





# THE RISK OF BEING HUMAN

*By Professor Bill Schindler*

I AM ALONE, SHIVERING, BOBBING IN A DUGOUT CANOE OFF THE coast of Oregon, wearing a soaking wet loincloth I fashioned from brain-tanned deerskins. The water is 40 degrees Fahrenheit, and I'm worried that my body temperature is getting dangerously low. The camera crew left a while ago to get drone shots, and then the fog rolled in like a blanket. The distant shoreline has disappeared. I can't help asking myself some serious questions.

Why did I take a semester off to follow this crazy idea? Hadn't I been living the academic dream, teaching archaeology, a subject I love, at a college with great colleagues and enthusiastic students?

**BEFORE THE KILL** Filming Episode 3, "Hunt," in Ethiopia, Bill Schindler chews on *Cuntiesa*, a plant used by the indigenous people to cover human scent. Using a replica 200,000 year-old stone tool he created on-site, Schindler speared a goat that wandered into the clearing. Levallois was the first stone tool technology used by *Homo sapiens*.

Photographs courtesy of National Geographic



**ABOVE** Filming Episode 9 of *The Great Human Race* in Alaska, experimental archaeologist Bill Schindler and survival instructor Cat Bigney follow in the footsteps of the first people to cross the Bering Land Bridge and enter the North American interior 15,000 years ago. The extreme conditions on the arctic tundra are among the most brutal on the planet.

Nine months before, National Geographic had contacted me — through a LinkedIn message I recovered from the junk-mail folder — to audition for its new television series, *The Great Human Race*, which would retrace the migratory routes of our ancestors, from the roots of humanity in Africa to the "new world" of North America. In each location and time period, I would be required, with a partner, to survive and adapt with only the tools and technologies that were available to our ancestors of that time and place. At first I didn't know how to respond. To say yes would mean traveling off and on for seven months, away from my family.

Beyond the physical, mental, and emotional challenges, I had no idea how this would affect my work. I had never heard of a professor hosting an entire television series — certainly not one in which he would run around the world on national TV in a

homemade loincloth, living on bugs and raw bone marrow.

But I decided that the show offered me a way to inform my teaching like never before. It was a ticket to the closest thing we have to a time machine, a chance to try living authentically in the crucial periods of our evolutionary past.

It also offered me a chance to experience learning through the process of "soul authorship" — a concept coined in 2003 by the blacksmith Michael McCarthy — which has become the foundation of my teaching philosophy. I firmly believe that students comprehend ideas wholly and retain them the longest when they engage with the material using all of their senses. They do this best by following a project hands-on, from beginning to end. For my students, these projects can include learning how to use fermentation to preserve foods, making stone tools they then use to butcher deer,

and brain-tanning skins to tailor their own clothes, which they wear while giving public presentations about Stone Age life.

Now I would get to engage in soul-authorship education of my own. I agreed to a Skype interview, which quickly led to a second Skype interview (they didn't like the shirt I was wearing in the first one) and several phone conversations. Eventually I was given a "chemistry test" — a day of filming in North Carolina's mountains with my future partner Cat Bigney to see how we worked together in front of the camera. The producers offered me the position about three weeks later.

Learning in this new context meant learning what it feels like to be truly hungry, dehydrated, cold, hot, stressed, scared, sick, exhausted, and, at times, triumphant. I was able to push my understanding of and skill with prehistoric technologies to the test.

Sheltered from the pouring rain under a pine tree in the Caucasus Mountains of Georgia, I learned what it was like to try to start a fire by friction when my fingers were so cold they had stopped moving. Hunting in the highlands of Ethiopia, I understood what it meant to copy and then rely on a 200,000-year-old stone-tool technology to create spear points, my only option for finding food. While traversing a melting glacier in Alaska, I was able to see how well the animal-fat waterproofing I'd put on my homemade skin boots protected my feet, which were already frostbitten. In Uganda, I felt what it was like to rely on an acacia-brush fence and a fire as our first line of defense from more than a dozen hyenas that encircled Cat and me. (They began to leave only when a lion showed up.)

For years I had been using primitive technologies to make my own clothes, tools, and foods, but always in a 21st-century context. Now I got a glimpse — directly, with all of my senses — of what life might have been for our ancestors.

I learned what it felt like to adapt and overcome.

The experience made the archaeological record come alive in a unique way, a sort of

“archaeology in reverse.” Instead of finding an artifact, material, or cultural residue and then having to make sense of it, I became the person leaving that residue.

It's one thing to make some stone tools in front of my class. It's another to be on the ground, having just killed an animal, and to deal with immediate problems like re-sharpening a knife or making a new spear point, with darkness coming on. How do these factors influence what's left on the ground? I am now a more informed archaeologist and better prepared to interpret that archaeological record.

More than changing me as a researcher, my experiences with the program have transformed my teaching. To reach millions of people, in 171 countries, I had to expand my notion of the classroom and adapt my teaching style. I needed to find new ways to convey information by doing, while focusing on a few key messages that could reach a general audience in just 10 episodes of 42 minutes each. I had to avoid lengthy tangents and technical language. After all, the power of the message doesn't matter if people aren't tuning in.

Back on campus, I continued to try to broaden the learning community when

the show aired, every Monday night, by creating an online classroom chat with students and faculty members at a handful of other institutions — including the State University of New York at Potsdam, West Chester University of Pennsylvania, and Monmouth University. These weekly sessions provided me with the opportunity to engage directly with my own students and facilitate conversations among them and those from other colleges.

In my actual classroom, I've brought the tools that I made so that my students, who saw me making and using them on the show, can handle them and feel their heft and strength. Being a part of *The Great Human Race* reinforced my drive to create experiences for students outside of the traditional classroom. I want to provide them with learning opportunities that are versions of what I experienced, a chance for them to author their own learning from start to finish, using all of their senses. I feel confident that not only can I create such experiences for them, but that the effort is worth all of the extra time and energy.

My soul-authored education has changed the way I look at the world, from how I interpret our distant past to how I respond to what is happening right now. It has deepened how I perceive myself, my family, my community, and the planet, and will guide my efforts to deepen my students' learning. Because what more could I want than to create a similar opportunity for them? ■

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**ABOVE** At the conclusion of the filming, Bill Schindler returned to the classroom and his sole-authored teaching style. In April, he invited primitive technology specialists to work with Washington College students and archaeology students from other colleges and universities who had been participating in the live virtual Twitter “classroom,” GHRchat, that coincided with each episode. During a full day of hands-on teaching and learning, Schindler demonstrated how to use ancient hunting weapons including the bow and the atlatl. Photo credit: Geoffrey DeMeritt '02



Learn more about the show.

<http://channel.nationalgeographic.com/the-great-human-race>