

# Immersion Therapy

The world needs Anderson Cooper. And vice versa. PATRICK SYMMES goes fork to fork with the CNN correspondent on how *Outside* kick-started his life, the perils of vacation, and how to make contact with a rebel group. (Hint: It's not like the bar scene in *Star Wars*.)

*A modest office on the seventh floor of a glass tower at Columbus Circle in Manhattan. Light snow is falling. Picture windows look east over Central Park. Enter Anderson Cooper, 40, silver-haired scourge of slow-moving FEMA bureaucrats and host of CNN's wide-ranging nightly newscast Anderson Cooper 360°. Cooper took the show prime-time in 2005, just after his emotional, outraged reporting from Hurricane Katrina made him a star; since then he's risen to the top in his time-slot ratings while filing dispatches from complex conflicts in the Third World. Telling hard stories has been Cooper's passion since 1992, when he traded his Yale degree for a Hi-8 camera, a fake press pass, and a plane ticket to meet Myanmar's Karen rebels, freelancing his way into jobs at the in-school network Channel One, ABC, and ultimately CNN. Now, back from a week in the Democratic Republic of Congo, part of his moonlighting work for 60 Minutes, Cooper is eager to go to lunch, but I force him to pause. At home, I have a shrine filled with artifacts from 20 years of reporting in the Third World, but Cooper's trophy shelf is vast and jealousy-inducing, with snapshots from around the world vying for space with his Kevlar helmet, handmade toys, and local art.*

## **OUTSIDE: Sweet painting!**

COOPER: I love this. It's a restaurant sign from Goma, in eastern Congo. I don't know why it says CHICAGO BULLS. I collect hand-painted stuff like this. Mostly I give it away.

## **And this sign, for Avenue Joseph Mobutu?**

That's also from eastern Congo. The rebels had just taken over that town, so I went out there one night with a screwdriver and liberated it before they could trash it. I like it because it shows the old Zairean flag. I was obsessed with that flag when I was a kid. I always tell people *Outside* changed my life. When I was—  
**Wait. You can't tell that until we're sitting down.**

## **The Boy and the World**

*A few minutes later, having been hailed twice by strangers on the way to lunch ("Thank you!" "Thank you, Anderson!"). Cooper settles into a restaurant booth. He talks a bit about his interest in Buddhism, which led him, early in his career, to spend a semester studying in Vietnam. Since then, he's reported from 58 countries, including some of the world's most hard-bitten war zones.*

## **Don't you ever get scared?**

I find it exhilarating, terrifying at times, depressing, fascinating. But I have a great desire to see it and to go back.

## **Did your own travel experience prepare you for that?**

I had my eyes opened when I first went to Africa, when I was 17. It was my senior year of high school. My college applications were in, and I didn't see much point in being there.

## **The senior slump.**

Right. So I decided to get out of town. And I used to read the travel ads in the back of *Outside*. A lot. And I remember finding an ad for this

company called Encounter Overland, which ran trips in a British Army lorry through Africa. I went from Jo'burg to London overland, in three or four months. In that way, I say *Outside* changed my life, because that trip opened my eyes to a lot of possibilities and different experiences.

## **You had some tragedies in your family.**

Yeah. My dad died when I was ten. My brother committed suicide. And all those were things that propelled me away, more than I would have gone otherwise. I got a job when I was 11 so I could start earning money. And when I was 14 I started doing these courses with NOLS. Mountaineering in the Wind River Range, kayaking in the Sea of Cortez. So by the time I went to Africa I was pretty independent, but it was the first time I'd been through a roadblock and had someone point a gun at me.

## **Did it change you? Your perception of the world?**

It certainly opened it up. I mean, New York had been my universe, and none of that seemed real to me. Africa seemed real. I felt comfortable, which is hard to explain. I don't know why. There wasn't a lot of chitchat. You get down to the core very quickly, and you see people as they are. It's less confusing.

## **Did you feel at home with yourself while there?**

I liked myself more there than I did here. I wanted to be that person. I grew up in a privileged environment [*this mother is fashion designer Gloria Vanderbilt*], but to me the

greatest privilege was at a very early age realizing that what a lot of people think they want, what a lot of people are aiming for—ultimately, they will be just as miserable as everybody else. Once you realize that, it's sort of freeing. **You weren't necessarily happy on that truck in Africa. But there is something deeply happy about those difficult experiences. People routinely say, "That was the greatest experience of my life." It's a strange alchemy, the way miserable things are turned into good memories.**

When you are hospitalized with malaria, it's not so great, but in retrospect, yeah, it was the greatest thing ever.

**But if people haven't had those experiences, they're afraid. They think, This is going to suck.**

It's OK if it sucks. Of course it's going to suck at times. But it's also going to be exhilarating and invigorating, and it's going to quicken your pulse in a way it's never been quickened. And you know what? Not everything has to feel good. That's sort of a revelation—at least it was for me. You should go through it. It *should* suck. It's not all about enjoyment.

