

The Talking Stick

Exploring Life's possibilities

Andrew J. Pike



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*To all my teachers, especially Kazalette,
Ješka and Stefan.*

Thank you. Namasté.

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FOREWORD

The Talking Stick is a tool used in many Native American traditions when a Council is called, allowing Elders to express their Sacred Point of View. The person holding the Talking Stick holds the floor, sharing his or her wisdom with the Council.

In April 2009 I was with a group of fellow students taking a week long residential course called *Sixth Sense* at the beautiful Sani Pass Hotel in the Kwazulu-Natal Drakensberg mountains of South Africa. The course was about learning to access our Sixth Sense when we respond to the things delivered to us by Life from moment to moment.

During that week one of the events in which we participated was to use the Talking Stick to share with each other the wisdom and insights we had on various topics.

I was handed the Talking Stick by one of the trainers who was facilitating the course. She invited me to speak of what I knew of Doubt and Uncertainty, a state in which I had arrived at the course in the context of some of my career choices.

Being given the Talking Stick and placed on the spot in that way was another of Life's gifts. As with many things that Life delivered, I hadn't particularly wanted to be given the Talking Stick, nor would I have chosen that topic on which to speak. But that is what had arrived in front of me. I was faced with the possibility of standing there like a rabbit caught in the headlights, or of seizing this opportunity, digging deep and seeing what was there to be said. Put another way, I was faced with saying 'Yes' to what Life had put in front of me, or 'No'.

I chose the former and spoke of what I knew, how Doubt and Uncertainty felt, its knock-on effect in my life, what I had learnt (especially in the preceding week) and what might be possible for me, going forward.

I found the Talking Stick format enriching and rewarding. It allowed me to make a choice about what I would do with the Talking Stick and then to plumb the depths of what I knew out of a space of openness, giving and realness. I could equally have chosen to embrace my fear, told myself that I had nothing to offer and shied away from the Talking Stick. That option would have denied me the richness of the experience and helped prop up the fearful part of me.

I also believe that what I shared that day was insightful and helpful for others who were then in the same place as me in aspects of their lives.

Up until then I had been pondering for some years how I would share with others all that I knew and had experienced. I had already published one book, written a lot for journals and newsletters and even started three other books without completing them, as none had felt right.

However, the Talking Stick woke me up again to the fact that Life is delivering challenges and choices to us moment by moment. It also woke me up to what I had to offer. There and then I decided that the Talking Stick could be viewed as one of Life's offerings and presented an icon for both me and my readers. The actual format of the book came to me a day later out of a meditation I had been doing.

As the use of the Talking Stick is a communal process, it seems only proper that it should not simply work one way i.e. from me to the reader. The book has therefore been written to offer you, the reader, the opportunity to have your own insights and inspiration to support you to live every part of your life holistically, consciously and with purpose. It also invites you to take up the Talking Stick and share with yourself or, if you are so moved, with others your own insights which may have been prompted by anything I have had to say.

In order to address the holistic nature of our lives, the book has been divided into eight sections which are: LIFE, RELATIONSHIPS, FEELINGS, SPIRITUALITY, HEALTH, CAREERS/WORK/MONEY (a single section), CREATIVITY and DEATH.

Every chapter in every section offers some of the learning I have had over my lifetime and invites you, the reader, to dig into your own experiences and learnings.

There is also a whole theme on Feelings. Although these are not a specific area in your life, they pervade every area of your life. Feelings are so important in helping you engage in the way in which you are at any moment in time that they required a whole section of their own.

Finally, I have written a section on aspects of Death. Despite the fact that we are told that this is as certain as taxes, most of us during the better part of our lifetimes pretend that this is not a reality and ignore it. Ignoring death or pretending it isn't going to happen anytime soon is another aspect of unconscious living. However, when it happens to loved ones or people we know, we are surprised, shocked and need to deal with the altogether unfamiliar in a space of crisis.

At my High School 30th reunion I discovered that 14 of my 92 classmates were dead. I was shocked. I could understand one or two, but almost 20% when we had not even reached the age of 50, woke me up to the fact that death is always present and never far from home. We will each deal with it in our own way, but if any of my experiences resonate, feel free to draw on them.

