Feature Choice

Positive Lessons from Kilimanjaro

In November 2017, Ralph and Szabi met, realised they shared a dream and began to plan for it. Climbing Kilimanjaro takes strength and stamina, as well as persistence and planning. In September 2018, they travelled from Amsterdam to Tanzania to begin their trek to the top. In this very personal essay, they reflect on the trip, the ways in which it reflected AI principles and practices, and how the journey changed their priorities.

Tuesday, September 4, 2018 – The flight

OW! The day of departure is here. Hard to believe that ten months of preparation are over and the trek awaits. Last night sleep was hard to come by.

Waking up this morning, it is hard to believe the day has arrived. Our duffle bags with two weeks’ worth of clothes are lighter than expected and our backpacks fit great.

We are traveling light – no PC, iPad, no wallet. My co-trekker, Szabi, and I met at the gate. Ten months of preparation brought us to this place – the start of our adventure – we’re ready! What began as a dream has become a reality. We started our journey in November 2017 with a conversation inspired by a vision exercise and set a date. We then explored the different routes and outfitters – we designed our trek and kept it alive with video chats. Toward the end we even sent each
other pictures of our goal. Each step brought our journey into greater focus while energizing us.

Wednesday, September 5 – Preparation

After a refreshing sleep and a nice breakfast, we met Gabriel Rassy, our guide and ‘father’ for the trek up Kilimanjaro. He greeted us with the thought that we automatically become friends and he has reached the Summit 163 times – we’re in good hands.

We stayed at the Ngorongoro conservation area for one day to rest and prepare our duffle bags for the trek.

The mud would be heavy. Nature is in charge here. Quietness surrounds us and there is a feeling of “take it easy – no hurry”. The whole journey has been a very natural process and feels in sync with our mindsets.

Thursday, September 6 – It begins

At the trailhead checkpoint our porters were selected and our gear weighed. Each porter was only allowed to carry forty lbs. After lunch we were introduced to our support team – Gabriel, Godwin and the medic. Gabriel’s initial conversation with us reflected his very positive mindset as he talked about how we would reach the Summit. He shared his experience and set the focus – one day at a time – followed by specific actions we would take. It all felt so natural. He shared his experience with the anti-altitude sickness medicine Diamox and what worked best – we listened and followed his direction. Godwin set the pace – pole pole – slow slow. We left from 2,100 meters.

The day's walk through the rain forest was mostly uphill, like a set of terrace steps that supported the climb. We stopped every 40 minutes for water and a break. The clean air and quiet were a stark contrast to our daily life. When we got into camp we found our tents waiting. After dinner, Gabriel walked us through day two. Bedtime at 8.30: it's been a long time since we went to bed at that hour.
Friday, September 7  Sunbathing on the mountain

The first part of the hike took us through dense rainforest. After a couple of hours we left the forest and came upon moorlands. Short, scrubby trees, very dry with sun.

The temperature picked up, the sun grew stronger, the path rockier, requiring us to pay attention to where we walked. Godwin’s inquisitive nature kept us on our toes, asking riddle questions that made us exercise our minds along with our bodies. It was great fun and made us laugh – we are blessed with great guides! After lunch we continued up a rockier path. A mountain goat would have been proud of us. Following the climb, there was a flat ridge and we descended into our camp for the evening. The view from our tents was of Kilimanjaro, our goal and while we knew we would reach it, we also knew it would take time and flexibility. It would not be a straight path. We left the dinner tent to a star show – the Milky Way, Venus, Saturn, Jupiter and Mars. We had never seen a sky so clear and bright with stars. Godwin pointed out the planets to us and some of the constellations. His knowledge was impressive. The quietness of the night and clear sky created a tranquil moment which engulfed us.

Saturday, September 8  –  The on-off switch

We woke to frost on the ground and a crisp blue sky – coming out of our tents we were greeted with a clear view of Mt. Kilimanjaro. It feels so satisfying to have made this journey and it has given us a new perspective and goal for the years ahead – to experience life and connect with others, to be of service. Our support team is a joy to be with and their kindness and generosity of spirit is contagious. We talk about looking forward to spending time with the loved ones who brighten our days! As I thought about this journey, it reminded me how I think in 4D’s – Discover, Dream, Design and Destiny. We made a decision to undertake the journey, then came discovery and setting a dream – a vivid outcome. Then designing the actions needed to make it happen, followed by walking and making it happen. Seems so obvious and I realized how ingrained these principles are within me.
When the sun was out it was hot; clouds meant an instant temperature drop of twenty-five degrees. Trekking poles were essential. During the four-hour trek we stopped several times for water and snacks, allowing our bodies to adjust. Our bodies are using all energy we are given – the meals are designed to nourish us.

