

The Heroes Of Absolute Zero

by Janna Holmstedt

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He had not found his place. He had doubts anyway, about it being truly real. Too much noise disturbed his clarity. This was a problem – all the disturbances that hindered pure experience from emerging in all its force.

Dr. Lilly lay in his specially-built water tank. Neither sound nor light could penetrate it and the salt content made it possible for him to easily float in the temperate water. Weightless, he drifted, hour after hour. A feeling of utter relaxation while the skin slowly filled with water. The boundaries of the body literally began to dissolve.

His thought was that if one is deprived of all external stimuli, all influences from the outside, then one would in the end experience the world as it actually is. Unadulterated.

The tank functioned beyond all expectations. The first days of the experiment had been uncomfortable, claustrophobic. Imagined sounds caused him to react as if someone was just outside – knocking, steps, distant conversations. But they were only sound memories. The only thing that there was to listen to in fact was the murmuring of his own blood circulation. Now when he entered the tank he could dampen his flow of thoughts after only a few minutes and slowly let the residue of sound and remembered images fade away.

First station (Maryland): Free from gravitation, still centred, still a body.

Second station (Virgin Islands): Improved navigation and maneuvering. Heading out of the body.

Third station (the absolute zero point): I have found a thread of truth, of reality and hence, of meaning.

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One's face blackens, everyday matters shed their colours, leave smears. Urban particles close the skin's pores. Blackening bits everywhere, the condition determines how much they spread, if the depth is impenetrable. The daily condition changes with small lateral jabs. In the end, one has landed on the side, where one looks askance at everything.

MacCandless viewed civilization from that skewed angle. Pressed, he sought a place where it was possible to measure oneself against reality and restore one's correct proportions. He wanted to get closer to his skin, touch it from the inside with a pounding heart, veins, bones and muscles. Stretch out, loosen, liberate himself from the oppressive feeling of irrelevance. It was time to vanquish the false creature inside. The persecutor.

Alaska is suitable. Alaska is large, empty, natural, straightforward – without obligations and compromises. Without suffocating others who deform the living space. He spends days on freight cars, hitch-hiking, walking further and further away from all traces of civilization and human life. He feels he is coming closer to a point where everything can begin.

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Action potential

There is a tension in every cell and a membrane that maintains difference (positive and negative). There is a pump and canals transporting charges from one side to the other. Similar currents keep the system at rest. In other words, we have an outside and an inside; we have a difference in concentration; we have a living cell as opposed to a dead one.



Now, sometimes there can be sudden rushes (thick fibres are the best conductors). A *volte-face*, positive and negative, propagates itself like a shock wave along the nerve cell at a rate of up to 150m/s (comp. a tornado). Finally, the wave reaches an end point, is slung over a gap and continues its journey along another fibre. Transfer of information generally successful.

It can also be slow (breathe in): a dull, aching pain spreads throughout the damaged tissues.

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It can clearly be seen on him. Time that disappeared between two lost memories rendered him taller, as if the laws of perspective were no longer possible to apply (he stands behind a car, in front of a house, dressed in green jeans) and she thinks: you'll remember me as the one who still knows everything.

Nothing stays in him, his cerebral cortex is a network of sudden losses. He has a batik T-shirt and three leather thongs around his right wrist. She describes for him in detail everything she can recall of their shared experiences. It becomes a history whose gaps he himself cannot fill in but which he is still compelled to keep as truth.

A blow
well-directed
needs only one
Her power to lie. His power to once again not remember.

Every day he notes point for point what shall be done: daily tasks which cannot be forgotten, things that have been said and agreements that have been made. Everything that he is compelled to remember he writes down in his notebook which he keeps in a bag on his stomach.

He puts bits of the surroundings into his mouth. Chews on threads from the sofa, on bits of the stuffing, everything that appears and dribbles out. A habit which cannot be halted. He connects to the world in other ways than through memory and she thinks: it's like this I'll remember you.

