



# BRINGING PROGRESS to PARADISE

What I Got from Giving to a Mountain Village in Nepal

Jeff Rasley





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Conari Press

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First published in 2010 by  
Red Wheel/Weiser, LLC  
With offices at:  
500 Third Street, Suite 230  
San Francisco, CA 94107  
[www.redwheelweiser.com](http://www.redwheelweiser.com)

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Some names are changed to protect privacy.

Additional photographs of Basa village and other Himalayan expeditions may be viewed at the author's website: [www.jeffreyrasley.com](http://www.jeffreyrasley.com).

ISBN: 978-1-57324-482-4

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data available upon request.

Cover design: Stewart Williams

Text design: Donna Linden

Typeset in Goudy Oldstyle and Perpetua

Cover photograph © Richard Kischuk

Printed in Canada

TCP

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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*Dedicated to Alicia who is my home; and to my friends and sirdars Niru Rai, Ganesh Rai, and Sanga Rai; and to the three lost on Zatwra La; and to Basa village.*

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# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Ang Nima Sherpa, my first sirdar; John Roskelley and Tom Proctor, who taught me mountaineering; K P Kafle, Hari Pudasaini, and Seth Chetri, who helped open my eyes to the beauty of Nepal; Uttam Phuyal, my friend and Katmandu caretaker; Sheila Candler, my loyal assistant; Dave Wood, my former partner and clothier; all my trekking and mountaineering companions from 1995 through 2009; the donors to the Basa School Project for their generosity; J J and Kate for their technical assistance; Caroline Pincus, my sensitive editor; my sons James and Andrew; and my parents, who gave me life and love.

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## *Epilogue*



*Ama Dablam mountain from Khumjung village in the Khumbu*

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# Prologue

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We were five ghostly figures in swirling snow, standing atop the 15,000-foot Zatwra La. Early morning rays of sun crept over and down the flank of the great white peak behind us. Wind blowing from the north made it hard to hear the others. Heather shouted over the hushing wind, “We’ve got to spread out!” But Tom insisted we should stay close together. All our rope was with our porters, who were slogging up the pass an hour or so behind us. Suddenly, Heather yelped and took off running. Tom cursed. Seth bellowed, “Go, run!” And then I heard the low distant roar that mountain climbers dread.

We took off down the pass with Heather in the lead. Judy cried out and fell down. Tom and Seth grabbed her arms, pulling her up, yelling at her, “Run! Run!”

I saw them out of the corner of my eye as I pounded mechanically down the rocky, snow-covered slope, stumbling into and over boulders hidden by snow. My consciousness was a gray crackling static. I knew my ability to think and respond was impaired by altitude sickness. All I felt was an instinctive drive to keep running, to get off this mountain, to survive.

The roar of the avalanche above and behind us was replaced by an eerie whirring sound. Spindrift came over us, stark white and opaque. I could barely see my gloves and boots. But the avalanche had petered out. We fell to our knees gasping. We looked up into a vast whiteness.



The avalanche struck when our team was hiking out from base camp after a failed attempt to climb 21,224-foot Mera Peak in the fall of 1999 in the Solu-Khumbu region of Nepal. Fifteen climbing teams spent most of the first week of October stuck in base camp or high camp. With unrelenting snow and terrible visibility, conditions were too tough to make a summit attempt. During my team’s eleven-day trek to the Mera base camp at 16,000 feet, we were rained on every day until we got above 14,000 feet. From then on, it snowed every day.

The trek was surrealistic, over high mountain passes, across rushing glacier-fed streams. We slipped and slid through a muddy bamboo forest and past the remains of a village destroyed the year before by an avalanche. Everything—our gear, boots, clothes—was soaking wet by the time we got above the rain, camping then in snow and ice. Our progress was slowed after that by having to slog through deep snow. After four days enduring heavy snows and blizzard conditions in base camp and high camp, our team gave up. I spent the last day on the mountain in a tent by myself, retching and wretched with altitude sickness and a sinus infection.

Snow continued to fall as our defeated and bedraggled team finally hiked out of base camp. At sunrise on the second day of the hike out, our tents sagged under five inches of new snow that had fallen during the night. Snow continued falling as we ate breakfast, packed gear, and then trudged 2,000 feet up the backside of the 15,000-foot pass called Zatrwa La. This was the last high pass to cross to escape the menace of avalanche from the great white-capped Himalayan peaks and to reach Lukla village, where a Twin Otter airplane was scheduled to fly us back to Katmandu. By the time we postholed up to the crest of the pass, fresh snow was over two feet deep. The conditions were perfect for an avalanche: fresh, deep, and unstable snow.

Barely visible through the falling snow on a ridge above and behind us were splotches of red and yellow—the down parkas of three Nepalese porters from another climbing expedition that was



following us out of the mountains. The three Nepalese guys were inching their way across the ridge slowed by the blowing snow and the heavy loads they were carrying.

