

# **The Force Within**

A person is running across a vast, undulating desert landscape of orange sand dunes. The person is in the lower right quadrant of the frame, running towards the left. The dunes are characterized by fine, rhythmic ripples in the sand. The sky is not visible, as the dunes fill the upper portion of the image.

**Once you have reached your limit,  
you have two choices: either abandon your goal  
or surrender the idea that this limit ever existed.**

**Max Calderan  
Extreme Desert Explorer**

# ORIGINS

**WHERE WE ARE BORN IN OF LITTLE MATTER:**

**WHAT COUNTS IS BEING BORN**

I look back and see a lot of passion in everything I have done. That very same passion which makes sacrifice and suffering seem normal when there is a dream to fulfil.

Nowadays nobody wants to suffer, and sacrifice has become a memory linked to our ancestors and past generations. I remember an explosion in Niger: I can still see the image of a girl who was destined to die because of a small injury to her knee which was infected to the point that her leg developed gangrene. The wound had been treated by the girl's parents with water taken from a well which animals used to drink from. Some basic treatment, which is low-cost by our standards, and better hygiene could have saved that child's life. What we may take for granted (a simple injury) can turn into a tragedy in another society. I left that hut in the middle of the desert in anguish and with a wrath in my heart.

Today we throw away millions of packages of medicine in the bin because they were left to expire and become unusable, while that girl died because she did not have a single box at her disposal. I thought about all the medicines I have at home: they are unused, wasted, destined to be thrown away in the bin or are out of date.

There are children who struggle to survive while others have everything, even impossible things. It is anything but sacrifice! I am sure that sufferance moulds us just like metal is shaped in the hands of a blacksmith. It is only then afterwards that we deserve to have the latest videogames out on the market. There are rules, tracks, models in which we can direct our efforts and those of our children. Certainly, sport in general is a great help. If you get up at 5 am on a Sunday morning and go for a healthy walk on the mountains, you will certainly do things in moderation the night before. If a training session in the swimming pool is needed to make you fit for your race, you will certainly not smoke a whole packet of cigarettes a day. We spontaneously adopt these rules, rather than impose them on ourselves.

As an athlete, I come from a mountainous area where alpine skiing and extreme climbing were hard workouts and daily routine. I started skiing at the age of six, though I also took up other sports as pastimes such as windsurfing, volleyball, water skiing and judo. Yet, I always longed to be in touch with nature. I wanted to be free to run naked with my body touching the grass in the meadows, the flowers and tree bark. I wanted to breathe the crisp air of the mountains, not only through my nostrils, but also through every pore in my skin. At the age of ten, I took part in a Sunday non-competitive run of only 10 kilometres in my hometown, Portogruaro (a small town in the province of Venice- Italy). The time it took

me to reach the finish line was so short that everybody thought I had taken a short-cut.

I had not taken a short-cut though. I had simply used all my potential, and had even amazed myself at the speed and intensity of my effort. When I arrived home, I began to suffer from severe chills and a blurred perception of what surrounded me. I felt like I was about to collapse, but said nothing to my mother. I think that was the first time in life when I risked to die as a cause of over-exertion.

How many aspirations have we had as children! “When I grow up I will be an astronaut, a doctor, a pilot...” Each one of us has had a dream. As soon as I saw them, I was enthralled by the images in an encyclopaedia about Saudi Arabia and the countries of the Arabic Gulf. The book was titled ‘One Thousand Searches’. My mother had bought it at the old Pellico cinema. I clearly remember that afternoon when so many families in my town gathered for the presentation of that brand new, trailblazing encyclopaedia.

My mother wore her best clothes and I sat next to her, hoping she would decide to buy that book which, to my eyes, represented the answer to all the doubts I had about my relatively small world. I also hoped that the small instalments proposed by the chubby convincing seller, would allure her into buying the book. My wish came true and my mother signed the promissory notes after only a moment’s hesitation. I gave the chubby man a hand to put those heavy volumes into our blue Fiat 127, feeling like the

richest child in the world. Once home, we arranged the encyclopaedia volumes one by one on a big chest in the hall. My mother did not really care much about whether the books were closed in a cabinet or put on display. She just wanted the books to be in a suitable place for my height so I could pick one in the same way delicious strawberries might have been put on display to be grabbed and tasted. I remember being immediately drawn to the volume that had an orange cover. It was about geography of the Middle East. Leafing through the book, I read that there was a “Pirate Coast” in the Arabic Gulf, which is the nowadays United Arab Emirates and Dubai. I also found many other curious facts which I felt like I had already learnt about. In the chapter about Saudi Arabia, I was drawn to one photo in particular which showed a caravan crossing the border of Rub Al Khali desert which was described as “absolute emptiness” and “nothingness”. A Bedouin sitting on a camel.

