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Relative Values: Felicity Aston and her brother Spencer

The leader of the first Commonwealth women's team expedition to Antarctica and her brother discuss their relationship

(Dirk Lindner/Sunday Times)

Spencer and Felicity Aston

Interviews by Caroline Scott

Felicity: I'm just about to leave for Antarctica, and it takes me right back to my first trip there when I was 23. I remember sitting at the kitchen table when the British Antarctic Survey rang to say I'd got a job researching climate change.

I was really excited because it was my passion — I'd just finished a masters in meteorology — but it was a tough time for my family. My mum picked up the phone and I heard her saying "Oh God! Oh God!" over and over again because it meant I'd be away for three years.

Spencer was 12 when I left the UK. He was a little boy whose head came up to my chest when I hugged him and the utterly adored baby of the family in every sense. For seven months of the year in Antarctica I didn't even get post, and then when it came, there'd be pictures of my baby brother with spots and long hair, playing the drums. And when I got back three years later he was a 6ft-tall teenager with a deep voice. The change was so dramatic that it was almost like meeting a stranger and it took us both a little while to find our way.

I find it very hard now to look back at pictures of that first Christmas together after Antarctica, because three months later Spencer had his car crash and we lost him. The Spencer we have now is just as kind and lovely, but he's different. At the time we were so grateful he'd survived, there was no time to grieve for the person who'd been lost. Spencer had been in a car with some older boys from school; the driver lost control on a corner and collided with another car.

No one was drunk, they all had their seat belts on, but the result was that the front passenger died and Spencer and his friend suffered serious brain injuries. I remember Mum and I walking into A&E in the middle of the night and seeing blood everywhere, then being shown

Spencer, who didn't have a scratch on him, yet he'd scored three on the Glasgow Coma Scale — as low as you get before you're pronounced dead.

The urge to shake him and say "Wake up!" was overwhelming. We were told there was no brain activity at all. Everyone was preparing us to switch the machines off, but then, after about 24 hours, one of the nurses noticed a slight reaction in one of his pupils and suddenly it was "He may not recognise you when he comes round". And we were saying: "You mean he's coming round?"

But that initial burst of optimism didn't last long. His brain scan was filled with black areas which were haemorrhages — he'd completely destroyed his thalamus. I didn't leave the hospital at all for the first week. Mum didn't come home for about a month. We willed him to breathe unaided, to swallow, to lift a finger.

He was given a board with a button to press for Yes or No, and he was so frustrated he kept banging this board: "No! No! No!" All of us thought: "Why Spencer?" He was the apple of everybody's eye, the focus of so much love. It was more than "Why couldn't it be me?" It felt so unfair. I'd done stupid things and taken all kinds of risks, but he'd never done anything wrong.

Considering the initial prognosis was that Spencer would remain in a vegetative state for the rest of his life, everyone's been amazed at his progress. He still has his sense of humour, but his sense of what is or isn't appropriate has gone. If you imagine every one of your thoughts or feelings being visible on your face, or suddenly blurted out, that's Spencer.

Because he's a young man, and he's very large and direct, people think he's drunk, and they find him intimidating. We've had a stream of eminent specialists here and Spencer will decide within five minutes if he's going to co-operate or not. If they are patronising he won't give them the time of day. I make clear to him where the lines are. If he's being rude to me I'll tell him. Sometimes he'll understand and apologise; sometimes he won't. Because he has a brain injury people tend to be too nicey-nicey with him and that doesn't do him any good.

He has a strong sense of what has happened to him — and of what he's lost. He says: "I'm worried what the Spencer before would think of the Spencer I am now." Spencer has had to sort out in his own head: "Why did I survive? And am I glad I survived?" He does have very down periods when I think he wonders. On the one hand, he's highly intelligent and independent-minded — since his accident he's studied for an A-level in photography and got an A — yet he needs 24-hour care.

One of the expeditions I'm most proud of is taking Spencer and a group of other brain-injured teenagers to Iceland. He wanted to go trekking through lava fields and swim in geothermal pools, but I had to work out how on earth we were going to get across a slippery glacier with someone who has severe balance and mobility problems and walks with a stick.

