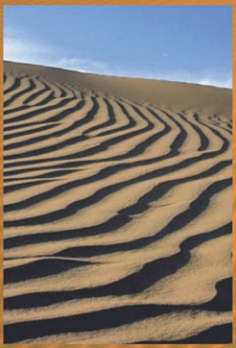
SHIFTING SANDS



A Guidebook for Crossing the Deserts of Change

STEVE DONAHUE

An Excerpt From

Shifting Sands:
A Guidebook for Crossing the Deserts of Change

by Steve Donahue
Published by Berrett-Koehler Publishers

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Chapter One

Follow a Compass, Not a Map

I had spent the night studying my map—
but uselessly, since I did not know my position.
—Antoine de Saint Exupéry, "Prisoner of the Sand," *Wind, Sand and Stars*

I met Tallis in October of 1976. I had hitchhiked from my home in Toledo to Montreal to board the M/S *Aleksandr Pushkin,* a Soviet passenger liner, for its last transatlantic crossing of the season. I was 20; he was 26. Our friendship was sealed on the third night at sea in the ship's cabaret. We found ourselves screaming into a microphone our rendition of the Beatles' "I Saw Her Standing There." It was the only rock-and-roll number the Russian band could play, and a much-anticipated break from the dreary Slavic folk songs that made up its repertoire. But the band didn't know the lyrics, so Tallis and I became a nightly version of Lennon and McCartney—which quickly lost its appeal for the rest of the passengers.

When we arrived in Europe, we rented a dingy, unheated apartment in Paris with another young Canadian a few blocks from the Bastille. Soon the weather turned cold, wet, and gray,

much to Tallis's dismay, for he hated winter—February, to be exact. He absolutely loathed every one of those 28 days. He was the only person I'd ever met whose sworn enemy was a page on the calendar. His goal was to spend an entire February on a tropical beach and escape the sting of the Canadian winters he'd suffered on the shores of Lake Ontario.

Paris in November wasn't much of an improvement over Toronto in February, as far as Tallis was concerned. We were spending most of our time and money in cafés trying to keep warm.

"Would you prefer Cannes or Saint-Tropez? Or perhaps Nice or Monte Carlo?" Tallis chirped to me as I sipped my espresso. His good humor had returned since I agreed to spend the winter with him on the French Riviera. He spread a map of France on the small round café table.

"Where are the topless beaches?" I asked, pretending to be only mildly interested in his response.

I noticed the man at the next table smiling at us. He was in his 60s and well dressed, with a hat and cane. He leaned over with a slightly bemused look on his face.

"Pardon, Monsieur—I hope that I am not impolite, but I couldn't help hearing your conversation," he said with a soothing Parisian accent that sounded like Maurice Chevalier's. "The south of France has beautiful beaches with beautiful women, but in the winter you will see neither of these delights."

Tallis looked up from the map, his finger still firmly planted on the Mediterranean coast. "Why do you say that?" he asked.

"Because the Riviera is horrible in winter. The wind, it is

called *le mistral;* it blows down from the Alps. The south of France is frightfully cold—worse than Paris."

"Where could we find beaches that are warm all winter?" Tallis asked.

"What you are looking for is not on your map, I'm afraid," he said in an authoritative tone.

Tallis looked dumbfounded. I felt lost. We both sat in stunned silence. A sudden dread of spending winter in a grimy little apartment and smoky cafés crept over me. Tallis's aversion to the cold must have been contagious. I didn't want to be in Paris any more than he did.

"So what should we do?" I asked Tallis.

"The answer is very simple," the Frenchman interjected. "You must head south—keep heading south."

"Do you mean North Africa?" I asked.

"If you want to be sure of tropical weather, one must go to the tropics, non?"

"But that means we'd have to cross the Sahara Desert!" I blurted out.

"Air France can fly you to the Ivory Coast in a few short hours," he responded.

"We have very little money," said Tallis. "Even train tickets are too expensive."

"Then you must simply head south," he advised, "by whatever means you can afford."

On a map, the mountain peaks have names but individual sand dunes don't. If you named a sand dune, the map would be out of date before the ink was dry. Yet we often start crossing our deserts of life with maps and

itineraries. You probably started your marriage or your career with a map. But the sands have shifted, the map is outdated, and you may be lost. The realization that where we are going is not on our map is for many of us the beginning of our journey.

