

*“As Mortality Gets Closer,
You Get Serious”*

JON TURK

Born 1945



In 2011, Jon Turk, sixty-six, and Erik Boomer, twenty-six, completed the first circumnavigation of Ellesmere Island, the northernmost island in the Canadian Arctic Archipelago, just west of Greenland. The journey covered 1,500 miles in 104 days. They completed it by cross-country skiing, dragging two hundred pounds of supply-stuffed kayaks through jagged ice packs and kayaking through nearly frozen slushy waters, including a narrow channel that acted as nature’s giant ice grinder. Along the way, they braved encounters with wolves, polar bears, and walruses.

At the end of the journey, Jon's body shut down; his kidneys failed. Near death, he was airlifted to an Ottawa hospital where he recovered. National Geographic named the Ellesmere expedition one of its Ten Adventures of the Year 2012.

Jon has a forty-year history of great expeditions, including an unsupported mountain bike crossing of the western Gobi and a three-thousand-mile kayak passage from Japan to Alaska that ranks as one of the all-time greatest kayak expeditions.

In addition to his adventures, Jon has a PhD in chemistry. He has written twenty-five college-level science textbooks, including the first on environmental science, as well as three non-fiction narratives about some of his adventures: *Cold Oceans: Adventures in Kayak, Rowboat, and Dogsled*; *In the Wake of the Jomon: Stone Age Mariners and a Voyage Across the Pacific*; and *The Raven's Gift: A Scientist, A Shaman and Their Remarkable Journey Through the Siberian Wilderness*. These recount his kayak expeditions around Cape Horn, rowing the Northeast Passage, running a dogsled up the east coast of Baffin Island, his kayak passage from Japan to Alaska, and his journey in the Siberian tundra. His time in Siberia led to a faith healing of a long-standing pelvic fracture that had been diagnosed as requiring surgery. The healing was performed by Molynaut, a shaman of the native Koryak people of Siberia. This led to a spiritual awakening and understanding that his travels have been more than a series of physical accomplishments.

Jon lives in the Montana forest, but spends his winters skiing in British Columbia. Jon's wife of twenty-five years died in an avalanche in March 2005. He remarried in September 2006, and he and his second wife are "learning each other's ways, wants, and personalities." Jon has three children and six grandchildren.

As we talked, Jon was preparing for a mountain bike expedition across the Tibetan plateau, near the birthplace of the Dalai Lama.

For whatever reason, I've always been naturally passionate about being in the outdoors. As a young boy, that's what I did all the time. Whenever I had an opportunity, whenever I wasn't in school, I was in the woods. I grew up near a reservation, maybe six square miles, a little Connecticut wood lot near a lake. That's where I would spend my time. That was the deck I was given to play.

Just about everybody has some innate component or activity that they're passionate about as children. Society tends to squelch that and say the activity is not efficient. It won't work in reality. You must learn to conform. I'm not recommending that everyone become an outdoors adventurer, but rather I'm saying that everyone should look deep inside themselves to find out what was it in their childhood that brought them the most joy. What did they gravitate towards?

I went through a standard education: Phillips Andover, Brown, and then the University of Colorado for my PhD in chemistry. Then, something occurred that made me stop. Near the end of my PhD program, I was out running my dog and he started digging in a field. I went over, put my nose down in the earth and breathed deeply.

Right then, I asked: "What was it about childhood that gave me so much joy? Is what I'm doing now giving me that much joy?" I suddenly had an "Aha!" moment, when I realized that I had to go back to that, whatever the cost.

My first outdoor adventure was when I was seventeen and my brother was twelve. We went down the Allagash River in Northern Maine in an old leaky canoe with a bent bow that wouldn't run straight in the rapids. As the older brother, I had the idea that we wouldn't buy any food. The trip was a couple of weeks or more. I think we brought some cornmeal, a .22 rifle, and a fishing pole. We'd live off the land in Daniel Boone fashion. The Fish and Game wardens were flying overhead in a floatplane when they saw us hunting ducks. They landed the plane and said, "Hey, guys, what's going on?" They took our fishing pole and our .22 and left us. We said, "But we don't have any food." They said, "That's your problem."

We made all the mistakes you could conceivably make, and we didn't die. We went down the river and came out hungry and mildly chagrined. So when you do something like this you come to one of two conclusions. This was a really dumb idea and I'm going back to the comforts of home. Or, it was a really good idea with a dumb execution, and try to improve the execution and keep the concept. My preparation has improved greatly since I was seventeen, but I still tend to be a little casual about things, which can sometimes open doors and cause problems.

The physical conditioning, especially at my age, you can't let it go, ever. For the last thirty years I worked out in the gym three to five days a week for up to an hour. If I stop working out for a month, it takes a long time to get back. Your body is very attuned to the exact activity you're doing. So no matter how much biking I've done, when I start skiing, I don't have my skiing legs. The only way to get strong skiing is to ski.

