

## **Cherie Cross**

### THE UNEXPECTED JOURNEY

I originally set out on the Hoka Hey Challenge to test ‘my feet to the fire.’ As a motivational speaker, I have been encouraging audiences around the world for the past 26 years to discover THEIR passion and pursue it with determination and resolve. I figured it was time to practice what I preached. My intent was to record skills-based learning CDs for young adults around the world with all the lessons I would learn on my journey. I expected to experience first-hand all the life lessons I have been teaching for years and felt the Hoka Hey would add credibility to my message of ‘HOPE’ for our future generations and leaders.

Well ... it wasn’t even close to what I had expected!

It was nothing like what anyone expected and tougher people than me were dropping like flies because they were unable to change their expectations or to flex and adapt to the rules of the Challenge when they heard the five requirements for the first time on June 19th, the night before the start.

What I learned is that if you can’t change your expectations, then you can’t change!!

For those who expected not to make it ... they didn’t! For those who thought it was a scam ... they convinced themselves that it was! Those who expected it to be easier, cheated! Everyone’s expectations became their reality, so if the expectation was failure, then they got what they expected. It was only when I changed my expectations that I was able to change my journey ... and succeed by being one of the 211 that made it!

Bottom line, what I learned is how to listen. I didn’t know what Care-Taker meant in Arkansas when he simply tugged on his left earlobe and whispered the word, “Listen.” I learned eventually. He meant to ‘listen’ to my gut, instead of the discouraging words of life-suckers and the already doomed; to ‘listen’ to my instincts instead of the know-it-alls who thought they knew the way; to ‘listen’ to my heart, instead of those who didn’t have any. And to change my expectations about the whole journey! This was a challenge of ‘heart,’ not ability or skill, and my only competition was ‘self’. When I went down on Hwy 41 (Alligator Alley) on the first day, in a rain storm, I thought ... “What the hell have I gotten myself into?” ... LOL

I had to overcome pride and ego if I was going to make it and every day it was questionable. I disqualified three times and was broken by discouragement every day, at one time or another. Yet I never failed, surprisingly.

I first disqualified when I was sabotaged by one particular rider, who wanted me and everyone else to fail because he was embarrassed by his own failure (which was common among those who criticized Jim Red Cloud and the Hoka Hey the most, LOL). When I was in route to the second checkpoint in Mississippi on the third day, a fellow rider who had already reached that checkpoint called me on my cell phone and informed me that

everyone had quit; no one was in Mississippi; the promoters were gone; there was no money; it was all a scam; and that he and a few others would wait for me to arrive if I would just hop on the interstate and disqualify myself so I could make good time, and then we would all ride together to Homer, AK and enjoy the trip. Well, when I reached the checkpoint, after hitting the interstate for 64 miles, I learned that none of what he said was true! He was gone, in route to the third checkpoint, never admitting to the promoters that he had already disqualified himself and was, in fact, taking his own chosen route via interstate, the whole way.

When I informed Beth (my Angel), that I had disqualified myself for the money, her words of encouragement helped me find new hope and a new challenge with new lessons to be learned about determination and the definition of success. Those who failed are those who didn't learn or even get close to really 'getting it,' mainly because they weren't truthful to themselves or others. They were caught between their own self-destructive expectations and their own disbelief about themselves.

Their hypocrisy weighted them down like an anchor and the fear of being found out intensified their embarrassment, which only fueled their hate. If they couldn't do it ... they didn't want anyone else to do it and found fault with those who did. You read it on the blogs and heard the rumors at the stops. It was sad, really. All their time, effort and money wasted on creating a way to survive with some dignity by believing their own lies and calling the Challenge a 'scam.' Yet, no one who bad-mouthed Jim or the winner was willing to spring for a lie-detector test to prove that they did any better. Who cares who won the money? One thing's for sure ... you didn't. I believe someone else should have won anyway (you know who you are, Ranger from Dawsonville: my hero!). If he's okay with it, then no one has a right to complain. And who can say for sure? I'm sure we all differ in who we think won the Challenge. I believe if you 'got it,' you were changed for life and walked out wiser and blessed, and ... you won!