I was completely captivated by that photo. I mentally plunged into it and saw a grown-up man walking alone between the very high dunes on a cold, starry night. I took my crayons and drew a picture. It was 1974 and I was 7 years old.

The picture represented the Arabian desert as I had imagined it, without even having seen it before: a large blotch, deep red in colour, which covered the sheet of paper. I was not influenced by anything when I drew the picture because,

even if it included part of Egypt, I did not draw the Canal of Suez as is the case in all maps.

I wrote '2010' in the corner of it. I took it to my mother and said "Mother, when I'm old, in 2010, I will be the first man in the world to cross the Rub Al-Khali desert." My dream was to search inside our world for a place that was still unknown, not necessarily on the moon or in space, just a place where no man had ever trodden, be it a desert or his inner self. In 2010 I did not try to run the great desert because life prevented me from making my dream come true, so I decided to postpone it in order to face a challenge called 'routine' first.

I was fascinated by everything that was unknown. "Why", I wondered, "has no man ever been able to get into that desert? Why did the Bedouins and their camels dread it, only daring to walk along the edge of it?" This has always fascinated me tremendously.

I was impressed by the man on the moon, precisely because he was the first man to set foot where no other human had ever been before. His eyes saw what no other living being had ever been able to see before. If there are now doubts about man's landing onto the moon and about whether that landing was real or a hoax, it does not really matter to me.

What matters is not being able to do what no one else is able to do, but to think about accomplishing something that no

human being has even dared to think about and which would be deemed “impossible” once revealed to the world.

Maybe someone else will accomplish this in a thousand years' time, but you will have been the first to have rendered that mission possible. If I remember correctly, it was Einstein who said that some things may seem impossible until a person who has no idea about them is able to achieve them. I would add that you need to rid yourself of all prejudices, all previous experiences and face anew without thinking about how you might have approached it before now. Nothing is the same as the day before, and even if it were so, it is you, man, who changes.

This was my dream. My innate curiosity and thirst for knowledge. A desire to give an answer to every ‘why’. As a child, I liked to pose many questions to myself so I could explore and discover the answer myself. Today many adults do not ponder upon the reason for so many things and life goes without having been given a real meaning, or without at least an attempt to do so. If we do construct this meaning ourselves, it is often for fear of realising that we are all alone. We were born naked, but we spend a lifetime covering ourselves to the point that we look in the mirror and do not recognise our very selves anymore.

Where are our childhood dreams?

“You wanted to be an astronaut, didn’t you?”

