

Finding Fredy: the Road to Qochamocco School

A Visual E-Book by Xavier Saer

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While doing some online research for my upcoming novel *"The Shaman, the Singer, and his Bleeding Heart,"* I stumbled upon a school in a forgotten part of the Andes called Qochamocco ...

The inhabitants of this community belong to a nation called the Q'ero. They are direct descendants of the Incas.

Almost untouched by western civilization, they are *proud of their ancestry and culture* which they fiercely guard.

As I found out more about their community and its needs, I decided to book a trip to Peru's capital, Lima, my city of birth, organize a benefit concert and donate all the funds to help in the completion of the school.

I had an array of information on how to get there from various sources, but no concrete facts.

There are no roads, no mobile reception and of course, needless to say, no electricity. An American friend who is tirelessly working towards the upliftment of the school introduced me via email to a very especial man, *Fredy Flores Macchaca*, a musician, elected Qochamocco community leader and young activist.

In the bedlam of organizing the concert I lost all contact with Fredy. I sent him a couple of emails but received no answer. No surprise: he lives at least a couple of days walk from the nearest computer.

With the event only a few days away, we desperately needed to speak in order to coordinate a meeting point where to hand him the funds.

And on the day of the event ... *still no contact.*

That's when I decided to look for him in an area the size of a small European country. I had a vague idea of where he was but nothing was certain. I only had a bunch of dollar notes ... and a little faith.

This is my story

XAVIER SAER
Angels in the city

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After a sold out benefit show at the *Cocodrilo Verde* bar in Peru's capital, Lima, I headed out with the funds wrapped in a grocery store bag on the first morning flight to Cusco. The Incas once called this magical place the "*Navel of the world,*" for being the centre of their Empire, the mighty *Tahuantisuyo*, the largest organized Empire the New World has ever seen. The image below is of the beautiful Cathedral in Cusco's central Plaza.



Family and friends warned me of the adverse weather conditions in the Andes during that time of the year, characterized by heavy, incessant rain, low temperatures, and a possibility of landslides called "*huaycos.*" This was no deterrent though, and to be honest, it was due to the lack of information I had on the area I was about to visit. Knowing what I know now, I would have prepared it a little more carefully ...

Prior to my departure, I had written to approximately 15 companies via email requesting the hire of certain necessary mountaineering equipment, namely a single backpack and a thermal sleeping bag, but only had one respondent.

Rosmery, the owner of the equipment hire shop, met me at the Cusco airport and from our brief meeting I knew she was going to be pivotal in my quest. Inside her company's small offices, her brother Edson, a man with a religious beard and a curious pair of compassionate eyes, greeted me as I entered.

After some brief formalities, I told them my situation. It was a Thursday morning ...

"I need to get Qochamocco in the community of Q'ero immediately. I only have 5 days to get there and return. My plane leaves back to Lima early on Tuesday as the following day I return home to South Africa. I've heard it takes 5 days to get there but you can clearly see that I don't have that time. I have two and a half days to get to Qochamocco and two and a half days to get back ... that's all I have."

Edson and Rosmery stared at each other with a secret look only siblings can decipher. Unable to interpret it, I continued, "I need to get to Ocongate (starting point of the trek) today, before nightfall. It's now eleven in the morning and I've heard the trip takes between three and four hours. There are 3 buses that leave for Ocongate from what I read on the Internet."

"But they all left this morning," Edson replied without hesitation.

I felt a lump in my throat - but my instincts quickly swallowed it. Surprisingly, I heard a voice clearly say, "There's a bus waiting for me at the station." I still don't know where that voice came from, but *it said those* very words. They both looked at each other again, surprised. I was far more surprised than they were, but somehow I *knew* I could trust that voice. I spewed it out after all ...

Edson quickly got on the phone and made two brief calls. Two different companies told us there were no buses left for Ocongate that day.

But I knew for certain that I wasn't wrong. Confident enough my transport problem was sorted, I moved to the next challenge: I needed a guide.

"Do you know of any guides that can take me to Qochamocco?"

"I thought you already had one," Edson was quick to answer.

"I don't know anyone. I'm relying on you to help me with that ... *please*," I almost begged.

There are few people left in the world like Edson and Rosmery - they didn't flinch when faced with an obstacle. They took everything with serenity, and the complete respect and understanding my mission required.

"Don't worry Xavier. I'm going to get you a guide," Edson replied.

I knew I could trust him.



A couple of calls later and things weren't looking too promising. Most of the guides for the area (and there weren't many in the first place) were already booked or were unreachable by phone due to the irritatingly low signal.

Lost in thought, Edson finally remembered a guide by the name of *Felipe*. Edson dialed his number.

Ring ... No answer.

Ring ... ring ... more damn rings. "Just answer that phone," I thought, desperately.

I heard a faint voice on the line.

"I have a friend who needs to get to Qochamocco in a hurry. He's helping a school there. He's a brother," Edson said, in a verbal hurry – the low signal might cut off the conversation at any time.

"Si, si," I heard the man reply through the line, softly. Some more faint questions and answers followed.

I looked out the window at the clouded sky and smiled ... ear to ear ... I trusted it was all working in my favour. "Just give me the good news man," I kept on thinking ...

"He said he can take you there," Edson said with half a smile, he knew the transport wasn't sorted out yet, "he'll meet you in Tinki later on today which is a little further up from Ocongate.

I told him you have a way to get there. He'll meet you at the bus stop."

"Thank you so much both of you. Let's celebrate," I answered with a beaming smile. "Where can I get some fresh juice?" It was too early for Tequila.



Edson and I stepped out of the office and crossed the road in the direction of the market. A million sounds and smells governed my senses as soon as I journeyed into this tiny microcosm of my country. What first struck me was to see such *organized chaos* work for everyone. As opposed to the memory I had of markets when I was a child living in Lima, this market was spotless and *flies had a warrant on their heads*. People were extremely proud of their stalls and what they did for a living. The market seemed organized in rows of products: one row would specialize in meats; another in cheeses; another in general household products and so on. Everyone seemed to make money in this extremely competitive environment because all stall owners had created for themselves a loyal bunch of customers who'd only shop at their premises despite having the same product a couple of meters away at an adjacent stall.



As I entered, on the left hand side was the "*cheese avenue*." Dozens of mouth-watering dairy products lay openly displayed and sold. One particular store sold its cheeses in small and large quantities and the owners incited one to try their products before buying. Having slept an hour the night before and lost in a rush to get to the airport in Lima on time, I skipped breakfast. Starving and feeling a little weak, I quickly sampled some of the local delicacies.



A peculiar stand sold *only* sheep's head and feet, which are used as ingredients for soups in the Andes where due to historical poverty and lack, every piece of an animal is utilized - and I mean "*every.*" This little store reminded me of something you would see in an Indiana Jones movie. I also noticed the great care the owner put into arranging his stock: visual appeal is very important in a store such as this - *we eat with our eyes first*. I kept on thinking, "another reason why I'm a vegetarian. RIP."

Apparently, the sheep head soup "revives the dead" as well as certain male body parts ...



In the same row, another lady selling meat was cutting up a crimson-red liver into sellable chunks. Hundreds of years ago, while the Spanish lords feasted inside the luxury of lavish haciendas with the finest meat, their Indian slaves received the off cuts. Out of necessity, these *sons and daughters of the land* learned to make the most delicious dishes using the little they had, aided by the unending range of wonderful spices and herbs that grow in Peru. Many of my country's most famous signature dishes were born from this lack. Currently, Peru is going through a *gastronomic apogee* of immense proportions and is taking the culinary world by storm.



“That’s the lady who makes the best juice,” Edson pointed to the woman cutting up some fruit in a bluish green overall. He greeted her, asked her to take care of me, and went back to the office.

“Give me your best liter of juice, mama,” I said.

“Coming right up casero (slang for *loyal customer* in Peru),” she responded with a smile. She cut and mixed a variety of bright, fresh, juicy fruit into a blender with the expertise of a samurai.

