Episode 75: Woniya was alone in the Arctic

Today we're talking about the concept of being alone.

Many people all around the world have been recently exposed to some form of loneliness or isolation because of the worldwide Coronavirus pandemic. This problem started a little over a year ago, but for a lot of people it seems like it's been longer than that, because they've had to stay at home in order to avoid getting infected.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson issued this announcement to residents of the UK, back in March of 2020.

Boris Johnson
From this evening I must give the British people a very simple instruction. You must stay at home. The critical thing we must do to stop the disease spreading between households, that is why people will only be allowed to leave their home for the following very limited purposes. Shopping for basic necessities, as infrequently as possible. One form of exercise a day, for example a run, walk or cycle; alone or with members of your household. Any medical need, to provide care or to help a vulnerable person. Traveling to and from work, but only where this is absolutely necessary and cannot be done from home. That's all. These are the only reasons you should leave your home.

These were the most stringent restrictions in Britain since World War 2. Very few people thought we would still be dealing with this a year later.

Being isolated at home, either by yourself or perhaps with some family members, can lead to some mental health issues. And that includes the possibility of depression. At least we have some ways to connect, using Zoom, Facetime, or some other audio/video communication. But it's just not the same as being with people.

Our guest today, Woniya, is actually pretty good at being alone. And we're not talking about just being stuck at home. She was brought to a remote spot in the Arctic, nowhere near civilization – just a middle-of-nowhere place, and she was left there to fend for herself. She had to build her own shelter, find her own food, and somehow stay warm in the unbelievably cold Arctic winter.

Woniya was a contestant on the reality show called Alone. This was Alone season 6, and it was called Alone in the Arctic. Right now, which is March of 2021, that whole season is available on Netflix. I highly recommend that you watch it, before listening to this episode. What we talk about here will make a lot more sense when you've seen what Woniya had to go through, and how she handled herself out there – for 73 days. I think you'll agree with me that she's pretty amazing. And if you want to learn some of the skills that she used to survive, hang around right after our conversation to find out how you can learn these things, directly from her.

Scott
You were allowed to bring 10 items with you on this venture.

Woniya
Correct.

Scott
I have the list here and I wanted to just mention it so people know what you were allowed to bring. Number 1 was a sleeping bag, and I bet you have a really good one too.

Woniya
-40 yep it was a good bag.

Scott
A pot for cooking all your various types of soups.

Woniya
Or not cooking as was the case for most of my days out there (laughs).

Scott
Yeah true. A ferro rod, and that is for starting a fire.

Woniya
Correct. It doesn't start a fire itself, it gives you a spark and then you need to blow that into flame. So different from a lighter.

Scott
I saw that one of the other contestants decided to not bring a ferro rod and it seemed like he regretted that early on.

Woniya
That was a bold move. He was the first person, I believe in the history of the show, to not do that and to make that choice going to the Arctic was very bold. Yeah he was very lucky because he was having a very hard time. I would not have made that choice. I prefer friction fire to a ferro rod, I actually hadn't used a ferro rod very much in my life, but knowing that it was a very extreme environment where I might not be familiar with the plant life, it's not a choice I would've made. So he was lucky because he happened to get a cutting board that washed ashore that was a different type of wood than any that was available. He probably wouldn't have been able to make a fire if that hadn't happened.

Scott
Right. He could have been out sooner anyway. Ok so you brought a knife, that seems obvious, also bow and arrows, a saw, a multitool, fishing line and hooks. You were never really able to use that fishing equipment right?

Woniya
Well I used them, but I was not successful with them because my water was all very very shallow.

Scott
Yeah the time that I saw you fishing was when you were trying to get through 10 feet of ice it seemed like and you never were able to hit water right?

Woniya
(laughs) Yeah I was not able to get through. It was about 2 feet of ice that I wasn't able to get through. That was supposed to be a fishing trip but because I couldn't get through the ice it

wasn't. That was kind of my last chance to get a big calorie source. Before that, that same technique where I was using the back of my folding saw and the metal butt of it, that was working fine before the ice was thick. Then we had a really big storm come in and the temperature dropped about 25F degrees over the course of 3 days. The ice went from 3 inches thick to 24 inches thick.

Scott
It was a lot of work and it wasn't worth the calorie expenditure.

Woniya
Right. Well I'm not even sure if I could have gotten through because of the narrowness of the hole and getting it that deep since I had to go in at an angle with the saw in order to chip the ice out. I also probably would have had to have several test holes to find a really good ice fishing hole. So given the amount of effort it was going to be and how low my calorie reserves were at that point, it didn't seem like it was going to be a good match.

Scott
You also had 2 other things which were paracord and emergency ration. What was in the emergency ration?

Woniya
So we got to choose 1 food item if we wanted, actually we could choose up to 2 but I didn't want to choose more than 1. It was about 2 pounds and we had about 6 or 7 foods that we could bring. Hardtack, jerky, gorp, rice and beans, pemmican and chocolate which I thought was pretty ridiculous. I chose pemmican. To me that was the only of the potential food choices because pemmican is a mix of dried berries, fat and dried meat, so it was the only ration that had substantial fat calories. That is absolutely everything in a survival situation, particularly an extremely cold weather situation.