Frustrations? That's the great thing about expeditions. In life, most of the little bad things that happen to you are not life threatening. You have the luxury of doing something stupid like being frustrated. It's a luxury; it's a waste of time; it's a waste of energy. On an expedition, when something bad happens, it's the first step to dying. So you don't have the luxury to go off on a tangent. You don't have the luxury to let your ego say, "I wanted the world to be this way and now the world is this way."

That's a luxury, a stupid waste of time. It's something we all do. But when you're looking at the potential of dying, then it becomes immediately obvious, so obvious that it clubs you on the head. You can't let your ego go on a rant. You have to take care of the problem. Automatically, you get a great calmness. The wilderness is the greatest teacher. It teaches you to see frustration for what it is—worthless—and throw it out the window and get on to the task at hand with renewed concentration and attention to detail because now you're in trouble. As mortality gets closer, you get serious.

I often use the phrase "the ineffable joy of vulnerability." I find joy because vulnerability strips away all the bullshit. Buddhists would say there are a lot of ways to enlightenment. So when you face vulnerability and you face uncertainty, it clears away all the cobwebs. And when this vulnerability is something huge that you can't control, you get hit over the head with a very heavy stick. Look, you can't control your sled breaking or a blizzard coming in. "Now you're vulnerable, dude." That is a path to clarity because you can't afford to play this charade that I'm master of the universe; you have to accept reality. That's a joyful thing that happens—you get this great calmness.

The Dalai Lama says that the wilderness will teach you the path to enlightenment. I've done these things all these years without seeing it in this way. But after my experiences and doing hard adventures, I stopped for five years to be in the presence of Molynaut, a shaman of the native Koryak people of Siberia. I wandered around the tundra, being cold, but it wasn't really big or really difficult, and I took those five years. I came to understand these adventures as journeys to seek equanimity, and not just hard-core physical quests.

Then I decided to do this Ellesmere trip, which was the hardest trip I've ever done. It's gotten so much acclaim. I launched it when I was sixty-six years old. It was very important to me. It was a shamanic vision quest, the idea that I can do something at this age that for any people, at any time, at any age, would be a very hard trip to pull off. I had to test that. That was the point of the Ellesmere trip.

Looking back at it, to push yourself to the doorway of death, quite literally. Not from an accident, or polar bear attack, but just from day-to-day, to push your body where it absolutely goes into metabolic shut-down. I never want to go there again, but I'm really glad I went there. You push through a lot of doors, and hopefully...we're all getting older, and as we go into the final doorway that experiment will help me through that final transition.

When I was being airlifted, I was drugged on morphine in a major way. Through a morphine haze, I remember radio chatter as we were

flying to Ottawa. “How much time does he have? Are we going to get there in time?” It was a detached feeling; the morphine was part of it. I wasn’t bummed out, amazed, or frustrated that this was happening. I was kind of interested, in an abstract way. Detachment. *This is interesting. I could die here.* There wasn’t a value judgment about it, whether it was good or bad.

Sometimes when you don’t complete a journey it’s because your preparation is bad. If it’s because of an abysmally bad job of planning, then I’ll feel a sense of failure. I made a mistake. I screwed up, not a good feeling, failure. Or, if I cut an expedition short because I didn’t push hard enough, then yeah, I’ll have a sense of failure. And there have been a few of those in my life where I could have succeeded had I waited a little longer or pushed through another door.

But if the environment gave me an overwhelming stop, or if huge meteorological events combined against me, then there’s no sense of failure whatsoever. Not long ago I was doing this kayak trip through the Vanuatu Chain in the South Pacific. I had some long crossings that I needed to do. One was fifty-eight miles and another was 125 miles. The trade winds were abnormally strong that year and currents were stronger than normal. The fifty-eight-mile crossing was all I could do. I was getting pushed out to sea in the Pacific and in danger of missing my landfall. Just washing out to sea and dying. The next leg was twice as long. I looked at that leg and said there’s no way I can go twice as long, twice as hard, so I’m not going to do it. There was no sense of failure. There was a sense that it was a good trip, a good idea; it didn’t work out this year. I’m coming home safe.

I’ve been aware of aging since I hit sixty. I realized things were changing pretty fast: my day-to-day stamina, joint problems, knees, elbows. My ability to push really hard and my desire to push really hard started to slow down. I don’t know why. I pushed hard on this Ellesmere trip. If I go out mountain biking, if I can do a twenty-five-mile loop, if I can get partway through, very often I’m content to come home a little early and sit on the couch and drink a cup of tea.

I still push pretty hard. It depends on whom you’re comparing yourself with. Self-esteem is your own self-evaluation of what you’re doing. Look, my knees are starting to show definite signs of wear. It’s quantifiable; an MRI shows they’re wearing out. So I go skiing and my knees start to hurt and I think, *My knees have only so many miles left, then they’re not going to work anymore.* Maybe I’ll go home and take a rest so I can go skiing tomorrow. I mean, I still ski more vertical in a year than many twenty-year-olds, but there’re also people who ski a lot more.