“Casero, do you know what my secret is?” She asked me with a proud look in her eyes.

I shook my head. I really had no idea, but I hoped it wasn’t a sheep’s head.

“Algarrobina syrup my child,” she said. “*Te pone oso*,” (literally translated into *it turns you into a bear* but really meaning it gives you increased sexual prowess).”

I almost asked for two liters.

Immediately after we finished the delicious juice back at the office, it started to rain. I called a passing taxi by waving my hands and asked Edson to accompany me to the bus terminal.

To our surprise, *the bus was there. Waiting.*

I entered the bus office and managed to grab the last available place: seat number 47.

I walked out with my fateful ticket and Edson advised me that just down the road, a smaller van was also leaving for Ocongate and I could reach it more comfortably and rapidly. I quickly bought a ticket on the smaller vehicle and stepped inside seeking shelter from the incessant rain. Edson and I said farewell and he wished me blessings and fortune on my mission.

Angels walk among us, disguised in many shapes. They don’t need to show their wings because we’re the ones that do the flying because of their kindness.



I waited. In the misted van window, I wrote the first words that came to mind: *believe*. I had no plan. I had no experience. I had no map to success. I only had one word etched within me. *Believe. Just Believe.*

With a large roar, the larger, older bus started its engine. I asked the kid in charge of the tickets of my van when they were planning to depart. Nonchalantly, he told me only once the van was full. Inside the ten people capacity vehicle ... were only two of us ...

In a flash, I got my money back from him and jumped in front of the departing bus with a huge backpack and a folded tent, desperately waving a soaking ticket. I placed my belongings in the side compartment and entered the bus soaked in rain.

“Let’s see ... seat 47,” I looked for my place as I walked into a bus of ninety two eyes, each staring at me. Right at the back, bang in the middle, was my fateful seat.

A large traditionally dressed couple sat on either side of my seat, and surrounded me during the three or four-hour journey. I took some South African dried mango and shared it equally between them. The sweet smell of Africa took me back to my second home ... and it broke the ice between us too. I was physically and mentally exhausted and the trip was a great way to catch up on some needed sleep. Also, in case my head fell on her shoulder or on her husband’s shoulder due to fatigue, I decided to befriend them from the start.



As people arrived at their destinations, seats opened up. By a window, on my left, a seat became available and I quickly moved at the opportunity. A curious kid seated in front couldn’t

stop staring at me. I took a couple of his pictures and showed them back to him. He was elated and couldn't get enough of seeing his image on the camera's screen, "perhaps a *future Peruvian president?*" I thought.

His dad was a large and bossy policeman seated two seats to my right. I politely asked him where they were heading.

"I'm going to a village past Tinki to my parent's land," he firmly answered. That was perfect: it meant the bus traveled past Ocongate as well as my final destination.

"Can I ask you a favour?" I queried as I offered him some of my wonderful South African produce – half the back of the bus probably wondered what smelled so sweet. Earlier on, I saw him check my precious cargo of mangos with a side-glance. Whatever I wanted, as long as I had the mangoes, I would get. I had him in my pocket ...

"I haven't slept and I'm extremely tired. In case I do fall sleep ... can you wake me up when we get to Tinki?" I was so physically exhausted from organizing the concert and partying until the early hours of the morning that I would have slept all the way to Bolivia.

"No problem sir," he replied in a lighter tone while chewing the ever-popular mango strips (export quality by the way).



I felt a strong tap on my shoulder. There was a hint of saliva just above my chin; I must have been in deep sleep.

When I opened my eyes, I heard the policeman say, "This is Tinki. You're here."

I thanked the kind officer, waved goodbye to our future president and stepped out of the bus opposite the nearly finished, pink-walled produce market.

A man wearing an old, brownish felt hat and dark tan leather jacket automatically approached me.

"You must be Xavier. *I'm Felipe, your guide.*" We shook hands in the middle of the desolate highway.

"You must be tired," he said, "There's a hostel down on the left. Get a room, put your bags in there, and make yourself comfortable. I'll meet you by that restaurant in 15 minutes," he tapped me on the shoulder and pointed to the low-roofed locale on our right. He then turned around and walked away.

Hostel Laroma was dark and dingy. I almost bumped my head twice against low-lying beams protruding from its shell. I'm not the tallest person, but inside this building, I was a giant. I proceeded to get a room for 10 Soles (about R28/\$3.5), left my bags inside, and proceeded to eat something with Felipe. I was starving and dinner was going to be my first real meal of the day.



As I walked in, a woman resembling an Inca princess sat on the floor knitting some kind of garment basking in the soft reddish light before dusk. I was at the heart of my country:

unspoiled, mystical and colourful.

Two young women with the rosiest cheeks I'd ever seen waited the low-roofed restaurant. Felipe and I shared some *Coca Tea* (fantastic for altitude sickness) while discussing the plans for the next day and the overall mission.

He asked me what I did for a living. I simply told him I was a musician and singer. One of the girls overheard me and approached my table shyly twisting her hands into complex knots.

"Can you sing for us?" she asked while the TV blared the latest tunes from radio.

"If you turn that TV off, I will." She ran for the power knob. There was no sound but the buzz of two mating flies.

I cleared my throat, "this is a song I wrote years ago and it's called *Loco* (Crazy)." I belted the powerful chorus in their tiny restaurant – it echoed like two angry volcanoes swearing at each other.

"What's your name," I asked the older one with the twisting fingers.

"*Bubulia*," she replied.

"So *Bubulia* ... did you like it?"

"*Si señor!*" (Yes, sir) She blushed and ran into the kitchen, of course, twisting her fingers.

When our food came, I noticed I had an *extra fried egg on my plate*.



After dinner, Felipe and I returned to the hostel, entered my room, and sat on separate beds opposite each other.

Felipe took the *Peruvian equivalent of an ID book* and placed it at arm's length on the room's dingy table. I took a picture of it.

"I know you don't know me but I have worked with Edson many times. He'll tell you I'm *trustworthy*." He accentuated *trust*.

I had no doubt he was telling the truth; I could feel his intentions.

He continued, "Before we start the expedition, I need to be paid the full amount Edson and I agreed on earlier. I need the money to buy provisions and food for the next four days. The fee also includes the services of two horses and an extra guide, my brother Eusebio," he said in imperfect Spanish.

With no hesitation, I took the money out of my leather wallet and *paid Felipe in full*.

"Tomorrow I'll be here at six in the morning. We will buy the provisions then. We will have breakfast at seven, and by eight, we should be ready to take a taxi to Mahuayani where we will start the climb. My brother Eusebio will be waiting there with the horses. Get some rest ... and

see you in the morning.” I escorted him to the door and with that he disappeared into the cold, dark Andean night.

That night I did not sleep. Not even for a minute. My thoughts focused solely on the money and the informality of our earlier transaction.

“Why did you pay him the full amount? Have you come all the way here to end up like this? You know nothing about this guy ... how do you know he’s honest?” Questions like this plagued me throughout the night like a broken cacophony of doubts.

The world teaches us not to trust. It’s all part of our *human conditioning*. But I knew that I was dealing with an honest man. Inside me, *I felt certain*. Then why were my heart and my mind clashing? I was going against what parents and educators taught me ... “Use your logic. Use your intellect. You should have paid him half now and the balance on completion. Don’t trust a stranger ...”



After one of the most torturous nights of my life, I recognized the sounds of dawn: donkeys and horses walking on the tarred highway outside my tiny window, their hooves like gigantic out of time castanets. Not far off, a truck carrying chickens to the slaughterhouse drove in a hurry and left the smell of diesel hanging in the air like a dark cloud.

“I need to take my mind off it. I’m losing presence. There’s nothing I can do right now so I better stop torturing myself with more questions,” I thought. I headed for the showers. The

hostel offered “hot water” on a signpost outside but *warmish* was a compliment; at least the cold revived me and pulled me back to the present moment.

At quarter to seven, the hostel owner announced to a visitor, “He’s up there.” I stood by the doorframe in my room deep in thought.