So the pemmican, while it was only 2 pounds of food, I think it was a huge part of me doing as well as I did on so little calories because it was able to give enough fat to augment the rabbits and squirrels I was bringing in that were extremely low fat. It also meant that I didn't get protein poisoning from eating such lean meats.

Scott
Too much protein and no fat. I've never heard of protein poisoning.

Woniya
Yeah there is this thing called rabbit sickness. You can starve to death on all of the rabbits you could possibly eat because your body cannot process that high amount of protein, which is essentially nitrogen in your system, without some fats as well. So you actually get poisoned by the byproducts of protein digestion.

Scott
I remember Jordan saying that's what he was experiencing. He had all that moose meat but I bet he was starving just because he had no fat.

Woniya
That wasn't actually accurate. He had fat, he just lost a lot of his fat. They made a big deal about Jordan not having enough fat, but he had some fat. Whereas I never had any fat. I mean

a moose has an infinitely higher percentage of fat than rabbits or squirrels. I think they kind of played that up with him whereas I didn't have any fat to lose in the first place. He lost some of his fat but not all of it. He also had fish which is much higher than fat. So I think they kind of played that up to make it look like I had a better shot than I did of outlasting him.

Scott
The behind the scenes stuff that we don't see in the edited version of the show. Ok, I want to clarify something about terminology. Your area of expertise is ancestral skills. Can you talk about what that is?

Woniya
Sure. So a lot of people want to spin folks who are on "Alone" as survival types, and ancestral skills are about skills we can use to live sustainably in the wild long term, as opposed to survival situations which we think of as emergency situations that we're trying to survive until we are rescued. Ancestral skills are the skills that our ancestors used over millions of years to live in a sustainable way.

Using resources in the natural world around us rather than high tech mylar blankets and super fancy survival knives with a compass and a ferro rod and all those things. Ancestral skills would be things like pottery, bow and arrow, fiber arts, hide tanning, basket weaving, all of the things to make and get what we need and not just survive but live and thrive.

Scott
So you already had all those specific skills. What did you do to prepare for the show? What was your strategy going in?

Woniya
I really didn't spend much time in preparation for the show in terms of skills. I have been studying this stuff since I was 19 years old. I've been teaching since I was 22. So the skills were already my strong suit. I spent a lot of time putting work into building gear for the arctic. Most people, up until the time I was on, went out with a bunch of really high tech gear. Instead I decided to put my trust in the gear that I know.

My business is Buckskin Revolution where I teach tanning and making buckskin clothing and wool and fiber art spinning and felting. We make our own gear with natural materials. I decided rather than trust high-tech gear, which is not something that I espouse in my normal life, that I was going to go with the things that I know and believe in even though I was going to a far more extreme environment than I ever had. I hand knit 2 sweaters in preparation for "Alone." I made buckskin and fur parka of all hides that I hand tanned and sewed myself. I made my own boots with all hand felted and hand paired furs and leather. I was making a ton of the things that I brought out there so I would have gear worthy of Arctic conditions.

Scott
So you're just completely self sufficient pretty much?

Woniya
No I wouldn't say that. If I needed to be I could be. I have the skills to be more so but I do live in modern America and at one time I wanted to just disappear into the woods with my knife and just never come back. I recognize now that community and relationships and sharing these

skills giving people an amount of hope and inspiration is more important than living the totally pure lifestyle myself.

Scott
What's the typical process to get on this show?

Woniya
There are a lot of different ways and my process was different from a lot of people because the show sought me out and contacted me and invited me to apply. A lot of people are doing everything they can to get noticed by the show and put an application in and hope they get a call back. I kind of joined the application process further in. In my case it was some conversations with the casting director and then making a bunch of videos highlighting my skills for them. Then at that point getting the invite to what they call "Boot Camp."

In my season I think there were 20,000 people who had applied. Season 4 had a pair of people going out, like a husband and wife or mother and son or brothers, that sort of thing. Season 5 was returning people who had already been on the show. So they had 3 years of accumulating applications for my year because Season 4 and Season 5 they weren't taking applications. So Season 6 they had the glut of all of those which made it a much more competitive year.

So from those 20,000 people they selected 22 and sent us to a "Boot Camp" which was a week of all kinds of testing. From camera testing to medical, psychological evaluations and skills evaluations, and rigorous testing. From that they chose 10 people to be in the season.

Scott
How much did you get to meet with the other contestants ahead of time? Were you able to see them and evaluate them, kind of gauge what kind of competition they would be?

