

VISION 8000

Jill Wheatley

The months leading up to September 2014 had been spent trail running and cycling, enjoying a newfound passion for long distance duathlons in the Alps I called home. However, no amount of training could have prepared me for the trail that followed...



Jill Wheatley approaches camp three on Dhaulagiri.
Photo: Vinayak Malla



Jill Wheatley on the summit of Manaslu.
Photo: Vinayak Mallia

After mere minutes from a sustaining a severe head injury, the local hospital sent me home to the Bavarian loft where I lived alone above cattle and corn, sheep and shovels. With a black eye, swollen shut from the moment my skull stopped a line drive, I lay listless in my own vomit. Deep within, I knew there was more than colour and closure to my eye, yet, just a high school health and physical education teacher and coach, who was I to question a medical professional? The diagnosis and the agony—I was stoic, stunned in every sense of the word.

Intuition proved precise. I was found a day-and-a-half later. I have sporadic memory of the ambulance transfer. My first weeks in the neurosurgery unit—the room, visitors, initial caregivers—are all blurred, like the clouds on the morning the story began, on a German sports field.

Imaging showed cerebral trauma with acute subdural hematoma and cerebral contusions of the right frontal lobe and traumatic fractures of the orbital. Essentially, my brain had been bleeding and swelling while I was home alone with a misdiagnosed black

eye. As the medical focus turned to my brain, little attention was given to my eyes. I was assured that my vision would be back to normal within a few weeks when the swelling and blood cleared from in, around and behind my right eye. Meanwhile, as blood crept across my face, darkness crept within.

With so much loss and so little control, I could not see light; no spark to imagine life with only 30 per cent eyesight, endless labels and stigma. Cycling races, endurance duathlons, trail running and ski touring all lost, and with that, any sense of autonomy.

The Subaru, with its adventure toys on top and in the back, had all been sold. My job, my residency permit and driver's license were all taken away, and along with them, any sense of independence.

Although constantly hooked up to machines and constantly in the company of medical personnel, I felt alone. They all said they wanted to help, yet no one seemed to listen or see from my perspective. With the little eyesight I had remaining, I stared stoically at the Colorado Rocky Mountains from my hospital bed for months. If they were not going to let me die, that was the only place I could fathom fitting in.

After 26 months contained to seven different hospitals and rehabilitation centres across three countries, I walked out of hospital 70 per cent blind, with my focus solely on loss. Sent off in an Uber to Denver International Airport, I breathed freedom, yet felt lost. I had arrived in a wheelchair with medical accompaniment, and so ill that I do not remember. When I was dropped off to catch a flight and with no sense of direction, the only sign I could see pointed to mountains—away from society, away from the “shoulds” and away the stares. I chose to travel in mountains for one year. To dance around the sun with Mother Nature, hoping its rays would guide me on an inspiring trail.

From Andorra to Argentina, New Zealand to Nepal, from Peru to Patagonia and the Pyrenees, Italy, Iceland and India, from the Andes to the Annapurnas, from tales of getting lost to finding myself running ridges and climbing up craters and through crevasses in lands of fire and ice. That year saw me adventure with gems in human form while sharing remote trails, meditation mats and fireside stoke with legends among surreal scenes of scree, storms, mourning and mountains.

From navigating the parking lot at the neurotrauma hospital in the shadow of the Bavarian Alps, to running over high passes in the Annapurnas, standing on a podium among stars and racing around the world's eighth highest mountain, more time in the herculean Himalayas provided an initial sense of direction, a beginning. I was beginning to move toward a place of acceptance and beginning to see opportunity; opportunity to choose my response to vision loss and the

unexpected trail my life had taken.

My introduction to the Himalayas had been love at first sight, so after circumnavigating trails in 13 mountain ranges around the globe, I chose to return to Nepal to run and explore my curiosity about altitude over three high passes in the shadow of Everest.

Steady, strong and deep in thought found me content in body and mind as I trekked up from Lukla to Namche. The trail was increasingly steep, the switchbacks plenty, as we gained altitude above the Hilary Bridge within an hour of the hub of Khumbu. Phurra danced along the trail, singing and talking with anyone and everyone he'd see. Slightly behind, he left me alone with my thoughts until something he felt I might want to see appeared far in the distance, between fragile tree branches slightly off the tight corner. He asked if I knew the name of the peak he pointed to. I did not. He was gitty; excited to share.

Our world's highest peak was peering far up the valley, about a week of walking from where we stood. With his uttering of “Everest” came a spark igniting a flashback to a dark day when I lay on death's doorstep. My thoughts drifted back in time as I climbed higher.

A revelation, I recounted the scene as if looking from the downlight in my hospital room in the heart of Denver. Dr. Mehler crafted a connection between what he read in my charts, a 70-odd page document that accompanied me in the ambulance, outlining the accident and avalanche of consequences it triggered, to what I was drawn to and what was needed for me to thrive. At the time, although I had no mountaineering or expedition experience, his articulate analogy struck me. I could envision a team roped up, climbing slowly in unison toward a specific goal.

He spoke slowly, quietly, “I understand you are an athlete who makes the mountains home. For now, this is your Everest, Jill. This is going to be an expedition. We are your team that is going to support your every move. Like any expedition, there will be storms and setbacks. We each have roles to ensure safety and success, though you need to put in the work too. Fuel, rest and time are all essential for moving on.”



Jill Wheatley (white and orange helmet) ascends fixed lines above camp one on K2. Photo: Gao Li



Jill Wheatley on the summit of Broad Peak. Photo: Angdu Sherpa

Only recently have I come to discover that Dr. Mehler was onto something.

While eyeing Everest was somewhat surreal, it was the beauty of Ama Dablam that caught my eye. I completed the Three Passes trek with incredible strength and motivation to learn and quench my curiosity about life above 6,000 metres.

