

IN THE LIGHT AND ON THE TRAIL

Last year, Jill Wheatley wrote in *Outpost* how a baseball to the head left her almost blind but refusing to be scared **as** she took to the world's trails to regain her confidence. Now three years into her mostly-solo journey, we caught up with her in the Himalayas for an update on her self-defined mission to conquer the mountains of her mind





With remnants of blood pasted along my shin, shorts dust-covered and shredded, my head hung heavy. Not enough. I walked into the Tea House sweaty yet frigid and tired. Tired not for the distance covered, speed I ran, altitude gained nor weight of my pack, rather tired of the demeaning voice repeatedly shouting, building a barrier on my trail within.

Running alone high on a Himalayan trail in Nepal yet in my mind the world watching with a critical eye, my shoe suddenly caught a stone that appeared flush with the trail. With a foot metaphorically stuck in the past even as my body propelled forward, I plummeted to the ground both body and mind. No shout of astonishment, sobbing or tears, only a roadblock boldly reading "Acceptance" emerged, obstructing my trail ahead.

In that moment, like many that have followed my traumatic brain injury (TBI), navigating past the mountainous obstacle felt impossible. I'm in a battle to accept life's trail, and sometimes am stuck.

Exchanging my grimy running gear for a fresh set of clothes, as when loitering voices of self doubt are replaced with positive ones, I feel refreshed. Yet a bucket of Chukkung's glacial water to wash away the physical remnants of the day cannot abrade the mental rubble, the roadblocks in my mind. I prepared my headlamp and sleeping bag, fiercely battling the temptation to crawl in with my dark thoughts and end the day before the sun began to set.

Taking a mindful moment, a time-out to check in with myself, I garnered all the strength I had, then trudged down the wooden staircase toward the dining room. Finding the room as vacant as the day's trail, I hugged the fireplace, thankful for silence and warmth. Wintry nights and frosty mornings deter tourists

at this time of changing seasons. As such, though intersecting with the popular Everest Base Camp (EBC) trekking trail, recent days along the Three Passes route were mine alone, most often in utter solitude, with only occasional encounters with smiling Sherpa working the land.

Soothing sounds of the fire crackling drifted me deep into reflection of how the day had started before sunrise, sipping tatopani (hot water) between frost-laden windows while scribing thoughts in my journal. As the sun climbed, I had embarked on the trail with my fastpack, a heart full of gratitude in anticipation of my only company being some of the world's most iconic peaks, Lhotse and Nuptse. Feeling physically stronger than I'd ever imagined possible as I surpassed 4,000 metres, I had teetered between running and hiking, while dodging yaks and blowing prayer flags between suspension bridges and mani stones.

Yet the colourful reflections disappeared as swiftly as the dung in the fire now before me, with thoughts of my tumble on the trail. Not efficient on my feet nor strong enough to recover before the spill, the roadblock escalated along with the voice, my inner critic, shouting these fallacies, telling me I am not enough. Tougher, lighter, stronger, faster, more resilient, my bar is ever rising.

Acceptance is a common fight since my TBI changed the trail I anticipated my life would take. Though the human brain is hardwired to make letting go a difficult task, deep within I know acceptance is a battle worth winning. But the self-constructed roadblock challenges forward movement. It confuses. Nostalgia, intertwined with thoughts of the trail life was supposed to take, creates a barrier between acceptance of what is. I alone am



responsible for the inner battle. Only I can let go, dust off my shorts and stride on. Resilience over roadblocks.

When the silence that set the scene for a quiet date with my innermost thoughts was interrupted with an eerie creak of the dining room door, a rush of emotions fired. With a glance up from the fire, distancing myself from the downward spiral of my thoughts, I greeted the stranger with Namaste, and hoped he would appreciate the silence as much as I did.

Leaning toward the fireplace while rapidly rubbing his hands together, fresh off the trail the trekker radiated energy. Clearly keen for fireside warmth and igniting conversation, parking himself in my blindspot, he enthusiastically pulled up a chair. Rugged yet jovial, he opened with a lighthearted comment about the sunglasses I was wearing in the poorly-lit room. My heart sank. The tempting sounds of my sleeping bag called louder than the crackling of the fire.

Inhaling strength, with a deep breath and fully aware that a focus on the emotional wall constructed after my fall was not a vibe worth sharing, I shifted my seat along with my perspective.