There are all sorts of other areas on which I could have touched. The ones in this book were the ones which matter to me right now. And no doubt I will wake up to other areas of unconsciousness in times to come... as we keep on doing.

A word about the context in which I have written this book. Almost no single chapter has been written sequentially after the previous chapter. Most chapters have been written when I have been moved or inspired to write them, some a while ago, others more recently. In a way, I have needed to be in touch with my own consciousness in order to address any particular issue, and the truth is that I am not always conscious about everything in my life. For the most part, my insights come to me when I most need them.

Over the years I have got better and better at being holistically conscious of all aspects of my life. It takes practice. However, I still find myself focusing on aspects of my life which need sorting out, and so I open up those spaces as and when I notice a need.

So, if it seems to you that any particular chapter appears to be out of sequence in time, or if I write about something that happened '*last week*', or '*yesterday*', please understand that the reality of when it was written was just a moment in time when I was inspired by a circumstance and my own conscious self.

My invitation to you as you absorb this book is to explore your own levels of consciousness in the various aspects of your life. Then share your insights with others, Talking Stick fashion.

A wonderful way of recording your insights so that you can reflect back on them is to keep a journal. Let your journal be your Talking Stick and note down your reflections, learnings and insights as I share mine with you. That way, we get to commune with each other.

That is what the Talking Stick offers. Council members hear and learn the wisdom and insights of Elders, one at a time. At the ripe age of 51 I think I qualify by now as an Elder (my children certainly think so). The wisdom shared with you, the readers - the Council - comes from a sacred Source. I am merely the channel.

This is my Talking Stick.

Talking Stick assignment

Buy yourself a journal, if you do not already have one.

Treat it as sacred and record your insights and learnings in life.

Also use it to do the exercises in this book.

INTRODUCTION: The gift of seminal moments

“ARE YOU READY?”... The Umpire, standing in his varnished wooden launch, white flag held aloft, asks the customary question of the two crews. A huge crowd is gathered on the river bank to our right, not 10 metres away. We squeeze our oars in the water, taking up the slack but trying not to false start. Out of the corner of my eye I can see the Ridley College boat, its oarsmen also wound up like coiled springs.

In the pause allowed by the Umpire after his question, the silence hangs over us like a wet blanket, silence that you will have to slash through if you want to disturb the tension and destroy this particular moment of truth.

My eyes are partly on Dave's huge, sprung back directly in front of me, partly on the Umpire, every thought on finishing my first stroke cleanly and not screwing it up. If I can get through that, the rest will be fine.

“ROW!” The white flag drops and mayhem erupts. The energy of sixteen beef-cakes explodes through their oars into the water, which boils and froths around the boats as they are released from their inertia and start moving. There is noise everywhere, undefined, white noise.

My blade comes out of the water cleanly and I hear Stuart's voice cutting through the din to my consciousness. *“Three quarters!... Three quarters!... Squeeze it out!... Hold onto your finishes!... Stride!...”*

In seconds, it seems, we have cleared Temple Island, we are flying and Ridley are ahead and almost out of sight. And now what?...

At the beginning of the 1979/1980 rowing season I was a 2nd year law student at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg in South Africa. I was a keen sportsman and devoted most of my spare time to the sport of rowing, which I had started at High School.

By the end of the 1979 season our University first crew, of which I had been a member, had won most of our races, including South African championships. Each of us had received colors for representing South African Universities and our province.

When the 1980 season started, most of us from the previous season's crew were still together and available for the new season, along with one or two oarsmen from other crews in our club.

We sat down one evening after a pre-season work-out in the gymnasium and, over a drink, agreed that if we put eight of us together with our coxswain from the previous season, we could be a useful crew for the new season. In fact, we believed that we could be strong enough to compete at Henley Royal Regatta in England, the international Mecca of rowing excellence. We agreed there and then to make our aim for the season to win everything in South Africa and tour England, with our primary purpose to be competitive at Henley.

It was a bold vision and, by setting it, we raised our own bar for achievement.

After a few weeks of training together we realized that we had the potential not just to be quick, but very fast indeed. Each of us was powerful as an individual, physically and mentally. We soon worked out that if we could harness the collective power we had, we could do something special.