I quickly ran down, conquered the steep stairs to the foyer, and found a strange man looking for somebody else.

I told myself that *I needed to trust my instincts* ... I’ve always called them “the voice of God” and ever since I can remember, they have never failed me.

At exactly seven, I walked into the restaurant. It was empty. I then walked next door to the grocery store. There, Felipe was putting together the necessary provisions - as he promised. He looked fresh and relaxed.

He greeted me with a wide, welcoming Andean smile, “Good morning,” he said, “no meat right?”



Looking southwest from the grocery store’s entrance rose the revered Apu (*mountain spirit*), Mount Ausangate (6384 meters).

Andeans believe *everything has a spirit*. This implacable sight in the morning light was breathtaking. I stood in awe and stared at the most beautiful peak in the region. This zealous mountain spirit will only let you conquer her if you’re respectful and collaborative - just like some lovers. The impressive sight was a sign of things to come. I didn’t know it yet.



I was anxious to depart. At exactly eight, a jovial man with a full set of gold teeth picked us up in a dilapidated taxi with a set of expensive mags, ready to take us to the meeting point. There we would wait for Eusebio and the two horses. We loaded the gear and took off in a hurry – I believe he picked up my restless energy. “I’ll get you there my friend,” he said while he looked at me through his rear view mirror, “even if I have to *push this piece of rubbish* uphill. Don’t worry.” He spoke calmly, taking his eyes off a winding road that ran close to a precipice for at least 10 seconds. He laughed by himself and carried on driving while the sun reflected off his full set of cheap, golden teeth.



Our next stop, Mahuayani, was about 20 minutes south of Tinki. I was just glad we got there without ending on the valley below via the precipice. We unloaded and the taxi driver bided us farewell with his two hundred dollar, golden smile. We waited by a rubbish dump filled with plastic bags and sheep bones for Eusebio to arrive with the horses.

A confident kid approached me, "So where are you going?" he curiously asked.

"I'm going to Qochamocco. Been there?" I replied.

"Nope. Where is that?" he asked.

I didn't want him to know that I absolutely had no clue, so I signaled to the far mountains on our left. I found out later that I was actually pointing in the right direction. He nodded and gave me the *"so what's on your bag,"* kinda-look.

I offered him some of my mini Toblerone chocolates and he placed two in his tiny mouth at the same time.

"Good or what?" I asked. He didn't blink and just stood there, staring ... What is the best chocolate in the world?" I asked, confidently (I wasn't paid for this piece of advertisement, by the way ...)

He didn't answer. I don't think he could say Toblerone with a mouth full of Swiss chocolate.

But he got the message.

Across a rusted, red steel bridge about 100 meters down the river, I saw a man running behind two horses at full speed. At the altitude we were at and at the speed he was running, this man was the epitome of fitness. I assume his heart and lungs were at least twice the size of mine.

"Eusebio?" I asked Felipe, curiously.

He nodded. "Get ready," he said.



Crespo (Curly) and *Filio* were so different. *Filio* was darker, calmer, and took an immediate liking to me; while *Crespo* was a nervous horse, and did not like me touching its face. The guides loaded the dozens of provisions on the animals – pans, tents, pots, gas canisters - tied them tightly, and stepped onto the highway. I had no idea, as I took those first steps, that I was starting *the adventure of a lifetime*.



Our first climb took us 300 meters or so above Mahuayani, our starting point. It looked easy from terra plana, but at 3500 meters above sea level, you have to multiply every effort at least by three. Halfway up that first stretch, I was already sweating profusely. I remember forgetting to buy newspaper, which is placed between clothes and skin in order to soak up the

perspiration. "This is going to be harder than I thought," I pondered as I wiped my brow with the palm of my left hand.

Before reaching the top of the hill, I stopped twice to get some thin air into my burning lungs. My oxygen-depleted body was crying out for help. The guides walked on ahead as instructed by me earlier, "*Don't wait for me,*" I clearly ordered - I certainly wasn't going to change my mind.

One must *never judge the rest of a journey from its first steps*. Our bodies take a while to acclimatize to an array of situations and given the necessary time to adapt, usually do. To give up this early would show lack of judgment and a weak resolution. It took me less than an hour for my lungs and heart to start working like a well-oiled machine. Bodies have an *inner intelligence* and millions of years of evolution have given us that wonderful gift.



Although the climb was gradual, I started to trail behind. I made up a Mantra "*Breathe harder, breathe deeper,*" that took some attention off my fatigue. I also applied some of my Yoga knowledge and through various *Pranayams*, I was soon receiving the oxygen needed to catch up with the runaway guides.



The route we traveled is used in either May or June (it varies according to the year) by thousands of pilgrims on the way to the *Qoylluriti festivity*, where up to 30 000 faithful gather at about 5000 meters above sea level to pay homage to the time when a shepherd boy is said to have seen a vision of Christ as he tended his flocks. The sight of the first cross was a welcome relief and I stopped and thanked God for the strength I possessed to make the journey. I asked

for a *little more determination* and the rest, to be left up to me. With renewed stamina and purpose, I caught up to the guides once again and decided to lead instead of trailing. I needed to set the example and consequently, the pace of the journey.



With tourists, my guides take approximately 5 days to reach Qochamocco. They walk slowly, allow time for lots of pictures and include plenty of rest. I only had 2 days to accomplish that same route. With that in mind, I passed the guides and continued the journey briskly.

I entered *a world that didn't belong in the 21st century*. Apart from the moving river below me, the lack of sound startled me. Noise wasn't welcomed here. This allowed me to experience, quietly and on my own, many moments of profound realization and peace. To have nothing but *the echo of whispers from within* was a real blessing. On my left, in a canyon below me, a woman shepherd sat, watching her flock graze.



I felt like a *runaway train* and my heart was the responsible engine. During a break, I stopped to take a leak above a crevasse with an unbelievable view. Something moved underneath me. I

tried to stop half way, but it was impossible. A huge male alpaca jolted in front. He didn't look amused. I don't know much about their kind and whether they or the llamas are the ones famous for a mean spit, but I took a couple of immediate steps back. We looked at each other eye to eye as if were about to step into a duel. I knew I was in the wrong - no one likes to be pissed on. So I receded, mentally apologized to the injured, and got out of there.



A dog with a peaceful nature looked at me as I walked past the alpaca flock he was tending. I could see this animal had an old soul: his eyes told a *million stories of summers in the rain*. Our gazes connected for a second and I could strongly *sense his spirit* which felt calm and wise. He let me go as I posed no threat and focused his attention on the job at hand.



In the Andes, ancient belief amalgamates with Christian tradition and worship.



I approached the first dwellings of the day. They were exactly like those I saw in my dreams. Outside, by a pond, a woman fetched water presumably for cooking. There was a flock of about fifteen white alpacas and a single brown one. I saw my life in context: *you were born an original ... so please don't die a copy.*

There were alpacas everywhere. Grass was plentiful due to the summer rain and there was an abundance of food for all. A hierarchy could be clearly spotted - the larger males surrounded the flocks and in the centre little baby alpacas ran and grazed next to their mothers. The amount of new born is *a sign the seasons have been merciful and poems of Life have been written in these valleys and hills.*

The weather kept changing by the minute. The sun would be displaced off its throne and *delved opaque* in an eye's blink.

Rain clouds built ahead - it's *a cumulus conspiracy*.

The extra humidity fell on us before we had time to seek cover. I had no idea that from that minute, I was going to be soaking wet for the next 3 days.



A young kid oblivious to the rain spotted me. He quickly jumped off my path creating a safe distance between us. He looked scared with my sudden presence but I won him over with my *million dollar smile* and a packet of sweets, *of course*. He hardly spoke Spanish and I didn't speak Quechua so our meeting was brief. I asked where Q'ero was and he responded with a *blank stare*. I pointed my finger due south and said, "Q'ero?" He shrugged his shoulders. I decided to bid farewell but not before shaking hands with my little Quechua speaking friend.



