

The Third Step: Give it All You've Got

Full effort is full victory.—Mahatma Gandhi



*Inti Yampu, Raft of the Sun, Lake Titicaca,
Bolivia - Photo by Nevada Wier*

Chapter 5

SAILING IN THE WAKE OF THE SUN GODS

Adventure? I've got a great one for you," confided my friend, the professional outdoor photographer Nevada Wier, over a cold Bohemia and a plate of cheese enchiladas at our local Mexican eatery on a sunny day in June 1978. In conspiratorial whispers Nevada spoke of a lake on the border of Bolivia and Peru where the Aymara Indians, descendants of a mysterious, pre-Inca civilization called Tiahuanaco, still live in near-total isolation. She was reading a book that told of hidden monasteries where mystic monks had achieved such high levels of consciousness that levitation was a routine feature of daily meditation.

Nevada excitedly told me about one of the Inca legends. Inti, the great sun god, didn't like the idea of humans living like animals so he decided to send his son and daughter, Manco Capac and Mama Ocllo, to teach them how to live properly. They arrived at a spot called the island of the Sun and decided to build a boat from

the reeds. Then they sailed the entire lake teaching people how to weave, spin, and farm. When they had done all that, they climbed over the Andes and started the Inca empire.

“No one has ever repeated that experience,” Nevada concluded with a wink. I just shrugged in reply, not catching her drift. If Indiana Jones and Anaïs Nin had ever gotten together, their offspring would have been Nevada Wier. She continued impatiently: “Jeff, what if we went to Bolivia, built a boat from reeds, and became the first people in modern times to circumnavigate the world’s highest lake in a traditional boat? What if we replicated the voyage of the ancient sun gods?”

I knew enough geography to realize that Nevada was talking about Lake Titicaca, the frigid inland sea of the Andes—at 12,500 feet, the world’s highest navigable waterway. But to sail it in a reed boat, following in the wake of ancient gods? It sounded ridiculous, far-fetched, undoubtedly dangerous.

“Sure,” I said. “Why not?”

When you begin doing things that no one has ever done, it doesn’t take too long to discover why no one has gone before you. There is a reason there are no reed boats left on Lake Titicaca. They are all under Lake Titicaca. Because reed boats don’t float—at least not for long.

But the locale of Nevada’s proposed “sun gods tour” was challenging in other ways as well. If there is a territory on the planet where Cheshire cats and talking caterpillars would feel at home, the otherworldly landscape of the Andean altiplateau around Lake Titicaca is it. You see, Bolivia is where the planet holds its Mad Hatter tea parties.

In the squalor and confusion outside the airports you first notice the natives. The deeply sculpted, impassive faces of the men stare at you from beneath crazy cone-shaped hats, like turnips set upside down. The women are bulky figures in colorful fringed shawls shuffling along in black rubber pumps and knee-length *polleras*—party dresses of pink, blue and yellow—that are parodies of those worn by the Spanish colonial women of the nineteenth century. Above gray or jet black hair pulled tightly into braids, the women also sport bowler hats set at a rakish tilt. These are the *Aymara*, the original inhabitants of the region, whose world is filled with mischievous spirits. For them the paramount virtue is cunning, not honesty.

Built on the side of an enormous crater, La Paz, the world's highest capital, reminds me of an enormous sports arena. Over a million people crowd the bleachers in a site chosen originally by a handful of Spanish conquistadores to escape the maddening winds of the high plain. Wealthy families claiming a pure European lineage have the prime infield seats down below in the affluent communities of Calacoto and Obrajes, whereas the indigenous *campesinos* content themselves with the cheaper seats in the stands above. At night the stadium comes to life with light.

This is Bolivia, cheapest ticket on this earth for a journey to another world. Bolivia has remained the poorest, highest, and most remote republic in South America. Sixty percent of its foreign exchange comes from cocaine, three-quarters of its population can't read or write, and after losing every war it has ever entered, the government still talks about attacking Chile to win back a beach town or two.

Six weeks after cooking up our absurd plan, Nevada and I were staggering, too—running from office to office in the capital at 11,000 feet, attempting to obtain all the requisite papers from the proper bureaucrats. If we thought the locals were a bit disreputable, they certainly thought no better of us. The Peruvian consulate informed us our trip would bring us across the border into their territory, where there was no immigration post; thus our plan was illegal and we would have to give it up. The Bolivian navy was even tougher. We hadn't expected to deal with the navy in a landlocked country, but this was Bolivia.