**You bring me to my cynical view that America is the comfort nation, that we want to be cocooned.**

I don't buy that. A lot of people are seriously interested in this stuff. More so than ever. Look at TV: There are tons of travel shows. Maybe it's arm-chair travelers, but that's OK. We all have our limitations.

**You are convinced TV can**



"I do think television can change things, and not in a grand 'save the world' kind of way."

**do more good than harm.**

Smart TV can. I'm a big believer in the power of television to bring you to a spot in a very visceral and real way. Whether it's Katrina or the DRC, it can have a quicker and bigger impact than anything.

**Cooper's Vacation Problem**  
The snow shower has turned into a blizzard. Cooper has consumed most of a filet mignon and two glasses of cranberry juice with soda.

**Do you have favorite places that you dream about going back to?**

Yes, absolutely. But I'm not sure I want to tell anybody.

**Fess up.**

I don't want people going.

**Fess up.**

Seeing the gorillas in Rwanda is something I really like.

**That would be g-o-r—**

Yes, g-o-r-i-l-l-a. I've done that six, seven, eight times now, going back to 1985. To be allowed to sit with them for an hour and have them brush by you or charge you or completely ignore you because they think you are so ridiculous. There's something about the intimacy that I find extraordinary... I also went

along the coast of Croatia, which was just incredible. **This was when you got called back for Katrina.** Yeah, I didn't get to see as much as I wanted to. But I saw that Paris Hilton went last year, so I started to feel like maybe Croatia is done. And Brazil—I like Salvador a lot. Bahia is one of the remarkable places of the world. But I don't do well at resorts. I get bored very, very quickly.

**Do you go on vacation?**

No. Not really. It's a problem. My deal with *60 Minutes* is I can only work for them on vacations and weekends. So if I take vacation time, I'd rather go somewhere for *60 Minutes*.

**That's your idea of a vacation?**

Congo was my vacation. Being able to tell a story I couldn't otherwise tell—it just feels... worthwhile. It feels like the right thing to do. So I need to do it while I can. At some point they're going to decide I'm not that interesting. That's inevitable.

**At some point you get to go on vacation.**

Yes, and I will be very depressed about it.

**Do Americans have an**

**exaggerated sense of danger about the Third World?**

Oh, yeah. But Americans have an exaggerated sense of danger about New York City. I'm also not a good person to ask, because my sense of what's dangerous is completely warped. People have stopped asking me for advice, because I encourage people to go anywhere. It really pissed me off, two summers ago, during the war against Hezbollah in Lebanon, when Depeche Mode canceled their concert in Tel Aviv. For security reasons! I don't understand why more artists don't go and entertain the troops. I mean, hasn't Jessica Simpson been over there? I saw this documentary on Marlene Dietrich, and during World War II she was going out, right to the front lines. I think she was having sex with a lot of the troops, too. I'm not saying artists should do that. But she took supporting the troops to a level that few have since.

**Take that, Hitler.**

Exactly.

**You're like Seamus Murphy, a war photographer I work with a lot. He was choosing a vacation spot to take his girlfriend, and he said to me, seriously, "Kabul!"**

I get that. There's a couple of nice little hotels there. I don't think going to places where there are kidnapping threats is wise. Kidnapping freaks me out. Bullets and mortars are horrific, obviously, but there's a randomness you can account for. Kidnapping? Being kept in a hole for seven years, chained to a radiator like Terry Anderson was? I can't imagine.

**I had some bad times in Colombia, which is well known for its kidnapping.**

That's my next vacation spot. **You're kidding.**

No, I'm not. I heard it's OK now. So that's on my list of places I really want to go.

**Getting Past the Why**  
*Columbus Circle is engulfed in a virtual whiteout. Our plates*

*are cleared away by a waiter who is careful not to stare.*

**Give me a tip. I'm going to Burma for Outside, and I don't know it.**

I've only been to rebel-controlled parts. I got in through a contact in Mae Sot, the border smuggling town in Thailand.

**That's one of my favorite things, making contact with the guerrillas. Do you tell people how you do that? I'm always ashamed, because it's sort of easier than it looks. You just meet the guy who introduces you to the guy who introduces you to the guy.**

I know. You want to cloud it in mystery to make it more impressive. People imagine it's like the bar in *Star Wars*. I once had to wait a week in a Belfast hotel for the IRA to contact me. It was a lovely hotel, and it felt very clandestine.

**Did you have any role models for this kind of adventurous life?**

Besides *Outside*?

Honestly, no.

**Good answer.**

It seemed so unlike anything that anybody had ever recommended to me. I'd always been interested in military stuff. I collected toy soldiers. British colonial wars. I was obsessed with the Zulu wars. Three years ago—this is going to sound really geeky—I went to the Zulu battlefields, Isandlwana and Rorke's Drift. I'm so glad I went. I forget what the question was.

**That is the question. Where does excitement about the world come from?**

I was interested in obscure wars that nobody cared about, just as now I'm interested in obscure stories that people aren't telling. There is something in the fact that people in these places are experiencing oftentimes horrific things, and nobody knows of their struggle. I find that particularly galling, or upsetting. At the very least I think people should go there, at least through television.

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### Do you ever have trouble coming back to New York?