Woniya
Yeah. I would say it was much more a place of comradery and bonding than a place of gauging one another, but that is also true. During the "Boot Camp" time in New York we were all 22 of us together and it was incredibly bonding for sure. Of that we didn't know which 10 were selected until we showed up to orientation and base camp. I wasn't out there for the competition aspects, I was out there for the experience, not to kick someone else's butt. (laughs)

Scott
It seems like for a lot of people the draw for this, of course, is the money, $500,000 dollars. That seems like it would attract people who are kind of 'outdoor hobbyists' who might think, "Well I'm tough and I can just suffer longer than anybody else." Unlike someone like you who just loves being outdoors and actually knows how to survive. Does that make sense?

Woniya
That's absolutely the case. I would say of my season, everyone who was out there besides myself and Ray, I would say the major motivation was the money. Ray and I both had a different perspective on it and really were a support for one another and staying true to our ideals of not having it be about the money. I think you really see that in watching the show. You see the people who are all about the money.

We actually met an alumni of the show, who actually happened to be a long term friend of mine. They had a person who was on the very first season meet with us at the Boot Camp and tell us,

“If you’re in this experience for the money you’ve already lost.” If you look at the odds, 10 people are going out and only 1 of those 10 people is coming away with the money. You have a 90% chance of not meeting your goal, if the money is your motivation. That would be if the playing field was perfectly even, but it’s not remotely even. So it’s actually far far less than a 10% chance for most people.

If you’re out there for the experience, that’s the one thing you’re guaranteed because it’s the love of the experience and the adventure. For myself also, the chance to represent myself and the ideals that I have, which are that ancestral skills are just as good as modern survival skills. That natural material clothing and homemade and the actual craftsmanship are better than factory made and the industrial technology.

So to me, just being out there and getting to represent that was already a win. Everyday I got to be out in this amazing wild place was already a win. So I was able to enjoy myself everyday. For the people who’s only objective was to win and they were prepared to suffer for that, that’s exactly what they got. Everyday was a struggle and every day was a suffering. They got to experience feeling like they were losing instead of feeling like they were winning for all their time out.

Scott
Right. It was very clear that you were just in your element out there and enjoying being outdoors. Even though most people would look at that and say, “It’s suffering! It’s freezing cold and you’re all alone.” You mentioned assuming the odds were equal, and obviously they weren’t equal. Ray seemed like he got kind of a bad deal on where he got placed.

Woniya
He did. He was on an island. He was the only one of us that was on an island. So he had zero chance at big game. All of the women were placed in a spot that had zero fishing. I had the least experience at fishing of the women out there, the other 2 were fishing guides professionally and none of them were able to bring in fish. None of us were because we were all in very shallow water.

Jordan is incredibly skilled but he also happened to get the cherry spot with tons of small game, access to fish, and big game. Then you had Ray in contrast, on an island with maybe 3 squirrels on it. Once he had shot one of them, what was he going to eat? He had a lake so he was able to do a little bit of fishing. To my point, yes, the spots are not equal.

The skillsets are not equal of course since everyone is coming from a different place. As you said, you have some outdoor hobbyists and some where it’s a lifeway for them. Jordan Jonas had spent years living in the Siberian tundra by himself on what he can hunt and catch, so that is not an even playing field, and that’s reality, that’s life. So that’s ok. The vast majority of people are not going to come away with the money, so you better be out there for something besides the money.

Scott
Were you aware of how far you were away from the other people?

Woniya
No. It’s like playing Pin the Tail On the Donkey. When they placed us by helicopter, they went around and around and disoriented us so that we couldn’t tell how far from the base camp we

were or how far from one another we were. I could actually see or hear the helicopters where they were dropping people so I had a very vague sense of where people were. That is a vast area though so no, that lake is 400 kilometers long so it's a huge wilderness. People sometimes with our season say, "You know, they weren't that far out. Yellow Knife is a big town." Which is true, but we were a half an hour plane ride from Yellow Knife, we were probably 200 kilometers at least, away from town. People don't understand the scale of that region.

Scott
You weren't going to bump into someone out in the forest there by chance. (laughs)

Woniya
No.

Scott
It seems to me, just watching the show and your day to day, it seems like the 3 biggest challenges were being alone all the time, the increasingly cold temperatures since it got cold so fast after you got there, and the severe hunger which you experienced. Which of those do you think was the worst or the most challenging?

Woniya
None of those felt enormously challenging to me. I would say the cold would be the hardest. I didn't experience loneliness at all. The solitude was not a challenge to me, it was beautiful and I loved it. I was bummed out when the crew showed up for medical checks. Not that I was bummed, I enjoyed them and they were good people who were nice to interact with, but it really shifted my psyche. When you're so attuned to being alone it's very jarring to have human contact. So it was not my preference to have to interact when they came out because it was not what I was there for.

Solitude was a big challenge for some people but it wasn't for me. I think that is because my whole life has been geared toward connecting deeply with the land around me. I have a Masters degree in environmental science and botany and entomology. So building relationships with the natural world is what I do and who I am. Being a naturalist and a scientist was a huge advantage for me because I was learning so much. I was deeply engaged and curious because this was a new place and new ecology to learn.

