

All that blisters leads to goal

By Ruth Ostrow

THE environment inside the Sydney Entertainment Centre is electric. More than 3500 people are standing on chairs, screeching and dancing to funk music. The bass is so loud, we're vibrating. Massive video screens hang from the walls, flashing images of gyrating bodies.

It's like a giant rock concert; the best, most fun rock concert you've ever been to. But it's not a concert. Quite the contrary. We are at an Anthony Robbins motivational seminar and we've gathered to perform one of the most outrageous activities invented by the human species: firewalking.

Robbins, the larger-than-life motivator from the US, is preparing us through subliminal messages of joy, to walk over hot coals in a ceremony similar to tribal rituals practised by native cultures. Undertaken in a trance, firewalking is supposed to be a form of spiritual initiation.

We're doing the firewalk in order to begin a four-day personal growth seminar, Unleash The Power Within; Robbins uses it as a metaphor for the fears and limiting beliefs that stop us getting where we want to be in life.

Those who didn't come with any limiting fears certainly have them after signing the release form handed to us as we enter the room: "I am fully aware ... I will ... walk barefoot on burning wood coals which will range in temperature between 1200F and 2000F ... If I do choose to walk on the coals ... I am fully aware that I may suffer serious injury, including severe burns or other physical or mental damage ... I hereby release Anthony Robbins ... from any liability whatsoever."

But that was four hours ago and the real danger of fire seems far away as we dance and scream to the images of erupting volcanoes superimposed on the screens to help us feel more "positive" about fire.

The crowd goes wilder as the images intensify and Robbins screams from the stage: "Yes! Yes! Yes!" We respond in a trance: "Yes! Yes! Yes!" while thrusting our fists into the air in mass hysteria.

"Think about what is stopping you getting ahead in life. Are you going to keep letting it hold you back?"

"No! No! No!"

"Are you ready to do this walk?" yells Robbins, sweat pouring down his eager face?

"Yesss!!!"

The adrenalin is surging through my body. I can't believe I'm standing on my chair yelling with such passionate conviction. I have been hugging strangers and jumping about all night. Usually this type of hype makes me sick.

I only came to observe the firewalk for this column. Not to do the silly thing.

But I've lost my head. I've lost my resistance. It has now been six hours of psyching up and I am so determined to walk over those red-hot coals I'd deck anyone who stopped me. "Yes!" I yell in a blood-curdling scream, nearly knocking myself off my chair.

And now it's 1.30am. We are exhausted, exhilarated. We've been locked inside this sweaty stadium for almost seven hours, no food, no rest. The doors open on what looks like the rubbish area outside the Entertainment Centre.

"Let's go!" yells Robbins as 3500 people stream towards a giant bonfire.

Bongo drums beat loudly and frantically as we emerge into the humid night, moving forward like lambs to the slaughter, grinning like fools.

The drums make me feel like a virgin about to be sacrificed to the volcano. Or rather it's my virgin feet that are about to be sacrificed. Lily-white feet that don't even tread on hot sand without thongs.

Twelve long coal tracks are spreading out from the fiery orb. Men with face masks and fireproof gloves are continually shovelling fresh, red coal on to the walkways.

There is no trickery here. It's the real thing. But am I limited by my fear? "No way!"

Finally, it's my turn. "Yes! Yes! Yes!" I scream preparing myself to focus on the positive outcome only. "Yes! Yes! Yes!" And suddenly I am walking, slow and firm as instructed, along what looks about a 5m path of red-hot coals, taken freshly out of the flame.

"Yes! Yes! Y..." Then suddenly I can feel the heat. I am halfway across and I feel like my feet are on fire. "Yes!" I yell, less convincingly, as tears of pain start rolling down my face.

And then I am at the other side, being hosed down. "You did it! Celebrate!" yells the woman who catches me, but I am already limping off in the direction of the bathroom to see if there is anything left of my blackened stumps.

I did get burned. Second-degree, according to my grizzling husband, who was the one holding ice-packs on my blisters at 3am. Many people I spoke to sustained some burning too.

But I went back the next day to finish the seminar. Why? Because although bitterly painful, the burnt areas are in fact small. A 20c coin and a 5c coin on one foot, a 10c coin on the other.

The way I look at it, more than 95 per cent of my skin area remained unscathed by 2000F temperatures.

As life metaphors go, I have to concede that compared to the cost of standing back in life and giving in to one's fear, those are damned good odds.

From the heart

Dear Ruth,

I, too, have found myself naked, drawing pentacles into the chilly air. But I disagree that the practice of Wicca is generally for "misfits ... looking for the magic". It can be a wonderful form of expression and transformation. Becoming

in tune with mother Earth can be just as meaningful as any session on the therapist's couch. Where is the magic in paying somebody \$100 to listen to self-created problems?

Louise Redding, Paddington, NSW

Dear Ruth,

We were on a beach in Fremantle, Western Australia, one day and I saw six Aboriginal children with little plastic bags near their faces. They were sniffing glue. They were between three and seven years old. The only thought I could muster was: "They have portable gas chambers." I have still not recovered from the shock. I am desperately looking for some balance and crumbs of sanity in this nightmare world.

Waldemar Buczynski, West Moonah, Tasmania

Dear Ruth,

Things can change with a click of the fingers and you realise how precious life is. Two years ago, I was hit by a car while out jogging. I ended up returning home four months later with bones broken in nearly 20 places, not to mention emotional damage. I found the coming home process such a contradiction. People want things to return to normal, but it's impossible when you can't even do up your shoes. They don't realise the impact illness has on both a psychological and physical level. I still feel like I'm dragging around a sack of potatoes. There is a social push to be "normal" but it is important to create your new life slowly, even if it takes years.

Maria McCarthy, Living with Trauma and Serious Injury program,
Satir Centre of Australia, Armadale, Victoria, (03)98247755

www.ruthostrow.com

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