



The Journey

HOW TO ACHIEVE AGAINST THE ODDS

DEBRA SEARLE

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Setting the Scene

Ninety-two days later, Chay Blyth and John Ridgeway rowed the English Rose III towards the rugged coastline of Ireland after an epic adventure into the unknown. At 26 years of age Chay Blyth had successfully rowed the Atlantic, and this is where my story begins.

Three decades later, in celebration of his amazing Atlantic crossing, Chay Blyth had a madcap idea – to organise a rowing race across an ocean! At the time, more people had been to the moon than had rowed the Atlantic, but undeterred Chay gave life to the 1997 Atlantic Rowing Race. It was the first ever rowing race across an ocean. Double-handed teams set out from Tenerife in identical 24ft marine plywood rowing boats, to compete on equal terms over a 3,000 nm voyage, across the Atlantic Ocean to Barbados. Each team had to carry everything they needed to survive including a water maker, freeze-dried food, medical kit, solar panels and boat spares. Outside assistance would result in immediate disqualification.

On a warm June afternoon in 1966, a young Scotsman stood on the beach of a little fishing port near Cape Cod, Massachusetts. In the foreground was a small wooden rowing boat. Beyond stretched the vastness of the North Atlantic Ocean.

The 1997 Atlantic Rowing Race had been intended as a one-off but after its success Chay Blyth saw no reason to end the story there. An east to west race across the Atlantic was planned for every four years and we were determined to be on that start line in 2001. So were a further thirty-five teams of competitors drawn from thirteen countries making it a truly international race.

Andrew and I were the only married team in the Atlantic Rowing Race, and the only mixed sex team in the event. We lined up against thirty-four double-handed mens teams and just one all female team off Playa San Juan Harbour, Tenerife on 7th October 2001.

An epic adventure of vast proportions unfolded over the subsequent four months – perhaps not as we had planned but an epic adventure – for both of us – none the less.

The journey held excitement, disappointment, disqualification, determination, exhilaration, peace, danger, loneliness and many hard, hard lessons. But somewhere along the journey something powerful happened – a personal realisation that I was capable of more. More hardship. More challenges. More joy. More determination. More attitude. More adaptability. More attainment.

My hope is that through the parables told within this small book you too will seek 'more'. And that you too might discover that the journey is as fulfilling as the journey's end.



DEBRA SEARLE
AUTHOR



the journey BEGINS

Mother Nature delivered another blow, her briny waves slapping me across the face.

I spat out the salty water and shook my head, trying to remove the stinging salt from my eyes. She had been a graceful companion as we'd rowed away from Tenerife a few hours earlier, giving us an awe-inspiring start to our race across the Atlantic ocean to Barbados. But now her anger, in the watery form of the Atlantic, was roused.

As the winds picked up and the waves became ferocious I began to see a nervousness in Andrew that I had not witnessed before. The waves were breaking over the boat and although adrenaline prevented us from feeling tired, we felt helpless. We were both being violently sea sick. It was almost dark; we had lost control of the boat and didn't know what to do to regain it. Andrew looked lost.

We were entering the acceleration zone, where all the winds that have funnelled around the Canary Islands reunite, and were having our first taste of what life on the ocean in a small wooden rowing boat was really going to be like. We struggled on through the night, as the stormy conditions enveloped us, refusing to acknowledge that our attempts were

futile against such power. Without moonlight it was impossible to see and respond to the waves. They were intermittently twice the height of the boat, hitting us from all angles and threatening to capsize us. It was our first experience of such conditions. We had little knowledge of, or confidence in, the boat's reactions. Training off the coast of England and Wales had ill-prepared us for what the Atlantic was now, literally, throwing at us. We were left with no choice but to abandon the rowing and take shelter in the tiny cabin, hoping that our deployed drogue would hold us stationary.

On the morning of day two, as light crept onto the horizon, we were able to survey the scene. It was apparent that conditions had not improved.

Andrew woke frustrated that we were still side on to the waves and was convinced that we were doing something wrong. He had found the first night horrendous, imagining that each slapping wave against the side of the cabin was the cracking noise of Troika Transatlantic breaking up.



Andrew was becoming paranoid, thinking we were the only crew caught in the rough conditions and that the other 35 teams must have gained hundreds of miles on us. We began to discuss the options, but not having any answers only increased Andrew's feelings of being out of control. I was optimistic and full of suggestions, but each one was greeted with an uncharacteristically negative response.

"I feel completely out of my depth." Andrew commented unhappily. "I didn't come out here to be thrown in all directions by the waves. I came out here to row and we aren't even able to do that in these conditions."

"The guys from the '97 race told us that the first five days are the hardest" I reminded him.

