



How Good Was That?

**An Innocent Looking Hill—
But All Is Not What It Seems**

‘How Good Was That?’

A Golden Door Peak Experience

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I’ve just returned from my Polar monitored early morning-run routine. I began some 4 weeks ago at Golden Door and have learnt to operate my newly purchased health toys: pedometer up to 10,00 a day and pulse meter between 130-160 beats per minute. These are early days as I have many flashbacks to the range of joyous, stressful, surprising and novel experiences during those 7 days.

This week I took time out to look at some of my diary entries, struck by the impressions from the last day’s ‘feedback’ form: ‘overall’ I wrote of my experiences as ‘playful and energetic week; wonderful professional staff; group really friendly and engaged; participated in new activities – acupuncture’s energy theory, Texas two-step, facial massage and skin care, tribal dance with foliage and memorial candle lighting, rugged Frisbee contest, Feldenkrais breathing methods, veggie cooking, dietary learning curve, how to in tennis - serve a second serve not a second fault, life planning, and many talks over hot porridge breakfast, salad lunches, the one promised desert awaited from day one, or just strolling/puffing to and from the cabins, dawn 5.45 wake up - 6.15 am Tai Chi, dusk walk by torchlight after dinner...



This was a world so far away from my daily profession – child psychiatry – which I tried to explain to some who never met one before. But really we shared the same life experiences, personal, family and social challenges, problems to solve and cope with as we all try to negotiate life’s next hurdle. Despite our different ages, we, 45 dedicated health-conscious adults ranging from mid 20’s to 60’s, despite our varied backgrounds and outlooks, we were more alike than different.



What I did not write in my ‘overall feedback’ were the details, the many precious moment-to-moment memories engraved in the ‘playful’ and ‘energetic’ ‘friendly group’ activities and just exactly what it meant to be ‘challenged’. It’s precisely in those fleeting moments that so many joyful memories spring from to live on, in a conversation, dream, prayer, and phone chat or, as now, in my writing. Moments linked from the first encounter at Brisbane airport, filling in health forms, the bus as it entered the Golden Door, the ‘beach-volley ball’ contest, already friendly competition that would replay itself in many settings over the next week, enjoyed won or lost (but how sweet it is to win!), and as I sprawled in the sand, having lost the point, how bitter to not win; David’s dry-humoured running commentary, those ‘pregnant pauses’ his trademark; my less welcome associations to my cabin’s address ‘9B’ as the image of my mother’s address ‘3B’ flashed through my mind, from over 60 years earlier, her ‘home at Auschwitz-Birkenau in 1944-45; against that flashback my health assessment took on a sinister edge, I was being ‘selected’ – not merely to be assigned to a name badge with the ‘green, blue, or pink’ colour code, but that sinister resonance from my family’s Holocaust background might have been the secret added stress reflected in my elevated blood pressure, the highest I’d ever been at 130/95.

Despite the reassurances, ‘today’s stresses probably elevated it – waking at 4 am, airport and flight, I had just wiped the sand from my sweaty face after losing that volley ball contest’ and the undercurrent of a haunting past. My medical professionalism, so effective, so reliable, like a ‘surge protector’ guarding against too much electrical energy to protect valuable electrical appliances, my highly efficient surge protector assists others to deal with over-

reactions, yet at the moment of my critical need, it failed. I panicked at the unexpected news of my blood pressure. At least I knew this was my familiar catastrophizing response – the reality hardly warranted my reaction. At least I had enough sense to realize that there was a ‘de-stressing, detoxify’ week ahead. There was time to attend to my panic in the days ahead.

But, in response, I did shift my focus from the planned for indulgence ‘tennis’, ‘massage’ to reduce the games and instead to sign up for the acupuncture, massage, breathing classes and ‘personal trainer x4’ as my extras. The blood pressure I saw as red flashing lights – best to attend to it immediately, if not sooner.

That is how I met Daniel on my first day for my PT session number 1. Daniel greeted me in the gym, just past the tennis court. His easy going manner gave no clue to what lay ahead. He was the picture ‘cool’, an ideal trainer: in his twenties, tanned with toned muscles, obligatory rap around sunglasses against the Gold Coast sunshine, his fitness was in evidence as he spoke, joked and laughed during our first assessment climb up a moderate hill, which I considered quite steep.

As we passed the rows of cabins, reaching my own, 9B, I was really starting to pant, while his easy breathing and carefree laughter was a marked contrast, both encouraging and inspiring. I thought Daniel’s humour boded well. In Melbourne I enjoyed sharing light chats and jokes with my personal trainers, Rebecca and my new Pilates trainer Kara, It eased the pressure when the going got tough. With Daniel sharing jokes took on a new turn.

On the homeward leg, down the other side of the hill, my assessment almost complete, so I mistakenly thought, Daniel said we’d do a brief cardiac ‘exercise’ to measure my aerobic and anaerobic capacity, the cardiac monitor would track my peak heart rates. He explained that we should try to push as hard as possible, calibrating down from 0 out of 10, 10 being collapse; 9 when you vomit; 8 when you feel you would vomit, but the we only need to go to level 8. That sounded good in theory.

