

Oh to Breathe Again

"I long to cry to the God of my youth, but the God of my youth will not hear my cry.

I must change my God or change my cry."

Large sheets of salt water crashed over the bow of the Blue Surveyor as we charged head long into the tumultuous sea. Twelve novice and anxious divers shielded our faces from the stinging water while clinging to the side railing. Occasionally we tentatively waved to the similarly drenched occupants of our companion boat, the Firewalker. The dark and swirling skies made evident that a typhoon had touched the tip of the island the night before, the remnants still threatening. This portentous scene was nothing like the four-color brochure that lured us to this tropical paradise.

After what seemed an eternity, we slowed down and circled. The captains of the two boats miraculously located the small white buoys bobbing in the giant swells. A crewmember snagged our line with a long pole and attached the cable to the boat. We had arrived at the site, the outer edge of Beqa Reef on the southern tip of Fiji.

Our dive masters gave us last minute instructions while we quickly donned our gear. More than ready to get below the storm, we carefully timed the swells and jumped in two-by-two. This was Ramona's and my eighth open water dive.

The waves tossed us like beach toys rendering our snorkels useless. Using our regulators to draw brief gasps of air, we slowly worked our way along the connecting rope to our companion boat. Here we found the mooring line that would lead us down to the coral head sixty-five feet below. After a brief equipment check, I gave the okay sign to Ramona and we began our descent.

We pulled ourselves hand over hand down the cable into the depths while fighting the strong surge. As we reached twenty-five feet, then thirty, the surge seemed to subside.

At fifty feet we encountered a traffic jam, a panicked diver already heading back up the line. Contrary to the stern warnings from the dive masters, I decided to let go of the line and swim the last fifteen feet to the coral head. The moment I released my grip, the current swept me away.

Kicking frantically, I desperately grabbed for the line, but with my distorted depth perception the cable was much farther away than it looked. Just as I felt myself slipping over the edge of exhaustion and panic, I was finally able to grab Ramona's outstretched hand. Heart pounding and barely able to catch my breath, we resumed our descent.

When we reached the coral head I was reluctant to let go of the line, but did. I was delighted to discover that in such a short distance the current had almost completely subsided.

We traveled almost due west along the coral reef for a hundred or so yards, descending another twenty feet to a sandy ocean floor. As promised, we found the horizontal rope that marked our destination.

Twenty-five feet beyond the rope, two large perforated aluminum trash cans hovered in the water, anchored to the ocean floor by ropes. Placed there the day before in anticipation of our dive, they had been leaching fish blood into the surrounding water. We anxiously watched as four dive masters took up positions as sentinels behind us, long pointed spears in hand. We turned to watch a fifth diver who was approaching the barrels when suddenly our field of vision was completely filled by a five-foot Grouper.

Gaining composure, Ramona looked at me, held her hand to her heart and patted her chest. It's hard to smile with a regulator in your mouth, but if we could have we would have.

We checked our air gauges. We had each started with 3,000 pounds of compressed air. Surprisingly, my gauge now read 1,100 pounds — nearly two-thirds gone. I quickly signaled one of the dive masters; he instructed me to be calm and stay where I was. I turned back just in time to watch the fifth dive master empty the contents of the trash cans — bloody fish parts. I attempted to breath shallow in an effort to conserve air but the anticipation of what was about to happen sabotaged the attempt.

Just a few months earlier I had purchased dive certification as a unique Mother's Day gift for Ramona. Now we stood side-by-side,

holding onto a thin rope, my air dissipating quickly, thousands of miles from home, ninety feet below the water's surface, a storm raging above us, intentionally diving with sharks. Are we crazy?

Sensing the promise of good prey, these torpedo-shaped predators had been patiently waiting some seventy-five feet off, just outside the range of visibility. Now they began slipping silently into view. The first one in was a huge bull shark. It confidently and effortlessly glided through the water heading directly for the alluring meal. Unexpectedly it was not scary, but of course there weren't any sound effects or ominous music.