When the avalanche struck, my team was on the crest of the Zatwra La trying to decide how to descend the steep 4,000-foot slope. The avalanche came down off a mountain shoulder well above and behind us, but right above the three Nepalese porters. They vanished in the gigantic wave of the avalanche. It wasn't until we were safely back in Lukla village that we learned the porters had been killed, along with four others who died in a series of avalanches across the Nepal-Tibetan Himalayas that same week of October 1999.

Of those seven deaths, only one garnered international headlines, that of the famous mountaineer Alex Lowe on Shishapangma in Tibet. If the deaths of six Nepalese porters in the avalanches were noted at all, it was as a footnote to the loss of a great Western mountaineer.

The three porters I saw enveloped in the death grip of the avalanche were known to me only as workers for another climbing expedition of Western adventurers. They lost their lives carrying heavy loads while taking a higher, harder shortcut out of base camp to get their employers' gear to Lukla before the climbers arrived.



The arc of this story begins with three being enveloped in an avalanche of death and ends in three being enveloped in an avalanche of love in a village called Basa. After that avalanche in 1999 I did not expect to return to Nepal. But Nepal had a hold on me and would not let go. Why did I feel such a strong pull to return even after the awfulness of the failed expedition to Mera Peak? It took almost ten years for me to fully answer the question.

I first went to the Himalayas out of curiosity and returned several times as an adventurer. However, since 2003, I have returned almost every year to try and give back to a country that has given much to me. My purpose has not been to alleviate poverty. Poverty is a relative term, and lack of material wealth by American standards is not in itself a misfortune. What I have tried to do since 2003 is to respond to specific requests for assistance from Nepalese friends who work in remote mountain villages by helping to create mutually beneficial relationships with friends in the West.

Our modern consumer culture has turned human beings into tools of commerce. Adam Smith and Karl Marx both agreed that modern human identity is determined by the value of one's labor. We are what we do. ("Hi, my name is Jeff. I'm a lawyer. What do you do?") But our work separates us from nature and our essential nature as humans. Nature is to be exploited for consumption by the market to be used up. We tear up the earth digging for coal and pollute the land and water drilling for oil. People are objectified as "the market." Human beings have become a sort of malleable matter, the purpose of which is to consume and produce.

But people who live close to the earth in tune with nature's rhythms are in cooperation with the land and its bounty. The earth and its resources are not to be used up but to be continuously recycled. Yak dung becomes fuel. A yak becomes clothing and food, but not before another is born to take its place. The land is tilled according to the eternal cycle of the seasons. Neighbors are not separated by security systems but are "our people." We are a clan, a tribe; we are Sherpa or Rai.

A village called Basa in the land of the Rai gave me the answer to my question of 1999 about why I should keep coming back to Nepal. The Rai believe that everything, whether animate or inanimate, has spirit and deserves respect. We modern Westerners long for a more soulful way of life. That is why stories such as that told in James Cameron's film *Avatar* are so compelling. We identify with the poor "primitives" instead of the rich "civilized." We long to live closer to nature and to be more

essentially human in our relations. People who have lived the same way for centuries, without wheels, electricity, or plumbing, welcomed two friends and me into the village of Basa. They welcomed us with an avalanche of love.

But now the question has become: What can we give to Basa that it really needs, and can we give to Basa without destroying it by allowing it to become too much like us?

## PTSD



I turned forty in 1993 and began manifesting symptoms of a midlife crisis. I whined about the responsibilities of marriage, two kids, a law business, and a mortgage. All the responsibilities and obligations were sucking the life out of me. Buying a Harley didn't cure it.

One evening my wife slapped a brochure down on the coffee table in front of me and said in a steely tone, "Why don't you do this? Go climb a mountain." The brochure advertised a Himalayan trekking expedition. I'd lived at sea level in Indiana most of my life and had no trekking or climbing experience. But I had done a lot of rugged outdoor activities, so I was intrigued. Alicia may later have regretted her "go take a hike" therapy, because I fell in love—with the mountains.

My friend and chiropractor, Long John, and I went trekking along the Everest Base Camp trail in Sagarmatha Park, Nepal, in the spring of 1995 in a five-member group through an American expedition company called Snow Lion. The group had an American guide but was really led by a sirdar (chief trekking guide) named Ang Nima Sherpa, and it was staffed by Nepalese mountain dwellers. I had never met anyone as strong, kind, and admirable as Nima, and the spectacular beauty of the Himalayas turned me on like no other place in the more than thirty countries I had visited in my travels.



Adventure travel was part of my life before travel companies packaged it in brochures. As a teenager I hitchhiked across the United States and traveled around Europe on buses and trains. In my twenties and thirties, I motorcycled around Mexico, scuba dived throughout the Caribbean, went horseback riding and four-wheeling in Belize, and kayaked around islands in the South Pacific and the Ionian Sea. From each of these experiences, I was enriched through encounters with different lands, cultures, and people. But my encounter with the Himalayan mountains and Nepalese-Tibetan culture on that introductory trek in 1995 touched me so deeply I could hardly wait to return.