We also soon realized that the local coach we had at that time, who was an experienced oarsman, totally committed to us and giving his all, was unlikely to be able to deliver what we needed to raise ourselves to a new level. We needed someone with international experience who knew what it was going to take to be competitive at Henley. We chose an English coach who, at the time, had taken up a coaching position at a top South African school after leading an English public school touring crew to South Africa which had destroyed all competition. Peter Jones was up for the challenge and said 'yes' when we invited him to be our new coach.

Peter radically overhauled everything we knew and thought we knew about rowing. Overnight he halved our workload, telling us that we could not go fast if we were tired all the time and that, for so long as we were flogging our bodies, he could not teach us any new technique. The idea of doing less work, whilst appealing at some level, was also scary. What if we were not as fit as the competition? However, we trusted that Peter knew what he was doing and life in a rowing boat suddenly became less about suffering and more about fun and excellence.

Peter then changed our rowing style, basing the new style on coaching methods which had originated in England in the 1930's. Astonishingly (to us, anyway), we started going faster.

For the rest of that season we swept all before us, re-writing all the record books and finally being named as the South African national crew to tour overseas.

Although there were other strong individual oarsmen around, we and the South African selectors knew that the chemistry in our boat was so powerful that any change of personnel might actually slow the boat down. We so trusted and believed in each other that anyone else coming into the boat would be faced with the task of having to persuade the rest of us

that he could make the boat go faster. We didn't want it and the selectors realized that, whatever they did, they were unlikely to make our boat faster by messing around with an established crew.

Already the press had been reporting that we were the best rowing crew ever produced in South Africa. I think the selectors finally adopted the view that, if the crew wasn't broken, there was no point in trying to fix it. We were going to tour as a national crew, with no changes in the boat!

We left for England in mid-June 1980 and arrived in miserable rainy conditions which persisted for most of our five week tour. The crew was made up of Stuart Cutler (cox), Russell Bruton (stroke), John Stark, John Myburgh, Ivan Pentz, Dave van Rensburg, Andrew Pike, Rod Tritton and Kevin Jacobs. Our spare man sculler was Dale Howes.

At a warm-up regatta in Marlow on the Thames a couple of weeks before Henley we came down to earth with a bump, being well beaten by a crew from Molesey Boat Club. We acknowledged that we had not rowed anywhere near as well as we knew we could. On analysis we realized we had been scared, tried too hard to prove ourselves and had 'wheel-spun' down the course, forgetting who we were and what we knew. It was a great lesson for us, both in learning some humility and also requiring us to re-connect with our vision of ten months earlier.

Henley Royal Regatta is a scary and brutal place for an oarsman. It is run along the lines of Wimbledon tennis: two boat racing along a hallowed stretch of water on the Thames, almost 1 ½ miles long. The winner goes on to compete in the next round. The loser goes home. The eventual overall winner in each division takes all and the runner-up goes home with nothing.

Typically, in order to get to a final, a rowing crew will have to win four or five races in succession. Every race can knock you out of the event. It is an uncompromising system, run in a tradition that started in 1839, and crews from all over the world come to Henley to compete.

In that curious way that only the English can achieve, it is not only one of the great sporting events, but also one of the great social events of the world. The Stewards Enclosures teem with English aristocracy and socialites from around the world, past and present Henley competitors, some interested only in the Pimms champagne, strawberries and cream and conversation, but many engrossed only in the rowing. Some are interested in both. It is almost as if there are two simultaneous events going on, one sporting and the other social, each being the *raison d'être* for the other.

Although we were a national crew, we were allowed to compete in the universities event, the Ladies Plate, as we were all students. We found ourselves drawn in the first round against A.S.R. Nereus, a scary sounding

Dutch crew from Amsterdam. We had no idea how good they were, so could only prepare to row the race as best we could without taking into account the likely Dutch tactics.

A day or two before the start of the regatta disaster struck. One of our key oarsmen, John Stark, withdrew from the crew with a back injury, no doubt sparked by the much higher intensity training which we had taken on in the preceding weeks and months. John was replaced with our spare man, Dale Howes. Dale was a good and powerful oarsman in his own right, but was a bit smaller than the rest of us and therefore did not match the body profile of the remainder of the crew. It is fair to say that we were all nervous of performing less than optimally when Dale joined the crew. Dale was immediately under huge pressure to perform, which placed an unfair burden on him.