Island Peak (6,160 metres) felt like a long day out with a friend. Dawa and I talked, climbed and laughed in the company of the Himalayan giants which, at that time, were something only real

mountaineers would embark upon. After standing on the summit as the sun began to rise, we made our way down, grabbed our gear at base camp and continued to Pangboche. Within five days, we stood upon Lobuche (6,119 metres). I was certain I wanted more.

More days away from the one a hardball knocked me into a deep, dark crevasse I had no strength to climb out of, I moved in the direction of acceptance. Beginning to see lessons from my traumatic brain injury, a shift in perspective led me toward what I had gained, rather than what I had lost. I did not choose vision loss, an eating disorder or anything else that came in the wake of that dreary September morning, yet I have the opportunity to choose my response.

I choose to challenge myself, challenge the mountains of my mind. Nothing will ever challenge me the way my traumatic brain injury has, and although I knew it would not be easy, climbing higher on the beauty that is Ama Dablam ignited a fire within. I have developed intense mental strength and a tool set to turn to at any signs of slipping, despite being so new to climbing. I set myself up with people and places to develop physical strength and technical skills in anticipation of climbing the renowned “Mother’s Necklace.”

Discovering the power of perspective and possibility, Ama Dablam was a gift. Emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic, the climb was historically quiet, leaving me alone with my thoughts and connection to my Dad, who passed away back in Canada as I climbed toward 6,812 metres. Working with no depth perception in the notoriously technical terrain, I tapped into lessons of impermanence when imposter thoughts invaded and voices of doubt heightened. Life’s climbs had prepared me for hard things. I was ready to climb higher.

Manaslu was where I initially fell in love with the Himalayas. Respecting the fact that the weather can completely change the complexity of any climb, Manaslu is considered one of the easier giants. I had run nearly 200 kilometres around its base, so with all of the pieces considered, the “Mountain of the Spirit” seemed like a fitting 8,000er to start with.

I climbed with high expectations of myself,

yet with a sense of shame that I had carried since the accident. Shame, an intensely painful feeling of unworthiness, hiding my scars and revealing nothing from behind the ever-present sunglasses. I struggled with the feeling that I did not belong among such experienced climbers. I climbed quietly, yet filled with a surreal sense of strength, to the true summit of the world’s eighth highest mountain, a place few more than a handful of humans have ever stood. I was bursting above the clouds with gratitude for the hundreds of hands and hearts that got me there. The doctors, nurses, therapists, certified nursing assistants (CNAs) and every staff member in all of those hospitals, and the family and friends who never gave up on me, who supported my every move out of that dark place. They are the reason I reached the pristine peak. Descending can play havoc with my limited eyesight, yet I did so with ease and inspiration, which ignited a spark—Vision 8000.

The name came as naturally as the smile stoked from the summit. Nothing can challenge me in the ways that my injury has. Climbing all of the world’s 14 peaks that stand above 8,000 metres will shatter the stigma associated with traumatic brain injury, vision loss and eating disorders.

I returned to Kathmandu and sat down with my friend and expedition leader, Mingma G., to map out the project to complete within two years. Dhaulagiri (8,167 metres) would be followed by Kanchenjunga (8,586 metres) and Makalu (8,463 metres) before heading to Pakistan for Broad Peak (8,047 metres), K2 (8,611 metres) and Nanga Parbat (8,126 metres). Year two will begin with Annapurna (8,091 metres), Everest (8,848 metres), Lhotse (8,516 metres), Gasherbrum I (8,068 metres), Gasherbrum II (8,035 metres), Cho Oyu (8,201 metres) and Shishapangma (8,012 metres).

Less than a handful of days later, using every last day of my Nepali visa, I went to climb Himlung. Though only 7,126 metres, Himlung is notorious for harsh conditions. The opportunity to put the energy and acclimatization from Manaslu into action combined with the relentless snow was ideal training for both body and mind. Coming into mountaineering somewhat backwards, despite the growing amount of time

spent among the highest places on the planet, I continued to feel very much like a beginner. I craved competence and so, straight off Himlung’s summit, I committed myself to a month developing climbing skills in the Canadian Rockies.

With more than 60 countries explored, I went to Alberta for the first time in my life specifically to work on technical skills. I had never had a proper lesson and felt ice climbing skills would transfer to what I would encounter throughout Vision 8000. The vulnerability and shame made for some rough mornings before the introduction to ice climbing course, making the challenge far more than physical. The people, the connections and comforts of Canmore fostered confidence heading to Dhaulagiri, along with the certainty that I would be back.

I returned home to Kathmandu and flew to Khumbu to ice climb the following day. I was excited to continue developing my skills and build fitness in anticipation of Dhaulagiri. The ice season wrapped up on Losar, a renowned 14-pitch climb across from Namche on Valentine’s Day—a sweet lead into Dhaulagiri.

Higher, steeper, more technical and notorious for its harsh conditions, I anticipated Dhaulagiri to challenge me more than any other mountain experience, and it did. Returning to the lessons of my injury—the power of perspective, embracing impermanence, authenticity and vulnerability—reminded me of the choices I have. I did not choose my brain injury or vision loss, but I choose to be in these challenging situations and choose my response when things get tough, both on and off the mountains.

I have learned about my body and the time it takes to acclimatize to altitude. Thoughts of potential headaches are triggering, since they take me right back to the early days at station 44 in the neurotrauma unit. In an effort to keep my body familiar with the decreased amount of oxygen at altitude, after only three days in Kathmandu following Dhaulagiri, I made my way to Kanchenjunga base camp, ahead of the other international climbers.

Climbing Kanchenjunga was a tale of its own. Getting lost above 8,500 metres while finding strength I once never imagined possible,