The hunger was uncomfortable. I had obviously never gone anywhere near that long with so little food before. Thinking about it before I had gone I would have said, "I don't think I could do that. That's probably going to be incredibly challenging. Not to say that I enjoyed it, I certainly would have rather had food, but it was also fascinating to experience the edge of survival like that. To actually understand what a calorie means in the body in a way that almost no modern humans do. The discomfort passes pretty quickly. You get used to not eating.

I had some pretty massive issues with constipation. That was really uncomfortable and from so little calories and fiber but the hunger itself, I wouldn't have chosen it or been thrilled to repeat it, but it wasn't anywhere near as hard as I think the average person who's gone without food experiences. I think that there is a reason that almost every religious tradition in the world uses fasting as part of their ceremony and part of their religion. In all different religions all around the world fasting is a regular part of it. There is something about deprivation that really gets you in touch with spirit in a different way and gets you in a different way and gets you in a different way of relating to yourself and the world around you.

In that way hunger allowed it to be a really transcendent experience for me in a lot of ways. I got to experience finding something to feed me besides that which I'm used to feeding myself with. The beauty, wildness, and adventure literally fed me the way food would because I didn't have an option to have food.

Scott
You were so appreciative of it when it happened too.

Woniya
Absolutely. That's beautiful.

Scott
The 2 rabbit day was just the highlight of your week or month, right?

Woniya
Months yeah absolutely. To me, getting to appreciate food that deeply was such an amazing gift. The hunger and the deprivation was a gift. The cold was challenging and uncomfortable and was certainly part of why I couldn't be there for as long as I would have liked to because it just ate through all of my reserves really quickly.

I've lived in cold climates. I lived in far upstate New York near the Canadian border, in northern Ontario, in Vermont, in Wisconsin, all of which are very cold places. Then here I was in the Arctic and it didn't feel as cold to me as some of the other climates I've been in because I didn't have the contrast of warm heated spaces. You acclimate to the environment you're in so when you're in heated spaces the cold feels much colder. When it's your day in and day out and there's no respite you learn to live with it and accept it in a different way when you're living wild.

We're used to this human controlled environment where we have thermostats and fireplaces and cook stoves and we take so many things for granted. You don't take anything for granted when you are making it all happen yourself. That's how I like to live so it was an opportunity to put all my ideals to practice in a way so much deeper than I would have been able to experience in any other way.

Scott
From the time you got dropped off how quickly did you start losing weight?

Woniya
My first medical check was day 21 and I had lost 21 pounds. So I was losing a pound a day from the beginning. Then it kind of plateaued. I had put on 20 pounds in order to go out there. I had started at just under 130 pounds and I was just under 150 pounds when we launched. Then when they came out and did the first weigh in I was back to my original weight. I think there was something about losing the fat I had put on quickly and easily, and then I was starting to get more food. Day 21 was also the first rabbit that I got.

From that point on I was able to get a little bit more food. I was also in ketosis. There's a metabolic state that we reach when we aren't taking in carbohydrates which is called ketosis, where we burn fat and protein. Fats more if we have them. It's actually much more efficient than carbohydrate metabolism. So by the time I switched into ketosis, I was actually going through

calories less quickly. Also as a woman my metabolism is a little bit slower, so I actually had a little bit of an advantage.

If Jordan and I had had anywhere near the same amount of food I probably would have done a lot better. He's this tall lanky guy so his caloric needs are so much greater than mine. It was amazing to feel how efficient my body was with the very slim calories that I was bringing in. It was so much more so than I expected. I still lost a tremendous amount of weight. I lost 50 pounds, but I was out there eating almost nothing for 73 days in sub-zero temperatures for a lot of it. I never would have thought that my body would have been capable of going as far as it did.

Scott
Yeah and you were active. You were using up calories building shelter and-

Woniya
I was not sitting around at all ever. A lot of people's strategy is to go out and just sit and conserve calories. I was doing everything I could every minute of the day, often by headlamp well after the sun was down. I was just doing everything I could. My goal was to stay through the winter, I did not want to leave. It wasn't about hoping that everybody else would leave so they could come and get me, it was about hoping that it would be a full winter before it came down to the last few people.

Scott
I know they monitor you and do regular med checks and everything, but it seems like even though this is a TV show, it seems that there is a very real actual risk of death. Like if you fell or you had a problem it's not like they're going to be there in 5 minutes.

Woniya
No. In fact, even the idea of safety and the red button you can push, it really depends on you spot. When you get that far north the satellites don't work that well because they are so low on the horizon. So I would have to walk around for a while just to find a signal to get a message through to them. The idea that they could come in time to help me if I got into trouble was really not a factor. I knew that I was out there on my own and that if I got into trouble it was on me.

Particularly as it got later in the season and got much colder, they could only fly the helicopter during daylight hours and it was the Arctic in November, so there were only 3.5 to 4 hours of daylight. That was 21 hours and they couldn't get to us at all even in the best of conditions. Then you look at blizzards and storms and weather conditions; again, this is the Arctic with roaring winds and really cold temperatures. So the reality of rescue was pretty low, and I knew that from the get go.