It became obvious to both Szabi and I that we could learn from this lifestyle of early to bed and early to rise. There was time budgeted to relax and after meal time for conversation, then bed and up at 6.30. We realized that when we worked late into the night we didn’t work at our best and it took time from our relationships. We agreed that a new schedule could be implemented to stop work at 7pm to have dinner as group or family. Each night on the trek we had dinner as team. We discussed a new schedule for when we are off the mountain, – in bed by 10pm, up at 6am to work out, a schedule we will do our best to implement. In a way not possible in our daily lives, our journey up the mountain provided us a very clear vision of what is possible when external distractions are limited and there is a singular focus. Going forward in our lives after this trip, it will become so.

We rested after lunch in a warm tent in the shadow of Kilimanjaro. Hard to believe. At lunch Gabriel reminded us of his goal, to get us up and down safely from the summit. Every day it is more impressive – his and Godwin’s knowledge. We will reach the top.

Our afternoon acclamation walk to 4,000 meters allowed our bodies to adjust and brought the mountain ever closer. At afternoon tea, Szabi and I discussed how we will implement what we are learning – simplicity, focus, time usage. Our brains are not aware of passing time as we trek up the mountain. Each day is very simple – get from point A to point B and give your body the resources and
fuel for the energy to make that happen. We have added another layer of warm clothes. Starting tonight and tomorrow, it will be cooler.

Sunday, September 9 – A new height

Another crisp, clean morning after a wonderful night’s sleep. Being warm makes all the difference. Crawled out at 6.30am to morning coffee, ready for another day and appreciating the consistency and simplicity of the morning routine.

We spent most of the day above the clouds. While the high dessert is barren, there is a stark beauty about it. The wind was consistent. Sometimes we walked in silence, allowing our thoughts to wander. At other times there was banter, from naming world capitals to riddles to the top three places we would want to live. There was a brief conversation about politics, with agreement that freedom of speech was desirable, a priority and a positive activity. The banter made the time pass, but the moments of silence were as welcome.

Being present in the moment and just experiencing all our senses could take in was a real treat. In our daily lives, we reminded ourselves, we are often buffeted by different distractions. Being present requires focus. I can construct being present by my focus and the conversations I have. Not sure the last time we had or took the time to let our minds wander with a multitude of ideas. It has become clear that the trek is influencing our priorities and how we will spend our time when we return home. We are becoming aware that relationships require time to nurture, and the trek is giving us the time to feed these new relationships that will stay with us. Through our conversations, we have come to know our guides Gabriel and Goodwin. We trust them. Following their lead while learning more about them, sharing stories with them, is easy. Daily shared meals support the opportunity to share stories – we have not missed our cell phones. We are enjoying being present in each moment.

The banter of our support team fills the camp and the joy in their voices is soothing and inspiring. During the trek to Lava Tower we encountered other trekkers, as it is a crossing point for several routes to the summit of Kilimanjaro. During the day’s trek, we saw litter from cigarette butts to snack bar wrappers to tissues, sad and disheartening. We only have one planet and it deserves to be treated well.

Monday, September 10, 2018 Kissing the Wall

Gabriel shared stories at breakfast in answer to our questions. When we asked why he and Godwin only talked about the day ahead, not more, he told us that when the Maasai kill a cow or goat to eat, the head of the house slices off one
piece and hands it to each family member until all have a piece. A second piece isn’t handed out until the first piece of meat is finished. So, until we finish one day there is no need to talk about the next. It is working very well on this trek. Listening to Gabriel’s stories is a real honor and treat.

The day’s trek was going to be long. The rising sun warmed us. At one break, Godwin filled his water bottle from a stream, saying that our stomachs could not handle the bacteria until we had lived here between six and twelve months. After several hours we were introduced to the Wall – 300 meters of rock climbing. It was physically challenging, rewarding and satisfying. At one point, I had the opportunity to both hug and kiss a rock. The climb consisted of grabbing crevices and pulling up and over rocks. At the top the view was spectacular.

What followed was three hours of going down to go up. It has become a consistent theme and gets us to the place we want to go. Godwin has such a skill in setting the pace that any terrain or incline is possible. Going down was more challenging than expected and our trekking poles were essential. Toward the end of the day, we were 200 yards from camp the way the crow flies and it took thirty minutes down and thirty minutes up to get there. Reflecting on our professional experiences, we realized an obvious action often requires time to become seen as such and it was important to enjoy the journey – which we did. We enjoyed a light snow shower during this last hour, which gave way to sunshine. Kilimanjaro behind us is inspiring. We are close.

At dinner we discussed the next day, which would be short, three hours trekking to base camp and then preparing for the trek to the Uhuru Peak the following morning. The excitement was building. As we left the dinner tent to head to bed we saw lights in the valley and miss the stillness and silence of the night before.

Tuesday, September 11, Base camp

As we left camp this morning, the path was straight up. We knew we would reach our target by putting one foot in front of the next, taking small steps. Step – step – pole – pole. Consistency is the key, keeping the goal in focus. The terrain was easier to navigate and our experience of the past few days gave us confidence we would arrive at base camp and 4,700 meters. The day has given me a new hobby – trekking. A great way to spend time, experience nature and be with friends.