During the next two summers, I took introductory and intermediate climbing courses at Seneca Rock, West Virginia. I joined my first mountaineering expedition to Ladakh, India, in 1996, led by the renowned American climber and writer John Roskelley. I went back to Nepal on increasingly challenging expeditions in 1998 and 1999. I didn't climb 8,000-meter (25,000 foot) peaks or attempt extreme climbs requiring oxygen tanks and hanging off sheer walls in bivy bags. As a father, husband, and attorney with staff and family to support, I knew becoming a climber bum wasn't in the cards; and I'm far too cheap to spend \$65,000 and six weeks to attempt Mount Everest. Trekking for a couple of weeks and climbing 20,000-foot peaks was sufficiently challenging and wonderful for me.

For a middle-aged Hoosier flatlander, Himalayan mountaineering and trekking is difficult in terms of the conditioning required and the physical and emotional stress of a long trek followed by twelve to twenty-four hours of climbing. It's grueling, and when weather conditions are bad, it's dangerous. But I loved it. The Himalayas pulled me back each year. That is, until the disastrous expedition to Mera. The experience of advanced acute mountain sickness, barely escaping an avalanche, and seeing three porters disappear broke the mountains' grip on me.

## Off the Mountaintop

Six months after my return from the Mera Peak expedition, I was driving home from my office in downtown Indianapolis. Without warning, tears started streaming down my face, and I had to pull over to the side of the street. I sat in the car and cried. I could no longer hold in the feelings of guilt and shame. The picture of the three porters just before they were enveloped in the tsunami of white snow was seared in my mind. I had done nothing to try to help. I could do nothing to help. But the memory wouldn't release me.

The author of Ecclesiastes (1.14–15) wrote, “All is futile and a striving after wind. What is crooked cannot be made straight.” I found myself overwhelmed with existential despair, feeling the unfairness of life and the futility of trying to do anything about it. It was unfair and awful that the lives of those three hardworking men could be snuffed out in an instant. I had no more thirst for adventures in the Himalayas; my throat was dry.

I had participated in four Himalayan expeditions in five years. But after the avalanche, I did not return to Nepal for four years. It was no longer safe to visit anyway. SARS had broken out in Asia and Nepal was undergoing a violent Maoist revolution against the king. The army was shooting demonstrators in the streets of Katmandu, and Maoists were blowing up buildings and bombing buses. In a shocking incident in June 2001, Crown Prince Dipendra shot and killed his parents and siblings as they sat down to dinner, and then shot himself. Political instability followed, because many Nepalese distrusted the new king, Gyanendra, brother to the murdered Birendra. Some even suspected that Gyanendra was involved in the murders. Nepal was put on the U.S. State Department travel warning list. Then came 9/11.

The allure of Nepal as a magical kingdom for Western adventurers was lost. In 1999, more than 500,000 tourists visited Nepal. By 2002, less than half that number entered the kingdom.

Religious people equate a “mountaintop experience” with a spiritual awakening or a transcendent connection with God. Why equate being on top of a mountain with experiencing God? Because feeling the awesomeness of the natural world on top of a mountain is such a glorious feeling that the limitations of language force us to call it “God.” Every day of a mountaineering expedition or high altitude trek, that feeling is available.

John Muir described “the ecstasy of the surrender to nature.” He meant that by opening oneself to natural beauty, the soul is magnified to a point of transcendence beyond the ordinary consciousness of task-oriented living. During each of my Himalayan expeditions, I surrendered to the ecstasy of nature. I learned and lived what John Muir described.

But after the disaster of the 1999 Mera Peak expedition and what followed, I'd had enough. The dark side of nature then got a hold of me. I was sick of being tired, cold, and sick. To hell with the Himalayas. I was done with mountains. So I went kayaking and diving in sunny Palau, a remote archipelago near Micronesia.

## JUBILEE



May 29, 2003 was the Golden Jubilee of the first recorded summit of Mount Everest by Tenzin Norgay and Sir Edmund Hillary on that date in 1953. That first summit of Everest, the highest mountain on planet Earth, turned the world's attention to the Kingdom of Nepal.

Nepal's economy badly needed tourists to return. The Maoists and the government, at war with each other, declared a truce for the Jubilee. Sir Edmund Hillary's family put its considerable resources to work at bringing tourists back to Nepal for the Jubilee celebrations. Sir Edmund would cohost with the King of Nepal a black-tie affair in Katmandu. Hillary's son, Peter, would cohost with the Rinpoche Tenzing, the Incarnate Lama of Tengboche Monastery, the "highest party in the world" on the monastery grounds at 12,700 feet. Mountaineers around the world were invited to return for the celebrations.

I was born in 1953, just a month before the first summit of Mount Everest. It had been almost ten years since my first trek along the Base Camp Trail. As the Jubilee approached, the magnetism of Nepal pulled me back.

