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It summarises my first Comrades experience in 2013

Andy Gild OAM, co-founder and CEO of Bicycles for Humanity Melbourne, is passionate about connection, wellbeing and challenge. Connecting runs through every aspect of her life—with her family and friends, with her clients through her work as a physiotherapist and mental fitness/wellbeing coach, with her volunteering, running and cycling mates, and with other peoples and cultures through her travels and adventures. Wellbeing is also important in her world, including incorporating self-care into her everyday life as well as supporting others in their wellness journeys. She is not afraid to step out of her comfort zone: she thrives on being physically and mentally challenged.

Comrades on the journey of life

It's 3.32 pm on Sunday 2 June 2013. With ten kilometres to go the end is almost, but not quite, in sight. The sun's oppressive heat persists even as the day draws to a close. As the pain in my knee sharpens, I struggle to keep running forwards, step after step, into the unrelenting headwind, trying hard to keep thoughts of not making it across the finish line within the allocated twelve hours out of my mind.

All around me are exhausted people, running, jogging, walking and limping up the last big climb of the five main peaks that make up the eighty-seven-kilometre Comrades ultramarathon in South Africa. This is what's known as 'the up run', from Durban at 21 metres above sea level to Pietermaritzburg at 596 kilometres above sea level.

I look to my right and see another tired soul, knee bandaged, walking slowly next to me. We start chatting. This is Siphwiwe's fourth Comrades. We walk, talk, hobble and run, all the while sharing stories. Mine is about growing up in South Africa with wonderful childhood memories but a deep-seated knowledge that things were not right, not fair. I talk of our maid living her life with our family, not seeing her own, not being able to travel on our buses, swim at our beaches, nor sit on our benches. Siphwiwe shares stories about his young family: his kids, Surprise and Cebo. He talks of being shot in the leg by police a few years earlier, and how it is still affecting his running to this day.

We speak of the challenges of the changing, 'new' South Africa, as all the while Siphwiwe leads me home. He walks when I need to and encourages me to run, steadily, slowly, step after slow step, if I want to take a medal with me back to Australia.

At 4.43 pm, after eleven hours and forty-three minutes, Siphwiwe and I make it, with just seventeen minutes to spare.

As I write this, I feel overwhelmed by the generosity of sharing, giving and connecting with a stranger who looked out for me and became my friend. Someone with whom I never had the opportunity to engage in the apartheid South Africa of my youth.

The Comrades ultramarathon is much more than a gruelling road race. It is steeped in tradition and ritual, encompassing almost one-hundred years of history and thousands of stories. It is a journey that lends itself to self-discovery, exposing every ounce of one's physical and emotional being, and it is much more than the day itself. It is, in so many ways, life changing. One begins to experience what it means to push boundaries, beyond those that can be imagined, and to see what can be achieved when we venture outside our comfort zones.

My story began with my dad. From a young age I watched his commitment to training, his passion and joy as year in, year out, completing training runs of more than fifty kilometres, he worked towards finishing ten Comrades marathons. My fascination with this race grew further as I became entrenched in my own running group and once again saw my friends dedicating themselves to achieving something that seemed unattainable.

The training itself is an immense commitment. Six months of selfish dedication to the (very) early starts, the seemingly endless kilometres on the road, the (very) early nights and the resulting inability to be as available to my husband and kids.

But it was the training that enabled me to develop the physical and mental fitness I needed to cope with the extreme challenges of the event on the day, and highlighted the importance of developing a strong base for coping with the challenges of our everyday lives.

To me this involves creating a regime built around self-care. It's about doing things every day that give us energy, that support and ground us in being the person we want to be and in doing the things we love to do. It means treating ourselves with kindness and compassion, looking after and nourishing ourselves with a healthy lifestyle. This includes moving, sleeping, eating everything in moderation, connecting with others, incorporating gratitude into our lives, making time to play, talking to our pets, laughing and trying to be present in every moment. This enables us to build our capacity for resilience. It gives us the ability to maintain our focus, to draw on the resources we've built up over our lifetime and to view life's challenges as opportunities.

Another lesson I learned from my Comrades journey sits under the umbrella of vulnerability. Brené Brown, through her research into courage, empathy, shame and vulnerability, found that vulnerability is not a sign of weakness but rather a place where courage meets fear. Just contemplating embarking on something like an

ultramarathon shouts of vulnerability. If we are able to raise our courage to a place where we can overcome our fears, that's where great things happen.

After recovering from the race and beginning to appreciate what I had accomplished, I had a sense that anything was possible. I felt strong and grounded. Even so, my subsequent decision was a surprise, even to me. I stepped away from my comfortable, part-time job as a physiotherapist and began my next stage of life as a wellness coach. It was another courageous step into vulnerability, and I haven't looked back.

The idea of ensuring that we all live from a strong, grounded place is something I continue to strive towards, and this has become the base from which I work with my clients. As we look around us, the world today is bleeding negativity and stress, yet at the same time there is great beauty, love and possibility. The way in which we live each day is important. Bringing mindfulness, self-compassion and respect for others, we are able to make the most of the opportunities that come our way and embrace our challenges from a place of being centred and grounded.

Why run the Comrades ultramarathon again? Those who have experienced this incredible event know that it actually alternates each year between 'the up run' from Durban to Pietermaritzburg, which I completed, and 'the down run' in the opposite direction. And so the challenge of experiencing the down run looms on June 11 2023...