

Dreams and Deserts

ALGERIA 1986



As a teenager I had a dream. I wanted to find or found a community where it was possible to live simply, close to the land. A place where the marginalized and broken could find refuge, and creativity blossomed. A place of learning, and a wild place where love of the land underpinned everything. In my twenties I settled down as a wildlife artist - scraping a living while squatting in a derelict chapel in the Shropshire hills. The dream did not diminish. I found a beautiful ruin. Being utterly penniless, I could think of no other way than sponsorship to raise the money. I began to dream of remote and challenging places. Nothing scared me like the idea of desert - so I chose a desert. But I had no money to buy a camel.

That was when I heard of the Churchill Trust. I saw a poster advertising fellowships but noticed that applications had to be in that very day! I rang the office immediately and asked if they could give me an extra day. They did! The only category I fitted into was adventure training for young people - so I applied, found some young people, and had the loveliest of interviews.

We (three young women) hitch hiked to Algeria with huge quantities of dried food to sustain us over the next months. We drove into the desert - as far as buses went - to find a camel market. The first nights were spent in an Algerian prison - a terrifying beginning that ended in a rescue bid by local nomads (Tuareg). Three months sleeping under the stars, two more arrests, a thousand miles on foot, dry wells, meningitis; and we were hitching back across the Moroccan border and homeward.

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Until one is committed there is hesitancy, the chance to draw back, always ineffectiveness.

Concerning all acts of initiative, there is one elementary truth, the ignorance of which kills countless ideas and splendid plans: that the moment one definitely commits oneself, then providence moves too. All sorts of things occur to help one that would never otherwise have occurred. A whole stream of events issues from the decision, raising in one's favour all manner of unforeseen incidents and meetings and material assistance, which no man could have dreamt would have come his way.

I learned a deep respect for one of Goethe's couplets:

"Whatever you can do or dream you can: begin it.

Boldness has genius, power and magic in it"

W. H. Murray (From his journal of the 1951 Scottish Himalayan Expedition)

The moment of commitment. For me, that was the moment I walked out of the interview room. It is extraordinary how people putting their trust in

you can empower you - make you want to take responsibility.

That is what happens each time a person receives a fellowship - someone thinks it's worth taking a risk with them. To someone who is not used to being given such a chance, it can be life changing. It alters the balance.

We dream, we plan our paths through life, and nothing works out quite how we imagine it to. I learned some really important things in that journey across the desert, things that have affected life's course. First there is a dream. And then there is the moment you make that commitment to it - to make it tangible. You set out on the journey. Everything goes wrong - but still you hold the dream like a guiding star ahead of you. And you accept the failures and the humiliations. Then it looks impossible, but you take a step in the right direction anyway. And then you find one day that against all the odds you are there at your destination - looking towards a new horizon.

There are many times in life where things have gone wrong and I have looked back to that old journey and taken strength. I have realised the value of endurance. To realise our dreams, it is essential. It is the oars that move us, one stroke at a time, even against the prevailing wind. Mental strength can help us to truly achieve and that is something that can be ours even if we have no genius or great talent. The desire to endure. To weather the storm.

30 years on, I realise that I stayed true to the dream - though there have been many times when I wavered on the path or felt discouraged. There was the beginning in the desert and the end in community. The community has form in a real place. A place that would not exist without the Fellowship. Hidden in the Welsh hills, a beautiful place, a refuge, a place of learning. In between them stretches a great journey, entwining the lives of thousands of extraordinary people from all walks of life and all corners of the earth. And now it is my turn to risk believing in the impossible dreams of the young people who come here - and to encourage them to make that first commitment and take that first step. And now it's my turn to watch them - just a few of them, turn dreams into tangible projects that will affect the lives of thousands and bring hope in a rapidly changing world.