The last three weeks of May 2003, I trekked with my friend and translator Hari Pudasaini through Sagarmatha National Park in the Khumbu region of Nepal along the Everest Base Camp Trail up to the base camp at 18,000 feet. Along the trail, I interviewed many Sherpas and mountaineers to do research for an article about the celebrations and the effect of tourism on Sherpa culture. Members of the Hillary family were making a pilgrimage along the Base Camp Trail, which became the most famous hiking trail in the world after Hillary and Norgay hiked it on their way to Mount Everest in 1953. The Hillary clan stopped at the Hillary School in Khumjung, the first of several schools built by Hillary's foundation, the Himalayan Trust, and inspected Kunde Hospital, the first medical clinic established by the trust.

After Sir Edmund Hillary became rich and world-famous, he devoted much of the rest of his life to philanthropy for the Sherpa people. He greatly admired the unique character of strength and Buddhist gentleness he found in the high mountain people of Nepal. The assistance of Sherpas employed by his climbing team led to him becoming one of the most famous people of the 20th century, and he gratefully returned many times to the Khumbu, home to the Sherpas. His philanthropic efforts brought schools, medical clinics, and eventually hydroelectric projects to the Sherpas. And the Sherpas loved him back. They called him "King of the Khumbu."

### **The Two Sides of Tourism**

I hiked to Phakding with Sir Edmund's older sister, June, who was then 86. During dinner, the intrepid octogenarian reminisced, "When Ed was young, he loved to personally work on laying bricks and stone to help build schools and medical clinics in Sherpa villages. He had so much fun!" But not all of the dinner talk was so sanguine about the last fifty years for the Sherpas of the Khumbu. In response to my question about how the Sherpas had been affected by tourism, a grandniece of Hillary exclaimed, "It's bad!" She argued that the renowned toughness of the Sherpas had been softened by material gain from tourism, and the Buddhist gentleness had been hardened by the pursuit of money.

At breakfast the next morning, Hillary Carlyle, June's daughter, confessed, "It's hard for us to judge whether the Western influence and tourism has been good for the Sherpas. My uncle has been such a significant part of all that." She told me she'd been to the Khumbu five or six times, "but it seems like I'm always here—it's the family business, you know."

The enthusiasm of the Hillary family for helping to better the lives of Sherpas was inspiring, but I was conflicted about the overall impact we Westerners have had on Sherpa culture. The Western influence can be seen in the villages along the trails that have become popular with trekkers and climbers in the Himalayas, especially the Everest Base Camp Trail. The lives of the villagers changed dramatically in the fifty years following Hillary's "conquering" of Chomolungma (the name of Mount Everest in the Tibetan language). Tourism in the Khumbu has affected Sherpa culture by turning many Sherpas from yak herders to lodge owners, or to guides, cooks, or porters working for expeditions. Tourism has brought trash and garbage into the majestic peaks and valleys of the Khumbu. Before the climbers and trekkers came, there was no metal, paper, or plastic in the Khumbu. Everything the Sherpas used was recyclable, because they had no man-made or manufactured products. Everything they made or used came from the yak, earth, or plants: clothes from yak hide and fuel from yak shit; shelter from stone and wood; and food grown in plots of rice, barley, corn, and potatoes. The mountaineers and trekkers brought packaged products and trash along the Base Camp Trail. The trail has become a potpourri of international litter—tobacco packs from India, beer bottles from Spain, blown-out boots from China, and ripped t-shirts from the United States.

Yet Mahendra Kathet, the headmaster at the Hillary school in Khumjung, told me in 2003, "Without tourism, we couldn't survive here." He has taught at the school since 1976. He flatly stated that no one in Khumjung thinks the changes brought about by tourism have been bad for the village. "Even the old people who maintain traditional dress think changes are good, because they have better food, like salt. Life is much easier." He related that before the Himalayan Trust built the school in 1961, people in Khumjung lived at a subsistence level. A guide employed by Peter Hillary's company, Ang Temba Sherpa, put it simply, "If you had the choice between walking two hours downhill and then back uphill carrying a bucket of water for the day, or having water piped to your house, which would you choose?"