We started this novel assessment with my running backwards up the hill for a couple of hundred meters. An interesting challenge, I thought.

My interest lasted about 20 seconds before it transformed into the familiar sense strain, exertion and stress, breathing more and more laboured as I realized that I needed to really push harder and harder just to keep breathing, where was the extra energy going to come from. Each backward stride demanded so much more, and then more energy just to keep going. Not to mention that running backwards, I had no sense of where I was heading, Daniel did nudge and signal when it seemed that I was about to launch myself off the track into the ravine below. (He did not know I’m terrified of heights, but who cared when I was so focused in just breathing!).

Understandably, my sense of challenge and adventure transformed with each

gasp, as I literally gasped for air. I sensed my comfort and then my safety zones were trespassed long ago - a new level of stress – survival – began to dominate my awareness. My sense of fun puffed away, Daniel seemed to absorb my spent energy with rousing yells: ‘Great! Great!, I love type A personalities, just tell them the task and they keep going!’

Daniel’s coaching was encouraging. True, he did recognize my competitive spirit, but that added to my burden, how could I stop, I would let the team down. In psychiatry this is called a ‘double bind’ or common sense ‘Catch -22. Either way I was in trouble. A terrible thought flashed through my mind – what if Daniel just shared jokes on the uphill leg a few minutes before to distract me from this torture, now barely endured after a couple of minutes?

But then came his magic words ‘just to that tree, only another 20, 15, 10, 5 meters. We made it!’ The torment came to an end. I was panting at a furious rate. He looked at the pulse meter. He smiled, he was impressed: ‘How good was that?!’

I’m was not sure, was that rhetorical, an observation that betrayed a callous or even sadistic streak, or was he expressing a genuine pleasure on my behalf?

For me, I was happy, no relieved, that what felt like the thinning air supply was returning to its normal density. I nodded, I still could not talk. That demanded more air. I agreed, it was a real thrill to return to breathing without panic. I’m sure whatever he meant, and what I felt, we could not have been on the same page. But I needed to survive, so to humour him and me, or maybe to avoid a confrontation by sharing my real feelings...after all, this was only our first 20 minutes in our first session, on the first day, and I knew I had booked a package of four – more critically, I knew that he knew that fact, how could I as an admired Type A graciously withdraw after this first session?

Anyhow, I was now breathing OK. He encouragingly said that he had some ‘good news and some not so good news’. Of course I wanted the good first: he praised my time, 2.30 as one of the best of any trainee in the last few trials. ‘How good was that?!’ again his broad smile invited agreement. It was brilliant, I thought, I’ll show him what this type A is made of, nerves of steel, a champion, fit for not only his middle age but any age! I was flying high on the stress created endorphins, likely I was overdosed. In slightly manic mode, I thought I’ll show him, I’ll even outrun him, make him remember me as his most outstanding and speediest, fittest and most remarkable trainee...

Now came bad news...we had to repeat the trial, and keep repeating it until I bettered my own time.

Finally, I realized that Daniel’s earlier sense of humour had returned, I was relieved we could start joking now. Since by now I could breathe, I could also laugh heartily. In response, Daniel had a puzzled, unfamiliar look. Gradually an awful thought dawned, despite my now almost even breathing, my consciousness took a nose-dive. Even the fresh air could

not revive my foreboding. Could it be...no, surely not...but just maybe Daniel was not joking.

To prove his point, he lifted his clip board, and there, showed me 4 times, the 4 trials of endurance a previous victim had to endure. She was not allowed to leave till she bettered her first time. It took her four turns. Proof. Daniel was sadistic and not funny at all.

So we started again. He assured me that by now my muscle memory would kick in, those quads, calves and hammies knew what they had to do. Before, the first time they really were struggling with that new and unfamiliar stress. Now it was different. Now they knew. (So did I, but I kept my mouth shut). And so this time, he was reassuring someone, but not me. This whole backward running thingo was still alien to me and I would guarantee him, also to all my muscle groups. How could the second time up that step hill be so much 'easier' and 'faster'? He reassured me – once we improve on the time, then we could get back to the gym to start working on my fitness program...if I improved my time, of course. Otherwise, 'we have all afternoon', he added with a smile.

Well, I don't have much of a memory of what happened next.

I guess he was right, and all my memory energy had drained form my head to be redistributed to my quads, calves, hammies, not to mention my diaphragm, intercostals, accessory and every other muscle that was under my conscious, unconscious and even spiritual control. I did pray!

And so it came to pass that the spiritual energy did kick in at some level, providing that miraculous, overdrive sense of a final burst of energy from who-knows-where. G'd was giving me a solid and supporting hand for the final 20 meters...he had the oxygen mask ready and I accelerated instead of collapsing...days later I learnt that another trainee did in fact succumb after an 'incident'...but now all that mattered was that I did beat my own time! 2.15.

So on the way down I was game to ask 'Why are my legs, knees and being shaking so much? 'How good is that?' was that now familiar smiling response Not very, I thought sheepishly...as my knees shook uncontrollably

He explained: 'that is your nervous system re-programming'. And it was not even the end of the first 24 hours at Golden Door, July 2007. The next 24 hours also had their highlights, as did that morning acupuncture, but that is for the next time...



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