

Adventures in happiness

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A lion, a donkey's head, and moving on in life

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A lion, a donkey's head, and moving on in life

"Ready John?" shouted Cat.

"Ready," I shouted back, failing to sound convincing, and grabbing the ears of the donkeys head, I lifted it off the truck. The head felt warm, its fur thick and bristly, and as I got an idea of its weight in my hands, blood dripped over my trainers. And these were my new and expensive trainers.

The head was heavier than I expected it to be, but it was too late now, I was committed, and I looked up at the fence I hoped to clear.

On the other side paced Obi - a five-year-old male lion, and, in the moment, I couldn't help wonder if this head represented my past life. Not that I'd ever decapitated anyone, but what better way to move on from something than by feeding it to a lion!

In the distance I heard a countdown of "three, two, one, go," and I swung the head back, and launched it through the air.

At first, for a donkey's head, it flew well. But, as it clipped the top of the enclosure, I wasn't sure it would make it or fall back at my feet. But it cleared, the lion pounced, gripped the skull between his jaws, and dragged it off into the long grass.

"Did you get that?" I turned and asked the Norwegian film crew stood beside me.

"We got it," they replied and gave me a thumbs up and a smile.

I gave them a big grin in return. Because today was Monday, and I was volunteering at a big cat sanctuary in the Western Cape, South Africa. And as my mind drifted back to the office job I'd left nine months ago, I knew my life could not have been any different.

Which was what I had wanted, and perhaps needed, from the start.

Chapter 1 Hitting the reset button

March 2015

The only way to create sustainable change is to reset the norm - Andy Cope - professional trainer, and author.

~ Take the opportunity ~

I dropped the envelope into the post box and gave a sigh of relief. My decision was made, and it felt good. The envelope contained my acceptance of the voluntary severance offer to leave the organisation I'd worked for since I was sixteen years old.

The Human Resource team would receive the letter in a few days. I would then receive a leaving date and a goodbye presentation, someone would cut up my pass, and I would walk out the door and not come back. Twenty-one years and no more. Thanks for your service John, and goodbye.

But this decision hadn't been easy. In fact it took months of procrastinating plus a few yoga classes to settle my mind before I committed myself. Not just because I was giving up a decent wage and a final salary pension scheme, but it went against my societal conditioning of being safe, comfortable, and secure.

But none of that mattered anymore. I was ready to try something new, and it wasn't because I no longer enjoyed my work. I hoped to find value in taking a break, getting out of my comfort zone, and having chance to experience a different way of life. And this would not be possible with a few weeks holiday a year. I'd realised if I wanted to make the most of my life I needed to make things happen for myself. Because if I didn't, I would be in exactly the same place next year.

It's also worth mentioning that the opportunity to take voluntary redundancy didn't come about on its own. In fact, I'd worked hard to encourage it through negotiations with managers for a year, and it was my third application to leave before I got the chance. But why was

that so important? Because it helped get me moving. Not only for the financial buffer, but it positioned me where I had no more excuses. It was now, or never.

Once HR received my letter, they told me I had four weeks left at work. It wasn't long, and as I wrapped up my projects as best I could, then said goodbye to friends, I had little chance to think about next steps.

Then the day arrived, and as I sat waiting for my customary leaving presentation, I was a mixed bag of thoughts and emotions. I still had nothing planned, and I would leave that day. The team came in, the laptop turned on, and my leaving presentation began.

I smiled as I received a goodbye ode from my manager Julie, along with positive feedback from my other manager Steve.

Then it was time to go. But as I walked out the glass-fronted office I'd sat in for many years, I had a massive smile on my face. And as I discovered a few weeks later, my fist-pumping-heel-clicking-exit was captured on the security camera. I was free!

~ *I was conditioned* ~

As I woke for my new life of freedom, my first thought was *this feels like a holiday*. Because it coincided with the Easter break (and April Fools day), I drove to North Wales to visit friends and family. I hoped a few days away would help me transition into my new life.

What was strange to notice was how relaxed I seemed. It was like an extended vacation. But with hindsight, I may have been in denial I'd just quit a good job with no plan of what to do next!

As I drove I let the thoughts of what I wanted to do run through my mind. *I could travel, maybe volunteer, perhaps even retrain*. But nothing seemed to stick. Then I remembered what a friend had said a few days ago.

"You realise you have an open book," he said, "so come on, what's the plan?"

But I didn't know 'the plan' and part of me suspected it wasn't as simple as one thing. So I pushed the

thoughts to the back of my mind and concentrated on the journey. An hour later I arrived at the crescent-shaped bay of Rhosneigr, on the Isle of Anglesey.