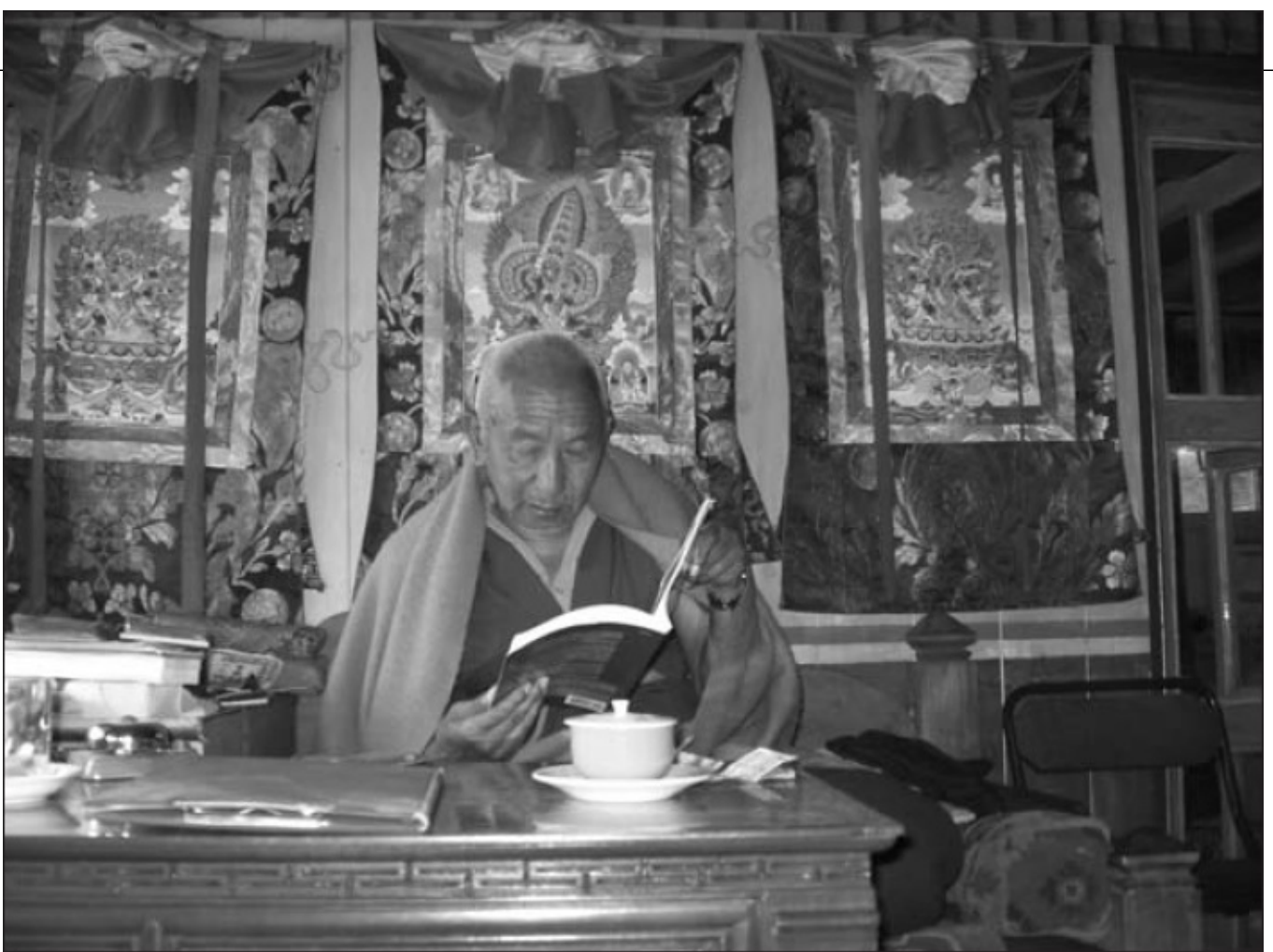
### **The Highest Party in the World**

Lama Tenzing is a small slight man with white hair. His skin is a soft mahogany. He wears a mango-colored cloak. He is revered by Sherpa Buddhists as a lama and the abbot of Tengboche Monastery. Lama Tenzing receives visitors every day and considers welcoming visitors one of his most important duties. He sits placidly on his divan looking at his guests with kindly interested eyes. His facial expression rarely changes. Decorating the wall behind him are brightly colored thangka paintings (sacred Buddhist paintings on cloth) draped with lengths of red silk.

A few days before the "highest party in the world" took place on the grounds of the monastery, Hari and I shared tea with Lama Tenzing. When I asked him what he thought of the effect of tourism on Sherpa culture, he responded through Hari's translation that he was "not happy and not upset about Western influence on Sherpas. People should do what they want."

As I walked across the grounds of the monastery back to the lodge where Hari and I were staying, the cumulus clouds to the north cleared and the Everest Massif emerged in its spectacular majesty. A single cirrus cloud trailed like a kite tail from the pinnacle of the highest peak on Earth. The sound of monks chanting in the monastery echoed across the valley. I was looking at perfection. The aesthetic bliss of the Himalayas and Buddhist chanting was working its magic on me.





*Lama Tenzing*



Pilgrims from all over the world endure the strenuous trek to Tengboche to be rewarded with this experience. Peace and harmony emanate from this beautiful human creation, developed by the ethics and aesthetics of Tibetan Buddhism and refined over a history of 2,500 years. Surrounded by the most magnificent natural scenery in the world, visitors apprehend the resident monks' harmonious discipline and are invited by the Incarnate Lama to participate in the peaceful character of the community.

But the night of the Jubilee party, the character of the monastery changed.

The official party commenced in a big blue tent erected on the monastery grounds at 4:00 p.m. There were many speeches, a fine dinner of yak steak and champagne, and black bowties for male attendees. Ladies wore long evening dresses over hiking boots. Peter Hillary, Sir Edmund's son, served as master of ceremonies. I know this not because I was inside the tent, but because I was outside looking in. About a hundred of us uninvited guests who had not paid \$400 for an official invitation stood outside the tent for over an hour trying to eyeball and listen to the festivities inside. Employees of Hillary's trekking company were stationed around the tent, and a particularly burly fellow stood at the entrance with a lethal-looking two-foot-long club in his hand. Sherpa hospitality was not the order of the day for the official celebration at Tengboche.