"I thought they said that getting to the start line was the hardest part!" Andrew snapped.

"Now it's the first five days as well?"

"It will get better," I said. "After five days the sea sickness will have passed, we'll have found our sea legs and we'll be out of the acceleration zone."

I really hoped this was true, particularly the bit about the sea legs. At six foot five inches Andrew was far too big for the boat and was constantly colliding with everything. He was either going to break himself or the boat!

Andrew was quiet for the next few hours, obviously thinking everything through. When he finally responded he said, "Okay, let's give it a go for a few more days then we'll see how we feel".

The seasickness did not return after that first night, but Andrew still found he couldn't eat. On day three after another sleepless night I became increasingly concerned about lack of food and sleep and the effect that this was having on Andrew's ability to think straight. My emotions were in complete turmoil. I was desperately worried about Andrew. But the sun shone, I was surfing down waves and absolutely loving every minute of life at sea. It was hard to believe we could feel so differently about the same experience.



But day eight was the big turning point from which there would be no way back.

Andrew spent the day trying to mend a leaky pump attached to the water maker. He grew more despondent as the hours passed, convinced that he was making the leak worse. He had lost confidence in his abilities and was increasingly self-deprecating. I had never seen this side of his generally stoical and optimistic character before. Perhaps he hadn't either. He had hardly eaten for a week and the weight loss had been dramatic. Panic attacks had prevented him from sleeping and the symptoms of malnutrition and sleep deprivation accelerated his paranoid state.

By the end of that evening heavy rain had begun to fall and the first signs of a storm were evident. I pulled on my Musto waterproofs and crawled through the hatch for my evening shift while Andrew rested in the cabin. I was uncomfortable with the thunder and lightning, but was determined to make the most of the fact that the heavy rain appeared to have flattened the surface of the water. The sheet lightning flashed out of the darkness, violently lighting up my watery 360-degree horizon and set my heart pounding. The low groan of distant thunder sounded like an animal in pain, putting me on edge in the tense moments before the inevitable crescendo.

When the lightning finally crashed it ricocheted across the surface of the water, vibrating in my lungs and left me cowering in the fleecy lining of my upturned collar.

At the end of my two-hour shift I crawled along the deck and sat outside the hatch.

Not wanting to let the rain into the cabin I only opened it slightly.

I shouted over the sound of the rain, drumming on the roof of the cabin:

"Andrew, it's your turn."

Andrew didn't move. I wondered if maybe he hadn't heard me.

"Andrew." Still nothing. I tried some reassurance.

"It's not that bad out here if you put your Mustos on. It probably sounds worse than it is in the cabin with the rain drumming on the plywood."

He still didn't respond, but after the day he'd had, I figured that he probably needed a bit more encouragement.

"Why don't you put the head phones on under your hood and listen to some music while you row?" Nothing.

"Andrew?"

Still only slightly concerned, I stuck my head in further, and was shocked by what I saw.

Andrew had curled his massive frame into the foetal position. He was groaning as if in pain and shaking violently from head to toe. He was obviously terrified.

I had tried encouraging, supporting and being there for him, but it just was not helping. I wondered if maybe I should try being firm.

“Andrew. I need your help,” I pleaded – and then, with an irony I couldn’t have appreciated,

“I can’t row this boat to Barbados on my own. We’re a team. We have to work together.”

I watched him for a moment, his body still shaking, numb and unresponsive.

I knew he wouldn’t make it.

“Well if you aren’t going to help, I guess I’ll have to do it on my own.”

It was an unnecessary and low remark, made to force him into action. But it didn’t.

I returned to the oars for another two-hour shift, filled with frustration.

Why couldn’t Andrew love it out here? I wanted to shout at him to snap out of it and pull himself together, even though deep down I knew he couldn’t. I knew too, that fear can’t simply be clicked on and off like a switch. I felt so terribly sad that he had struggled so far and that I was unable to make it better for him.

Two hours later nothing had changed, except that I was now exhausted. I stripped my sopping clothes into a bin liner and crawled into the cabin next to Andrew. There was no point trying to talk. He had not responded for hours. I realised it would be better to wait until we had both rested.

I woke at five-thirty and found Andrew lying on his back, staring at the ceiling of the cabin with wide eyes. It was hard to believe that I was looking at the same person that I had witnessed curled in a ball just a few hours before. There was a serenity about him, almost a peacefulness. Something had changed.

“I can’t go on.” His voice was calm and controlled. I realised in that moment that he had stopped fighting the fear and had finally given in. That was the source of his peacefulness.

He sounded as if he had been considering his decision all night, but as he said the words I watched a tear roll down the side of his face.