Hardly able to take my eye off of this graceful creature, I quickly glanced again at my air gauge: 900 pounds and dropping fast. I felt a familiar surge of adrenaline. At this depth, even shallow breaths consumed a lot of compressed air and I wasn't breathing shallow. I touched Ramona's arm and she turned to see the gauge. Not good. I again signaled one of the dive masters, more urgently this time, and he quickly motioned me to come with him. I motioned for Ramona to stay with the group, turned my back to the sharks and followed the dive master.

Within moments I felt something nip at my fin. I instinctively jerked around to face my fate. There were sharks in the area but no imminent threats other than a very vivid and active imagination, at least not yet. We resumed our journey.

The dive master took me on a circuitous route around the coral reef while doing his best to avoid incoming sharks. As we crested the coral head, the mooring line was finally in sight. I stopped kicking, paused for a moment, looked behind me and exhaled a deep sigh of relief. Ramona was in the hands of experts and safe and there was only 70 feet between me and the mooring line that would take me to safety.

I attempted to inhale. Instantly a tsunami of terrifying emotions crashed over me ripping apart every remaining fragile fiber of sanity.
My tank was empty. I was out of air.

I had been trained for this moment a few weeks earlier - in a community swimming pool - but I was nearly seventy feet underwater, surrounded by feeding sharks with a violent storm raging above us.

I want you to inhale deeply through your mouth. Go ahead: pull in as much air as you possibly can, until your lungs are at their full capacity. Now hold your breath just for a moment as you presence yourself in your current life circumstances - relationships, career, state of your finances. Are you present? Can you see it? Can you feel it? Now slowly exhale through your mouth. When all the air has been exhaled, push with your diaphragm to force out any last vestiges of oxygen. Now - hold your breath as long as you can while you read the next paragraph.

Do you feel as if you are drowning in debt, self-doubt, fear, confusion or overwhelm? Are you single, aching for a deep, meaningful and committed relationship? Are you a young

mother buried in laundry, dishes, poopy diapers and the constant demands of little children? Are you stuck in a boring, mundane and repetitious dead-end job? Have you poured your life and life savings into a business that is struggling and nearly out of air? Are you paralyzed by an abusive relationship, lingering addiction or shame from a past mistake?

Are you gasping for air, out of oxygen, out of energy, out of money, out of faith, or out of hope? Does it ever look like it's never-ending? Does it ever seem unsolvable? Do you ever feel like all is lost? Is it like you're seventy-five feet under water, tank empty, surrounded by flesh-eating sharks and slipping over the edge of exhaustion and panic and there is no one to rescue you?

Do you hunger and thirst for success, happiness and peace of mind? Are you willing to do whatever it takes to breathe again? Breathe.

As you have probably guessed, I was not eaten by sharks that day, nor did I drown. But I did come away from that ocean experience with a new appreciation for air and the power and poetry of breathing.

The moment I realized my oxygen tank was empty, I lunged forward kicking as hard as possible until I touched the dive master's fin. As he turned to look, I signaled my crisis by slashing my open fingers quickly across my neck. In one instantaneous motion he swept his arm

back, located his spare regulator and positioned it in my mouth. With a grateful heart nearly leaping out of my chest I welcomed a long draw of the fresh oxygen mix.

Oh, to breathe again.

We soon reached the mooring line and made our ascent, stopping just once along the way for a critical few minutes of decompression. Soon I was sitting safely on deck of the Blue Surveyor inhaling great gulps of delicious salt-tinged air while being warmed by the sun that was peeking through the thick clouds. I was grateful for my modest training. I was deeply grateful for an expert dive master. I was grateful to see Ramona when she surfaced safe and sound.

