



PHOTO BY JAROD GATLEY

The Hard Way

By Jim Cornelius | Editor in Chief

A couple of weeks ago, my friend Vernon Stubbs sent me a most inspiring video. It features highly decorated Marine combat veteran Major Brian Chontosh, who, after leaving the military, has continued to challenge himself in ultramarathons and Crossfit competitions.

The artfully shot 13-minute video is titled “The Hard Way.” In the context of chopping down and bucking a tree with an ax over a 24-hour-straight period, Chontosh extols the many benefits of challenging ourselves, of making ourselves uncomfortable. Not just vaguely uncomfortable. Extremely uncomfortable. Pushing ourselves to the point where we want to quit — and keeping on. The video expresses an ethic we can all adopt, even if we’re not approaching the exceptional level Chontosh has hit: We need risk, failure and constant testing of our capabilities.

The belief that modern living has provided way too much comfort — and that comfort is actually killing us not just physically, but emotionally and spiritually — is having a bit of a cultural moment.

Journalist Michael Easter has touched a nerve with his recent book, “The Comfort Crisis: Embrace Discomfort to Reclaim Your Wild, Happy, Healthy Self.”

Easter cites data we’re all familiar with by now. A huge proportion of the American population is overweight — many qualifying as clinically obese. Many people have mobility issues and diabetes. But what is perhaps more stark is that Americans are suffering tremendously from disorders of the psyche and the soul. Easter writes:

“People today are also suffering more and more from diseases

of despair: depression, anxiety, addiction, and suicide. Overdose deaths in the last two decades are up more than threefold, and the average American is now more likely to kill themselves than ever before... these diseases of despair caused the U.S. life expectancy to fall in 2016, 2017, and 2018. There hasn’t been a lifespan drop like this since the period from 1915 to 1918, when World War I and the Spanish Flu pandemic united in a symphony of death.”

The book is a journey through the myriad ways that taking on tough physical challenges, “rewilding,” detaching from constant stimulus and allowing ourselves to be “bored,” and mindful contemplation of the fact that we all must die can be liberating and unlock dramatic improvements in both health and happiness.

It’s convincing.

I have seen the pernicious effect that an addiction to comfort brings — comfort of the physical, intellectual, psychological order. The most miserable people I’ve seen believe themselves to be victims, are afraid to challenge themselves — and can’t seem to get themselves in decent shape. They are inveterate seekers (in vain) of comfort. The happiest, most satisfied people I know are those who are not merely unafraid to challenge their physical, intellectual,

and psychological comfort, but are *eager* to do so. They do it every day, in some form or other. It doesn’t have to be an ultramarathon — but it has to be something. I *know* I’m a better man, and easier to be around, when I do the hard stuff — whether it’s pushing myself physically, challenging myself to learn a new skill, or taking a good, hard, raw look at cherished beliefs.

Chontosh says that everyone has a ruler that they can measure themselves by. His ruler is not my ruler is not your ruler. How our ruler stacks up against someone else’s isn’t particularly relevant. What is relevant, Chontosh insists, is whether we’re pushing ourselves further and further out along our own ruler. As cliché as it may sound, what matters is continuing to become better and better versions of ourselves. And that only comes with — and from — discomfort.

We are blessed to live in an environment where it’s easy — and actually attractive — to push ourselves. There are mountains to climb, rivers to run, trails to hike or run or ride. It’s easier to be eager to push ourselves when we’re doing it in such a beautiful, inspiring, and soul-stirring environment.

One of the simplest and most beneficial ways to challenge ourselves is

to put on a pack (it’s good to work with a little extra weight) and simply *walk*. Walk long, and walk far. It’s good for the body; it clears the mind; and it soothes the soul.

One of the outfits Easter connects with in his “Comfort Crisis” journey is GORUCK. With missionary zeal and entrepreneurial spirit, GORUCK (goruck.com) encourages people to get out in groups with a weighted rucksack and *move*. They promote challenging “group rucks.”

“It implies action, energy, and purpose,” the company says. “Rucking requires strength, endurance, and character — and builds it, too.”

Of course GORUCK thinks that rucking makes the world a better place. They’re in the business of selling rucksacks and other gear, right?

“Sure we sell rucks,” cofounder Jason McCarthy told Easter. “But this is America and we believe in the role of business to drive social and societal change. We want people to get out and be active together. Doing more of this is how we define success. Not by the amount of rucks that sit in peoples’ closets, but by how many people are out using them.”

Easter concludes:

“In our pursuit of better living we’ve allowed comfort to calcify our natural movements and strengths. Without conscious discomfort and purposeful exercise — a forceful push against comfort creep — we’ll only become weaker and sicker.

We have allies in making our individual forceful push. The mountains and rivers are calling. They’re beckoning us to slough off our comforts for a time and go out and do things The Hard Way.

See you on the trail.



To view the video, scan the QR code at right or visit <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JgE4SZ89DQU&t=3s>. (Editor’s note: minor degree of salty Marine language.)