I was really proud that I didn't let his needs diminish the adventure aspect of it all. We wild-camped in the middle of nowhere as usual, but instead of squatting behind rocks to go to the loo, we carried round a commode chair with the wheels chopped off. That trip was a very precious experience for me, because I think we recaptured something of what those young people had lost.

People often ask me if I feel guilty I lead such an exciting life. I don't. I believe not to use my mind and body as fully as possible would be an insult to my brother and all the people like him who have had so much taken away.

Spencer: Felicity and me and our sister, Alexandra, played in the woods behind our house and roamed free when we were younger; we had the best childhood possible. When Felicity went away, it was a major point in all our lives.

I think it helped me to grow up, because it made me realise that nothing stays the same. I have post-traumatic amnesia, so memories from six months before my accident are hazy. But I've retained my long-term memory. I remember being in hospital, not being able to move or speak, and seeing my sister and her boyfriend at the bottom of my bed.

She had a portable DVD player, lots of DVDs, chocolates and sweets. Felicity had brought "home" to me — it was a heart-warming moment. She was always good at finding just the thing to make you feel better. As a family we're all pretty optimistic; whatever we're told, we'll find something positive in it. That's part of the reason I've gone on improving.

But there does come a point where I have to let go of the boy who used to be on the rugby pitch every weekend, or playing the drums. I look the same, but I act completely differently. There were times when I couldn't speak and I couldn't move a single muscle, that I thought:

"What's the point in being alive?" All of that is still in my mind, yet at no point has my family let me feel a lesser human being because of what's happened to me.

All of my family think outside the box, and that's such a brilliant skill. Felicity will say: "Okay, so you can't do this, but how about looking at that now." She helps me focus on what I can do, rather than what I can't. When I couldn't speak, they bought me a laptop, and Felicity suggested I start keeping a journal, to get down how I felt and what my worries were. It took me hours and hours, but already I had something to aim for. My mum documented every stage of my recovery in pictures — from the hopelessness and desperation in my eyes at the beginning to now. Looking back,

I can see how far I've come — and I never want to be back there again. My family helped me see everything as a challenge. When the doctors said, "He'll never walk again," I thought: "Don't tell me what I can't do. I'll walk back in here with my head held high." And I did.

Before my accident I was at the Judd School in Tonbridge, one of the best grammar schools in the country, and I had good predicted GCSE grades. I've had to find a different path and Felicity has been highly instrumental in that. When I woke up in hospital, knowing I'd be unable to follow the academic career I'd planned, Felicity just said: "Well, Spencer, how refreshing is that? Now you're off the treadmill."

She encouraged me to think about what I wanted to do, how I really wanted to live my life. I've tried to focus on what makes me happy, and for me that means photography. But how many other people would have looked at my situation like that? I've really thrived on Felicity's out-of-the-box attitude, especially as I can see she applies it to her own life.

Felicity also went to a very academically driven, career-focused grammar school, then did a degree in physics and astronomy, followed by a masters in meteorology. She could have done

anything, yet she chose to follow her dream to be an adventurer. It proved to me that being successful in one area doesn't mean you can't change direction and be successful in another.

Felicity is very logical, very determined. One Christmas she bought me a web address, then found she didn't have a clue how to work out HTML codes, so she spent six months teaching herself. She's got an unbelievable mind and she's always trying to better herself, to do something that hasn't been done before.

Every single night before I go to sleep, I spend a few minutes thinking: "Was that a good day? What will I do tomorrow?" I try to think of small, manageable goals. And then it's down to my critical eye as to whether I've hit those targets. It's difficult, because the way my life is now, I can't be too hard on myself when I don't make it.

I hate it when people are patronising towards me, and Felicity is the reverse of patronising. If I've taken a rubbish picture, she'll tell me. And if I'm out of order with her — bloody hell, she'll let me know, big time. She is prone to outbursts, normally over something I've done. Because of my injury, my behaviour is sometimes a little bit cutting-edge, and she's one of my biggest critics. I'm quite thick-skinned — I'd prefer that she tells me I'm being an idiot rather than let me carry on.

What's annoying is that anything you can think of, she's done it before. "I know how it's done. Do it this way, Spencer!" I mean, we get on well and that, but she's very much my 32-year-old sister.

Felicity is currently leading the first Commonwealth women's team to Antarctica, aiming to arrive there on New Year's Day; www.kasperskycommonwealthexpedition.com