“It’s okay,” I said softly. “I know.” I had known from the minute I had stuck my head through the hatch the previous night and had seen Andrew in a place where he should never have been – way out beyond his fear threshold. It was the right decision – the only decision.

I understood his tears of frustration. We had spent years planning our race entry, raising the funds, building the boat and getting ourselves prepared for the challenge. He had accepted that he had to give up on our dream and it was devastating for him. I longed to take away his pain. Such a big decision wasn’t going to be an easy one to live with.





run_{THE}movie

I suppose the decision to carry on alone should have been a difficult one for me . . . but it wasn't.

I was loving life at sea and that was obvious to both of us. Andrew had never seen me looking so positive and in control. My enthusiasm was shatterproof. No matter how bad it got I seemed to thrive. Despite Andrew's concern for my safety he didn't want to stop me from fulfilling my dream, so he encouraged me wholeheartedly to row on alone.


My head and my heart told me I had to give it a go.

For as long as I can remember I have always wanted to be a professional adventurer. After completing a five day expedition as part of my Gold Duke of Edinburgh's Award at school I began to read books by explorers such as Ranulph Fiennes and other brave men who had tackled Everest or canoed the mighty rivers of the world. My school careers advisor didn't think it was the best idea she had ever heard but I had become passionate about all things adventurous and set my heart on becoming a 'female Ranulph Fiennes'! Life would have been a whole lot less dangerous and less stressful for my parents if I had grown up with a passion for accounting or beauty therapy but I didn't.

This was what I loved doing more than anything else and, delightfully, I discovered that I had quite a gift for living in very uncomfortable conditions and for putting my mind and body through tough times.

But the decision to carry on alone, armed with the knowledge that it may take the support yacht up to two weeks to get to me if I injured myself or capsized the boat, put this adventure on a whole different level to any I had tackled previously. I had never even spent one day alone in my entire life, let alone tackled a solo expedition, so I knew I had to face up to some big questions about whether my heart would still be in it if there was no one else around to watch my back and help me through the hard times.

Thinking back to something Sir Chay Blyth said at our pre-race briefing helped seal the decision to carry on alone. Chay (who rowed the Atlantic with John Ridgway in 1966 and was the Race Organiser) had said to us all.



"As you are rowing across the Atlantic looking down at your little brown toes, ask yourself, 'Am I the happiest I could possibly be?'" CHAY BLYTH



After Andrew and I made the decision for him to be rescued I asked myself Chay's question: "am I the happiest I could possibly be?". I pulled on the oars and drove back with my legs, taking a good look down at my exceptionally brown toes out in front of me on the foot place and I was thrilled that my answer was a resounding 'yes!'. That my heart was still most definitely in it was all the confirmation I was looking for.

As for the head bit, well that had been engrained with a vision of life alone at sea some four years earlier when I read of an amazing solo rower called John Searson. John had rowed the Atlantic single-handed after his rowing partner was forced to retire with a back injury. Not only was I inspired by his phenomenal solo voyage but it impressed on me the need to be prepared for any eventuality — even the possibility of Andrew having to be rescued, leaving me with the decision to carry on alone or quit.

After reading an account of John's journey I decided that if Andrew was forced to retire from the race through injury then I would at least give it a go on my own, as John had. That promise to myself had remained buried in the back of my head throughout the years as we prepared for the race. Being mentally prepared for the possibility that one of us may get injured made the decision to carry on alone so much easier. In fact, to keep that promise to myself, there really was no decision to be made. I only gave myself one option — to go on alone and finish it for both of us.

However, what we hadn't realised when we made the call for the rescue at the end of the first week was that it was going to be another full week before the safety yacht would get to us. By day 13 I had secured, fixed and rearranged everything that would make life safer and easier for me as I continued solo. Little rowing had been achieved. The waiting game continued.

From the dawn of day 14 we were on the lookout for the distinctive pale yellow sails of the safety yacht on the horizon. The mood was a mixture of sadness and excitement for both of us. Andrew was excited to be getting off Troika Transatlantic and I was excited about my new solo adventure — but we hated the thought of being apart. At times Andrew seemed distant. The emotional battle must have been tough for him to deal with. I couldn't decide which of my emotions was dominating: the excitement of embarking on my new solo adventure, the sadness of being separated from Andrew or the relief of knowing he was finally going to be safe and well.



We first spotted the yacht at 1pm.

Trying to find a rowing boat in the Atlantic is like spotting the proverbial needle in a haystack. Even when a yacht is only half a mile away, a rowing boat can be almost impossible to find, as it is constantly lost amongst the waves. It took the yacht crew a further two hours until 3pm to locate us. We finally made radio contact on the VHF and were left with 20 minutes alone before they would draw alongside. It was time to say our goodbyes.