Eventually, most of us impecunious voyeurs drifted into the meal room in the nearby Gomp Lodge. Pints of Mount Everest Whisky, a quite nasty drink brewed in Lukla, appeared. The manager, who wore monkish garb, brought out a cassette player and blasted techno music at full volume from the little recorder. A few porters entertained the crowd with a Nepalese version of techno dancing. We clapped and hooted for the dancers and passed the pints around.

After an hour or two, someone burst in and shouted that the tent was open. Everyone dashed out of the lodge and into the big blue tent. Two porters began to thump out a beat on gourd drums as others chanted the erotic lyrics of a Nepalese folk song. The crowd began to clap and sway to the beat of the drums. The rhythmic beat, clapping, and singing got more frenetic. Women were hoisted onto men's shoulders as Nepalis of all ethnic groups and trekkers and climbers from all over the world shouted and clapped to the pounding beat. Loose-limbed Nepalis, longhaired trekker girls, scruffy sunburnt mountain climbers, and spiritual seeking trekkers got down and the dancing got wilder.

At 10:30 p.m., the lights in the tent were extinguished. But the spirit of revelry propelled the crowd into a snake dance out of the tent and across the monastery grounds to the porter dormitory. A huge bonfire was lit and flames and ashes shot up into the night sky. Dancing, drumming, and singing around the fire went on till after midnight. Then, fifty or so remaining revelers danced back across the grounds and behind the monastery to the edge of an overlook above a 500-foot drop. We danced and sang for another hour, shining our headlamps in a communal beacon up at the stars.

The joy of a Bacchanalia is the loss of individuation, the letting go of self, not the loss of consciousness, but the loss of self-consciousness. We had clapped and stomped our feet and swayed to the rhythm of the drums. People from different parts of the world, who had never met before, grabbed each other and danced. We were liberated, in the words of the Rinpoche, "to do what we wanted."

### **Magnetic Effect of Nepal**

The Jubilee experience had a magnetic effect on me. I felt the pull of Nepal again, but it was more than the mountains, the culture, and the need for adventure. My encounters with Sir Edmund Hillary's family and my interviews of Sherpas compelled me to think about what I could do for Nepal and the



to act. I did not want to stew in my ambivalence about the impact of Western consumerism on Himalayan villagers. I'm not rich or famous, like Sir Edmund, and I don't have the time or inclination to own and operate an expedition company, like Peter Hillary. But I do have friends, and so I thought I could help to make a positive connection between Nepal and friends from the West.

I decided I would organize expeditions and contract directly with Nepalese expedition companies. All of the economic benefit from the expedition would thus go to local people. One of the most expensive components of a Western guiding company's charges is the cost of the Western guide—his wages, his transport to and from Nepal, and his living expenses. By not paying an American or European guide, I would be able to introduce friends to Nepal at a lower cost, with all of the wages going to Nepalese staff. Organizing fundraising projects was also part of the plan, and I hoped that friends who would experience Nepal through the expeditions would want to support projects that benefit mountain villages.

I began implementing the plan in October 2004 with an expedition of three: my old buddy Elliot from University of Chicago Rugby Club days; Briggie, a South African woman Elliot and I met in Katmandu; and me. I raised and delivered \$1,000 for a village water project in Dolpo, a remote and poor area in western Nepal, and brought sixty-five pounds of school supplies to be distributed by a non-governmental agency run by my Nepalese friend, K. P. Kafle. In 2006, seven friends joined the expedition I organized to Gokyo, Lobuche, and Tengboche. In 2007, nine came with me, five from the Central Indiana Wilderness Club, and we handed out school supplies and gave stuffed animals to children along the trails we hiked in Helambu and Langtang. Several members of those groups made ongoing commitments to Nepalese charitable projects.

I had not lost my ambivalent view of the effect that exposure to Western ways has on Himalayan villagers. Although we may bring superior health care, electricity, and clean water, we also bring exposure to consumerism. There is an existential difference between villagers living in organic communities and Western postmoderns living in a consumer culture. Jacques Lacan and other postmodern philosophers make the point that anomie and alienation are increased by consumerism; I am what I consume, and nothing more. But many of us postmoderns find traditional culture interesting and compelling. People living in traditional communities are defined more by their relationships and what they produce and create, rather than by what they consume. This strikes a deep chord in those of us who feel the loss of the emotional honesty and interpersonal warmth of an organic community.

There is an attraction between Western and traditional cultures and peoples. Indigenous people desire what we have and we desire what makes them who they are. We have what will improve their lives in a material sense. But they have something we want: their sense of place, groundedness, and wholeness. Unfortunately, this relationship, even with the best of intentions, has too often resulted in the destruction and distortion of indigenous culture.

It is perfectly understandable that Ang Temba wanted the benefit of piped water to his family's house. But what was lost to the community by families no longer gathering at the nearest river to fill their water buckets? We know in the States that increasing affluence leads to greater isolation behind the walls of gated communities. The more you have, the more you wall yourself off from your neighbors to protect what you have. When folks gather at a river to fill buckets or go to a local market to purchase food, friendly relations are created and maintained. Once the acquisitive process starts, however, the attractive power of increasing one's material wealth and comfort overwhelms community values and local customs.