Time on the trail alone, with only his thoughts and his guide, was seemingly not conversant enough for the man's sociable demeanour. He shared his worries and guilt for trekking onward while his partner stayed back in Namche where she struggled to acclimatize. Eager to engage in conversation he jumped right into tales of his travels in Solu-Khumbu here in eastern Nepal, from the steepness of the day's climbs and the strength of Sherpa, to stories of squatters and his stargazing schedule.

He continued to speak of highlights: sighting Mount Ama Dablam for the first time, the unpredictability of mountain weather, effects of climate change, of spotting Himalayan

blue sheep, abandoned trails, and the girl he was astonished to see running while he stopped for *dal bhat* in Dingboche earlier in the day.

From tuning out to tuning in. A girl running. He did not mention her appearance, size, speed, pace, blood oozing from her knee or glasses hiding her face. In fact, he only mentioned her because she was the lone human other than a handful of Sherpa descending from Island Peak Base Camp that he'd noticed since handing off his backpack to a porter in Pangboche that morning. This chatty stranger had no idea I was that girl.

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Two years ago he would not have seen that girl running because she was hooked up to tubes that were keeping her alive. Today, the mountains are her lifeline. My eye still fixated on the fire, my mind shifted from the fallacy of thinking I am not enough to the positive voice that rises above my inner critic. Move away from the roadblock, accept the scars, accept the stories they tell and the trail which they have led you on.

Accept. It is up to me alone to move ahead past the roadblocks I build myself. What feels so omnipresent, so raw and obvious to me, is invisible to this stranger. The speed, pace, blood on my leg, physical scars and vision loss had not fazed him. I drifted back into the mountains of my mind. As inner voices battled, I was listening to his anecdotes, but not.

His tales, not a detail to spare, came back to his partner he had left to acclimatize a few days back. Loneliness was clearly catching up with him the deeper he got into the shadows of Everest; a place they had dreamed of discovering together. Perhaps because of my blank face, extended pause or silence, he curiously questioned how I ended up here



in Khumbu so late in the season, asked of my route, my itinerary, my gear and water supply.

His endless questions sparked nostalgia and a temptation to speak of life before my accident. Articulating accomplishments and labels long past would only speak to my roadblock; reluctance to accept all that life is now. Owning my story—no shame in what I hide behind sunglasses, of falls on my trail, sharing what is and not what was—had potential to add light to his fire and mine alike.

Resisting the craving to bury myself in moonless memories, make a quick emergency exit and dismiss his curiosity, I challenged myself to stay. While my thoughts had been headed into a dark place rooted in that stumble on the trail, he presented not an obstacle but an opportunity to put to rest the night's storm of self doubt.

"I am wearing sunglasses because I am visually impaired. I am that girl you saw running on the trail today."

With disbelief written all over his face, his jaw dropped, speechless until he was not. An avalanche was triggered. Hows and whys, a barrage of curiosity, rolled off his tongue like trees being downed by a wall of whitepowder raging towards a fall line. One after another his questions snowballed before I could open my mouth. Interrupted only by the Tea House host serving chia and asking about dinner, I welcomed the pause before I bravely entertained his curiosity.

Without delving too far into the depths of the accident, I briefly touched on the backstory, the misdiagnosis and being pinballed between seven hospitals across three countries. With instantaneous change from an autonomous life with perfect eyesight to a severe visual impairment, my acceptance of a new

reality was hindered when the medical professionals ascertained that my eyesight would make a full recovery once the brain bleeding ceased, swelling subsided and blood cleared from my eyes. I trusted the trail would lead back to where I had left it on a Bavarian sports field.

The trail never led back. My eyesight did not return. Adapting to a new trail that included almost 70 percent vision loss and changes in my mental and physical capacities came with no option to accept or decline. One singletrack, mine to embrace through the rubble, the clearings and climbs.

From fit to fragile, teaching teens in a classroom to intensive care in a hospital, a specialist in one country to others in another country and then a third, the constant hands-on care was a test in itself for more than two years. Eye gymnastics, needles, ice and heat, glasses and tape, patches and prisms, the guaranteed fixes were wearing. As time in clinical settings progressed and my visual impairment did not, the loss of autonomy grew more clear, as did my struggle to accept and my will to survive. I wanted to run.

With the trekker's tired eyes now turned on my tinted glasses, I described a mountainscape analogy of my timeline that treads through peaks and valleys, ups and downs, trips and falls, and countless characters and cheerleaders around the globe. And how an unimaginable story that began in early September sunshine led to chapters in darkness and lost hope, and how adjusting to the changes had not come as quickly as the speed of the ball that connected with my cranium.