Finally we resorted to a tried-and-true American strategy: we announced our intentions to the local press and were interviewed on television and by the newspapers. Soon we were national celebrities just for coming up with such an audacious plan. The navy and other obstreperous government agencies relented and decided to let two foolhardy gringos risk their lives on Lake Titicaca after all. The Peruvians were still not impressed, but we decided that if we made it that far we'd resort to the oldest trick in the book, common to ten-year-olds and expedition professionals: it is always easier to say you're sorry afterward than to get permission beforehand. One problem remained: we had to get a reed boat somehow. And it had to float, at least for a while.

Of the boat builders we met by the lakeshore, only Samuel Choque never told us that we were completely nuts. You could see through the holes in Choque's blue

cardigan, but his gray eyes were opaque and inscrutable. Choque was an Aymara born and raised along the lakeshore, a crafty survivor who knew more of the lake's secrets than any living soul. He found for us some of the same craftsmen who had made the *Ra II* for Thor Heyerdahl, and over several weeks he supervised the making of the largest reed boat ever to sail upon Titicaca.

I was nervous about trusting Choque at first, but Nevada convinced me that we had no choice. After all, Choque was on a first-name basis with the *achachilas*, or grandfather spirits of the lake, to whom the locals regularly offer tobacco, coca leaf, candy, and strong drink. The sight of these economically deprived people throwing their prized indulgences into the water for the benefit of the gods is not soon forgotten by possessive *norteAmericanos*. But then, we didn't grow up on the shores of the legendary Titicaca.

At the center of the Aymara cosmos is the sacred lake, surrounded by summits of 20,000 feet sending down fierce winds that stir up whirlpools and generate huge waves crashing against rock islands and sheer cliffs. Comprising 3,200 square miles of icy glacial runoff reaching a depth of a thousand feet, Titicaca is more of an inland sea than a lake. Taking Samuel Choque at his word, Nevada and I would sail his creation into the realm of the *achachilas* where, before us, only a son and daughter of the sun god had dared to tread.

Every journalist in the country was there to watch us hoist anchor. There were officials from the UN, the U.S. Embassy, several tourist groups, and a gang of rough-cut travel folk from the Residencial Illimani hotel—a motley assortment of backpackers hailing from New Zealand to Belgium who, during the endless weeks of preparation, had become our late-night party buddies and emotional support team. Like any wanderers deserving of the name, they enthusiastically took advantage of the free food and champagne provided by a La Paz-based insurance company that had decided to “sponsor” us.

The craft was spectacularly beautiful. The *Inti Yampu*—raft of the Sun—was twenty-five feet of golden reeds, its long upturned bow festooned with red cantuti flowers and yellow daisies. The wife of the insurance company's president tried to break a bottle of cheap champagne on the grassy bow, but it bounced instead. Speeches were made. Exceedingly large amounts of beer and candy were offered to

the *achachilas*; it looked like the natives thought we could use all the divine help we could get. With the drinks left, boisterous toasts were made to what the local press hailed as “one of the greatest sailing adventures of our time.”

At dusk, we slipped away toward the Strait of Tiquina. Our departure was clumsy, but at least no one was there to watch. Only Choque remained on the dock, waving silently.

We were silent, too, because we were exceedingly anxious. Earlier that day Nevada had admitted that she had never really sailed before. I found this bit of news quite alarming. I had been counting on her skills—because not only had I never sailed, I could barely even swim.

On the first night out, we found ourselves stuck in the middle of the strait. Dripping wet, we huddled together beneath the inadequate refuge of our one-room straw house amidships while rain poured down upon us by the bucketful. Since the balsa is an ancient vessel, it has no keel and, therefore, cannot tack. It sails with the wind or not at all. Although we were hardly seasoned navigators, Nevada and I determined that the wind was definitely not in our favor. We dropped anchor. Our boat filled like a bathtub, bounced like a rubber ducky.

By day three we had visited and left the Bolivian navy dock at Tiquina. We entered the big waters of Titicaca. A brisk wind allowed us to plow into a safe harbor at a cove populated with fishing boats and planted in eucalyptus. Then for nearly a week, gales kept us pinned to the shore, waiting in our tent.

With a lot of spare time on my hands, I walked the rocky shoreline not knowing whether to pray for a good wind or a sudden end to our expedition. It had begun to dawn on me that of all my undertakings so far, this was the most bizarre. The magnitude of our adventure was enormous: the lake seemed as endless as an ocean, and its typical weather would make Cape Horn look like a vacation in the Bahamas. The constant rocking of the boat in the waves made me seasick.

After our festive send-off, the natives' reception was almost as chilly as the waters of the lake. Everyone we met spoke to us in Aymara or not at all. When they dared to approach us, they inevitably shook their pointy-hatted heads. Some laughed, riotously. A couple of especially theatrical fishermen mimed our demise, banging their heads with rocks and falling, melodramatically, to the ground.