Is there a clearly marked road to follow across the desert of midlife? Can you know in advance how you'll get through raising teenagers and experiencing menopause at the same time? When the doctor says that the test results are not good or when your marriage is crashing against the rocks, is there an itinerary you can download from the Internet to guide you step-by-step over any of those shifting sands? Not having a map doesn't prevent us from traveling. It only means that we must follow our inner compass.

Whether we are crossing a desert of life or a desert of change, a compass heading should do three things:

1 Guide us when we're lost.
2 Take us deeper into our desert.
3 Keep us focused on the journey rather than the destination.

When my marriage ended, I had no plan for my life. "Now what?" was the question I kept asking myself. The one thing that really mattered to me was my kids, who were 10 and 13. I decided that I was going to have a better relationship with them than I had when we all lived together in the same house. That became my compass heading.

Then the kids moved with their mom from our home in the Selkirk Mountains of British Columbia to Vancouver Island—a nine-hour drive and two-hour ferry ride away. I

considered moving to be near them, but there was no guarantee that my ex-wife would stay there, as she was looking for work. I didn't know what to do. I was lost.

So I turned to my inner compass for guidance. That direction—having a better relationship with my son and daughter—helped me decide what to do. For the next 18 months I commuted to the coast to live with my kids for 10 days every month. I rented an efficiency hotel room, and for those 10 days I cooked and they did chores; I drove them to school and watched their soccer games.

When we'd check into a hotel, we would ask how far apart the beds were. If the front desk clerk couldn't guess that we intended to jump from one bed to the other in a variety of Olympic poses, then the complaints from the tourists and businessmen in adjoining rooms soon revealed our activities. We had so much fun that we were actually thrown out of one hotel. This is a very bonding experience between a parent and children who are 10 and 13! That week and a half in a hotel each month brought me closer to my kids and deeper into my desert of parenting.

The third function of a compass heading is to help us pay more attention to our journey. We often avoid the present because it's painful or boring, or we're thinking of our destination. But the right kind of direction makes the present meaningful. The right compass heading makes the sand dune beneath our feet more interesting than the horizon and more real than the mountaintop. Spending 10 days a month on the coast allowed me to experience the everydayness of parenting. All that mattered was that we were together every day; I was a dad and we were a family.

It is more meaningful to follow a compass than a map.

But it can take hard work to find the right direction. Our compass heading is like a personal mission statement about something that really matters. It should describe a way of being or way of living rather than a goal or destination. The direction we follow across a desert of life should be one that has deep meaning and clarity.

When you're mountain-focused, what matters most is the last day or last hour of the climb—reaching the summit. If we live a life obsessed with goals, all that matters is the arrival. An inner compass heading keeps us in touch with what really matters every day of our journey.

Raising a rebellious teenager might cause us to focus on a destination such as when she finally moves out or stops driving everyone crazy. But concentrating on the destination could make us lose what really matters more than anything else. We could miss the chance for a lifelong connected relationship with our child by having tuned out of the daily journey because it was so annoying or painful.

A direction can be as simple as "Have fun." When you were a child, that compass heading probably guided most of your waking hours. It was not consciously chosen but seemed to emerge as the right and natural direction to follow. Could this be a direction you need to follow right now?

Directions often have the word *be* or *have* in them: "be true to myself"; "be patient"; "be in the moment"; "have quality time with my loved ones"; "have a positive attitude"; "have faith in God." These are examples of simple but powerful directions that can guide us in the deserts of life and change.

But we might also follow unhealthy directions. We can "be a victim"; "have an ax to grind"; "have a chip on our

shoulder." If we look back, we can probably see with the benefit of hindsight that we've followed the wrong direction at times as well.

Let Go of the Destination

There are three techniques that can help you clarify your inner compass. The first is to let go of the destination.

Tallis and I had a clear picture of sandy beaches on the French Riviera, the cobalt blue Mediterranean, cafés along the boardwalk, and Brigitte Bardot cavorting in the waves inviting us to join her. We had a destination and it was on our map. But all of a sudden there was a vacuum. No destination, no goal, no map, no route. In the absence of a specific destination we found our compass direction: head south.