When people in an indigenous culture embrace a tourist economy in the hope of obtaining greater material wealth, the danger is that they then become so like us, they lose their attraction and the

tourists stop coming. The native people are then left with a damaged and distorted culture, and they don't even have the tourist dollar as compensation.

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To find a middle way was my goal. By organizing worthy philanthropic projects for Himalayan villages and introducing curious and sensitive friends from the West to the culture of Nepal, I hoped to develop a healthy exchange between cultures. But would it be possible to have a wholly positive effect on the local people our groups encountered, or was it inevitable that we would be agents of further infection spreading the cancer of consumerism?

In general, I am plagued by ambivalence and find it hard to make commitments. I prefer to keep my options open. Yet I have come to understand that the most meaningful relationships in life are created through commitment, marriage and parenting being the most meaningful. Commitment requires faith despite feelings of doubt and ambivalence. So I decided to make a commitment to the plan despite my continuing doubts about whether it would help to promote a healthy relationship between Western friends and Nepalese or just lead to further exploitation and the spread of consumerism.

My faith in the commitment would be tested in a most amazing way in the 2008 expedition.

But back to 2003 and the Khumbu Sherpas . . .

## RAPE OF THE MOTHER GODDESS



Sherpas call Mount Everest “Chomolungma,” Mother Goddess. They know through their folklore that their ancestors came from the other side of Chomolungma, from Tibet, to settle in northeastern Nepal. Ethnologists have confirmed the truth of the Sherpa legend that more than 500 years ago they migrated from Tibet into what is now Nepal's Solu-Khumbu District. (The northern half of the district bordering Tibet is the Khumbu; the southern region is Solu.)



*Mount Everest*

While they lived below the mighty flanks of the highest mountain in the world, they did not attempt to climb or conquer her. They worshipped the goddess that lived within her. But their relationship with Chomolungma changed in the 20th century, when the King of Nepal began to lead Western mountaineers into the Khumbu to try to climb the sacred mountain. Rather than resisting the assaults on her, the Sherpas welcomed the economic opportunities brought to them by the Mother Goddess.

Before Western explorers, adventurers, and climbers were allowed into the Khumbu, the Sherpa economy was based primarily on yak herding and potato farming. So long as nature was not too harsh, the Sherpa way of life continued as it had for centuries, in tune with the changes that dictated where the yaks needed to be herded and when the potatoes needed to be planted and harvested. When the Westerners came, Sherpas at first served merely as porters for the exploration and

mountaineering expeditions. The expeditionary style of mountaineering employed in the mid-20th century required an army of porters in a siege-like assault on the mountain. With their extraordinary strength for carrying heavy loads at high altitudes, Sherpas were naturals for the job. Their Western employers soon recognized other skills of the Sherpas, and they became cooks and guides as well. And when the West became serious about “conquering” Everest, a particularly talented Sherpa climber, Tenzing Norgay, was invited to participate as a member of the climbing team.

On May 29, 1953, Tenzing Norgay and Edmund Hillary became the first human beings known to stand upon the highest point on Earth. Within a generation of that first summit, Sherpa climbers became the dominant members of Everest climbing expeditions and hold most of the records for summits of Mount Everest. Some expeditions to Everest assign one Sherpa climbing guide to each paying client. Everest expeditions charge clients about \$65,000, so they can afford to pay the Sherpa guides extremely well by Nepalese standards. (Remember, the average income in Nepal is about \$1 per day.)

Serendipitously, when Hari and I hiked into base camp on May 26, 2003, to hang out with friends in the Nepal Mountain Madness expedition company, Lakhpa Gelu Sherpa, a member of the Mountain Madness team, had just returned to the camp after breaking the record for the fastest ascent/descent from base camp to summit and back. Lakhpa Gelu took “the standard route” pioneered by Hillary and Norgay, and reached the summit in ten hours and fifty-six minutes and then rapidly returned to base camp. His total round-trip time was eighteen hours and twenty minutes. I don't know what to compare this with in terms of amazing physical feats. Assuming no delays for bad weather or acclimatization problems, it takes most climbers at least seven to fourteen days to summit and return to Base Camp. Lakhpa Gelu completed in eighteen hours one of the most difficult feats performed by any human being, and one that at that time had been performed by fewer than 1,700.



Lakhpa, thirty-five years old when he accomplished this astounding feat, had first summited Everest in 1993 at age twentyfive. He told me he didn't do anything special to train for his record attempt. "Just climb mountains." He carried only eight to ten (rather than the typical thirty-five kilograms of supplies in his pack. These consisted of an oxygen cannister, a brass plaque to place on the summit, a Nepalese flag, food, water, and a camera. He stopped to rest about ten times for two to three minutes. He left base camp at 5:00 p.m. on May 25 and returned at 11:20 a.m. on May 26. I interviewed him less than two hours after his return, at about one o'clock. I asked him what the record meant to him and why it was important.