Andrew sat outside the cabin, with his little bag packed, all ready to go: “Just remember, if it doesn’t work out, or if anything happens, we’ll be right back to get you”.

“I know. I’ll probably hate being on my own but I’ve got to try. I’ll always wonder ‘what if if I don’t give it a go.”

“You will stay clipped in, won’t you?”

“Yep.”

Andrew gave me a big hug, “I’m going to miss you,” he muffled, his face buried into my hair.

“I’ll miss you too.”

We held each other and cried.

Andrew’s anguish was obvious: “I don’t want to leave you now.”

“I don’t want you to either.”

There was something rather ominous about watching the safety yacht gliding slowly through the water towards us, its yellow sail apparently growing larger. It looked like the fin of a giant shark. This, I mused, was the thing that was going to be responsible for taking my husband away from me.

Mentally I knew I was ready. I had spent the week doing visualisation exercises to prepare myself. They are the one thing I can rely on to help me feel more in control during life’s more intense moments. I have found that in any intense situation, be it at home, at work or during an expedition, the most effective visualisation exercise for me is a technique I call ‘Run the Movie’, where I run a movie in my head of the impending moment. I see the scene unfolding and imagine experiencing it through every sense in my body – smells, sounds, colours, the things someone might say or do and how I will respond, along with how I am going to feel. Every second unfolds in minute detail. I sometimes play the same movie over and over again, viewing different versions of conversations or events and every time my performance is an Oscar winning performance! In the movie I have all the right answers and handle the situation in the scene in just the right way.

I’m not a great fan of horror movies but the few times I have watched them I have noticed that my ‘run the movie’ technique has exactly the same effect as watching a horror movie for a second time. The first time you put the DVD in the machine and press play you find yourself jumping at the scary bits because you don’t quite know what is going to happen or when. But when you put the DVD in for a second viewing and press play you don’t jump when you get to the scary bits because you know when they are coming and are prepared for them.

By running movies in my head I am effectively preparing myself for the scary scenes in life so that when the impending moment arrives I don’t jump. I’ve seen it before in my head and am prepared for any eventuality. From time to time I think we all feel fear because we don’t know what is going to happen next or how we are going to cope in a given situation but I have found that if I can visualise some of the possibilities then I can limit or even eliminate the fear. This, in turn, makes me feel more in control and has the knock on effect of helping me to perform better.

So that is all I did when Andrew left the rowing boat. I just pressed play and the movie started to run.



burn IT AS fuel

We would never have predicted the way things turned out.

Neither would our friends and acquaintances who all knew of Andrew's pedigree as a successful oarsman. They believed it was me who would struggle at sea, and often made comments to Andrew, suggesting that if he was really serious about winning the race he should go with another man. It never helped my cause when they discovered that I had not rowed prior to entering the Atlantic Rowing Race! We were both amazed by the responses we received when we told people we were entering the Race together. The passing comments and stunned looks we received said it all, especially when we talked to other rowers.

A conversation we had at Henley Royal Regatta was a prime illustration of this pervading attitude. Andrew introduced me to an old rowing acquaintance of his in the Fawley Bar. My friend Joanna King was also with us, and the conversation turned to the Atlantic Rowing Race.

"Who are you rowing with?" asked the six-foot-five-inches (1.95m) tall acquaintance – himself a rower.

"My wife." Replied Andrew, looking Mr Six-foot-five straight in the eyes at matching height.

Mr Six-foot-five immediately turned to Joanna, who is a 6ft lean 'rowing-goddess' of a woman, assumed she was Andrew's wife and started asking her about the race. I was ignored. Standing at five-foot-five (1.65m) the conversation was all taking place way above my head anyway, and I began to feel like a stupid little girl.

"Jo's not my wife" Andrew said, relieving an embarrassed Joanna. "This is my wife." He gestured proudly downwards to my less significant stature. The look on Mr Six-foot-five's face was a picture. It was a mixture of utter disbelief and brazen disgust. After what seemed like an eternity he finally gestured towards Joanna and said:

"Well, mate, if you're going to row the Atlantic with a woman you should at least go with one this size".

The disbelief in my ability continued right up to the point that Andrew sailed away on the safety yacht but the few weeks in Tenerife leading up to the start of the race were definitely the worst. They seem funny now but at the time some of the comments from the other teams were hard to swallow. For example, one young lady who was a family member of one of the other rowers asked me if I would be rowing or if I was going along to do the cooking and cleaning!