Goals can be a cheap substitute for a sense of direction. It's easier to set a goal, to choose a destination, than it is to find a deep and meaningful direction that will guide us across a desert of life or change. We've been misled into thinking that achieving goals will make us happy. Many Everest climbers spend only 5 or 10 minutes on the summit. They're too tired to savor the moment, and their lives are in danger if they linger. Already there's a new destination; return to high camp before the weather traps them in a deadly blizzard.

For a man in the desert of midlife, buying the perfect motorcycle or finding a girlfriend half his age might provide temporary relief from the feeling of loss or loneliness. But that renewed sense of vitality will pass and he'll just need another mountain to climb.

There are times in life when goals are important—even essential. If you've recently been diagnosed with cancer, you may be focused on winning that battle. Your doctor may have a plan of action. You have a goal, a destination, and a map to regain your health. By all means start climbing toward your objective. But if that summit eludes you and the issue becomes how to live with cancer, then an inner compass will guide you to bring deeper meaning to your life in the time that remains.

Goals can still have a place in our deserts of life. There are mountains in the desert. But they should be markers or indicators that we are following the right compass heading. We need to have a direction first. Start with finding that inner compass to guide you. To do so, you may need to let go of any goals or destinations until your direction becomes clear.

Tallis and I had no idea how to head south. We couldn't afford train tickets, and hitchhiking in France is pretty much impossible without a short skirt and long legs. At the university, we found an index card posted on a kiosk by two Frenchman: Jean-Luc, an engineer in his late 20s, and André, a semiretired dry cleaner in his 50s. They each had a vehicle and were looking for passengers to share costs on their trip to West Africa.

When I first met Jean-Luc, his olive skin, dark hair, and dark eyes convinced me that he was Spanish and maybe even North African. He had been born and raised in Algeria, but his family was French, *pied noir,* which translates as "black foot." This term was used to describe the French citizens who fled Algeria in the 1950s and '60s during the brutal war of independence.

Left to right: Jean-Luc, André, and Tallis in the Atlas Mountains.

Settling primarily in the south of France, they were immigrants in their own ancestral homeland. Many of their families had been in Algeria for a hundred years.

Jean-Luc's love for Algeria and the desert was genuine and as contagious as Tallis's aversion to winter. As he spoke of the stillness of the Sahara and its vast sand seas, I recalled romantic images of *Lawrence of Arabia.* Jean-Luc described the eerie lunar topography of the Hoggar Mountains in the central Sahara and the enigmatic Tuareg nomads, who still lived there. He told me that there were 15,000 perfectly preserved rock paintings on a desert plateau that dated back 8,000 years, depicting a time when the Sahara was a verdant savannah.

The Sahara was no longer a wasteland to cross en route to our beach. The desert itself began to fascinate me more and

more. According to Jean-Luc, the farther south we went, the more mysterious and awe-inspiring the journey would become.

It's a good sign when the journey becomes more interesting than the destination. It's also a matter of survival in the Sahara. The hazards from off-road driving force you to look no more than 10 or 20 feet in front of your car. Hidden rocks can snap your axle, and dangerously soft sand can't be seen until you're right on top of it. But if you look down, you'll notice that the desert is changing—the color of the sand, its texture, its firmness.

Mountain climbers spend a lot of their time looking up. Being destination-focused means that we gaze upward or far ahead because the summit, the goal, or our beach is what matters the most. Squinting constantly toward the shimmering desert horizon means that you'll miss the Sahara. Focusing too much on the summit means that you'll miss the mountain. And there is also much to miss in the deserts of life: the journey itself.

As I write, my friend Alonzo's dad is dying of cancer. It struck suddenly, and its progress has been swift. Each Friday evening as their family celebrates another Sabbath dinner, everyone knows how lucky they are to be together. A terminal illness is a harsh but effective teacher of how to live in the moment. It lowers our gaze to the sand beneath our feet. But we don't have to wait until someone we love is dying to learn how to be present with what is happening right now.

Lower Your Gaze

The second technique for finding our inner compass is to lower our gaze. Once we let go of our destination, we bring our attention to the part of the journey that is right in front of us. A compass heading can help us focus on our journey. And focusing on the journey helps us find our compass.