Scott
So if you're going to break your leg you better do it in the morning.

Woniya
Better do it in the morning on a clear sunny day, yeah. Which did happen, I mean the first person who left fell and broke his leg and it was early on when they were able to fly easily. In fact, they were still able to use boats. By the end of my time out there the lake was frozen so boats weren't an option.

Scott
A lot of your days were spent setting traps, which you called snares, and going out and checking those snares. What's the mechanics of that? How does a snare trap work?

Woniya
Well there are different ways. In my case I did not bring snare wire, so my snares had to be a lot more complex and they took me a lot longer to set up. I was using the fishing line that I hoped to be fishing with for my snares.

A snare essentially is a loop that closes on itself and chokes an animal. Usually you can use wire and you can gauge the wire thickness for the game that you're after. You'd use really thin wire for rabbits and squirrels and something much thicker for larger game. We weren't allowed to take anything larger than squirrels or rabbits with snares so that wasn't an option for us. We were limited to a very narrow gauge.

With wire you can just set a snare on the ground and the force of the animal passing through that noose and getting it around their neck will shrink it down. Ideally you have made a knot or a mechanism that will allow it to tighten and not loosen. Otherwise they could back out. The average animal instinct is to keep running and keep moving forward, not to back up when they get caught. Smarter animals can sometimes get out of snares.

In my situation, using the fishing line, all the animal had to do was turn around and snip it with their teeth to get out. That meant that I had to make a snare that was mechanically set up to lift an animal up and off their feet so that they were hanging from the snare and couldn't reach around and bite it off. 90% of the animals I caught in my snares chewed their way out, or snipped off the snare before they even went through it because they could see them. They would nip off the fishing line to clear the trail. That's what animals do as they keep their runways clear.

So my snaring was incredibly challenging because I had to drive pegs into the ground to hold a horizontal cross piece from which my fishing line was tied. Then I had to have it loose enough so that when they pulled the horizontal cross piece it came out from the up rights. I used either a rock weighted mechanism or a pull mechanism or a spring pull, to lift the animal up and off its feet. That meant that I could only set my snares in areas where there was soil strong enough to hold my pegs. Once it got cold enough that the ground was constantly frozen it was incredibly challenging to set them.

Regardless, before that I was on a rock peninsula with hardly any bare soil. It was mostly bare rock or sphagnum moss, neither of which you can drive stakes into. The reason why all day everyday I was setting snares is because it took me an hour and a half to set one snare. To find an area that had the conditions to make snares which are soil, a game trail, a sapling or branch to dangle a weight from nearby. Snaring doesn't have to be that complicated but in my situation it was.

Scott
Right and even after all of that work, even if you had success you still had to compete against the fox who was trying to get what you had caught.

Woniya

Yes! Say 5% of my snares actually catch a rabbit and then I was maybe getting 30% of those rabbits before the fox gets them. I began doing mechanisms that would lift the rabbit higher off the ground and out of reach of the fox. I also started checking my snares at different times of the day. The foxes were smart enough that they would just go around right after I set them. I had to start outthinking the foxes and going different times of day to check them before the fox was going to be making their rounds.

Scott
Did you have a particular routine everyday? Like a schedule with times to do different things?

Woniya
It changed throughout my time there and based on conditions, but I did more or less. I didn't start snaring right away. I hadn't planned to be doing any snaring, if I had I would have brought snare wire. My season was the first season that anyone had ever done any- well I should say, watching past seasons I saw that no one had ever successfully snared before. So I didn't really have much reason to think it was going to come down to snaring. What I knew was this was a destination fishing lake that people come from all around the world to experience. I went out thinking that fishing was going to be my main calorie source. I tried everyday for weeks to fish, there just wasn't deep water anywhere.

You're limited in range too, you get set in a spot and there are boundaries to it. You can't just go wherever you want to and wherever has the best resources, you're stuck with the spot you get. My spot didn't have fish. So I had to strategize, but from the time that I started trapping, I had a really predictable time to my day. As the temperature got lower it shifted a bit. Just getting water and staying warm became a huge part of the day.

You also have to remember that in the Arctic it gets dark incredibly quickly. We were out there before the equinox. We went from 12 hours of daylight before equinox and then after the shift there were less than 4 hours a day. So we had less and less time to do all the things you need to do in a day, as life is getting way harder and takes more time. It takes time just to thaw enough water to keep yourself from getting horribly dehydrated. By the time you get your game it's frozen solid so you have to thaw it before you can skin it and process it. The situation gets more and more challenging in a variety of ways as time goes on, so that shifts the routine.

Scott
Obviously you were happy being out there, but it seems towards the end you were really torn. You wanted to stay but you knew that you could potentially be doing long term damage to your body, even though you felt like you could keep going.