Does this bum me out? Does this lower my self-esteem? Not at all! This transition we’re going through, this transition into old age. Well, here we are, vulnerable and uncertain. It’s quite wonderful to just accept your body the way it is and watch this process of getting old.

Aging has had no effect on my curiosity or optimism; my curiosity is still there. When I came out of the hospital and I was almost dead, I said, “Oh, maybe I’m going to quit being an expedition person.” But that wasn’t quitting life. That was making a transition. I live in the woods in western Montana and I thought that I would just spend more time gardening and being close to home. Well, that didn’t last. As I got better, I realized that I have a few more expeditions to do.

Aging didn’t affect my joy, wonder, or excitement at the world. No, no, no. It’s just ratcheted down a bit. I just have to match my choice of activity, my itinerary, with the reality that I’m sixty-six years old. I don’t want to sound groovier than I really am, but the conversation with myself on this was just fine. I live in a really beautiful place in the woods. I have a wonderful wife who is totally content to be out here in the woods. My alternative to expeditions is to live here in this relationship with this wonderful woman, to grow a bigger garden, to live in this wondrous natural environment. If I walk out my front door and start walking due west, it’s 120 miles to the next road. I live in this big wilderness.

Getting old is not pretty, and it’s not fun and it’s not cute. It’s nasty, but it’s inevitable. Either we accept it and go graciously with it, or we

don't and go out as very grumpy, very unpleasant people, unpleasant for ourselves and for the people around us.

I often say that we're driven by happiness, intensity, and ego, and these are undermined by selfishness and ego. Well, we all try not to be selfish. As I've gotten older, I realize that we're driven by ego and how important we are. But, we lose our importance as we get old. You lose your job, your wife, your children move out. Your place in the office hierarchy, your physical ascendancy, all that gets wiped away. I've watched a lot of people get old.

I'm committed to at least try to age with some element of grace. That means throw the selfishness and ego out the door and try to be creative about aging. Maybe you lose your ability to formulate sentences in a coherent way. Then you can no longer be a writer. That's been my creativity, but there's still other ways to be creative. Creativity is important, but I would put connectivity and awareness as more important because creativity is producing something. Connectivity and awareness are joy in being where you are. As we get older, we're likely to lose our ability to be creative, but we will never lose our ability to be connected and aware.

My goals have changed. I've promised myself not to push as hard as I did on this Ellesmere trip. So I have no goals on a point A to point B destination. My next expedition will be to mountain bike with an old friend on the Tibetan Plateau, where the Dalai Lama was born. We'll be traveling in about a month.

The prospect of decline in health is scary. It's not pretty. Anyone who says otherwise just doesn't have his eyes open. I think that the only sensible approach to old age is to develop patterns, ways of seeking equanimity, develop patterns in your mind of being at peace with yourself. Learning to sit by a creek and learning to appreciate sitting by a creek does that. I think that the patterns we develop in our younger age carry over to our older age. So if we follow a pattern of seeking our maximum economic opportunity, then maybe when we get old,

we won't know how to sit by a creek and watch the water flow by. That's the most important skill I'll need when I'm old and can no longer work.

I can roll my wheelchair or ride my three-wheel bike or get pushed in a wheelchair and sit by a creek and be peaceful with that. That's the best preparation for being old.

I love to write. I go to my office early in the morning. It's thirty to forty yards down the hill. It's a tight space and heats up quickly. I intentionally don't use a chain saw to cut the wood, but do it with a little band saw. I start a little fire and then I write. It's a totally enjoyable process. I love it. I love the process. Musicians love to make music. Painters love to paint. It's who you are. And when I start being stupid and writing gibberish, I notice it right away. "Whoa, this is junk!" I notice it right away and shut the computer off.

Then, I go outside and do chores, go for a hike, ride my bike or ski. That downtime is a very important part of the process because I reflect on why the last two paragraphs were so horrible, egregiously bad, and it goes through my subconscious about how to start again. Sometimes in the evening I'll scratch some notes on a piece of paper, and I'll get going again in the morning. Beating your head against writer's block is really just counterproductive. If it doesn't come from deep inside and it comes just because your butt is Velcroed to your chair, it's not going to be worth reading.

We have these ideas and if we convey them well enough, we can convey a message to a lot of people—to be connected, aware, and passionate in whatever you're doing, that's the only route to being truly yourself. You have to be at peace with the whole thing.

The biggest trap that we face as Americans is the trap of consumerism. I was driving home from Missoula and there's this huge billboard that shows a woman with all these gift-wrapped boxes sticking out of shopping bags, and the billboard touts euphoria as shopping at a mall. The most blatantly consumeristic advertising I've ever seen.

You're going to be happy if you buy stuff. My message is: "Don't buy that stuff. Find another route to euphoria." I can't tell you what that route is because you're different than I am. But once you fall into that consumeristic trap, man, you are looped! They've got you, and they're going to run the show for you, and that doesn't have to be.