I don't believe anyone did it by ALL the qualifications, but begrudging others of good fortune because they did it the best is what led to the battle of Little Big Horn so many years ago. Wanting what others have is what leads to war! History repeats itself if people don't ... listen. Right, Care-Taker?? Be grateful for what you have. Everyone who survived already has more than those who died!

It wasn't at all what I wanted to write about, and I feel lost over what I really could offer anyone by telling my story. The journey 'broke me,' and then 'made me.' I doubt that anyone who claimed to be an atheist at the start of the Challenge, finished their own journey as one. Whether you cursed God or praised Him, everyone was aware of Him! It brought everyone (that I met) to their knees at one time or another along the way. Even being angry with God is the very act of acknowledging His power. It was a journey you had to take by yourself and one you couldn't without the help of others. (Thank you Lloyd, Jersey Girl, Care-Taker, Curly and Jim). Finding that perfect balance between both was key.

I also learned how insignificant I really am and how little I've contributed to this planet. I met men and women that are true heroes along the way. I met one man who is the very

meaning of ‘determination.’ My crew, new husband “Cotton” and I stayed in Homer an extra week so we could greet him at the finish line. My admiration for what he accomplished is unparalleled by any other. I knew he would make it when so many doubted. I was thrilled with delight when he proved them all wrong! Terri Meyers, you were the ultimate winner! And your bike was held together by dirt and, I think, a rubber band, LOL. You rock!!

I found the meaning to my journey around the fourth day in New Mexico, eight miles outside of Angel Fire, NM at the First Vietnam Veterans memorial and it was, in a word ... ‘Gratefulness.’ This, along with shame, guilt, anger, abandonment, resentment, appreciation, fear, joy, and happiness! I was overwhelmed by the magnificence of these United States, seen from state and county back roads and awestruck by her beauty, rarely noticed in all my work travels, every year around the country. I was grateful to live in a country where I’m free to ride, pray and celebrate what I love, the wind! Proud of the U.S.A.

I was equally sickened by the poverty and misfortune of so many in this country. I was ashamed by how we promote laziness through the ‘system’ and reward-dependence. I was angered by what our government has done, or rather not done, for our Native Americans. I am nauseated by the common misconception that these proud people are well taken care of. I was shocked by how little I really do know and embarrassed by all that I do know and don’t do anything about. It was the hardest thing I’ve ever done and the most blessed I’ve ever been! It was a humbling experience and I accomplished something different than what I set out to do.

The Lakota Nation and Jim Red Cloud were awesome in supporting my quest to support our future leaders – our children – through education. Thank you

I disqualified the second time on the 7th day in Arizona. I was chased down by Native Americans on the Navajo Reservation during tribal distress late on a Saturday night. Oddly, I didn’t hate or even resent them for it. I confess, I was a little scared. Beer cans were chucked at my head and I was run off the road very late at night with only a half a tank of gas and no way of getting more. Fortunately, two other riders came by to help me lift my bike and get it back on the road. (Thank you, Jeremy and Jim!) I got a room at the Holiday Inn for five hours in Chenile, AZ until the sun rose, gas stations opened and I was out of danger. The others had gas to travel on. I was grateful for my first shower in five days. My crew decided I should skip the 6th check-point, which was Chief Red Cloud’s house in Pine Ridge, SD, to make up time. The last disqualification happened in the Yukon when I was trailored for five hours after my bike broke down. Ahhh, the truck was warm!! Thank you, K-BOB. Couldn’t have done it without you. Failure is not falling down, it’s remaining where you have fallen!

The most joyous moment was in Homer, AK on July 4th, when I vowed to love my best friend for the rest of my days and I married my ‘lobster,’ Cotton! (BTW, lobsters mate with the same partner for life.) What a great party at the most awesome venue – overlooking Grenwhick Glacier! Thank you for supporting me through all my crazy adventures and making them even better.

Rain, snow, dust storms, wind gusts, fog, extreme heat and crippling cold were my teachers. Loneliness gave birth to self awareness. Coping with exhaustion was the daily goal. And I was my only true enemy. My anger crippled my motivation at the beginning, and forgiveness became my new inspiration to keep going toward the end. Altitude sickness was the most dangerous element we all had to contend with and it was a ‘crapshoot’ if you survived. I saw America like I've never seen it before. The prejudice, the wealth and privilege, the industry, the magnificence of a country taken for granted by a population that feels entitled to all its glory and splendour – without appreciation or warrant – was clear and evident.