Woniya
That was exactly it. I wanted to be out there and everything in me wanted to stay. The crux of it, and they showed this, was being absolutely determined to stay thinking, "I'm either here until my dear friend shows up in a helicopter to collect me because I'm the last one, or until they pull me for weight." I was hoping to be out there for a good long time before either of those things happened.

Then we got to the part where my birthday was coming up. I thought, "What is the gift I would like to give myself for my birthday?" At first I thought," Well, obviously to spend my birthday in this amazing beautiful wild place living the life I always dreamed of. That would be the best possible gift I could give myself."

Concurrent with getting closer to my birthday was the first time that I was really starting to feel the changes in my body that the medical team had been telling me. I didn't want to hear it and didn't really believe them. They had been telling me for a while that I was getting dangerously skinny and that they were concerned about me. I felt fine so I said, "No, you're crazy. I'm good, this is great and I feel wonderful so it's not an issue."

Just toward the end of day 70 I had a medical check where they asked me, "How are you sleeping? How does it feel to sit on the ground? Is it uncomfortable with your bones jutting out like that?" I was like, "No I don't know what you're talking about. I just need to put a few more bows on my bed. It's just because the bows are spreading so my bed isn't as cushy." Then I actually started to feel my body. I could feel my bones jutting out and feel the changes they were talking to me about. Then I was thinking, "What is the best gift I could really give myself?"

I know that I'm someone who has the capacity to push myself to the point of doing myself harm. I can work through the night easily or forget to eat, I'm a very driven person. I have the physical strength and capacity to push myself beyond what's good for me.

I thought, "What's the most life changing decision I could make? Yes the idea of staying out here and making a lot of money would change my life; but what are my actual values? I've never been a person who's put money above my freedom, my health, or making and doing for myself. So if I was to let go of some of my most closely held values for money, and on national television, would that be a win? Would that be a gift to myself and to the world? The biggest gift to me would be to show myself that I value myself and my well being more than anything else. More than proving myself, more than a particular competitive goal, more than money, more than all of these things that our culture tries to tell us we are supposed to value. That would be the strongest message to myself and the strongest message to the viewing public."

In fact, it was a really amazing epiphany one of those last days, checking my trap line and having it be empty yet again. I knew what that meant for my body and how skinny I was. I recognized that my time out there wasn't just about me and what was best for myself, it was also what was best for all of the young people watching me. Was I going to be another example of somebody throwing myself under the bus for the money or for the win? Or was I going to actually exemplify what I believe in and what I think is good modeling for young people?

I just burst out in tears when I had that epiphany because I realized that I couldn't stay. I would be going against everything I believed in and all the beauty I'd experienced out there if I didn't choose what was right for myself and for all of the audience.

Scott
Right. I'm glad they got that on camera too.

Woniya
Me too.

Scott
What a revelation when you talked about that. You talked about first that you wanted to make the right decision and exemplify what you stood for, and then you said, "Today's my birthday." It was like a gut punch to hear that thinking, "Oh wow, this is happening on her birthday, man."

Woniya
The other thing that you don't necessarily see from watching the show, is part of what was behind that decision was knowing that I had a medical check on my birthday. I was fairly certain at that point that it was a medical check that I couldn't pass. At that point it wasn't even about, "Do I stay here longer or do I leave for my birthday?" Instead it was, "Do I let them come and pull me and let people see that I sacrificed my own health and let someone else decide what was in my best interest? Or do I attain my autonomy over my body and my sovereignty and make the choices that I know are right for myself, and model that?" So it was also giving myself the gift of choosing for myself rather than having someone else make the decision for me.

Scott
I love that. What was the first real meal you were looking forward to?

Woniya
Well, certainly the idea of a biscuit with butter on it was really exciting. Really the food I was fantasizing about all the time while I was out there, was the food that I could have gotten had I been in another spot. I was picturing bear fat, moose steaks, and a beaver tail. I was picturing meat and fat. That said, I thought I was going to have a birthday dinner when I came out. I didn't realize that when you've been starving for months you can't start eating food again. It would actually literally kill you.

There's a thing called refeeding syndrome. People who were liberated from concentration camps sometimes died from being given food right away. So I had weeks of slowly reintroducing food so that I didn't do my system damage. My birthday meal was a little bit of pureed vegetables and some bone broth, it was not the feast that I had pictured getting myself for my birthday (laughs).

The first time that I was able to eat what I wanted to eat was at a brew pub there in Yellow Knife before going back. I think I got to have a burger and fries after weeks of slowly getting back and reintroducing little bits of food a little bit at a time. At first I was given a quarter cup of food at a time because my stomach and digestive system were pretty shrunken.

Scott
Yeah, tiny. Let's talk about your work now. What do you do everyday now?

Woniya
The very ironic thing is that these days I am working really hard to teach these skills to so many folks who just have realized how important these skills are; because of the coronavirus. These days I'm spending a lot of time in front of a computer (laughs) rather than out in the wild because I'm doing that via video during the global pandemic.