Although I laugh now, at the time I was getting pretty sick of it. Enduring endless looks and comments, all of which suggested that I was not big enough, strong enough or in any way skilled enough, began to play on my self-confidence.

I'm someone who used to find it very easy to waste time and emotional energy worrying about things I could not change but my time in Tenerife put a stop to that. It became apparent that I could not change what they thought of my participation in the race, or that I was the smallest competitor with the least rowing experience, so there was simply no point in wasting time and energy worry about it or letting it squash my confidence.

I decided it was time to be proactive rather than reactive so I took every negative comment and stored them all away in the back of my head.

I used to think 'when I get out there in those 30 foot waves I am going to think of you and what you just said to me and I'm going to burn it as fuel'.

Now I love looking back on this time in Tenerife as it is such a powerful reminded to me to focus on the things I can change rather than those things I can't.

When the safety yacht finally reached us they asked me to come on board the yacht briefly to sign a disclaimer. Andrew and I sat down with the skipper Jonathan in the galley and talked through the problems Andrew had been having.

Then we discussed how I would cope on my own.



I couldn't be certain, but deep down I had this belief that I would be able to cope with the journey ahead, so I gave Jonathan an outline of the plans I had been visualising to ensure I would be safe.

"I'm going to make safety my number one priority, obviously." I explained. "I'll stay clipped into my harness if it's rough and always at night."

"We have that policy on the Challenge Yachts – it's a good one to stick to." said Jonathan. "You have to remember that if a wave washes you overboard, the wind would push the boat away faster than you could swim after it."

"I realise that. I've got a flare and the EPIRB (Emergency Position Indicating Radio Beacon) just inside the cabin hatch and we've moved the life raft to the foot well so that it's on deck and accessible."

Jonathan seemed reassured.

"It sounds like you've thought this through carefully and logically."

"We have." I nodded. "We feel certain we're doing what's best for both of us. I really want to give it a go."

Jonathan smiled. "I'm sure you'll do great Debs, but if you don't, just let Race HQ know and we'll be right back."

He grinned at an afterthought. "We've got a DVD player on board, hot showers, stereo, proper food and all the mod cons so we can look after you well if you do decide to give up."

I had no intention of giving up.

I don't think that the race organisers truly believed I could make it on my own so I was grateful to them for letting me try. They actually had good reason to believe that I would not be able to make the 3000 nautical mile journey solo, as two of the double-handed men's crews had already been reduced to one rower and had tried and failed in their solo bids. It was understandable to therefore conclude that I too would not be able to manage the solitude.

However what mattered was that I believed I could make it and I really did.

The sight of Andrew looking so relaxed on the safety yacht was a great relief. The shadow of fear in his eyes had already lifted and the muscles of his face, tightened by stress, had relaxed. Sian, the race nurse, was immediately on hand to help Andrew and that, too, was very comforting in our time of need. I looked forward to having the old Andrew back again. At times I had hardly recognised the man who had been onboard the rowing boat with me for 14 days.

Andrew had been too unwell to row for most of his time on Troika Transatlantic which resulted in us being the most easterly boat in the fleet. The safety yacht had the tall order of having to drop by all of the other rowing boats, firstly to check that they were alright but secondly to make sure that they weren't breaking any of the race rules. By coming to our assistance they were now quite some distance from the front-runners in the race and if they didn't sail after them straight away they wouldn't be able to catch up with the lead boats. Consequently the safety yacht was not able to take Andrew back to Tenerife.

In many ways I was pleased that the yacht had to push onwards as it meant Andrew would arrive in Barbados by sea after all. He would be with a professional crew, on a big, safe, comfortable yacht and with good medical support. It would be an achievement in its own right. Andrew was told that after a day resting he would be integrated into the crew watch rotation and become part of the race safety team. He looked forward to it.

I just didn't feel right on the yacht. Something about the way the tons of steel moved heavily through the water made me feel queasy. The motion just wasn't the same as the rowing boat. I had to get off before I was sick! I couldn't wait to get back on Troika and took that desire as confirmation that I had made the right decision.

Once the disclaimer was written and signed, I was eager to begin my new adventure. Up on deck, the atmosphere was light and happy, as I said my good byes to the crew. They teased Andrew that it was his turn to cook that night. He was in good hands and I felt certain that the banter on board would be a great thing to help Andrew through what had been an extremely heavy-hearted time.

I gave him a big hug and he whispered, "Good luck" in my ear. We had said everything we needed to say. It was time.

I climbed over the rail and lowered myself into the tender, while one of the crew steadied it, holding onto the side of the hull. We cast off and were on our way back towards my beautiful little Troika. I looked straight ahead. There was no turning back now.

My mind was made up.