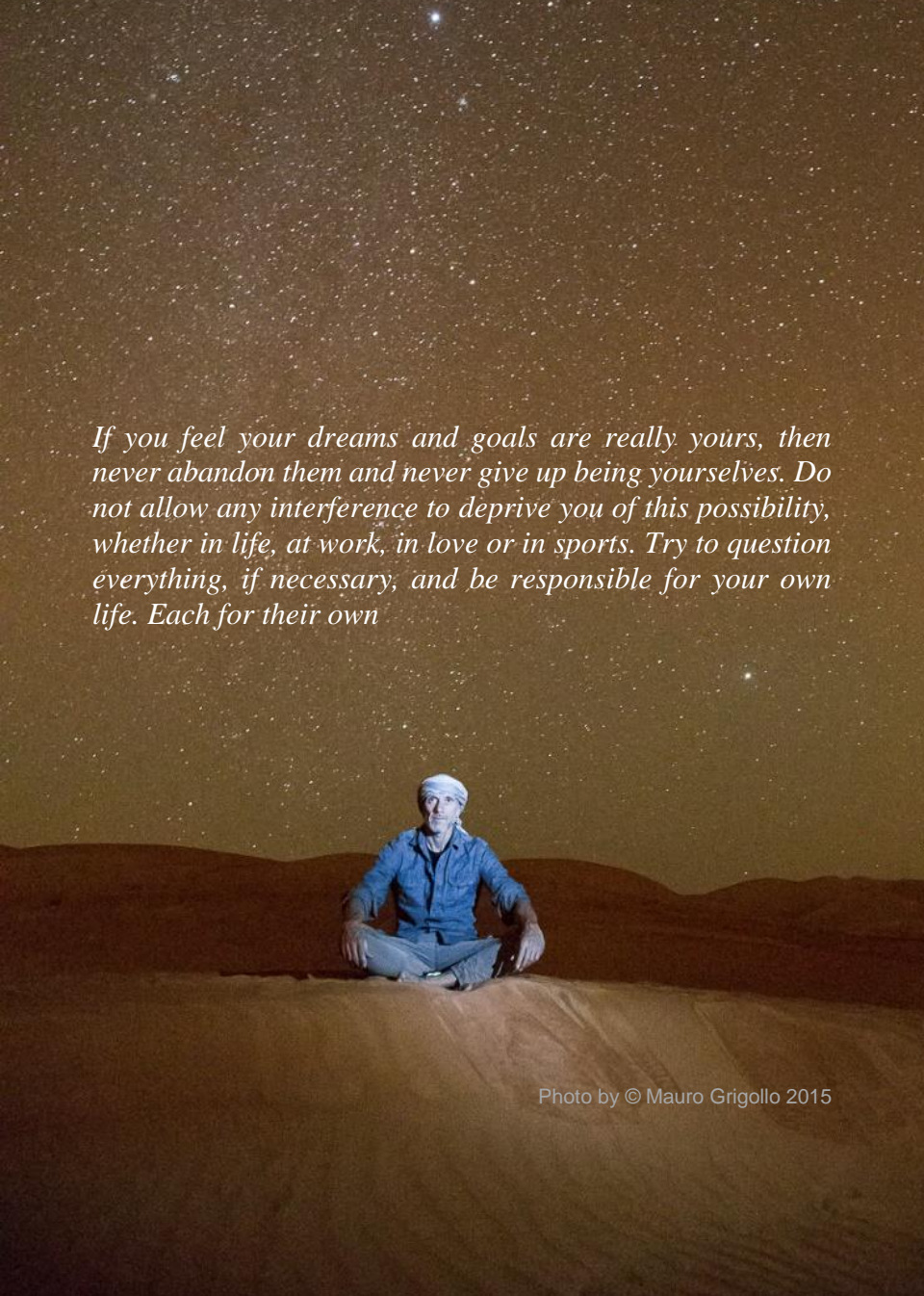
“Well, I could not study, then I got married and had two children, then...”

These are all excuses. You have lost the match with yourself. It does not matter if you haven't become an astronaut. What matters is whether you still hold on to the conviction that you could have become an astronaut and that you would still be able to if you wanted. A dream cannot die if the force inside you is strong enough to keep it, though, unfortunately, it may often lie asleep and appeased.

It seems easier to give up than to fight and suffer a lifetime to make your dreams come true. I'm often asked "Why go to all the trouble?" I would be tempted to answer “What about you? What makes you the way you are? Are you perhaps dissatisfied with your life, in a job which does not fulfil your needs, but which you will never leave for fear of change? Are you in a relationship to a woman or a man you don't love?” Giving up is often easier than fighting. I have always decided to fight for my dreams to the end of my days. I draw happiness from trying, daring and never giving up. This is how I feel rewarded, regardless of whether my dreams come true or not. Each one of us should do this.

Therefore, I will answer to the question “Why go to all the trouble?” by asking you “Are you happy?”



A man with a white head covering and a blue shirt is sitting cross-legged on a sand dune. The background is a vast, dark night sky filled with numerous stars, suggesting a desert landscape at night. The overall mood is contemplative and serene.

*If you feel your dreams and goals are really yours, then never abandon them and never give up being yourselves. Do not allow any interference to deprive you of this possibility, whether in life, at work, in love or in sports. Try to question everything, if necessary, and be responsible for your own life. Each for their own*

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