Half an hour later I saw a conglomeration of human dwellings. It was picture perfect. The snowy peaks in the background and the soft, green hills took me back to a childhood filled with stories of Heidi.

The day dream was interrupted by an increase in the intensity of the rain and the unfriendly bark of 2 dogs coming from behind the stone walls. The animals were soon running at full speed towards me. I didn't see my guides so I picked up two large stones and *prepared for battle*.

The dogs stopped about 40 meters ahead next to a little river. I breathed a sigh of relief and waited in the rain for my guides to arrive.

Eusebio pointed that we needed to dissect the dog's territory. I placed myself between the two loyal horses. The furious dogs got closer and closer but the large horses kept them at bay. My mobile alarm set at *11.11am* each morning suddenly went off. I still don't know why but I took the phone out of my pocket and played the ringtone to the raging dogs. I can't explain logically why they stopped their attack. All I know is that they gave me a weird look, and left.



The biggest climb yet awaited us. I looked up, saw a massive mountain ahead and *took a deep breath*. The guides were so graceful: they weren't walking; they were *caressing the slopes* while I, the city kid, trailed behind *praying for air*. I remembered when I climbed a glacier a couple of years back that I seemed to fare better if I didn't look up and just concentrated on the steps of my feet. I brought back the breathing Mantra to mind and I charged my lungs with pure, cold mountain air.

A quarter ways up the hill I found a gathering of stones surrounded in blue flags. It reminded me of the prayer flags Buddhists pilgrims place on their holy routes all over the Himalayas.

I looked around for my guides but they were *nowhere to be found*. I climbed some more and managed to spot them about a hundred or so meters downhill. Our paths looked like they were going to join eventually on our top right - so *I carried on the road less traveled*.



I advanced 30 or so steps at a time; it's all my heart could muster before feeling like it was going to burst. I told myself that I would not take less than 30 steps and will increase the amount gradually as my body adapted to the altitude. My mind was saying yes; but my lungs were saying no, no, no. In these cruel conditions, lactic acid builds up rapidly in one's muscles and fatigue waits faithfully until you have to *stop, quit or collapse*. I pushed some extra freezing oxygen deep into my lungs and made sure I only breathed through my nose; in and out ... in and out ... "Again Xavier, but now a lot slower," ... I inhaled deeply and *let life in*. As I looked up, the mountain had no visible horizon.

Apu, the mountain spirit, watched me and smiled, "How much have you got?" it said. "Until I try, I don't know how much sir," I replied, respectfully. "But here's my little share," and took another step up.

I had spoken to my parents the day before. As soon as I arrived in Cusco I gave them a call to let them know I was safe. During the conversation, an aunt walked in, heard it was me on the phone, and shouted, "*Tu puedes, tu puedes*" (You can, you can!) as loud as she could making sure I heard her. I can't put into writing the power behind those two words: they represented the belief my family had in me. To carry a family's total belief on my shoulders was a great responsibility. This was becoming one of the toughest challenges I had ever undertaken and I

wasn't going to let myself down. I also remembered thinking, as my power waned, of the kids and the school, *the real reason* I was here. Seeing their happy faces and being able to change something in their lives also *pushed* me through that climb.

We hit the 5000 meter mark and to celebrate, the sky decided to throw rice at us in the form of hail. *The soft little impacts on my face kept me awake* and brought back circulation on my frozen cheeks. The ground was completely saturated and the moss was damp, preventing a good grip from my already soaking wet shoes.



We reached a plateau. Little puddles of water had turned the mountain crevasses into swamps. I heard the rain as it gently caressed their surface and bounced up into crown-shaped droplets before disappearing back into liquidity. *The landscape was out worldly.*



A security wire mesh stretched across a number of stone mounds impeded our advance. Eusebio looked at me and lifted the wire. He let Filio, Crespo and Felipe go through first. There was an *unspoken language between us all*; we knew what we had to do and no obstacle was going to stop our journey.

We reached the *highest point* and there was hardly any vegetation on the ground; I calculate we were at a height of between 5200 and 5500 meters above sea level. A beautiful aquamarine lake appeared on our right and from behind the rock monoliths *I felt feline eyes on me*. I could sense the spirit of a Puma watching and following us silently. His presence entered through my nose; I could smell him although I couldn't see where he was. I asked Felipe if there were Pumas in the area. He mentioned they had been spotted where we were as they were likely to hunt around small lakes. I could feel a *connection between our spirits* and prayed that he would perhaps appear to me.



I asked my guides to proceed. I wanted to *stay and connect* with the Puma spirit. I sat on the highest rock on the Apu, closed my eyes and looked for him. Cats are elusive and vigilant; he wasn't going to be caught out that easily. I sensed he was teasing and not ready to appear, so I opened my eyes to the falling hail and tasted it with my tongue. Felipe and Eusebio were hundreds of meters below me. The downhill had started. The ground was slippery and managed to fall a couple of times. Thankfully I had my gloves on and they managed to prevent some nasty gushes on my palms. We reached another plateau at a lower altitude. The path had been washed out by a landslide. A precipice lay ahead. From where I stood, there was *no way forward*. A beautiful, powerful waterfall violently rushed down the mountain on our left.

An older shepherd, dressed in traditional Inca attire, saw us and signaled a safe passage down. He was about a hundred meters downhill. *I thanked him with a bow* and he simply acknowledged it with a toothless smile.

We forged some extra distance down the mountain slope. About halfway, Felipe asked me if we could camp. I wanted to ensue but didn't want to grow unpopular. I signaled my approval. The chosen spot was a rock protrusion providing a welcomed shelter from the rain. The men untied the horses and prepared camp. The moment I sat down *the journey hit me square in the jaw*: the freezing weather, damp clothes, lack of sleep, soaking shoes, and altitude all paid me an unexpected visit before lunch.



Out of nowhere I felt a barrage of exhaustion and nearly collapsed. My mind kept repeating, “*What did you get into? What did you get into?*” The constant battle with my racing thoughts started again. It all made me sick. I felt like puking.

Felipe started to cook. The last thing I wanted to smell was food. He offered me toasted bread in oil and oregano and I politely took a couple. I told myself I was going to swallow them. I did.

I grew quiet.

I shifted my thoughts and realized *my character was defined in moments like these*, when no one was watching. What was I going to make of it?

Eusebio asked me how I was doing and I gave them both the saddest look with a hint of a smile.

They knew exactly what I was going through and grinned in solidarity. I started to laugh uncontrollably and they followed suit - that shifted the energy in camp and reiterated the strong inner belief I had in myself. *It’s all possible. Everything is possible.*

I looked at both *immersed in my own silence.*

Felipe had this look that can read minds.

It’s somewhere between soft, sympathetic and prophetic.

His eyes could belong to a *lone wolf* who has lived in nature and learned its secrets. His pupils bled *wisdom of the ages*. It had an unspoken knowingness of what I was feeling and thinking exactly – at all times.

He gave me a cheap, green plastic dish and filled it with soup. The warm, chunky broth was *soul reviving.*



After lunch they offered to take a photograph with the damp valley behind me. I had *reached my lowest point* -yet I wasn't done for. My heart didn't know the word *quit*. I realized the only one standing in my way ... *was me*. Each challenge must be taken and assimilated in such a way that it makes you grow. *I learned that my attitude is everything* and my source of inner power is defined in how I choose to look at a situation.

It is human to err and wean sometimes. It is all part of the human experience. How can we ever know how high we can fly if we haven't fallen at least once? Those moments of pure weakness taught me how human I was and "*human*" was a word I felt I never belonged to.

On those slopes *I conquered my flesh* and my limitations.

At that moment I was taller than the mountain.

We descended into a swamp of tiny pools of frozen water. Within minutes we were climbing the east side of the mountain range. Hundreds of little streams rushed down the slopes in a desperate search for the mother river below.

It was a great idea to fill my stomach again.

My strength was regained.