My work has always been teaching ancestral skills. I've also often worked various odd jobs doing different things in order to be able to afford living a wilder and less conventional life where I live off grid and homestead. These days my life looks more modern than it has for most of my adult life because I am on the computer more and teaching over WiFi.

I'm also working on a couple of different books. I have a book that I'm working on about my time on "Alone." I also have a book I've been working on for many years about sewing with buckskin and making buckskin clothing. Both of those projects are a lot of my time. I'm still doing a lot of crafting but less than I was before I was teaching online (laughs).

I've created the "Buckskin Revolution Academy," which is a bunch of online courses about a lot of the skills I learned while I was out on "Alone."

Scott
So for people who want to learn that kind of thing, they can learn it from you online?

Woniya
Absolutely.

Scott
You've got a big gathering coming up now. What's that all about?

Woniya
I am used to traveling all around the country where people come together to learn these skills. When the coronavirus pandemic hit last March and things started to shut down, all of those gatherings were canceled. I decided to go ahead and do an online version, thinking that it would be a one-time thing because of coronavirus. Well, I found that I reached so many people who never would have known about these skills gatherings, or never would have had the capacity to get themselves to one in person. The impacts on people were just amazing. I realized that this is a really important and needed thing, not just during the pandemic times, but for all of those people who are hungry for these skills and have no other way to get them.

Through doing those gatherings I've also created a really flourishing online community of people who are now online regularly posting questions. I just had someone post a picture of a willow basket they made because they taught themselves willow basketry. My buckskin sewing course is on there and people are posting all of the beautiful buckskin garments they've made since taking my course. So I have this online community of folks with a bunch of different subjects, even ones that they haven't learned from me, supporting one another in their learning journey. They're learning nature connection, hide tanning, and buckskin sewing. All aspects of ancestral skills, off grid living and related subjects.

Scott
So if someone wanted to join that spring gathering, that's coming up pretty soon right? As we're recording this, it will be live on March 26, 2021 and your online gathering is starting pretty soon.

Woniya
It starts April 5th. I won't be closing registration until I reach a critical threshold, so I still have time and attention for everybody that's in there. By March 26 I believe I will still have spots available. They can sign up and it is a 6 week event, but they have 6 months to do all the courses and 6 months of access to the online community. It has 4 different tracks: Wilderness living and survival, awareness with a focus on birds, plants and nature connection, homesteading and sustainable foods, and ancestral skills and handcrafts.

So depending on your subject of most interest you can focus on a specific track and go along with other people who are interested in that as well. Or you can take all of the tracks or sample from all of the different tracks. It's a broad range of different skills and you design your own journey with it. It's mostly pre-recorded classes that people can watch on their own schedule, then there are also community calls, myself and peer mentors and this ongoing community forum.

Scott
This is a big thing. This is not just an hour of training on Zoom. You've really put together a big thing here.

Woniya
(laughs) Yeah it's a well curated full learning journey, appropriate for both beginners and people who have been doing this for decades. It's designed for all skill levels and for everybody to get something out of it.

Scott
Good. Well we'll have a link to that in the show notes of this episode, as well as your website which is buckskinrevolution.com. I know you're on Youtube and Instagram and Facebook and you have a Patreon, you're all over the place.

I just now thought of this, you might be training a future contestant.

Woniya
There is someone who is in my Fall gathering who is being considered for the next season of "Alone." Yeah so I am potentially right now helping out the next "Alone" participants.

Scott
That would be pretty awesome.

Woniya
It would be.

Scott
Is there anything you wish people would ask you about with this experience that nobody ever does?

Woniya
Yeah. A lot of people when they hear about the "Alone" experience, particularly in the Arctic, they want to hear about all the things that were so hard. I wish people would ask me more about what was beautiful and life changing and what I loved about it as opposed to what were the biggest challenges and how I managed that degree of suffering.

I would love to share with people the beauty and fulfillment that comes along with these types of skills. Already the deprivation and suffering is what seems foremost in people's minds. That I think is due to the media that likes the extreme and the dramas and has the doom sound when the predator is coming. They don't have the opposing soundtrack of the beautiful music when the lake sparkles just so or when the ice is forming. I would like to see a more balanced view and more emphasis on beauty.

Scott
Yeah. They need to have the sunrise with a banjo playing or something. (laughs) I think you're a great example of how someone can really control how you react to something, even if it might be something uncomfortable, like being cold or hungry, it's how you react to it that makes all the difference in what your experience is.

Woniya
That's exactly it. It's your attitude. Attitude is what makes your lived experience. You saw that in the show where I was out there in the exact same conditions as everybody else and a lot of folks were suffering and I was having the time of my life. I was singing and dancing everyday and just in absolute bliss. I chose to focus on the things to be grateful for rather than the things I was missing or didn't have. We have that choice everyday in our daily lives. We can focus on what we have or we can focus on our disappointments and the things we don't have. One leads to greater joy.

Scott
Anything else you want to add?

Woniya
One thing that feels important to tell the listeners, particularly if they've seen "Alone." A lot of them want to put folks who do this up on a pedestal and think about how they could never do something like that. I want to just encourage people to recognize that you too can do all of these things and in fact it's what you've evolved to do.