Although Anglesey is far from my home in Derby, I consider it one of my favourite places in the UK to practice my passion of kitesurfing. As I looked over the sandy beach and the rugged mountainous backdrop of Snowdonia National Park, the weather seemed fine. I got the familiar excitement of being close to the ocean, able to chase the wind and the waves.

The next ten days passed by fast as the Easter holidays happened. I caught up with friends, climbed Mount Snowdon, and spent time kitesurfing. But as people returned to their daily lives, reality hit me. My time in Wales had been a fun distraction, but now I needed to decide what I wanted to do. Which is where I struggled.

For most of my life I'd turned up, done what was asked, and rushed home to spend my pay-cheque. Now I had to make active choices which affected the rest of my life. It was proving as unnerving as it was empowering.

So, with the realisation this transition wasn't as easy as first hoped, and a head full of ideas but no firm decision, I drove back to Derby to figure out what to do next.

~ The problem is choice. The solution is easy ~

A few days had passed since I'd returned from Wales.

As I sat in my house in the Midlands, I succumbed to the fact the honeymoon period had ended. What had begun as a high culminated in a low. To make matters worse, it had begun to rain.

As I gazed through the window, I zoned out and watched beads of water forming on the glass. They left tiny trails of bubbles as they fell. And for the first moment since I left work, I doubted what I had done.

I then jumped as I felt a pain in my thigh. "Agghh," I shouted and looked down. My cat, Mitsy, had

jumped, dug her claws into my jeans, and now hung off my leg. As usual, she wanted feeding. But she had also brought me back to my self inflicted predicament. Of course I hadn't made the wrong decision. I just found it hard to decide what I would do next.

I wondered then if I could have been better prepared. *Perhaps*, I thought to myself. Yet I didn't need to have life all figured out, but I needed to make my choice, and quick, because there was a risk I would end up where I started. Because that's what we sometimes do as humans. Even when we have a choice, we follow what we know, stay comfortable, and repeat our patterns.

As I lent back in my chair and unpicked the cat's claws from my jeans, I relaxed. Then I saw the funny side. What a paradox to have gone from no-freedom to overwhelmed by options overnight! I gave it more thought and concluded an adventure would be a great way to shake me up and give fresh perspective. So I decided to travel. It was something I'd always talked about doing. Decision made.

I then researched countries I had an interest in and looked at South America, Europe, and Asia, but it didn't take long to confuse myself. Analysis paralysis they call it, and I was right back to where I started. So I decided on a new approach. Just choose, trust it's the right choice, and change course if needed.

This worked, and I decided to travel Europe in a campervan. This had been a lifelong dream, and I'd bought a campervan a few years ago for this purpose. Once I had made my decision I could think about making things happen.

Happy with where my thoughts led, I found an old map of Europe and scanned the pages for routes. I paused at Spain and noticed Tarifa - the kitesurfing capital of Europe. I'd remembered an email I'd received a few days ago from a friend, Inés, from Portugal.

The email read she planned to visit the Andalusian town in a few weeks time and asked if I wanted to join her and her friends. What good timing.

I kept Tarifa in mind as I looked back at the map, and an idea formed. *What about across the Straits of Gibraltar to Morocco.* As much as Spain interested me Morocco would be more of a travel experience. It was North Africa! Then I remembered discussing travels with a friend Tom I had made on my recent adventure to Wales. He'd mentioned he would be in Morocco in six weeks time and talked about meeting.

I gave it a moments thought and decided that was enough. I would aim for Tarifa, meet Inés, take a ferry across to Morocco, and meet Tom. Perhaps it was in my subconscious all along, but I now had 'the plan'.

~ *A test to see if I was committed* ~

A few days later I took my campervan for an MOT but it failed. I was so annoyed. It had been given the all-clear a few months ago.

My plan had been to leave in a few days, but now I faced an estimated bill of two thousand pounds, plus a delay of four weeks. *The strip down, the welding, the risk of it catching fire while being fixed.* All things I didn't need to hear before embarking on an extended adventure. There was a choice to wait and change my plans, but I didn't want to take it. I guessed this to be a test of my commitment to this adventure.

Instead, I enlisted the help of my Dad to try the work myself. Over the course of the next two weeks, in-between unsettled April weather, supported by cups of tea from my mum, we did what we could. Then I found another garage to finish the job.

As the garage completed the work, I booked a one-way ferry ticket to the north of Spain. There was no procrastination. Just a quick search for a ticket online, click buy, and done. Decision made. I would leave in six days. The campervan wasn't ready, but I had the idea I would work better under pressure. Enough time had passed since I'd left my job and I needed to get moving.

The focused approach worked. As I walked back out of the garage after the campervan retest I was smiling.