No words or pictures can ever describe the look and feel of the *lost secret mountains* deep in the Peruvian Andes. Taking a photograph is like saying a horse with blinkers enjoys the full view ahead. The size of the Apus surrounding us was majestic. The wild and rebellious rivers were majestic. The rain on our faces was majestic. *Everything was majestic.*

Places like these remind me that there's no biblical heaven or hell. Earth is heaven and this is exactly *where I found myself*. The views changed at every corner and there was always a scene of raw beauty right before your eyes: a new waterfall, a hidden lake or an unfolding hill dressed in fragrant flowers.

Lost in awe, the *Thunder Apu* decided to let us know his presence. A thunderous roar echoed across the thousand valleys surrounding us. Here everything was magnified ... or multiplied by ten. Even *silence was louder*.

I turned around and saw where we had come from. The snowy peaks in the far bottom of the valley waved us goodbye. Today *we were conquerors*. But today the spirits of the mountains were kind to us too.

The clouds turned charcoal black as we neared the first double storey building we crossed all day. It was extremely quiet. I didn't spot a single movement inside the confines of the walled dwelling. It's like we had reached a ghost village. No dogs, no alpacas and no humans. *Where was everybody?*



Straight ahead a chaperone and his lady on a horse broke the green monochrome landscape. He greeted us with the customary Andean smile. The woman was seated with both legs on one side of the horse and looked extremely uncomfortable to what looked like a *high altitude balancing act*. She seemed a little embarrassed and avoided all eye contact. I wondered how long they had traveled and where they were headed. The world was a big place...

A small man made bridge, probably hundreds of years old, allowed us to cross to the other side of the valley. An adjacent cemetery lay filled with stone plaques except for a yellow tombstone adorned with bright coloured flowers. I paid my respects and felt a *rush of gratitude* for being alive.



Our muddy path followed the curves of the river closely. The sun decided to make a surprise appearance and I could see my distorted reflection on the puddles of water left on the ground.

The warmth of the sun thawed my face and with a magic kiss it disappeared leaving me passionately longing for my star lover. The jealous sky had enough of her flirting caresses and decided it was time to engulf the visitors in the *heaviest rain yet*.



Our path multiplied into a multitude of smaller journeys converging into the same distant point. That could mean only one thing: there was *civilization nearby*. The rain was dealing a hard revenge on us and it felt like my heart was three quarters full of water. As quick as lightning, a horse-mounted girl entered from the horizon and stopped right in front of me like an *Amazon warrior*. Behind her, a father-like figure followed, urging their alpaca flock to move forward. I grabbed my camera in order to take a shot of this incredible girl, and swift as the wind she tapped her horse and disappeared. But not without giving me a cheeky smile that said,

“Not this time gringo, not this time,” ...

The mountain Apu in front of us was nothing short of colossal. Rivers broke its skin as if a giant cat with a gargantuan paw had taken away some of its flesh. About three quarters up the slope,

a dwelling stood alone in the dizzying heights. Why would anybody live there? Were neighbours that noisy? The terrain looked unstable and with the summer rains at full force I'd imagine it was a pretty dangerous place to live. Something's we just can't understand with a *western frame of mind*.

The first words uttered in hours were Felipe's request to stop due to the rain. I didn't like the idea as I could see from the sky that the rain was not going to cease anytime soon and my body would lose core temperature when not moving. But I could see the precipitation was bothering the horses and so I called a brief rest. The men found shelter next to a rock mound and I, inside a *u-shaped stone Apu offering site*. Twenty minutes later, with no sign of rain stoppage, I signaled the continuation of the journey. My priority was to get to Qochamocco in time. We had been walking in the rain for hours; proceeding was not going to make much of a difference.



The small town of *Ancasi* appeared amidst the storm. Compared to what we had seen in terms of human habitat, this was a *Metropolis*. Ancasi had a plaza; few cement buildings and a road.

A small number of heads looked through a heavily misted window at the strangers approaching their Andean fortress. In these parts everyone knows each other on a first name basis, for hundreds of kilometers around - they immediately spotted we were not locals.

"Buenas tardes señores," (Good afternoon gentlemen) I uttered to the group of men gathered under a government office building (I could see it was a government building by the Peruvian emblem on top of the door). Three kids watched vigilantly behind the adults.

"Buenas tardes señores. Where are you coming from?" A largish man with a pleasant face dressed in a faded red jacket replied.

"We've come from Tinki and we're on our way to Qochamocco. We're going to give a hand in building a school," I said.

The man's expression softened and he asked us to come inside, away from the rain.

The room was very dark and I noticed the roof lacked the outlet for a light bulb. On a semi standing desk was an old typewriter: two clear signs of no electricity.

"I see there's no power around here. Roads but no power," I told the leader.

"We've been asking the government for years, but to no avail. They have forgotten we exist," he answered.



They offered us warm tea and I reciprocated the favour with some dry mangoes, chocolates, Coca leaves and sweets for the kids. A discussion followed regarding the school, my mission and if I could help their community in the future. We talked about the possibility of getting some kind of solar panel technology in the area. I affirmed that I didn't want to promise anything but I would certainly look into it. I noticed how *people live on hope* and the chance of a better life. Injustice hits my *solar plexus* like a boxer hits a punching bag and I will seriously consider helping this community in the near future. The leader and I exchanged personal details and I bided all present farewells.



The southern town limit of Ancasi was delineated by a man-made stone bridge over a river. A cream coloured wet pup resting just above it took an immediate liking to us and started to follow. He walked proudly by my side granting me the occasional *look of approval* and a tail wag.



Outside Anccasi, a circular stone wall used for herding alpacas was chosen as our first camp site. In the middle, there was a strange cream jacket covering a mound of cow dung. I asked

Felipe what it meant, thinking it might be an offering or something mystical.

“The jacket is there to protect the dung from the rain,” Felipe explained. “Dry dung is used to light up fires.” Nothing mystical about that ... I guess it made total sense in such wet weather.

“The owner better not use that jacket on a first date,” I said, and they both laughed.

My tent was set up in a flash. The rain had ceased. It was almost dark and the temperature dipped rapidly. Once in the tent I looked for dry clothes inside my backpack but to no avail. The tent I had borrowed from my cousin was designed for the tropical climates of our coastal regions as the lower parts of the walls had air-circulation vents. I climbed into my minus eight degree sleeping bag, but my attempts to get warm were *utterly futile*. I had been wet and cold from about ten that morning and by dusk, my core temperature just wouldn't normalize without some kind of physical effort.

Felipe walked in with a familiar smell: fresh pop corn.

“What movies are we watching?” I asked, but he didn't get the sarcasm.



After a great dinner of pasta and semolina soup I attempted to sleep, but again, to no avail. Honestly, I just couldn't get warm. I *desperately needed* to sleep that night; three nights with no rest was not the best way to tackle a mountain climb the following morning.

The blackest black *paled in comparison* to how dark the Andean night was. The only remnant of brightness was the explosion of lightning and thunder when an Apu spirit was in a playful mood.

A tiny fragment of light broke through my almost see-through tent and a familiar voice called my name twice. I emerged from my sleeping bag to find Felipe shining a tiny torch on my face.

"You're cold, aren't you?" he asked me.

"How do you know? I haven't made a sound!" I uttered.

"Well, you've been wet all day and the first night is always the toughest until your body gets adjusted. It happens to many people, so I just wondered ..." He lowered his torch so it wouldn't shine on my face. "If you want, you can join us at our tent. It's warm in there. You need to rest because we're reaching Qochamocco tomorrow. What do you say?"

"Give me ten minutes. If I'm not comfortable by then, I will join you," I replied.

"As you wish," With that Felipe zipped back my tent, and went back into the *soaking darkness*.

It made no sense staying in my tent. I had attempted for an hour to warm up to no avail. He had a point; tomorrow was D Day and I would need my strength to accomplish the mission. I stayed inside the sleeping bag, opened my tent and hopped, like in a potato sack race, all the way to them.