Not a straightforward trail, sometimes even backwards, acceptance of all that comes along my new path in the wake of my TBI has made Khumbu climbs feel like sunny walks in the park.

As the inquisitive stranger probed with buts, whys and hows, I resisted the path of least resistance: speaking of the losses. Acknowledging his perspective, I admitted that I can get caught up in wonderings amid my struggle with acceptance. Would acceptance have come easier had I known right away that my eyesight would never return? Would acceptance come any differently if my injuries were invisible to others? I quickly caught myself and diverted my train of thought, certain that such unanswerable questions only take me further from the present moment.

With my diversion his demeanour seemed to dive. I tried to rekindle the fire. The uncertainty of my trail, I said, with its wayward ridge guiding toward acceptance, has endured time and travel; yet, I have grown immeasurably.

It was easy to be angry, resentful, and to focus on what had been taken away from me; yet when I shifted my perspective, I could see that rather than giving up on life focusing on what I can do sparked my fire. Though at times my trail feels dark and lonely, there is no anger, no resentment nor blame. Once I conceded that my new life's path was going to be on a different map than the one I had been on, my eyes opened to new possibilities. Mountains, none more challenging than the Himalayas near me now, were full of potential. Though my vision is a small fraction of what it once was, I see life with more clarity—and much more gratitude.

Between sips of sweet Nepali tea, in an unheard of act of bravery by myself, I lifted my sunglasses, exposing what was hidden behind to my new mate.

His brief silence screamed perplexity, before he tried to jump in with a sympathetic apology. I deflected with a slight snicker

and smile, before I clarified that I was in fact not winking at him. My right eye is sealed permanently. My wink is forever. Despite the fire, he seemed frozen, locked in disbelief. Returning my glasses to return some comfort, I stressed my distaste for sympathy, before I turned back to his curiosity.

Echoes of runners in my blindspot, skin scraped by sticks unseen, screeches of bike brakes, sounds of baseball fields, sports lessons and hovering helicopters are all triggers that taunt me. I counter the tales of triggers, and challenges of abolished depth perception, with a lighthearted laugh. And with that, our fireside connection continued with stories from trips on trails around the world.

Attempting to explain how I run with such limited eyesight, I felt my energy stir as I described my love for long climbs and the freedom I feel cruising along an alpine traverse, the highs I felt my first time at 3,000 metres in the Andorra Pyrenees, then at 4,000 metres in Ladakh, and my tears of gratitude when I reached 5,000 metres.

As my eyesight comes solely from a limited range within my left eye, without binocular vision I am forced to rely on other visual cues to gauge depth. Determining distances and the ability to tell if an object is near or far are helpful in trail running. Technical descents, camouflaged roots, rocks, stumps and stones make trail running exciting—but with monocular eyesight, often more bloody. My brain has adapted, as has my patience, yet slopes of shale and scree around the globe have taken countless tokens of flesh from my hands and knees.

Accusatory fingers of blame, a focus on faults and "should-bes," often trip me up on a trail more than falls. Though I appreciate others' well-intended compassion, expressions



of such thoughts cast dark shadows in my mind that tend to lead silent isolation.

I spoke about this darkness, and its potential to take up inner space. Like a headlamp with its narrow focus enhancing every microscopic rock and root on my trail, when I shift focus my perspective is enhanced. It's not often that I run in the dark, nor place myself in settings with little light. Self-talk, and mantras on repeat, fill darkness. When I take to a trail before the light of dawn, its impermanence actually inspires me; it's a reminder of change, of darkness passing, of new beginnings that are possible. When I find myself in front of a piercing stare, or an innocent question about my eye, or a stranger mocking my sunglasses, frozen in fear of rejection, I embrace impermanence and plod on. And when I find myself on a trail as daylight comes to an end, I tap into that tune of impermanence, along with positive reflections of the darkness I have overcome.

I spoke of the pressure I put on myself, how it fluctuates when I get caught in the pristine picture that nostalgia is capable of creating, and of the cruel voices that shout within. When I reflect on where I have been—how death's doorstep had been a place I called home, when I lost all hope for light and believed that life with a disability could not be worth living—those horrific chapters now feel surreal; as though I can replay them from above but was never really there, painfully watching a stranger struggle. And now, when I dial into what really matters—embracing life, and accepting the trail that led me here—I radiate with gratitude far beyond the heights of the Himalayas.

