



Achieving the Impossible

Lewis Gordon Pugh

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Have you ever taken a cold shower, a really cold shower, on a very cold day? Did you first put your arms under the spray of water, followed by your legs before easing your torso into the pain and then, finally, with what seemed like the hardest thing you'd ever done, move your head into the line of freezing-cold fire? The temperature of that water was probably between ten or eleven degrees.

At a little after midnight on July 15, 2007, Lewis Gordon Pugh stood on the edge of the sea ice at the North Pole. It was the fifteenth anniversary of his father's death and he was wearing just a Speedo swimsuit, the old-fashioned one that barely covers all that needs to be covered. Air temperature at the North Pole that night was below zero, the water into which he was about to plunge was minus 1.7°C (29°F) although this was no in-and-out dip into the world's coldest water. Pugh was about to swim one kilometre across the North Pole and the thought did cross his mind that he might die.

If you had been alongside Professor Tim Noakes who stood in a small Zodiac boat supervising Pugh's swim, you would have seen something truly startling. One of the world's most eminent exercise physiologists, Noakes was looking at a computer screen hooked up to a thermometer on the swimmer's body. What the screen told the scientist was in the minutes before the swim was to commence, Pugh's core body temperature was rising significantly.

More or less naked, standing on ice in freezing temperatures at the North Pole and yet his body was heating up. Is it any wonder they called him 'The Human Polar Bear?' Noakes, who had never encountered this phenomenon before working with Pugh, came up with a scientific term for it, 'anticipatory thermogenesis.' Without it, Pugh wouldn't have stood a chance of swimming a kilometre in those Arctic waters. With it, he was still dicing with death.

What scared him was the depth of the water, he would sink over four kilometres before reaching the bottom. Drowning was a possibility because hypothermia creeps up on the cold-water swimmer, pressing on his respiratory channels, denying muscles oxygen, until there is no power to fight, limbs go limp, swimmer disappears. Pugh would do the swim without harness or rope and if it went wrong, his body would not be recovered.

Why was he prepared to do it?

That is a remarkable story and, ironically, extraordinary testimony to one man's belief in life. Yes Lewis Pugh wants to help protect the most wonderful places on the planet, yes he wants us to reverse the damage we have done to our environment and yes he has given up everything to dedicate his life to this purpose. And it is not like he feels he is wasting his time.

Lewis Pugh spent the first ten years of his life in England, the next 17 in South Africa, and since then has lived in both countries, not forgetting great times spent in Norway. He is a maritime lawyer by training and a pursuer of dreams by inclination. There wasn't an ocean or a sea that he didn't want to swim, nor a mountain he didn't want to climb and it was no surprise to him when he quit his well-paid lawyer's job in the City of London for a life more interesting.

He spent five years in the British SAS, devoted his free time to preparing for and swimming in the world's most hostile places; the North Cape, the Antarctic, the North Pole and developed an understanding of the beauty, the preciousness and fragility of life and its many eco-systems. Driven by nothing more than deep belief, he has achieved things most would regard as impossible. He doesn't tell us what we must do but shows what can be done.

The challenges are enormous, tough laws will have to be passed, but when you have read Lewis Pugh's remarkable story, you will understand that now, more than ever, is the time for us to realise that it is possible to achieve the impossible.

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