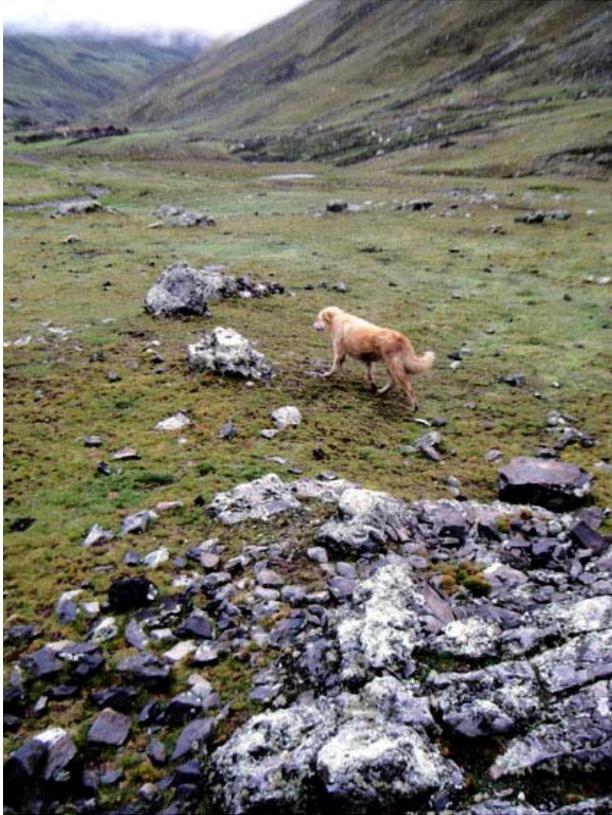
"Open up, it's the police," I whispered.

If I slept for an hour, I was lucky. The tent got so hot that I had to take my garments off one by one, every hour, as the temperature in our small confine gradually reached Saharan heights. Four thick blankets covered us below a large *mat* made of heavy and smelly sheep skins tied together. Besides the heat, one of the men snored like a lion and the horses made an incredibly loud sound every time they urinated. The animals didn't stop eating the whole night. Horses do not chew with their mouths closed, by the way.

Just after sunrise, it was time to wake up. By now, I was getting used to not sleeping at all. I didn't want to see my *pitiful face in the mirror*, so I decided not to shave. The dog that followed us the day before stood guard at the camp's entrance. As I approached, he retreated, which made me think that *some "inhumane" human* had not been kind to the pooch.

There's nothing like open spaces to freshen up in the morning. My mind projected itself to a time when my forefathers left their homes and conquered new and unknown worlds. I felt *real freedom* - something you *cannot feel in the city*. This was how the men of yesteryear survived and made their fortunes; they were tough, they were strong and they weren't pretty.

That morning I looked like crap - and I loved it.



Out of the corner of my eye I spotted small, swift movements. *An approaching renegade Inca!* My mind was still day dreaming ... and it took a while for it to return to reality. I turned around and found a tiny kid just behind the camp's stone wall staring at me. With a yellow toothbrush deep in my mouth and minty white foam all over my chin, I managed to whisper, "Hello?" The kid laughed and carried on staring at the strange creature with both yellow and white things protruding from his mouth.

I spat the foam, "What's your name kiddo?" I shouted as I approached him.

"Elliott. My name is Elliott."

"It's nice to meet you, Elliot. Do you want to join us for breakfast in a while?" I asked.

He nodded.

Elliott lived about five big boulders and a raging river from the campsite. He also spoke minimal Spanish so our conversations were based on my barrage of questions and his yes and no answers.

He stayed for breakfast as promised, and had the bigger half of my egg sandwich. He left with most of our cookie packet, some dry mango and a handful of lemon sweets. With a bounty like that Elliott ran home like a Puma. He probably thought we were going to change our minds and take the bounty back ... and so he vanished.



The last section to Qochamocco started about eight in the morning and I was in high spirits. I again lead the expedition and an hour into the walk the most unbelievable valley opened up. I stared in awe at what unfolded in front of my eyes ... If I could describe Eden, this was it: majestic mountains protecting fertile plains filled with wild alpaca, waterfalls, tiny lakes and the sound of the furious river on the right ... birds flying low and nature in perfect harmony with its surroundings. I don't think I had ever felt *as proud* to be born in this magical land. Peru was now in my vocabulary, *a synonym of paradise*. I thanked God for giving me the eyes and mind to see and understand such beauty.



Just behind the streak of the horizon I heard a noise befitting the movie "*Gladiator*" ... dark, solid hooves pierced the ground and water splashed in all directions gradually became louder and louder. Dazed and in a spell, *I stood in total silence*. About ten wild horses, all in different colours, appeared at full speed from the distance directly towards me. The sound was deafening - *I was in a visual and sonar trance*. Such wild splendor! Those seconds felt like minutes. When the peloton was about 30 meters away my instincts took over. Against my will, I moved

to the left and out of their path. I managed to grab my camera and photograph the last of these *majestic beasts in full throttle* - an image I'll never forget.

We reached the end of the valley and the guides left our provisions at a friend's dwelling. This would make our attempt to climb the last stretch to Qochamocco faster and lighter. Eusebio offered me to ride Filio but I decided to walk as a small way to solidarize with the children of Qochamocco who walk 4 hours to school every day.



The guides glided through the steep mountain slopes on top of the horses. I trailed behind but made *steady progress*. A kid pushing a small red bicycle came down the mountain in our direction, a strange sight. He walked slowly and with great care in order not to scratch his precious cargo.

We reached the halfway mark. The guides dismounted; it was too steep to proceed on horseback.



I felt the *Puma spirit* again, getting stronger and stronger. *Every person has an animal guide or spirit* and I felt this was mine. He was around, watching us.

We reached an emerald, mystical lake surrounded by a band of clouds. Every time I've felt the Puma spirit within me, we've approached a body of water. Felipe looked at me. I didn't have to spell what his eyes were telling me. *I think he felt it as well.*



We kept on climbing and got closer to the much talked about “*place in the clouds.*” We were almost five thousand meters above the sea. It was cold, windy and we were soon surrounded by a vortex of heavy mist. A *unicorn like horse* broke through the haze. A kid in a yellow soccer shirt followed its metallic footsteps. A man, who I'd imagine was the *embodiment of an Inca* of yore, appeared two minutes later with a shovel tied to his back. He and the guides engaged in conversation. He was Fredy's father.

He explained *Fredy was not in the village.* He had left for Ocongate, where I was 2 days earlier.

He mentioned Fredy might also be going towards Cusco and gave us the sad news that *the village was almost deserted.* All the men had gathered in another community a day's walk south.

Qochamocco was virtually empty. We offered him Coca leaves and thanked him for the information.

Soon the clouds completely surrounded us. We could only see about fifty meters in all directions. It made sense why the *Spanish Conquistadors* never reached places like Q'ero: *this is a land of myth and mystery where fantasy and reality co-exist as one.* A foreign soldier would be subject to surprise attacks in such low visibility. The altitude would also prevent him from fighting for too long before collapsing due to fatigue and his metal armour would also work against his body warmth. The terrain was *ineffably treacherous* and horses would be rendered useless in such conditions. Many of these factors explain why the runaway Incas fled to “the place in the clouds” seeking refuge from the Spanish onslaught.



Some renegade rays slightly broke through the heavy, humid mist and fell on an array of little lakes that had the appearance of *miniature mercury baths*. It's hard to describe what I saw. "M" words such as magical, mysterious and mystical do not do it justice.





As we descended the mist got lighter. We heard the sound of a giant waterfall somewhere in the vicinity. Felipe looked at me. *Twins know what the other is going to say*, and I needed no words to understand what his eyes were telling me.

We were there.

I stood on top of a hill. A majestic and wild waterfall fell on my right. The skies were almost clear and the view surpassed what I had seen in my dreams.

"Thank you Felipe," I uttered as I grabbed his forearm.