My campervan passed its MOT and was now ready to go. I had cut it fine. There were only twenty-four-hours until my ferry departed, but all I had to do was pack my kites, boards, and clothes and I would be on the road.

Then I hit another disaster.

With no warning the head gasket failed on my engine, and water leaked out as fast as I could pour it into the tank! Convinced that I was being told something, I limped to the garage to ask for help.

They gave me two options. Fix the problem which could cost up to a thousand pounds and take four days; or try a sealant developed for the American space programme costing thirty pounds, taking forty-five minutes. If it worked.

In my mind I didn't have a choice. I wasn't waiting any longer, so I asked the mechanics to pour in the sealant. They did, and I stood and waited with my fingers crossed.

At first nothing happened. But then the leak slowed, became a drip, and after thirty minutes stopped. I couldn't believe it. Thanking the mechanics I drove out the garage to a shout of "don't go far because it's only a temporary fix." But I ignored it. I would leave tomorrow regardless.

This adventure was about to begin.

Chapter 2 An adventure into Europe and Morocco

May 2015

If happiness is the goal - and it should be, then adventure should be a priority - Richard Branson - English business magnate

~ This is not a holiday ~

After yesterday's fiasco I said goodbye to friends and family and made the long drive to the South Coast of the UK to board my ferry.

This was it. The start of my adventure. The leaking engine seemed to be OK, but I carried a spare bottle of the sealant which had, so far at least, cured the problem. I knew it was a risk to drive my campervan anywhere, but it was a risk I would take. *And anyway*, I told myself, *what's the worst that could happen*.

Once I'd arrived at Portsmouth, I checked my campervan was OK before boarding the twenty-four-hour Cap Finistère ferry. Everything seemed OK, and I boarded. Now I was committed. We set sail into the Atlantic Ocean and slowly moved towards the north coast of Spain.

Once the ferry settled into a steady pace, I thought back over the last six weeks. If it was anything to gauge by, I suspected I could be in for an adventure and I wondered how I'd cope. I had never travelled on my own before and now I was free to make my own decisions and mistakes. There was no-one else to rely on, and no-one else to blame.

There wasn't much to do on the ferry so I spent the time trying to learn Spanish, spoke to other travellers, and picked up a recommendation for a campsite close to the city. Until now, I'd not considered where I would sleep, but a decent night's rest made sense.

Twenty-four-hours later, once we docked into the Port of Santander, I followed the directions, and checked into a green and shaded campsite. I then tried to

impress the girl behind the reception desk with my new Spanish language skills before deciding to explore the town of Santander.

It seemed a pleasant city, and I had time for a walk before the sun set. But I got locked out the campsite, had to scramble over a security fence to return to my campervan, and got into trouble with the security guards before I could rest! Unsure if excitement or nerves bothered me, sleep didn't come easy that first night.

The following morning, after discussing ideas with travellers on site, I decided to drive to the Picos de Europa mountains. They were not far. Perhaps an hour away, and keen to get straight to travelling I left the campsite early and drove west along the coast road.

The warm weather and easy drive served as a nice introduction to life in Spain. After an hour I turned south and made my way inland until the sights of the tall, grey, mountains came into view. I found an alpine village called Potés, and deciding to base myself, parked my campervan, and explored.

Then a strange thing happened.

As I walked the narrow cobbled streets and explored the medieval style town, I kept seeing the same girl wherever I went. This went on for an hour until, intrigued and distracted by what kept happening, I bumped into her by chance outside a coffee shop. We both saw the funny side of what seemed a predestined meet and agreed to sit and share a drink.

We got on well. She told me her name was Olga, that she was an English teacher from Russia, and nicknamed herself 'The Curious Russian Fox' for her curious nature and love of travel.

Over the next few hours she told me about life in Saint Petersburg, and I talked about my recent changes and current plans. Conversations continued until she stopped and asked me if I knew what I was doing. Confused, I put this down to a language barrier. Of course I knew what I was doing, and I asked her to explain.

“Well,” she said, “you keep saying this is a holiday. But this is more. From what you’ve told me, you are following your own path, and your own purpose.”

Laughing I replied “in that case I know what my purpose is. To travel. At least for now.”

“OK” she continued, “why do you keep calling it a holiday if you are certain it to be more.” She fixed her eyes on me and stared, waiting for my answer.

I stuttered because she was right. I was still thinking of this adventure as an extended holiday. She must have sensed my unease because she let it drop. The conversation then switched to something else, and soon after she said she had to leave.

Because she was heading in the same direction as me, I offered her a lift.

“No it's fine,” she told me. “I’d better not. I must return to my husband. He is sleeping. I am on my honeymoon and came for a walk. But remember what I said, it might be important.”

With that, she smiled, and with a knowing glint in her eyes, turned her back on me and walked away.