent on the Antarctic Plateau. (Photo: © Felicity Aston)

that another little figure appeared, this one riding a tiny Triceratops dinosaur. More belligerent than the first, the second man shook his fist in annoyance at Felicity as he galloped off into the blizzard on his bonsai Late Cretaceous "steed." Paradoxically, these scenarios seemed perfectly normal, even rational in the context of Antarctica's isolation. Situation normal—likely a reflection of the desire for companionship compounded by the profound level of exhaustion.

Long after her return home, Felicity would feel a sense of guilt for not conversing with the Sun on a daily basis, and she admits that on occasion she still gives the Sun a quick covert wave to assure it she hasn't forgotten its steadfast loyalty and protective friendship.

As Felicity and her Pole of Cold expedition team continue on their journey across Arctic Scandinavia and Siberia through the months-long darkness of the polar night, we can only wonder whether there will be equivalent conversations with the Moon and Orion or the dancing swashes of the Northern Lights. And if there are, what languages will they speak? ☞



Felicity and the Sun enjoy their camaraderie in Horseshoe Valley.