Few times in my life have I felt that proud. Seeing the school's rectangular metal roof shining in the sun was a picture I will never forget. *I knew I was meant to be there*. Leaving my dreams behind, I proceeded towards my final destination. Knowing I was guided throughout the

journey was also both exciting and humbling. If I could bottle this moment forever I would place it in the shelf, "*Highlights of my Life.*"

A horse announced our arrival in the village, but no one appeared. *The dozen kids running in my dreams and welcoming our party were replaced by peaceful silence.* But I wasn't disappointed, being there was still a blessing.



We took a look at the school and made notes on the infrastructure and what might be needed for its completion. Exhausted but elated we sat next to what I thought was *the 8th wonder of the world* and had lunch. A kid in the far distance looked at us with both marvel and caution; not many strangers landed up there. I invited him to join us in Quechua but he ignored my pleas. I remembered the universal language of all kids: wave a bag of sweets. In commando-style, the kid jumped across boulders, rolled on the wet green potato fields and spied on us from a shallow ravine. Eventually, he approached us shyly.

"What's your name," I asked.

"Hector ... Hector Quispe Quispe," he said timidly.

He told us he was an orphan from both parents and his slightly older sister took care of him.

We also found out that he couldn't wait until the school opened in the village. The school he sometimes attended was on the other side of the mountains and he needed to walk for a couple of hours in order to get there. Often, he also finds no teacher. His story reminded me why I wanted to get involved in this amazing project: the operative school will feed the dreams and aspirations of dozens of children like Hector. Although he didn't know it, he stood there representing all his peers. Unknowingly, *he was the voice of the project and his dreams were now my dreams*, too. He is the *unnamed face* of many children in my country, and the third world. I thought that I could have been Hector, but fortunately, I was given all the opportunities to become anything I wanted in life.

Hector deserved no less.



I looked up and a ring of clouds surrounded the perimeter of the village. It was one of the strangest phenomena I had ever seen. The ring was quite dense. If you were standing on the outskirts of the valley, the village would have remained barely visible. In the middle of the valley, *where we were*, the skies opened up and the sun shone in its full glory for the first time.

"God is present in this place," I thought.

We needed to return in order to reach Ancasi before nightfall. Hector said goodbye and went back home. I mounted Filio. As I galloped up the gentle hills of Qochamocco I looked back and understood why this place was so high on the earth's surface: this magical place in the middle of nowhere was *a little corner of heaven*. No map features it and not many souls get to see it, but it didn't need to appear in any atlas, as for millennia, we've understood that *heaven is not a place*

we find with a compass ...

Few things remain sacred in our times and this tiny village called Qochamocco had just been tattooed holy on my heart forever. For all that is pure, for all that is sacred, for all that is still untouched ... I left my heart in the middle of the Andes because I knew that while it is there ,

it won't lose its childish sense of wonder.



Two shy little girls watched us from their lair and I summoned them by waving my last big pack of sweets. They looked at their mom for approval. *Her smile said yes.* The older one grabbed the bag from me rapidly, ran back to the comfort of home and waved us goodbye. I learned so much from a tiny place with no borders or signposts. *On this adventure I brought so little, yet I took so much.* I forgot about myself and in doing so, learned how little I needed to find happiness *inside* me. The more I drank from waters of selfishness, the less water there was and the more I wanted to drink - nothing was enough to quench my thirst. Instead, here I found a fountain that bloomed inside me and I discovered that I never wanted to drink from anywhere else. The water filled me deep inside ... and *that refreshment was all I needed.*



As we hit the clouds that protected the village, *I walked with my brothers and our hearts were smiling.* A fallen angel with a *giant halo* traveled behind us. As I took more photographs of the expedition, the silent sun followed our steps and guided our strides. I led again as the terrain didn't allow me to ride Filio. I was in real pain. I remember reading that in order to forget one's

pain one must allow their mind to be somewhere else. To shift the *focus off my broken knees*, I started to look for certain rocks and stones. For the next hours I searched for the whitest and purest pieces which distracted me from the excruciating sound my knees were making.



A day earlier I was dreading the climbs. Now *I wished the world had turned upside down* and I was climbing again. I didn't mind hearing my chest beat on my eardrums or having food come out my nose as long as I didn't have to slide down another slope.

The best way I can describe the feeling is as if someone was taking a sledge hammer and striking my knees every two meters ... I had kilometers to go ...

From mountaineering I had learned to zigzag downhill with both feet pointing in the same direction. I tried that for a while but it also seemed futile. "Just take it," I kept saying, "And shut up."

Our minds control our bodies. Pain is increased by how much attention we give it. In the military they teach you that. It's mind over body, all the time. That was the battle I was fighting, and I decided to win it that day, whatever the cost.



We reached the place where we had left our provisions earlier. Two kids, a boy and his sister, received us warmly.

"Can I see your home?" I wanted to see what a typical Q'ero hut looked inside.

The little boy looked at me with pride beaming from his face.

"Si, pasa." (Yes, come in)

The hut was smaller than what it looked from the outside. It was extremely dark and for the first time I had to use my camera's flash in order to take a picture. The far right was composed

of a makeshift kitchen, a burnt wall and some half washed dishes. On the opposite side, the boy smiled and proudly pointed to his bed, like one would see in a furniture TV commercial.

"So how many people live in here?" I asked the boy.

"Cinco." (Five)

"No, I mean in this dwelling," I had to reiterate.

"Cinco," he reassured me.





His sister was jovial amidst the downpour. These are *children from the rain*, and I guess rain is like traffic to a boy from Lima, pollution to a kid from Mexico City or gusty winds to a little girl with ponytails from Cape Town - just normal.

The guides shared a smelly, cheap cigarette from a small red packet. They told me they could breathe better after a smoke and it didn't look like they were kidding!

The little girl stared, and smiled at me. It was my time to remember my party tricks: rubbing my tummy and head at the same time, pretend to use a single strand of hair like a rope which I then inserted into my lip to raise it like magic, and of course, how can I forget, doing the *jelly dance* while I burp.

Now, secured into her good books, I managed to take a great shot of her with the look, "*Which planet are you from funny man?*"

The Apus granted us a dry spell and we took the opportunity to head back, splashing and spurting the saturated ground. *We got swallowed again by the valley of the wild horses and disappeared in the clearing mist back to Anccasi.*



My mind ran away with me again and I pictured myself in *high dark boots, sword on my side and a leather hat* being the first non Inca to walk these lonely paths. I trailed behind my two guides, both *perfect image of their ancestors*, men of courage and unfathomable endurance, loyal to my wellbeing and faithful to my mission. I see in them *a heart as alive as mine*; a determination to live the best life they can possible lead, for their own and their children, and now, sensing deep within us, *a holy sense of brotherhood* that I haven't forged with anyone in years.

These are the men of my country. Those two shadows ahead of me guided me to the light, and have quietly shown, like no book or person ever had, how unbelievably proud I'm to be born in this land called Peru.

This was a land that some men forgot, but today I learned, God never did.

"Life is a daring adventure or nothing at all," Helen Keller said once. Today, I chose to live by those words - and I learnt to die by them too. I wished I could have expressed the gratitude to walk among such giants, but words just aren't enough sometimes. My favourite saying claimed a stake in my life once more today ... when *I decided to look for life instead of waiting for life to look for me.*



"Everything around you has a spirit," Felipe said as he looked deep into my soul.

I was certainly listening.

Wisdom this ancient has to be listened to, honoured and passed on. As I looked around the valley, I heard nothing but my feet against the gravel and the churning river on my left. "I'm not alone in this Eden," I thought, "I'm part of it." *There's as much Eden in me and there is me in this Eden.*

How can I feel alone?

The wind lives in my lungs. The river quenches my thirst and runs downward from my eyes. The earth grounds me and holds my weight. Fire keeps me warm and clouds evaporate from my skin and cool me as rain. I am this. My spirit is here. *Everything has a spirit because I have a spirit.*

Wait a second," *I am spirit.* "

And yes Felipe ... today I understood why everything around me has a spirit.

And I bow to you.