As we reached base camp, there were tents everywhere and the number of people present was overwhelming. Many trekkers wake at midnight to begin their ascent. We will leave Camp at 6am, arriving at the summit around noon. Along the way we will see the crater and return to base camp. It will be an eight- to
ten-hour trek, slow and steady, to reach summit. Gabriel’s confidence is infectious. We’re sure we will reach it, and anxious to start.

At afternoon tea, we go over the ascent details – dress, timing, safety. We really value Gabriel’s focus on safety first. He outlines the route and expresses extreme confidence that we will summit – he tells us to have cameras ready.

We pack and dress for the morning, all our warmest gear and multiple layers. The key is to be warm overnight and during the trek. We’re grateful for all those who supported us and made this journey possible. This is the type of experience that has profound influences on participants; it certainly has had on us, and we’re grateful for that.

Dinner early and in bed by 7pm as we will be up at 5am to head to the summit!

Wednesday, September 12 – The summit

All the planning and training had brought us to this point –1,200 meters to go up and reach the summit in the next five to six hours. Not sure what to expect or what we would encounter.

We left at 6.20am and Gabriel took the lead. He said his short legs would set the perfect pace – he was correct! There was minimal conversation and the wind was cold. We were wearing all of our warmest clothes including gloves and hats. The plan was to stop every forty-five minutes or so for water and a short break.

Nothing could prepare us for the day walking at a measured pace up the mountain. Physically we were ready: Gabriel and Godwin had acclimatized our bodies to the higher altitudes and the activity. My focus was on the back of Gabriel’s shoes, rarely looking up to see what lay ahead. All the focus was on getting to the top. At every water stop, there was encouragement from the folks who were descending: “it’s well worth it, keep going!”
Internal conversation was critical, especially in the last hour and positive self-talk gave us the boost to keep going. The sun was out and the surroundings spectacular along with more folks descending, saying “you’re so close, keep going”. Hearing we had trekked to 5,400 meters, more than half-way, was such a boost of energy. Having a clear focus when we started this journey in November of 2017 was now paying dividends as we kept the focus on being at Uhuru peak. We could not have anticipated the effort the day would take. It didn’t matter. Our guide and his team, along with our clear focus, moved us up the mountain. When we reached the summit and Uhuru peak, a tremendous sense of satisfaction washed over us. We had achieved our goal. It is hard to put it into words. We took pictures of ourselves and the flags we brought, along with the team, essential to us reaching the peak. We spent some more time reflecting on our accomplishment and taking in the incredible view, then began the descent. We acknowledged that what we had accomplished would take time to sink in and would have a lasting impact on our lives.

When we returned to Base Camp, ten hours after we started, exhaustion hit, physical, emotional and mental. Neither of us could remember being so tired. We were running on empty. The feeling of success was overwhelming and we shared our joy with all in the camp – our support team was great. We had accomplished our goal and the feeling was fantastic. Ten months of preparation had paid off. This was a day we will remember for a lifetime. It will remind us of what is possible with preparation, focus, teamwork, flexibility and passion. We thought about these traits in different settings and realized we can choose to implement them at our discretion.

Whether in our personal life around learning a new activity or broadening our understanding – keep it simple and focused. We created our reality – our trip – through our words and dialogue. This seemed so obvious on Kilimanjaro. In our work it has been challenging to achieve, but we realized that positive energy will go a long way. The Positive principle. Underlying all of these was the Anticipatory principle: we anticipated our success on this journey and there was no time spent on a Plan B – the summit was the only result!!

Closing thoughts

As we sit on the plane, we hear conversations from other travelers who were on Kilimanjaro and hear the excitement and energy in their voices and stories.

And beyond that there are deeper impressions and thoughts. The now-familiar refrain of “jumbo-jumbo” and “washy-washy”, “pole-pole” and “pili-pili” will be with us forever along with the peaceful morning coffee. There is the generosity of spirit of the people and the beauty of the nature. There was the
simplicity of the life we led while trekking on Kilimanjaro. Being off the grid was
new and rewarding. It gave us the opportunity to be in the moment and focus on
what we came for – the trek up a mountain. We are leaving with so much more.
It will take time to process and digest all we experienced.

We are the architects of our day and how we use our time. Technology has given
us many opportunities and also many challenges. On our trek up the mountain
we had a singleness of purpose and all our actions were focused on achieving our
goal. There was no wasted effort and we were a part of a team that coordinated
all actions around a goal that was simple and straightforward, something we
realized is frequently missing in our daily lives. It is a topic within our control to
address upon our return. We looked for ways to implement this in our personal
and professional lives – having a singular focus, being present, allowing time for
relationships and being mindful of how we spend our time.

The trek up Mt Kilimanjaro forged a bond among us and those who supported us.
We invested time and energy in those relationships. Sharing stories and asking
questions – time was created in our schedule to allow and encourage this. A gift
of this journey has been the new relationships formed and the ability to see the
best in each person we met and spent time with. The connections we made will
continue to grow and the effort needed will be a priority, translated into new
actions upon our return – creating time to build and nurture relationships.

“If you can dream it, you can do it.” – Walt Disney

We did it!!!