Several of us had to reshuffle our positions in the boat to accommodate Dale, meaning that a few were in unfamiliar positions and we now had a crew which, whilst still strong, was different from what anyone had envisaged. Life had thrown a curved ball at us and we were called on to face and deal with it.

On the first race day we lined up against the Dutch crew, A.S.R. Nereus. The starter explained to us the protocol, as he did to every crew before the start of each race: "*I shall start you in the following manner: I shall say: 'Are you ready? Go!!' and simultaneously drop my white flag.*"

Nereus suddenly burst off their station, their cox yelling "*Drie-kwaart, drie-kwaart...!*" ("*three-quarters, three-quarters...*" – their starting pattern.) Bemused, we realised that they had comically false-started, mistakenly having thought that the starter had actually given the command to race. They then had to reverse themselves quite a way up the course to get back onto the starting buoys. We all relaxed a bit and then the race got properly underway. After making a solid if slightly shaky start, we slowly pulled away from the Hollanders, settled down and eventually won the race with ease.

Confidence levels soared as we had not only beaten an unknown Dutch crew and not been knocked out in the first round, but our competitors in the next round turned out to be Imperial College, London, whom we had beaten earlier in the year when they had toured South Africa.

We rowed the round of 16 with confidence and style, beating Imperial College easily. And that brought us to a quarter final against Ridley College, Canada, previous winners of the event who always had strong crews.

Peter Jones told us that they would be quick off the start and that we would need to match them if we were to beat them.

And now here we were. We had blasted off the start, rowing as well as we had ever done, but still found ourselves almost a length down on Ridley, a situation we simply did not know. Having won everything in South Africa, we had never been seriously challenged or had had to come from behind. This was new territory for us.

We thump past The Barrier, still trailing Ridley by the same distance. The boat feels settled and stable, rhythm coming through, every blade hitting the water in perfect timing as we drive our legs down and then start the next stroke, and the next.

Suddenly Dave loses control of his oar. I see the distorted shape of some waterbird which has strayed onto the course and under Dave's blade. The oar buries itself in the water, dragging the boat down on the right we are fighting for some rhythm.

In rowing parlance this is called 'catching a crab' and is perhaps the cross-country runner's equivalent of snagging his vest on a bush. Not fatal, but hugely disruptive of rhythm and speed.

In a remarkable display of oarsmanship and strength, Dave somehow immediately recovers control of his oar, but in the unfolding of that drama we have lost another half a length or so and Ridley are out of our sight.

Stuart, our extraordinary and canny coxswain, calls for us to settle down, consolidate and regain control of our boat. Somehow we all know that the race is not over for us.

Stuart calls for one or two hard pushes and soon lets us know that Ridley is coming back to us, foot by foot.

We pass the Big Tree and Stuart counts our strokes down for another push. "*Three..two..one... GO NOW*". As one, we pump our legs down and the boat surges again.

We are approaching the Stewards Enclosures now, the final stage of the race, our lungs bursting, legs and shoulders on fire with pain. And Ridley are still ahead.

Stuart counts down again to the next push, telling us that this is it: now or never.

We came abeam of the Stewards Enclosure, and Stuart calls for the push. It is a final moment of choice for all of us. Despite our imploding bodies, in two strokes the boat again lifts itself out of the water as, to a man, we call on every last ounce of resource available. Ridley slowly slides down the length of our boat, the crowds are screaming for us – more white noise - and we are past them with ten strokes of the race left. Through a haze I hear Stuart shout: "*Easy All*" and to a man we collapse over our oars as we cross the finish line, trying to drag some breath back into our aching lungs.

We have won by one third of a boat length, a narrow margin in rowing terms, and are through to the semi-finals.

I cannot remember a time when I have been more exhausted or more tested. Some crew members were in tears, but we knew we had just done something special.

The semi-final the next day was against Harvard University, the east coast sprint champions of the United States. We knew they would also be fast out of the start and were determined not to have to try and come from behind again.

Before the Harvard race we went out to practise some starts. The boat was flying and we declared ourselves ready for Harvard.