A mile to go before we reached Anccasi ... and that means rest. I could see our campsite ahead and Elliott's home on the far right. An alien flower-like-monolith rose next to his house among the perfectly labored terraces flourishing with potatoes. There was an ancient spirit living here.

... And if you chose to open your eyes and heart ... you could feel it.

At thousands of meters above sea level, these places are physically and spiritually closer to heaven.



Straight ahead, a young lass and her three stallions crossed the river. She looked at me and gave me a smile as *big as a city*. I looked behind me, perhaps her boyfriend was there, but there was no one ... her smile was definitely for me. "What an honour! " It costs nothing to smile," I thought. What I received for standing on the side of a bridge and letting her go through first, was priceless.

We were almost at the end of this unforgettable journey. In Anccasi, we settled inside one of the vacated school's rooms which consisted of two not-so-clean beds, a floor, a roof and a window. Pop corn time again! The community leader in the faded red jacket explained there was a van we needed to take at half past three in the morning in order to get to Ocongate early, which might give us a slight chance to find Fredy. There was mobile reception too and I could at least attempt to make some contact with the elusive young man. No guarantees though, but it was better than nothing. And right now, I had *nothing*.

Again, I couldn't sleep. My guides told me it could be two things: a woman, or stress. I thought it was simpler - and cheaper. I missed my pillow.

Time to wake up, the van arrived. I said goodbye to Eusebio who was returning with the horses and equipment back home. Felipe was to accompany me on this section of the journey. He was to meet his wife in Ocongate too.

If you could fit ten people in total inside this van at a squeeze, please add five. And that was without the equipment, beds, bags, and potatoes sacks that unequivocally have to go on the roof. You couldn't enjoy this cocktail without the cherry on top.

When I saw the state of our transport, I asked the driver to put Felipe and me in the front seats.

I wanted to be the one next to the door in case of an emergency. I knew how some Andean roads deteriorated during the rainy season and a mistake by the driver or machine would send us plunging down to the misty gorge below.

I took my right glove off and traveled to Anccasi with my fingers firmly gripping the door handle *ready to exit the vehicle if the situation called for it.*



A man with half his body outside the window was ready to help the driver spot any danger ahead. The driver had also just woken up. The front window was misty from the heat emanating from a dozen plus *live* bodies inside. Not ideal driving conditions.

The commuters were all in a hurry and the driver made sure to get us to Ocongate in time. The vehicle's right wheel joint, where I was sitting, made a horrible sound every time we braked or veered left. The bottom of the car would also scratch the so called "road," due to the weight of both passengers and luggage.

Many small rivers falling from the Apus during the night deteriorated the already pathetic state of the road. Some passengers had to leave the car in order to alleviate the weight so we could

continue. They also cleared the extra rocks or large stones lodged by the flowing currents which also impeded our passing.

The views from my seat were spectacular as we crisscrossed the mountains at full speed. Give a three year old pen and paper, and see what they draw... that would indicate accurately how the roads cut through the Andean landscape.



Close to our destination we reached a small town and I decided to stretch my legs. I was so surprised we managed to get where we were with the amount of people and things on that poor car. The *comical and charismatic mayor* of Ancasi had kept the locals entertained the whole way in laughter and conversation. I was at the heart of my country - not a word of Spanish was spoken the whole way. The back passengers laughed and made jokes non stop in Quechua for three hours. They were completely unconcerned with the conditions we faced while I fought sleep and traveled with my hand on the door handle ready to jump.

Did they know something I didn't?

Little Peruvian towns all have small plazas in their center: *it's where everything happens*. On Sundays, people from the surrounding communities gather around the plazas, which are encircled in tents, shops and food stalls. The last day of the week provides an opportunity to socialize, buy food for the week ahead, and catch up with small town gossip. In the middle of the plazas, generally, there is a monument, statue or painting which is delightful as it is *cheesy*.

Ocongate is graced by the cheesiest image of a condor in bronze you'll ever see.

There, I phoned my parents back in Lima who had not heard from me in almost 4 days. There was instant relief in their voices as I woke them just before 7am with a faint call due to bad reception. I also took the chance to get a nail cutter from a tool shop as my hands were filled with grease, dirt, and other lovely solid presents from the expedition. I also needed the first shower in 3 days, badly.

Felipe found his wife and we got briefly acquainted. She was a lovely lady of about thirty five with colourful clothing and a large, golden tooth. We went for breakfast. I tried to call Fredy but his mobile was off. Feeling a little disappointed, I realized there wasn't much I could do. I simply needed to get back to Cusco and deposit the money that I carried with me all along the trek in his bank account.

A yellow and red bus arrived advertising its final destination: Cusco. I paid for my ticket and stood on the church's side steps with Felipe talking about our lives and dreams. The bus was leaving in half an hour. We discussed some possible treks in the future and how he desperately needed a computer. I promised to help him next time I was in Peru.

I saw a guy in a brown leather jacket rush into the bus *like he was looking for somebody*. I paid no extra attention and carried talking to Felipe. The young man stepped off the bus and suddenly approached me. He cleared his throat and in Andean accent politely asked me, "Excuse me señor, I'm looking for a gentleman who's apparently been looking for me. He went to one of the communities in Q'ero and I've heard he might be around. *My name is Fredy.*"

I stood there for a second without saying a word. *My mind stopped working* as if I was falling from a building towards my death because the whole trip flashed before my eyes.



“Hi Fredy,” I paused, “I’m Xavier. I’ve been looking for you. *You have no idea* how long and how far I’ve been looking for you!”

He looked surprised at my statement. I said, “Take a walk with me around the plaza.” I asked Felipe to hold his goodbyes for just a little longer. *I could see the happiness in his eyes too. He knew what this meant for me.*



We talked about the school, mentioned the money I had raised and told him that I would transfer it into his bank account. He asked me to please use Western Union (no advertising here) as his bank account had not been in use for over a year. We discussed what was needed for the school and what his life was like too. Before I presented him the donations I had to make sure that firstly, he was the right person and secondly, that I could trust him. I didn’t know Fredy at all but I had to trust my instincts. In that plaza, *I felt his honesty and deep commitment to the upliftment of his community.*

When my heart said “Go on,” I took the money I had wrapped in a plastic bag to keep it dry and handed it to him. I said, “Here’s the money from my concert in Lima, I want you to have it.” He looked at me in complete disbelief. “Now you can get to Cusco and do what you have to do in order to complete that school. This is for you and the kids. Take it.”

His eyes watered and I know he lacked the words he wanted to say in the middle of the busy plaza.

“I don’t know what to say. Thank you. Thank you.”

No two words have ever sounded so sweet in my ears. How the sound of two simple syllables can take the pain away and put a blanket over one’s heart. All the effort my team and I had gone through was *worth it a thousand times.* It was one of the proudest moments in my life.



As we headed back to the leaving bus I embraced Felipe. He said, *"We're no longer friends. We are brothers."* Tears welled up in his eyes as well as in mine. I guess I'm better at hiding my emotions than he was despite the lump, more like avalanche, I had in my throat. Some people live in *the hope of a better life*. I think I was that *little ray of light* in his at that moment ... and I don't ever wanna make that fade ...

As I boarded that half-empty red and yellow bus back to Cusco I knew that my journey had been blessed from start to end and that I had the privilege of meeting a bunch of human angels deep in the heart of Peru.

This journey taught me about brotherhood, about the simplicity of life, about believing (just like I had written in that misty van window), about purpose, and following that purpose till the end. The engine started and the bus began to move. It suddenly stopped. Fredy got in and looked around the seats until he found me. I got up. With the most appreciative face I have ever seen he said once more, *"Thank you."*

I held his arm and said *"I should be thanking you."*

About the author

Xavier Saer is a published and signed Singer-Songwriter, music producer, photographer and explorer born in Peru and living in South Africa. He's currently writing his first novel *"The Shaman, The Singer, and His Bleeding Heart"* with plans to release it mid 2011. To find out more about his work please visit his website www.xaviersaer.com or find him on Facebook: Xavier Saer. xs@xaviersaer.com