All of our ancestors up until a couple hundred years ago were living lives out in the wild, making and doing, hunting and gathering for themselves. We all have that capacity within us and we never know what we're capable of until we are in a position where it's what we have to do. I want to encourage everyone to believe in their own capacity.

Isn't she great? I really enjoyed talking with Woniya, as you could probably tell.

And if you're interested in joining her Spring Gathering and learning for yourself about wilderness survival or ancestral skills, she has created a special discount code just for listeners to this podcast. So when you sign up, use the promo code WWTL15, that's WWTL one five, for a discount off the price. And that promo code expires on April 1, 2021.

And a couple other things –

Raw Audio 12 is now live! I know lots of people love hearing the actual 911 call audio, and the stories that go along with them, and those extra episodes are what you get when you sign up to support the show for just $5 a month, over at WhatWasThatLike.com/support. So in this newest Raw Audio episode, a social worker suspects the worst when she's blocked from a supervised visit –

Caller
I'm afraid for their lives.

911 Operator
Ok, has he threatened the lives of the children previously?

A young man takes too many Mucinex DM pills and does something he later regrets

911 Operator
Ok, what do you mean you murdered your roommate?

Caller
I shot him 3 times and then used an ax and mutilated his body.

And a 2 year old girl goes missing for two days before a volunteer searcher finds her

911 Operator
Describe to me what she's wearing sir.

Caller
She is in a purple shirt and gray pants.

911 Operator
Ok. Does she have her shoes on?

Caller
I don't know. She's got her feet in the weeds.

As a supporter you get access to all 12 of the Raw Audio episodes, as well as the future ones that I release regularly. That's at WhatWasThatLike.com/support

And finally, I got a voicemail from Rich, who has a question:

Rich
Hey Scott. This is Rich here in the Tampa Bay area. Love your show, I subscribe to several podcasts but yours is the only one I listen to consistently. I let a few build up and then I'll binge and listen to all 3 of them. I've listened to every single one you've had and I really appreciate them. Please keep it up.

I have a question for you that you didn't get asked on a Q&A, maybe you can answer it at some point. Have you ever done a podcast or interview and then never published or released it? Or maybe you held it for 6 months because you weren't sure it was appropriate or had concerns about it. Just asking, anyway thanks again and take care. Bye.

Scott
Thanks Rich. Yes that has happened, in fact a couple of times. The one that comes to mind though is the first time it happened. Here's the thing, most of the people I have on this show to tell their story are not professional public speakers. They aren't used to being interviewed. There's really kind of an art to being interviewed. When you're a guest with some kind of unusual story, like what we do here on the show, you want to really give all the details. You want to paint a picture in the mind of the listener.

One thing I tell each guest before we start recording is that they don't need to be brief to save time. I don't care about time. What I care about is getting all the details of the story out there. The details are what everyone wants to hear and is what makes the story interesting. I really don't want these stories to be just interesting, I want them to have you on the edge of your seat to hear what happened next. If you're listening in your car and you get home before an episode is over, I want you to sit in your driveway so you can hear the end of it. I know what that's like because I've had those driveway moments myself.

Since my guests aren't usually accustomed to being interviewed, a lot of that is on me. I need to ask open ended questions like, "What was going through your mind when that happened?" A really bad thing to ask is, "Were you scared?" Then you get the answer, "Yes." That doesn't really go anywhere.

There was one guest who had this really crazy story and I'm not going to say where this happened or what country it was in, but I get stories from all over the world. He was on his treadmill getting ready to work out and his treadmill happened to face an outer wall. Suddenly a car came crashing through that wall and ran right into his treadmill and knocked him into the ground. Of course there were all kinds of questions to be answered at that point, "Who was injured? Who was the driver? Why did they crash through the wall? Who was responsible? Were there any witnesses? Does someone need to call an ambulance for anyone?" All kinds of stuff like that.

The problem was, I kept trying to get the guest to tell the story and he would only give me a sentence or two at a time. No details. It was more like he was just reciting the facts of what happened. Without those details we were all done in less than 15 minutes. For each episode I really shoot for the story itself to be at least 30 minutes and as you know many of them go much longer than that. So a 15 minute podcast doesn't cut it. So that particular story just never got released.

Thankfully those cases are pretty rare. Thanks to Rich for calling in with that question. If you have a question or comment for me, I would love it if you would call in and leave a voicemail just like Rich did. You can call the podcast voicemail line anytime of the day or night. No human ever answers, it's just a place for you to leave a message. If you mess up what you want to say just hang up, call back and try again. The phone number to call is 727-386-9468.

That's going to wrap it up for this episode. I've got lots of amazing stories in the pipeline, and they're all coming up soon. So make sure you subscribe or follow. Either way the What Was That Like podcast episodes are always free and when you subscribe you're sure to always get the newest one as soon as it gets released.

Stay safe. I'll see you next time.