Yeah. It's very strange coming back. Now I'm used to the dichotomy of it. But it was really hard in the beginning. When I first started going to Sarajevo in '93, '94, the height of the war there, coming back I kept trying to picture how New York would fare if the Bronx, Brooklyn, and Staten Island were full of Serbs lobbing shells into Manhattan. It doesn't take long for everything to break down. It doesn't take long for people to change, for one's heart to harden and for the dark stuff which is in all of us to come to the fore. Once the electricity goes out, and the lights go out, and the air-conditioning stops working, or you get really cold, it doesn't take long until you start killing one another. I would always wonder, like, in New York how would that play out?

### Did you get bitter about life here?

Not bitter, just more confused. It made it harder to fit in. I stopped going to parties. I remember coming back from Rwanda during the genocide, and going directly to a dinner party and not being able to converse with anyone. I just had nothing to say. I remember being very negative: They were talking about stupid stuff. But you can't exist like that forever. You have to come to some sort of understanding in your own head.

### What's the understanding?

It's just that all of this is contained in the same world and probably always will be, and that it's OK. It is the way it is. You can knock your head against the wall asking why something has happened. At a certain point you get to a place where there isn't any why. You just stop asking the why. And even in the midst of horror and sadness, there are great acts of compassion and kindness, there are acts of great joy, there is life... I do think television can change things, make some things better, and not in a grand "save the world" kind of way. But you can tell stories that change the world. It's the only thing I know how to do, frankly.

### You sound almost optimistic.

Yeah, I am. There's no reason not to be. It's a privilege to go to these places, to walk into someone's home, turn your camera on, and tell their story, and to be trusted with that. It's not my job to be optimistic or pessimistic; it's my job to be there. How could I not go there, how could I not do that? Shame on me if I didn't. **o**

CONTRIBUTING EDITOR PATRICK SYMMES HAS REPORTED FROM 17 COUNTRIES FOR *OUTSIDE*.

by many who remembered media reports about the Sharp and Nangpa La incidents. His reluctance to speak publicly about these matters only confused things more.

After scrutinizing Brice over the past year and a half, I had come to think that he was neither demon nor demigod. Maybe he was both—but in a way that not many people could recognize or appreciate. Brice could certainly be surly and abrasive, even vindictive. But I couldn't get past the fact that he did as much as anyone guiding in the Himalayas to make sure his clients came down alive.

"I'm just a guy who made commercial expeditioning into something that was profitable and safer for clients," Brice says. "I daresay if I know I've helped to improve safety and reduce the number of people dying on the mountain, and if I've helped the local community to a degree, then that will be pretty cool. But life's like a bucket of water—you put your hand in it, and shake your hand around, and it makes a few waves. Then you take your hand out, and nothing's changed."

The next morning we met by the lifts and rode to the top of Vail Mountain. This was a rare respite for Brice, who would be swept up in preparations for the 2008 Everest season as soon as he returned to France. In March, it turned out, just two weeks before he was scheduled to meet his '08 clients in Asia, Brice learned that the north side and upper portions of the south side of Everest would be closed until May 10—an effort to clear the mountain while a Chinese team carried up the Olympic torch. As this issue went to press, he and other outfitters were left scrambling to save a season that might never get off the ground.

For the moment, though, Brice could ignore the worries and simply play in the mountains, unfettered by the burden of running complex expeditions. Ever the guide, he led us to the top of one of his favorite slopes, where a thick blanket of fresh snow stretched out beneath us, and shoved off, the smoky powder swirling in his wake. I admired his turns for a moment, then chased after him. **o**

**NICK HEIL'S DARK SUMMIT: THE TRUE STORY OF EVEREST'S MOST CONTROVERSIAL SEASON WILL BE PUBLISHED IN MAY BY HENRY HOLT AND CO.**

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## BETWEEN THE LINES

### Career Services

Growing up, the only Sunday observance my family kept religiously was *60 Minutes*. I'm not sure what that says about my family, but it does help explain why the first time I saw Anderson Cooper—a cable-news guy?—filing a story in such sacred air space, I almost choked on my dinner roll. Then I started watching. I couldn't help but notice that the ambitious stories Cooper takes on for both *60 Minutes* and CNN seem, well, perfectly at home in the pages of this magazine. Endangered silverback gorillas in the Congo. The effects of global warming on the remote rainforests of Brazil. Along with building one of the world's most impressive adventure-travel résumés, he's become TV's most reliable storyteller.

When it came to interviewing Cooper, we sent the only guy we knew who could match him exotic tale for exotic tale: longtime contributing editor Patrick Symmes. What Symmes turned in was less a traditional Q&A than an exchange of ideas about travel, danger, and the itinerant lifestyle. Naturally, one of my favorite revelations was that an ad in the back of *Outside* was what first inspired Cooper to travel the world. Even better was this nugget: In order for Cooper to report for CBS's *60 Minutes*, he has to use his vacation time from CNN. I can't think of a better example of the theme of this month's best-jobs feature (The Guide, page 70): When you pursue what you love, you never have to work another day in your life.