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The present is a beautiful forgetfulness, as empty of memory as of expectations. And thus infinitely hopeful or consoling – before forgetfulness is once again dispelled.

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Dr. Phil, life strategist as he calls himself, was on TV again today. "Take control of your own life!" he urges like a southern preacher and we feel that it is just this that is lacking, that it is a little chaotic just now and that we are not quite ourselves. Sometimes we are beside ourselves.

At his revivalist meetings he awakens the feeling that it is time to regain one's true self. That it is time to recover from the world – as if one had been a prisoner there, taken hostage and now one wants to return home, back to one's very origins. "This is who I really am", we say and draw the borderline between the inner and the outer world, a border which is a gigantic leakage.

On the fifth of September 2003 David Blaine was hoisted up in a plexi-glass box over the Thames in London. He was to live there for 44 days without food. He calls himself an illusionist but this was no illusionary act – it was for real.

Below gather fans and the curious. Some had written "We love you David" on placards and streamers. Others threw sausages and hamburgers at him. Day after day the spectacle could be seen on Channel 4's homepage.



“I have learned more in that little box than I have learned in years”, said David to the assembled press when, haggard and clearly exhausted, he stepped out of his self-imposed isolation. Isolated and exposed. He seemed to have fed on the social sustenance that poured out on him from the mass of media and people. Perhaps that was the trick: to see to it one is seen.

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On the second of March 1972, Pioneer 10 is sent on its journey from which it will never return. It is the first space ship to pass the asteroid belt and the first human-constructed object to leave our solar system. The objective is the star Aldebaran, 68 light years away, the eye of the constellation Taurus, and at the speed of 44,063 km/h it will take the capsule two million years to reach its destination. Seven months before David Blaine isolates himself in his plexi-glass box, we lose all contact with the little pioneer.

A 152.5 x 228 mm, 12.7 mm thick plaque containing a message from humanity is mounted on the capsule. The plaque shows a man and a woman who are naked and drawn in a stylised manner. The man raises his right hand in greeting. Beside them is a map showing our position in the galaxy.

The least amount of information for the greatest possible communication – to create the ultimate summary of what human beings are and are capable of, etched in a gold-plated aluminium sheet:

“Hi, we are here.”

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Zero point fluctuations

There is an ideal point where all movement ceases, where pressure abates. Atoms stop vibrating and cold air spreads. Zero Kelvin. At 100 nanokelvin individual atoms lose their identity, their specialness. They suddenly synchronise their movements and become impossible to tell apart. In this new material condition the temperature sinks drastically to 2 nanokelvin. Closer to absolute zero than this is impossible to get.

At room temperature matter moves at 1500km/h. Our solid condition is breakneck velocity.

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One man goes out into the wilderness
One demarcates his body *ad absurdum*
One loses his memory, simply misplaces it.

Twenty-four year old Chris MacCandless took himself to Alaska in order to find his true self in the wilderness. He was found dead, starved, two years later. About the same time, a man the same age loses his memory. The goal had been to annihilate his whole existence, but he was left with those parts of it that could no longer remember why they should be wiped away.

Dr. Lilly lowers his body into the sound-insulated, darkened water tank, searching for reality, the unadulterated self, the zero point, which would facilitate real communication – undisturbed by preconceived opinions and external circumstances. He prepares himself for the task of communicating with other intelligent beings.

Voyager 1 was launched five years after Pioneer 10 went into space. This time human voices recorded onto an analogue gold disc were sent along. One of the greetings is: “Hello to everyone. We are happy here and you be happy there.”



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In the meantime

If you turn outwards you are already there. Thrown forward. Gravel under the hands, nose, everything that resists. It still smells of dust and damp. Marks of stones in the palms of your hands, sharpness.

Raise your head and feel your shoulders fall. This is also a place for weight and time: waiting, resting, time for futile efforts and an echoing void. Breathing, again, pulse; a scarcely discernable exertion.

Time – for one single movement at a time.

Translated to English by Jan Teeland