I have reflected on this defining moment many times since. We had received basic training and passed a simple test. Certified to dive, we courageously jumped in. Early in the journey we encountered dangerous seas and used precious air just getting to the mooring line – just getting started. On the way down I had violated a basic rule by letting go of the line prematurely believing I knew more than the dive masters. This mistake cost critical volumes of compressed air and could have caused serious if not fatal injury. As a result of this misguided decision, I had to abandon Ramona at the bottom of the ocean to focus on my needs and a rapidly developing crisis.

When I ran out of air, I was in real need. This was not a situation that could be resolved with sheer determination, raw will power,

visualization, a clever aphorism, affirmation or a motivational speech. I could not just gut this one out. I was out of air and could not breath.

This was not the time to resent my circumstances. This was not a time to wallow in self-pity. This was not a time to draw a line in the sand at the bottom of the ocean and cling to my independent, resistant and often rebellious nature. This moment required immediate and decisive action; there was not a second to waste. It also required assistance from my experienced dive master who had been in this situation before and who had air to spare. It required that I ask for guidance. It required that I do my best to stay level headed and strictly adhere to the directions given. It was my thinking that got me into this mess. It was time to surrender.

Let's go deeper. This experience was a vivid reminder of another defining moment. We had lost millions of dollars in the real estate collapse in Southern California in the late 1980's. We were facing the prospect of paying back a million dollars in personally guaranteed corporate loans and other personal debts accumulated while trying to save our business, fortune and lifestyle.

We barely sold our dream home before the mortgage became delinquent but had to drop the price significantly to do so. The net proceeds were immediately consumed by creditors. The Mercedes, Ferrari and Corvette were gone. The custom 40' bus was gone. The ATVs were gone. The Brian Head condo was gone. The live-in housekeeper, fulltime gardener and the children's tennis coach were long gone. Years

of gut wrenching work along with the millions accumulated had all evaporated into thin air.

For the previous five years, and only as an avocation, I had been writing, directing and producing educational films on social causes such as teenage drinking and driving, acquaintance rape, emotional, physical and sexual child abuse. It was time to convert this avocation into a career. Thirty-five years old and with everything that was left loaded in two Ryder trucks, we packed up our seven children and relocated to a new city and state.

Sales from these educational films, mainly to schools, school districts and the US government, kept us afloat. I worked closely with our creditors while tenaciously studying story structure and tirelessly writing eight to ten hours a day, six days a week, all in an attempt to make my skills commercially viable.

For Ramona and our seven small children it was quite an ordeal maintaining the peace and quiet to facilitate this re-tooling. Thanks in large part to their willingness to support this endeavor; I was able to complete four original feature length scripts in less than two years.

Then one day it happened. With the stroke of a pen, legislative changes dried up funding for purchases of our films. What little income we had ceased. It wasn't very long and the modest reserve created mostly by selling the last of our personal treasures was gone. We had reached the end of the road. It was a living nightmare that every young father fears most and one from which we could not awaken. I was a

proud man with a proud heart. I was a hard worker. This was not right. This was not fair! Why was this happening to us, again?

In the darkness of the darkest night, buried in debt, doubt and discouragement, every option that I knew thoroughly exhausted, my tank empty, completely out of air, I audibly cried out in excruciating pain, "I long to cry to the God of my youth, but the God of my youth will not hear my cry. I must change my God or change my cry."

Sometimes we need to reach this point in our life, a pivotal moment where we are ready and willing to do whatever is necessary to create change. We live in a world where we are taught that vivid visualization creates tangible reality. We live in a day when people want to escape and avoid the rigors of life seeking self-centric ease instead of creating value and making a contribution. We live in a time in history when more is known about human interaction yet we have never been more disconnected.

Having witnessed the failure of our mothers and fathers, we live together often uncommitted and are far too often very alone. Behind the walls of hate and suspicion which we have built round our hearts and which we present to the world, private storms rage, souls ache, hearts break, self-esteem is undermined leaving us with little or no energy to willingly focus on the needs of others.