After several days, we could take no more. Ignoring seasoned advice and our own intuition, we headed out into a changing wind and were carried right back to our starting point at Tiquina. Daunted but undefeated, we took a few days' break and ventured forth once more.

Slowly we gained familiarity with our rigging and learned how to find friendly patches of reeds where we could drop our two anchors and catch some sleep. One night near Thajocachi, a storm caused us to slip anchor, forcing our boat onto the gravelly beach. Rocks ate big mouthfuls of reeds from the side and ripped apart our ropes. Nevada and I somehow managed to pull the *Inti Yampu* back into the waves; another few minutes and she would have been little more than a few tons of grass clippings. The next day, local schoolkids helped us with repairs when the two of us, numb and shaking, could no longer stand the 50-degree waters.

A Gift to the Spirits

Along a deserted coast north of Kakachi, we were dined by a barrel-chested Aymara fisherman named Bonafacio Nina Chacón and his daughter Maxima in their crumbly mud home. A calendar from the previous year with a photograph of a chubby, poncho-weaving *cholita*—a Bolivian countrywoman of Indian descent—was all that adorned the walls. The kitchen, dining room, and bedroom were the same one room. The fare was a small potful of potatoes. Ceremoniously our host scooped up much of the contents of the pot and with a guttural "*Cchua achachilas!*" tossed them onto the earth outside the house.

I was stunned. "Why did you throw out that food?" I asked.

Our host smiled paternally as he doled out the remainder of the boiled potatoes. "You probably think that those potatoes are wasted. It is not so. They are a gift to the grandfather spirits, the *achachilas*, the spirit of the lake, the spirit of this place." He gestured in a circle around our humble surroundings and added, "You see, everything is alive. Everything has a personality. Westerners think the world is a machine to be controlled. The Aymara know it is pure spirit and can never be controlled or even understood. There *is one simple rule: you must give more than you can afford. And be grateful for whatever you receive. Always.*"

Emerging from a night of camaraderie, returning to our boat, we found our line had been cut. Only a miracle had kept the *Inti Yampu* and everything we owned from blowing into the middle of the lake and disappearing beneath the waves forever.

“The *achachilas*,” murmured Bonafacio.

“Saved the boat, or cut the rope?” we wondered.

“*Quién sabe?*” he responded. Who knows?

One month passed. Then two. Nevada and I slowly became passable reed-boat sailors, accumulating a lifetime’s worth of extraordinary sights and experiences along the way. Along the empty mudflats of the Ramis Peninsula, what we thought to be a distant community of pink houses took to the air a few dozen feet in front of us: a flock of wild flamingos. Near Chaguaya, a fleet of Aymaras in their own small boats came to greet us. When the winds turned against us, they threw us ropes and, bending to their oars, pulled us for miles along the coast. We were entranced by a sense of magic and impressed by the humility of people giving far more than they could afford to us—and to the *achachilas*.

In Pusi we became godparents to a young Quechua girl and learned a crucial lesson about teamwork. Eight weeks into a trip we had hoped would entail only a few, Nevada and I were suffering a distinct loss of morale. Once the best of travel companions, we had virtually ceased talking to each other. Our expeditionary efficiency had plummeted as a result. We hoped that a little onshore leave would raise our flagging spirits. Unfortunately, our host Hipolito couldn’t provide much in the way of a fiesta.

Clustered around a smoky fire fueled by an acrid cocktail of sheep and cow dung, we fortified our spirits with a bottle of high-octane corn distillate that represented the equivalent of the family’s monthly earnings. We were the first outsiders to have ever come ashore in this ancient world. Having performed the ritual first haircut on Hipolito’s tiny daughter Vincentina and offered our presents of oranges, bananas, and peanuts, Nevada and I had made a fast new friend. Accordingly, he entrusted us with a confession.

Apologizing for the meagerness of the celebration, Hipolito admitted that he was worried about the survival of his family. His cows had died and his lambs would

not last much longer on their diet of dried barley stalks, the only feed he could provide. Neighbors had planted their fields so densely that they had left no outlet to the lake where Hipolito could graze his animals on the only feed the environment provided, the water plants called chanko that clogged the shore. He had asked his neighbors to leave some small access to the lake. They had responded that they required every available square foot and furrow along the lakeshore to keep their families alive.

A motorized pump was the obvious solution, we suggested. It could pull fresh water from the lake and irrigate the countless acres of arable land that now lay dry and fallow just a few hundred feet away from the water's edge. After an initial investment it would solve everyone's problem, increasing the wealth of every family a hundredfold.

Our host shook his head dismissively. With tears in his tired eyes he said, "*La gente estan trabajando en contra. No saben trabajar juntas.*" People are working against each other. They don't know how to work together.

