

Life Skills for Adventurers at Heart

By Erik Schlimmer

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I reached out and touched the chain link fence topped with barbed wire. Adorned to this barrier was a yellow, bullet hole-riddled sign, its black print warning: "U.S. Government Structure. Do not Molest Under Penalty of Law." Located in the tiny border town of Lochiel, Arizona, the barrier separates two economies and two cultures: Mexico and the United States. I squinted through the links into sun-drenched Mexico, a sea of Saguaro cactuses and gravel hills.

Fifty-two days earlier I stood on the U.S.-Canada border, peering past a Customs station into Canada, an endless extension of evergreen forests and alpine lakes. In between these two countries, naturally, lays the Wild West of the United States.

Reaching the U.S.-Mexico demarcation marked the end of my long-distance pilgrimage, a two-month mountain bike ride from border-to-border. Traveling solo, I pedaled across Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, Utah and Arizona, along a route I established entirely myself. A thin strip of dirt and pavement, my pathway provided me with an education in American culture. But all good things come at a price. I climbed an estimated 185,000 vertical feet end-to-end, the equivalent of climbing Mount Everest from sea level more than six times. I had to carry my bike through un-ridable terrain for thirty miles, adjust to extreme temperatures, ride at elevations exceeding 11,000 feet and camp through 1,000 miles of grizzly bear country solo.

It was my toughest challenge to date and I owe my success to six life skills: know the hard skills; keep solutions simple; communicate effectively; build confidence; possess specific goals; and bring solo experiences into the group setting. Previously employed while climbing the 770 3,000-foot peaks of the Northeast, mountain biking across the U.S.-Mexico border, and traversing twelve long-distance hiking trails (in addition to riding from Canada to Mexico), these skills excel in my real-world professional pursuits as well.

Interestingly, six authors guided my refinement of the six skills, as you'll see below. Each became master of a particular skill, their gift to the rest of us. In addition to giving them their due credit, citing these historical and present-day authors illustrates the six life skills have value beyond the wilderness.

How and where you chose to employ each skill is entirely up to you. Whether you're on top of a remote summit or performing in the economic community, I guarantee they will help you succeed. Their employability is limited only by your motivation.

No. 1: Know the hard skills, like John Wesley Powell (1834 – 1902)

Powell is best known for completing the Powell Geographic Expedition of 1869. Consisting of nine men, the expedition shoved off from present-day Green River, Wyoming. Navigating south on the Colorado River for 1,000 miles and 99 days, they reached the south end of the Grand Canyon, making the first traverse of the mighty Colorado.

At the time it was an obscenely wild trip – no topographic maps of the region were available and the Grand Canyon didn't even have a name. Powell owes his success to a mastering of hard skills – talents you can put your hands on like paddling, navigating, repairing boats and camping.

Get the skills: Read Powell's *The Exploration of the Colorado River and its Canyons*, first published in 1895 and named one of the "100 greatest adventure books of all time" by *National Geographic*.

No. 2: Keep solutions simple, like Thor Heyerdahl (1914 – 2002)

A Norwegian anthropologist and zoologist, Heyerdahl received eleven honorary doctorate degrees yet presented non-traditional thoughts on the early migration of humans. Most notable is his theory of South Americans sailing on homemade rafts to the Polynesian Islands as early as 500 AD.

To prove his theory, Heyerdahl went big but went simple in 1947. He and five friends went to Peru and built a raft using primitive tools, naming it after the Peruvian sun god, Kon Tiki. Utilizing prevailing currents and wind, the team of six eventually crashed onto a Polynesian island after sailing 101 days and 4,300 miles. Simplicity is

what brought Heyerdahl and his raftmates success.

Keep it simple: Read Heyerdahl's *Kon Tiki*, which has been translated into more than fifty languages and sold millions of copies since first published in 1950.

No. 3: Communicate effectively, like General Tommy Franks (1945 –)

For a guy who failed out of college with a 0.8 grade point average, Franks has come a long way. Now possessing a Masters degree, being a Knight Commander of the Order of the British Empire and serving as a Bank of America board member, Franks also possesses remarkable military achievements.

Franks was a U.S. Commanding General who held theatre-level responsibilities, overseeing Central Command (CENTCOM). CENTCOM is composed of 27 countries including such troublesome beauties as Lebanon, Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, Somalia, Sudan and Syria. Only months into his command, Franks responded to the *USS Cole* and September 11 attacks. He then led the 2003 invasion and occupation of Iraq and invasion of Afghanistan. Only with effective communication could Franks ensure a U.S. presence in the CENTCOM region.

Be a communicator: Read Franks' *American Soldier*, which made the *New York Times* best-seller list in August 2004, its year of publication.

No. 4: Build confidence, like Benvenuto Cellini (1500 – 1571)

"I have achieved many noble exploits and still I live." This quote from Cellini's autobiography speaks of his confidence, often increasing to conceit. Cellini was born at just the right time for during the Renaissance artists and warriors were loved dearly. Luckily for Benvenuto, he mastered both employs.

As a sculptor and goldsmith Cellini produced art for Dukes, Kings and Popes. His most revered works include *Perseus Holding the Head of Medusa* and *Salt Cellar*. Also a warrior by trade, Cellini left cities in smoking ruins and slit countless throats. Most memorable was his involvement in the Sac of Rome in 1527 when he saved the Pope's life and killed the leaders of the invading army. Confidence was Cellini's middle name.

Get confident: Read *My Life*, Cellini's autobiography written in 1566 and first published in 1728. Called "one of the most fascinating books in existence" and "the most notorious autobiography ever written."

No. 5: Possess specific goals, like Bill Clinton (1946 –)

Born to a poor family in Hope, Arkansas, Clinton's biological father died at a young age. He then inherited an alcoholic stepfather. But Clinton overcame obstacles from childhood to adulthood by setting specific goals. Throughout his life, he set short-, mid- and long-term goals and reports the only one he did not meet was bringing peace to the Middle East.

This system worked: graduated fourth in his high school; Rhodes Scholar; Harvard Law School graduate; University of Arkansas law professor; Attorney General for Arkansas; five-term governor; two-term President of the United States. Clinton is now a public speaker and consultant, dedicated to making HIV and AIDS treatment affordable, promoting alternative energy use and mitigating conflict.

Be a goal-setter: Read *My Life*, the autobiography that merited a \$10 million advance. First published in 2004, Clinton has autographed 40,000 copies alone.

No. 6: Bring solo experiences into the group, like Edward Abbey (1927 – 1989)

Dubbed "the desert anarchist," Abbey never identified with a group. Even to his death he remained the lone wolf: his few friends simply wrapped him in a sleeping bag, tossed him in the back of a pickup truck and laid him to rest in an unmarked desert grave.

Though Abbey was a misanthrope to the core he chose to share his views with readers. The author of 26 books, he possessed a style of writing that developed a cult following. The lone wolf shared and it may have made the world a better place, adding to his and others' success.

Learn to share: Read *The Monkeywrench Gang*, the book that propelled the formation of Earth First! in 1981, six years after its publication. The *National Observer* called it "a sad, hilarious, exuberant, vulgar fairy tale. It'll make you want to go out and blow up a dam." «« E.S. »»