For example, if you're dealing with serious financial hardship, you might have a goal to become debt free. But it could take years to reach that mountaintop, and you could miss a lot of the journey on the way. If you let go of your destination, you might find yourself trying to live each day within your means, spending no more than you earn. That could, in fact, become your compass heading.

Or lowering your gaze to the everydayness of living within your means could reveal a new and deeper compass heading, such as savoring the nonmonetary richness of life. What would it be like if you followed that compass heading? Savoring the nonmonetary richness of life could guide you to nurture your most important relationships, notice the beauty in the world around you, or express the wealth of your own creativity. Although you might still be in debt, with this compass heading you could live a richer life than most millionaires have.

It's not wrong to have goals. The problem is when the entire focus is on the mountaintop. Getting out of debt is pretty important if you're in serious financial hardship. But taking the focus away from the end result allows something new to emerge. If we're not careful, though, all that emerges is a different goal or another plan. So we should

direct our attention toward what is right in front of us, as if that were all that mattered. This is a powerful shift in how most of us live, and it can reveal a meaningful compass heading to guide us.

We can practice lowering our gaze even if we are not in a desert of change or searching for our compass heading. What if we lived every day completely attentive to the present moment? What if whatever you were doing—whether ironing shirts, commuting to work, playing catch with your daughter, or cleaning the lint out of the dryer—was all that mattered? You could still have a to-do list, but instead of focusing on getting the next thing done, you would keep your attention on the task at hand. The fullness of the moment would not be lost in the rush for the future. This attention to the present is a desert mind-set and makes our journeys richer. Perhaps this is why the Tuareg language, Tamashek, has no word for tomorrow.

After separating from France, Algeria changed many road signs from French to Arabic as a statement of its independence. So we were lost in the foothills of the Atlas Mountains. Jean-Luc, who professed to know that area like the back of his hand, was poring over a map that was spread on the hood of his car. André peered over his shoulder.

Tallis and I walked along the side of the road. He was enjoying his first cigarette of the morning. André didn't allow smoking in his little Citroën truck. Jean-Luc was also a non-smoker, which was just fine with me since I was spending 10 hours a day with him in his blue four-door Peugeot sedan. We had found what seemed to be the only two Frenchmen who

didn't chain-smoke the sweet black tobacco so popular in France.

Unlike us, they had precise destinations. Jean-Luc was on his way to Nigeria, hoping to work in the oil fields and sock away vast sums of tax-free income. André had taken leave of his dry-cleaning business in Normandy to realize a dream. It had been a goal of his for many years to visit the metaphorical end of the earth, Timbuktu. I was surprised to learn that the place actually existed. Once a thriving cultural, commercial, and Islamic center, it was now a dusty outpost on the southern edge of the Sahara Desert.

I sauntered up behind them as Jean-Luc and André studied their map. Jean-Luc explained that there was only one road they were interested in, the N-1 highway. It was the quickest, most direct route into Algeria's vast Sahara. Forgetting that we were only paying passengers and that the Frenchmen would plot the route, I suggested that we simply keep heading south. Jean-Luc said that would be a waste of time; they didn't want to wander all over northern Algeria.

In a world that values efficiency, wandering has a pretty bad name. But that's only because we apply mountain values to the deserts of change. When I climb the spectacular glacier-capped mountains of British Columbia, I'm looking for the safest, most direct route to the top. I prefer day climbing, so there's only so much time to get up and down before dark. The last thing I want to do on a mountain is start wandering.

In a desert, wandering is efficient if it leads you to a truer sense of direction. In the long run, you'll make better

progress if you know what compass heading to follow. In Australian aboriginal cultures, a *walkabout* is a coming-of-age ritual in which a young man wanders alone through the desert to learn more about his own character and strength—a good way of finding what his compass heading in life will be.

Sometimes we have to wander around, get lost, and chase a mirage so that we can home in on our proper direction. As with real compasses, which need to be corrected for deviations in the earth's magnetic field, we have to allow for our inner compass's not always pointing true. We also have to allow for our own inability to read our internal compass. After following directions that parents, bosses, spouses, and society have laid out for us, we may struggle at first to hear the faint whisper of direction from within. Also, if the compass direction we need to follow is unpleasant or painful, we can find lots of reasons to head in the other direction entirely. It takes time to find our bearings.