Back on our boat that night, Nevada and I found our boat surrounded by chanko, unable to move. Using my oar as a pole I pulled in one direction, Nevada pulled in the other. We wobbled back and forth, going nowhere. Finally free, Nevada rowed in one direction. I rowed in the other. We were turning in circles, each of us too stubborn to give in. The setting sun found us stopped dead in the water, hurling complaints at each other, airing out weeks of petty resentments and imagined injustices.

Finally Nevada pointed out that just like Hipolito's community, we were working not with but against each other. But in our case the truth was painfully obvious: we were literally in the same boat. We had to laugh. There could be no claim to the high ground on a flat lake. I needed to help Nevada be all she could be, to assist her in every way possible in order to attain my goal, a successful circumnavigation of Titicaca. Nevada, in turn, needed me to be confident, content, and fully functional for the same end. So we agreed to work together again.

What we had hoped would be the final day of our trip nearly became the final day of our life. Three months had come and gone; by this time our boat was disintegrating into a floating heap of compost, literally alive with green mold and

white larvae. Fortunately for us human stowaways, the Strait of Tiquina was in view and a morning wind blew favorably from the north. "Today's the day!" we laughed. But not for long.

Out of the east came a gale, turning the swells into troughs, filling our sail till it threatened to pull the mast, cables and all, from the boat. Though sodden and soggy, the *Inti Yampu* raced like an outrigger over the waves, moving faster than we had ever moved before. Ahead of us loomed a solid wall of rock.

"Lower the sail!" yelled Nevada, pulling on the rudder with all the strength she possessed.

I did, but it was no use. Our haystack had turned into a hydrofoil, careening out of control, bearing us headlong toward destruction. Beyond pain, beyond exhaustion, we pulled at our oars in a desperate attempt to guide ourselves southward past the heightening row of cliffs.

"Oh my God! *Noooo* . . ." gasped Nevada. She stared over the side of the boat at the oar that had slipped her grasp, now roller-coasting up and down through the huge swells. "We need that oar!"

This was an understatement; without that oar we were history. Now all we could do was hold on to the bucking balsa for dear life until we were dashed against the rocks. How could it end like this? Had we taken the lake too lightly? Or had the lake gods simply tired of two presumptuous, heathen foreigners? Our adventure epic, often punctuated with slapstick by our amateurish antics as novice sailors, seemed about to end in tragedy. Shaking with cold and exhaustion, we gaped at each other in stunned disbelief. We were going down. . . .

Then, suddenly, an utter stillness fell upon us. The winds had died to nothing, even more quickly than the gale had arisen. Now there was not even a breeze. Our jaws hung open. In more than a hundred days the winds had never simply changed from gusts to gone in a matter of seconds.

Soon the dead calm was followed by a gentle breeze blowing sweetly from the north. It made no sense. Even the swells had diminished to a friendly level, and now they were coming off the rock wall itself, moving us out of harm's way. Amazed and trembling, we hoisted sail. The breeze carried us south until dusk, when we glided right into our old parking place at the navy dock in Tiquina. From the shore we must

have looked like old hands, professional sailors. Although not yet safely back at our starting point at Huatajata, we had now successfully circled the lake.

That night, in celebration, Nevada and I shared our remaining food with the sailors who came down to join our cooking fire by the boat. There was peanut butter, strawberry jam, powdered milk, and chocolate.

“*Cchua achachilas!*” cried a diminutive sailor in a torn uniform, repeating the oath as he threw a handful of precious Hershey bars into the water.

“What are you doing?” I yelled, rushing to stop him before all of our treasures disappeared into the dark lake. “Stop that! I don’t care if you eat them, but no more payoffs to these spirits. We’ve survived already! and we never gave anything to the *achachilas*,” I huffed. By now I was convinced that this Aymara tradition wasn’t a religion but rather a metaphysical extortion racket.

The sailor smiled and shook his head. “Of course, you are right. By the way, you seem to be missing an oar. How did you get back without it?”

A shiver ran down my spine as Nevada and I exchanged nervous glances. We had to recognize that we had recently been at the mercy of extraordinary forces that pushed us beyond our limits and demanded from us more than we could afford to give—like our oar, among other things. Something or someone had led us to the edge of oblivion, then graciously given us back our lives. Certainly we had much for which to be grateful.

Two days later we arrived at our starting point, Huatajata, where a handful of local Aymara folk lined the dock to greet us. As we clambered off the boat a voice growled from the back of the crowd: “They said you could not have sailed the entire lake. But one look at that poor balsa and I can see that you must have done it.” Samuel Choque stepped forward, shook our hands, and said gravely, “Congratulations.” He tilted his head toward the listing *Inti Yampu* before smiling warmly and adding, “I am proud of you.”

Now we were truly done.