On Sunday morning (finals day at Henley) we were lined up on the Henley stake buoys (starting blocks), nervous but confident. The umpire, resplendent in his blazer and umpires launch, lifted his flag and the starter boomed out: "*Are you ready? ROW!*"

After 200 yards Harvard have taken 1½ boat lengths off us. So much for practising our starts. Harvard are out of sight and we have to repeat our previous day's feat against Ridley, but this time have even more ground to make up. At that moment, having lived through the Ridley race, not one of us doubts that it is possible. However, every one of us knows what it is going to take.

The race follows a similar pattern, except this time we steadily claw back water all the way down the course, with Stuart talking us through it, cool, calm, professional and un-panicked. As we approach the Stewards Enclosure, again dying of oxygen shortage and lactic acid overload, Stuart calls for a final push.

Harvard panic, lose their rhythm, catch a crab and we have beaten them by three feet in the dying yards of the race.

Doing what we did to Ridley was unusual at Henley. Doing it on consecutive days was almost unheard of. We had become the darlings of the crowd.

The final that afternoon was against a crew of giants from Yale University. They hadn't been pushed in any of their previous races and we were spent from our last two. They beat us by 2½ boat lengths and Henley was over for us, other than some serious partying that night at the hallowed Leander Rowing Club.

The rest of our tour was an overwhelming success, with us returning to South Africa with a number of trophies and medals from other regattas and hailed by the then President of the South African Amateur Rowing Union as '*the finest [crew] ever to represent South Africa*'.

As I write, I am coming to the end of a weekend at Henley at which our 1980 crew has together celebrated a 30 year reunion.

During our time of re-connecting, sharing our memories, playing and laughing together again and acknowledging our love, affection and undying respect for each other, what has emerged for each of us is the seminal moment when we were called upon to make our final push against Ridley College.

No one of us has been left unaffected by that experience, and it has served every one of us at different times of our lives over the past 30 years. For my own part, I have drawn on the learnings from the Ridley race time and again in my life, most especially when the chips have been down and Life has called on me to lift my game. Some of these are mentioned later in this book.

The lessons that the Ridley experience delivered for me included:

- The understanding that Life will from time to time, if not from moment to moment, deliver to us moments of choice and possibility
- We may not want, ask for or like the things that Life delivers, but it will deliver them anyway
- In those moments, we are free to choose which road we will take along our path: whether to choose a high road or a low road. Each is a possibility and each will take us in a different direction
- When we take the high road, at that moment we say 'Yes' to the thing that Life has delivered and grasp it with both hands
- Conversely, when we say 'No' to what Life has placed before us, we are choosing a low road
- The high road is typified by acts and behaviour which reveal conscious and purposeful living, whilst the low road is lined with acts of unconsciousness and purposelessness
- When we take the high road, we have learnt the lesson that Life delivered for us and are ready to take the next step on our journey
- When we take the low road, Life will continue to deliver the same sort of challenges until such time as we have learnt how properly to deal with them
- The way we choose to live our lives is entirely up to each of us as individuals
- No matter how much we may try and blame others or Life for our circumstances or predicaments, ultimately we choose for ourselves how to live Life when it presents itself in its numerous forms
- There is no thing that happens in our lives which is not a gift, is not delivering some sort of learning and calling us forward to be the very best we can be: no exceptions.

There were other pieces I learnt from the Ridley race, such as not giving up (ever) and also understanding that there are other human beings on whom I can count unreservedly to do their bit. It was only then that I discovered that the possibilities for my own life are limited only by the limitations I place on myself, that I am 100% reliable and that I can do most anything to which I set my mind.

We all have seminal or defining moments in our lives, and they offer the possibility of bringing out the best in every one of us, whether it be our authenticity, courage, lovability or humanity. One way or another, Life will keep on throwing down offers to discover our true selves and invite us to be the best we can be.

What I offer you in this book are the lessons I have learnt and the possibility to draw similar lessons from and for your own life.

If anything in this book has some sort of resonance with you, then please take and use it for yourself. However, my hope is that you will use the journal work which I offer and get your own insights.

Every section in this book offers you the possibility of different ways of living consciously in each area of your life. It explores possibilities in particular situations in which we find ourselves from time to time, in those seminal moments which arise in our lives.

The sections in the book offer you various ways of waking up in different areas of your life by drawing on those seminal moments, together with an awareness of how Life could possibly be. It is those moments in your life, both big and small, which keep on arising and each time offer you the opportunity to learn from them and lead your life in a conscious and meaningful way.

Andrew Pike