

KINDRED SPIRITS ON ADVENTUROUS JOURNEYS

By Ammaji

At last! I am not alone! I have found someone who is a kindred soul! Someone who can understand ! Someone who has undergone experiences similar to my own in running our Ashram's Six Month International Yoga Teachers Training Course (Residential) every year without fail for 45 years.

Her name is Rachael Robertson and she was the leader of an expedition to the Antarctica. She has written a very perceptive, wryly humorous account of her experiences in a book called, "**Leading On the Edge – Extraordinary Stories and Leadership Insights from The World's Most Extreme Workplaces.**"

I chuckled upon reading it, as much of it I could have written myself!

She had been selected to lead an expedition to the Antarctica which was to live there, in extreme conditions, for one year. She worked under the auspices of the Australian Antarctica division.

The living conditions she and her team lived under reminded me strongly of the situation here in our Gurukulam by the sea, Ananda Ashram at ICYER (of course, minus the ice, snow and the penguins). The weather conditions in both places are extreme, albeit at opposite ends of the thermometer – Extreme hot verses extreme cold. (One of my students from Finland sheepishly informed me some years ago, he preferred the cold!)

Ms. Robertson made a very valid observation!

There is nothing tougher than living with a community of strangers, in freezing temperatures, around the clock and with no escape. Well, actually there is, doing all this in a small tent with no running water and no toilet.

Of course, we have in the Ashram a large garden of two acres, private rooms, running water and a toilet. So, we're one notch ahead of the Antarctic expedition! Roberson related the various immense crises she had to face in dealing with interpersonal conflicts in the confined space of a "refrigerator." (In our case, we call our Ashram "an oven")

Little did I know at the time how thoroughly I would be tested. I would need to manage a true emergency as well as negotiate a peaceful settlement to a war about how the bacon should be cooked.

My emergencies centre more around whether brown sugar should be added to the morning herbal tea, whether the fans should be on or off during relaxation in Shavasana and how many chapattis an individual student should be allowed to eat.

Rachael termed the amazing violent conflicts and quarrels which erupted over how bacon should be cooked as “bacon wars.” I would term our similar experiences as “sugar wars” or “fan wars” or “chapatti wars”. The basic cause is the same: cabin fever, pure and simple. She describes her experiences in eloquent style.

In some offices people leaving dirty coffee cups in the sink can drive others to despair; in some investment banks I have worked with the issue is often night traders leaving their dinner dishes or pizza boxes lying around.

I call these things “bacon wars”. I had my head in a book when one of my expeditioners burst into my room. “Boss, we need a stop-work meeting to decide how to cook the bacon.”

You’re kidding, right? I thought . But the obvious anxiety and concern on his face made me check my tongue. On the surface, bacon wars appear to be simple, insignificant things. But dig a little deeper and you’ll find they could be signs of a bigger issue. As it turned out, our Bacon War was a longstanding but undiscussed disagreement about vehicle maintenance!

The lessons she learned were similar to the ones I have imbibed in leading earnest souls in our six month Yoga training into the hazardous wilderness of their own souls, into the jungles of ignorance and the terrors of the sub-conscious traumas and Karmic residues. She said, and I fully, happily and soul-fully agree with her.

I learned an incredible amount about leading through crises. Most of our business training goes into “managing” these events. We have contingency plans, risk plans etc. But the role of the “leader” is just as important. Morale must be maintained and business as usual must continue. Information, visibility and careful choice of words are paramount.

This mirrors my own experience. When facing a crisis of any kind (in such an enclosed atmosphere, every small conflict becomes a crisis), the most important thing is to make sure “business goes on as usual.” In our Paramparai we call this “The 3 R’s : Regularity, Rhythm and Repetition.” The daily duties and the regular rounds must go on, come what mayhem. (One of my students who is a nurse used to say her head nurse’s morning pep talks always included the line – “do your daily duties and make your regular rounds.” A good way to create the strong regularity needed for any systematic organization to function well.)

This truism is well known to disaster relief teams. The most important task is to restore as much “normality of routine” as possible after natural or man – made calamities. Those living in the Ashram know in such a tightly controlled structure, every small thing becomes a crisis. Here, life is lived under a microscope. Swamiji set it up that way,

as the structure is designed to develop Swadhyaya – or self – knowledge. Without Swadhyaya there can be no correct perception of any situation and thus, no Sadhana! Furthermore Swamiji taught us, “Don’t be afraid of crises. They are the opportunity to change.” In fact, the pictogram in Chinese calligraphy which indicates crisis actually means “the opportunity to change.”

In this we have an advantage in our Ashram over the Antarctic Team. Everyone who comes here is dedicated to discovering the truth of their own nature, with all its flaws, faults and greatness too, or they should be, if they are truly sincere in their Yogic search. So, conflicts and crises, and our reactions to them throw back a good mirror image of who we really are. This makes us come face to face with our own nature – to see ourselves clearly without excuses or escapism. Swadhyaya. Man know thyself. To thine own self be true and then it follows as the night the day, thou can’t be false to any man.”

Gurus-guides – leaders of Antarctic expeditions as well as of groups engaged in intense Yoga Sadhana must be conscious, controlled, aware, sensitive and strong as well as diplomatic if they are to succeed in their sacred task of guiding souls through dangerous terrain, whether internal or external. As Ms. Rachael Robertson said so well

Leaders aren’t there to sort out every little spat between team members. But we do have a responsibility to use our judgment and understand the small, interpersonal differences that we all must tolerate, and what behaviors are symptoms of a deeper issue.

She concluded her article on a touching note, a high note that I could also sing after 45 years of either assisting Swamiji or leading aspiring souls along this razor’s edge, this Himalayan climb into the rarified atmosphere of higher conscious awareness.

*I’m often asked if I’d ever go back to Antarctica. That place has a tight hold on my heart, but my life is here now. So would I go back? No, I would not. If I knew then what I know now, would I still have gone? Probably. But, do I regret going? Not for a heartbeat. **“It’s better to die on your feet than to live on your knees.”***

Do I want to lead my life all over again? No, I do not! Do I regret having chosen this difficult path? No, I do not! Not for a heart beat! I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race. I have done my best and now, I leave the rest.

I have spent my life walking the only path I know, the Yoga path, not on my knees! On my feet, with my spine and head erect and my eyes fixed on the stars!