Battered by the baseball bat of life, we suffer the bruises of failure and the wounds of mediocrity. We are so ripe for change. If our wall is high it may take the loss of almost everything before we will

introspectively examine our lives and surrender to the truth. I was finally ready.

The answers unfolded and it was not pretty. I had been focusing on me. I had been telling myself that my “why” was about my family – a noble and altruistic cause. My real why – the secret desire of my heart was to be wealthy enough to get above it all, to live a life of luxury free of stress, pain and frustration. I was seeking what Og Mandino calls the “delivery of gold, love, good health, petty victories, fame, success and happiness.”

That night it became readily apparent that my wishes could not be granted and my prayers could not be answered. I discovered that prayer and desired success just don’t work that way no matter how much I wanted it to be different - no matter how many books supported my way, no matter how many speeches and speakers taught it.

With clarity came a newfound desire to engage in life, embrace time-tested principles, connect with people, create value and contribute to the world. I willingly let go of the desire for ease. I willingly let go of anger and resentment. I willingly let go of fear and self-pity. I willingly surrendered my resistant and rebellious nature. I willingly gave up the need to be rescued.

This required a radical change in the way I was thinking. I would need to radically change my cry.

In the little, yet poignant book, *As a Man Thinketh*, James Allen writes, “Let a man radically alter his thoughts and he will be astonished

at the rapid transformation in the material conditions of his life.” I stand as a witness that this is true.

With a new “why” in development, a why that was congruent with the power that governs abundance, came a new focus. Instead of seeking wealth for the sake of ease, I began to focus on the acquisition of ability believing that opportunities would present themselves just as soon as I was ready.

Og summed up this process nicely in one pithy and cogent sentence, *“I ask not for gold or garments or even opportunities equal to my ability; instead, guide me so that I may acquire ability equal to my opportunities.”*

Within a month, a phone call came and the first door opened, an opportunity to write a script. I had paid the price to acquire ability and was ready. It was easy to apply the principles and practices to the script writing process. It worked and I was offered another opportunity. My trust and faith was growing. Then came the third and with it an opportunity to direct a project.

I was not the best writer or best director, not by a long shot, but knew a great secret and it was my “greatest weapon and none on whom I called could defend against its force” – focus on the people and solving their problems.

Two hundred projects later, I wrote out the last \$14,000 check and mailed it to the bank. What a stark contrast from the dark nights when the light of hope had been extinguished and death would have been

welcomed. That which only a few years earlier seemed impossible was now an accomplished deed.

It is with reverence that I reflect on another pivotal moment, the evening after sending the check. The moment caused me to spontaneously fall to my knees and express heart-felt thanks. My “why” had changed, ability had been acquired, and doors of opportunity opened. Principles and practices being taught were applied, walls came down and miracles manifested and success was realized.

As thankfulness was expressed to my now trusted partner, He asked only one simple question, “What lesson did you learn?” The answer rolled off my tongue then and echoes today as a constant reminder any time disconnected surfaces, “You open the doors of opportunity and I do the work.” The response in return was warm and reassuring, “Lesson learned.”

My work had become passion-driven action. I was excited to get up every morning and take on life. Before this transformation work was far too often boring, mundane and repetitious. What a huge difference between these two approaches to life. One drives intentional creation and the other destroys energy, enthusiasm and commitment.

This work is the fulfillment of the promise I made on that darkest of dark nights many nights ago, “If you will show me how to get out of this dark pit and how to actually create worthy dreams in tangible reality, I will spend the rest of my life assisting others to do likewise.”

Are you ready to breathe again? Are you ready and willing to surrender to the real secrets of success? Are you willing to do whatever it takes to learn and apply the principles and practices and become an Intentional Creator of your life? Do you want to live your dreams in tangible reality? My mission is to heal torn bodies and torn minds, one person at a time. If you are ready, let's begin the journey.

Oh to breathe again!