A natural result of letting go of a destination is the feeling of being lost. Our low tolerance for ambiguity may push us to find a new destination to replace the old one. But we have to resist the urge to impose structure, plans, and goals on our deserts. We might be rewarded with a sense of direction if we can stand the uncertainty. Learning how to wander on purpose is a good way to manage the discomfort of uncertainty.

Wander on Purpose

There are three mistakes people make when they wander. One mistake is to focus on the destination. We search for

the perfect job, our soul mate, an instant cure for the emotional pain of childhood, an easy solution for an addiction. Wandering on purpose means that we're looking for direction to guide us, a path to walk—not a magic potion that solves our problems instantly.

Other times we wander around the edges of a desert of change. It's a way of avoiding the journey. We pretend that we're trying to find our direction, but we're really just avoiding the desert. An example might be the professional student who keeps pursuing new degrees or fields of study because he's avoiding the desert of life called "having a career."

The third mistake is to wander unconsciously. This is when we go on autopilot. We stop paying attention to where we are headed and drift off course. We start a job or a relationship with a clear compass heading, but then we lose touch with our direction. We wake up years later to realize that we aren't following our compass or that the direction no longer matters.

In my early 30s I decided to become a stand-up comic. The road to success was pretty well mapped out. You began as an amateur at open-mike nights. After developing seven minutes of solid material, you could find work as an opening act. Eventually you'd be a headliner, once you had 30 to 45 minutes of top-notch comedy; then you'd go to New York, Vegas, and eventually your own sitcom in Hollywood. The road and destination seemed pretty straightforward to me.

My most successful stand-up performance was also my last. I'd been allotted seven minutes at an open-mike night in a comedy club in Toronto, where I lived at the time. I

delivered my jokes and no one laughed. Nothing. Not a chuckle. Then I had an idea. I repeated my routine almost verbatim to that very same audience, this time inserting the F-word before each punch line. The audience howled with laughter. In the same seven minutes I'd found out how I could succeed as a comic while discovering it wasn't my new career.

When I let go of the destination, my mountain became a desert. Stand-up comedy was a mirage, not a summit. Instead of climbing the mountain called "becoming a comedian," I started crossing the desert called "changing careers." I didn't know what my next career would be. But I hoped that some direction would emerge.

I lowered my gaze and focused on my current job as a corporate fitness and wellness consultant. Most of my time was spent working with individual employees to develop a fitness and lifestyle regimen. But occasionally I would deliver a sales presentation to a potential corporate client. After one such presentation, I received a standing ovation from the committee I'd spoken to. Amazingly, I didn't get the contract, but I did get a clue to my direction. My compass was pointing toward speaking in public.

Next, I responded to an ad to teach classes for people who wanted to stop smoking. The only two requirements were a desire to speak in public, which I had, and being an ex-smoker, which I wasn't. So I lied. I fooled my employers because they were desperate for seminar leaders. I didn't fool my students. Nicotine withdrawal does two things—it puts you in a bad mood and it gives you X-ray vision. Those smokers saw right through me. They could tell I'd never touched a cigarette in my life. So I quit the job.

But I was wandering on purpose, and my compass heading was becoming clearer. I'd learned even more about my direction by following a second mirage. Not only did I want to speak in public, but I also wanted to speak to audiences that weren't drunk or irritable from nicotine withdrawal. Most important, I wanted to be myself rather than impersonate someone else.

Try following a compass heading for a day or a week. Name a desert you're in, even if it's just the grand desert of life, and choose a direction, a way of being, a way of living. Wander along that path for a while. Keep asking the question, "Is this taking me deeper into my desert?" Ultimately, that is the only way to cross a desert—to go deeper into it. Your compass should help you focus on the journey while heading in a consistent direction that has meaning for you.

There is a verb tense called the *present progressive*. This is a good way to think of our compass. It keeps us in the moment while we journey deeper into our lives. With the right sense of direction, we can make this kind of progress even when we're lost and our maps no longer work.

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