Turning and gesturing toward the Tea House window, I told my new friend that life following TBI is not all pretty Himalayan rice paddies, potato pastures and sunkissed peaks! And that

every day I try to let go of the craving to piece the broken together, and instead work to understand how the puzzle has taken a new shape.

The brokenness of traumatic brain injury is not something that gets fixed. Life does not return to how it used to be. And though the new shape is full of potential, some days it can be hard to see. A trio of recent hospital stays, pneumonia, a dental debacle, a knackered knee, insurance anchovy, along with perpetual inquisitive stares, are all more recent side stories with lessons of their own. Only bumps on my trail, each is an opportunity to learn and grow resilient roots. And I spoke of how marrying meditation with reflective writing and mountain running make for welcome company and comfort.

So intrigued, so genuinely curious. He stood up. Seemingly dumbfounded, he started to speak and then stopped. Stuttering sounds of the word "impossible," he began again. He stopped again. He could not concoct all that was stirring in his mind. Covering his right eye with his toque while maneuvering a hand to limit the vision in his left eye, he attempted to walk across the wooden dining room floor in a straight line. He stumbled. We laughed.

For someone to recognize, feel and connect to my situation moves mountains within me. Our shared laughter was a light that overtook the darkness the recent fall had cast on my trail. Humour feels healthy.

I find joy in helping lost hikers with directions, spotting spiders, finding friends' lost trinkets and catching others using phrases otherwise unnoticed: eye opener, the blinding sun, can't see a damn thing, telling me they'll keep an eye out for a good deal, or can't keep their eyes open! I joke about missing trails on my right, about marking race routes for well-sighted runners,



and challenges when cultural differences make it difficult to counter heartfelt sympathy. Laughter, like hugs on the trail, is natural medicine that can change a day.

It took more than a year after I was discharged from a Colorado hospital to mutter a mention of my accident, and then another to openly admit my struggles and share my story. Only on this current trip around the sun have I started to laugh and move toward a place of acceptance. With time and connection, when I tell my story with all my heart, as I did this evening, I hear strength, I hear courage, and recognize the power that shared light can bring to struggling souls. When I let go of the self-critic that extinguishes inner fire and builds roadblocks, I am reminded of the power of a spark.

As he sipped his tea, continually moving his head between shakes of disbelief and nods of affirmation, I connected the adversity he had encountered with mine. His Everest Base Camp trek was not going according to plan: his partner was sick, he'd never imagined leaving her behind and hiking alone; yet here he was sipping tea, laughing and connecting with a stranger, something he never imagined.

Like my new friend who could not change the effects of altitude on his partner, I cannot change the impact of my TBI—but I can control the way I respond to it. Craving or clinging to the past endures sadness. I can resist the ways my injury has changed me—or I can surrender. Letting falls be falls, getting back up, striding on without grasping to what was: acceptance allows me to thrive in the present.

As dinner was served, his continued curiosity for my story matched his appetite for yet another serving of dal bhat. He asked about white sticks, navigation, lawsuits and loneliness. I told him of my tendency while running to get lost in thought



much more frequently than I get lost on the trail. And I took him deep onto a trail in Patagonia, where I got lost in the beauty and clear skies of temperate forests, mountains and glacial lakes, only to have an unexpected junction appear before me like an alarm clock when waking from a dream. Somehow, out there lost in my own thoughts, I got turned around on the map—and apparently, in my mind. How I navigated to that point remains a mystery to this day.

Yet there was no panic—only a pause, and no doubt that all would work out; life has taught me that. An encounter a few hours later with hikers fresh off the heels of a Mount Fitz Roy excursion got me pointed back toward camp. Yet even now I feel wonderment when thinking of the places my mind travelled to while my feet carried me along that dance with Cerro Torre.

As the sun began to set behind the mountains, I was not distracted by the evening's darkness. Vulnerably sharing had lightened my thoughts, and laughter had eased the day's end. I climbed the creaky Tea House stairs to rest my head for the night. With my heart full, I connected even that small climb to personal steps towards acceptance.

From denial to disbelief, to frustration and loss of hope and light, to the place I am now: accepting the climb. Letting go of resistance, embracing the roots, rocks and stumps across my inner storms fosters flow from one trail to the next. I am finding potential in all roadblocks now, and inner peace among the world's pristine peaks. This is my ongoing mission, and this is my story.

Jill Wheatley wrote this story between adventures in Switzerland and Nepal. You can travel and run along with her at www.mountainsofmind.com.