I finally learned my last lesson about ‘listening’ after the event. It occurred two weeks later on my way home as I rode from Seattle, WA to Pine Ridge, SD – 1,800 miles to Chief Red Cloud’s house (the stop I missed before). I had experienced every emotion known to man during the event (and I think a few new ones for the psychology books). Yet, there was something that I needed to do and it was frustrating because I didn’t know what it was. My journey was incomplete and I didn’t know why. I had the nagging thought to go see the Chief (totally out of my way home to Atlanta, GA). That nagging thought turned into a burning hot desire, almost feeling like desperation.

I waited patiently in his entrance way, heart pumping. When the Chief rolled out from his bedroom and came around the corner, I was suddenly filled with shame and love. I fell on my knees and buried my head in his lap as I sobbed the words, “I’m so sorry ... sorry for EVERYTHING!” I then reached in my back pocket and pulled out the one thing that meant more to me than anything else I owned at the time ... my gold and silver coin, #261. This was given to each of us with our own number embossed the night before the start and we were told we must carry it on the whole trip as one of the five qualifications of the Hoka Hey Challenge. Jim Red Cloud offered me and others \$1,000 for our coins when we crossed the finish line in Homer on July 3rd. My response was, “You’ll have to pry it from my dead, cold hands. It represents everything I’ve been through and all that I’ve learned. NO WAY!!”

It wasn’t until I experienced the feeling of ‘loss’ that I got it (the message that Care-Taker was trying to teach me). Loss is self-defined. What it does to you or for you is up to you. Listen to your Heart.

When I handed the Chief my coin, I told him that I felt the coin was never mine. I wanted to give something back because of all that was taken from his people. I knew it was small, but it meant more to me than anything else I could have given. I thanked him for allowing me the privilege of carrying it with me while I learned so many unexpected lessons and I felt that he was the rightful owner, not me.

I was instantly consumed by sadness; I was struck by panic and overwhelmed by loss. The feeling of loss was what I needed to try and understand what the Native Americans had experienced. (Even though it was insignificant by comparison – I’m sure, it wasn’t even close!) In a phrase ... THEY FELT LOSS!

The Chief, who had his own reasons for prejudice against a race who destroyed his own, cupped my face in his two leathery hands and said something. With tears in his eyes, he assured me it was okay without using those exact words. He also whispered something about 'healing' and 'a wheel.' I wish I could remember his exact words or that I have an opportunity to ask him if he remembers one day. I was so stopped up from crying. No matter, the moment we shared was unlike any other I could have hoped for or even expected.

Between the Chief and I, the conversation included understanding, forgiveness, gratitude and acceptance. Some of it was spoken; most of it was just understood or felt. It was graduation day from the journey, but it was just the beginning of a new Challenge and the beginning of a new day with new lessons to be learned. Finally, I felt the completion, which was my reward for being open to all those hard lessons. Who knew? I met up with my crew 60 miles later and climbed into the truck and sang every song played on the radio on the way home.

I made some good friends for life and discovered I really didn't have a clue about all the things I was proud of before the Hoka Hey. Wow! I didn't learn one lesson that I expected to learn on this historical event. I did discover that I'm just not all that I thought I was and way more than I believed I am. And now, I have the hope to be so much more!

If you're even considering riding in the second annual Hoka Hey Challenge in August, 2011, then 'listen' to your own heart. Not all the 'blood-clot' crying from those who puke meaningless accusations on the blogs or in circles. They don't want you to experience what they couldn't. Make your own decision, based on the story you want to tell when it's all over ... and it's never really over once you experience the Hoka Hey Challenge. Few have the privilege of telling such a story. What will yours be?

If you doubt your own ability, get used to it! Doubt will become your friend. The experience is not what you expect and, if you can't change your expectations ... then you'll never change. Maybe that's a good thing??

I wonder how I'll do next time with more danger than the first time? Hope it works out because I can't wait!

Respectfully,

~ Cherie "Messenger" Collins, Dawsonville, GA