

A Journey in the Wilderness: Character, Stickability, Relationships

Twenty four headlamps, pinpricks of light threaded the darkness up Langalibalele Pass towards the summit of the Drakensberg at 04h30 this morning. As the Carbineers' grave emerged from the pale light of dawn, we stepped up into Lesotho to watch an orange sun rise over KZN, taking shelter from the icy gale in the lee of the grave cairn.

Our Journey thus far has been extremely hot and windy. The cycling has again proved to be the toughest section for most boys and it was rewarding to see the stronger riders pushing (or pulling) the slower guys up the tough hills. Seven boys rode all the way up the final hill to Giants Castle.

Hefting full rucksacks to head into the mountains was a welcome change to most.....and those rucksacks were full!!

We have completed the toughest sections of the Journey, the boys have been great and spirits are high as we look forward to the rest and peace of Solitude, followed by a few days paddling down the Thukela River. (Group 1 Day 6 2014)

“ Thank-you for doing everything with us and not just driving past in the vehicle calling out ‘well done boys, keep it up’ “

Teaching is a relational profession. Trusting and authentic relationships between teachers and students are the foundations of good pastoral care. The C Block Journey is a unique opportunity for staff and boys to get to know each-other really well. Few other spheres of school life bind adults and boys in more meaningful relationships than this experience. We share the deprivations of being away from the comforts home. We become dirty, sweaty, thirsty and tired together. We bathe in rivers and dams and drink from mountain streams. We all share ‘Dug’ and the roll of loo paper in the total absence of clean porcelain and water-borne sewage. Together we seek shelter from the weather. We marvel at the sunsets and sleep under the stars and get to know each-other better than we could ever do in the confines of the classroom or sports field. The Journey, in a very short time, elevates teachers to valued mentors who fill the ‘*in loco parentis*’ niche to its full extent.

“Boys’ prefect nominations after the Journey very closely match those of the teaching staff”

Team members, staff and boys, greet each-other differently after the Journey. Levels of respect increase when a staff member, on the cycling leg, takes his turn to push a boy up a steep hill, or shares a kayak with another, for whom the rapids seem too formidable.

Most boys tell us that they would not like to disappoint their leaders, with whom they have forged sound relationships. Inappropriate behaviour mostly ends with eye contact or just a quiet word.

The Journey strips away all facades and exposes us for who we really are. That skinny kid who has never seen the inside of an A or B team, who drags the high profile sportsman up a pass or down a rapid gains a new status in a very short time. The noisy dorm hero, who cares little for his team-mates soon relegates himself to the side-lines of authentic leadership

“I cried when I read the letter from my Dad”

Forty hours alone with no i-gadgets, watch or torch, little food, just letters and writing materials. Many boys tell us that the first night of solitude, is one of the more frightening aspects of the Journey. While the opportunity for unhindered sleep and rest is eagerly anticipated, this is marked with some anxiety. Fear of strange sounds in the dark and the stress of mild hunger are challenges which our boys face for the first time while on solitude. Neither is fun, but both bring new awareness of life outside their extremely comfortable life-zones. There are few opportunities to escape the noise and busyness of life to just absorb the messages of love and affirmation from family and friends; and then to contemplate handwritten responses.

Many receive, for the first time, a letter from their fathers. These special letters are priceless. The paper on which they are written may become muddy, crumpled and lost, but their messages remain etched on hearts. The excited chatter over the end-of-solitude breakfast soon fades to muted tones and we hear snatches of ‘I never knew they cared for me like that...’ Or ‘I can’t wait to see my folks now...’



“Hi Mr Alexander just really want to say that the journey was one of the toughest times in life but at the same time the time I grew more than ever. I was talking to my cacks and they were saying they just had cycling training and I started reflecting on that time. I don't think I really ever fully noticed the growth in high school. But I just want to say thank you so much for pushing and guiding my friends and I, the sacrifices and investment you guys put in us is really amazing, and know that you are much appreciated” (Batebang, Journey 2012)

Research into Character Education tells us that of the most valuable character traits are Empathy and ‘Stickability’, that combination of Integrity, Resilience and Grit. These are difficult to develop with-in the comfort zones of our homes and dorms where we are seldom tired, but have to continue; where we control our surroundings and where all our wants and needs are provided at our whim. The Journey intentionally takes us out of this comfort zone. It is necessarily tough and prevailing, but is designed to allow everyone to finish. It is a Journey, not a race and each group travels as fast as its slowest member. For many, this is the first time that they have had to seek the help of others or, indeed, give that assistance.

Almost without exception, boys acknowledge that one of the things they learn about themselves on the Journey is that they can accomplish things which they did not think possible. Some boys don’t enjoy all parts of the Journey while they are out there, but most appreciate the changes it brings in them once the blisters have healed and they have had a chance to reflect on their own personal journeys.

Everyone who completes the Journey will have developed heaps of stickability; sufficient for any of life’s future challenges.

Paul Fleischack