He said, "Record is important because set on Golden Jubilee. I wanted to set record for several years, and wanted to do it this year. It is important that Sherpa set record. Sherpa are strong. We carry so much weight."

When I pressed him about what the record meant to him personally, he simply repeated that it was important that a Sherpa hold the record, and he wanted to do it for Sherpas and Nepal. When asked how he felt, he said his "upper legs and throat hurt a little."

### **Sherpa Ascendancy**

Sherpa ascendancy to the top of the mountaineering world was paralleled by their economic ascendancy from one of the poorest ethnic groups in Nepal to one of the wealthiest. Sherpas were considered so insignificant among Nepal's fifty-some ethnic groups that they were just referred to as "the people of the east." Their status changed as increasing numbers of trekkers and climbers came to the Khumbu after the historic first summit in May 1953. An average of 35,000 tourists per year entered Sagarmatha Park during the spring and fall trekking seasons in the 1990s. Consequently, comparatively large amounts of money entered the Khumbu in that decade. Within forty years of the first summit, the basis of the Sherpa economy along the Base Camp Trail had been transformed from yak herding to tourism. The hillbillies of Nepal became the nouveau riche.

The Mother Goddess brought the West to the Sherpas. From Western climbers, the Sherpas learned how to climb mountains. The Mother Goddess brought tourism to the Khumbu, and the Sherpas learned how to become tourist entrepreneurs. Some became quite wealthy, owning chains of lodges, airlines that fly trekkers and climbers from Katmandu into the Khumbu, and even an Internet café at Everest Base Camp. And the Mother Goddess? She has been desecrated with rubbish, oxygen cannisters, and the dead bodies of failed climbers.

The ratio of deaths to successful summits of Everest is about one to ten. Next to the medical clinic in Pheriche, which is a few hiking stages south of base camp on the trail, there is a monument to climbers who have died attempting Everest. The last time I paid my respects at the monument in 2006, it had 250 names. About 2,500 climbers had successfully summited Everest by then.

One might be tempted to think the Sherpas great hypocrites, if all that was known of them was that they had exploited their goddess for profit. A friend, who is a schoolmaster in Sikkim and has worked to preserve traditional Buddhist practices and culture in Sikkim, calls the Sherpas of the Khumbu "whores." But Westerners who encounter Sherpas come away from the Khumbu extolling the virtues of these amazing people, whose character combines superhuman toughness with gentle Tibetan Buddhism. "They are the strongest, toughest, yet kind, friendly, and most gentle people I've ever met" is typical of the effusions about Sherpas by first-time trekkers. And such effusions come from old Himalayan hands as well. "It has been my privilege to work with and get to know these kind, generous, extraordinarily gifted people," Jim Whittaker, the first American to summit Mount

Everest, gushed in a letter to *Outside* magazine (July 2003, p. 23.).

I understand my friend from Sikkim calling the Sherpas whores and hypocrites for exploiting sacred goddess for material gain. But it would be even more hypocritical for a tourist-adventurer from the United States to criticize Sherpas for becoming intelligent opportunists seeking to improve the standard of living. Isn't that a fundamental human drive? Still in all, I can't help but mourn the increasing loss of the traditional Sherpa way of life as the Khumbu Sherpas become more like me.

Sherap Jangbu is the owner of the Panorama Lodge in Namche Bazaar, the commercial center of the Khumbu. I interviewed him for my article about the Jubilee Celebration in 2003. He wore neatly pressed Levis and a light blue cotton shirt with collar. He had a son in college in the United States. I particularly liked this quote from Sherap:

Changes are always good and bad. Tourism gives better jobs and money. Fifty years ago we could only be porters and guides to the expeditions. Now we have doctors, pilots and we can go to Katmandu. But we don't have politicians. Not much interest in national politics in the Khumbu. We have our own way.

Sherap, like every Sherpa I interviewed, expressed deep gratitude to Hillary and the Himalaya Trust for the schools and medical clinics built in the Khumbu. But Sherap insisted that tourism was the major source of successful development in the Khumbu. Even the foundation's funding, he reasoned, was based on the success of tourism. "The people that gave the money were people who became interested in helping the Sherpa people after they visited the Khumbu. People liked the Sherpas and wanted to help us."

When I asked him whether there was any downside to the fifty years of changes, he sounded a note of ambivalence.

Men only wear traditional clothes for ceremonies. Modern clothes are easier to wear and warmer. Young people like modern ways. They're not as interested in singing and dancing. Kids in Katmandu don't even speak Sherpa. About one-half don't come back. But only four to five doctors are needed in the Khumbu, so we don't need all the doctors and engineers to come back. And now with the drop in tourism, there are too many lodges.

Every Sherpa I interviewed for the article agreed that the changes tourism brought to the Khumbu were well worth any cost to their culture. They uniformly insisted that the essential Sherpa character had not changed. When pushed, however, a note of nostalgia about "lost ways" would register. But the more pressing concern to Sherpas now dependent on tourism was, as Sherap Jangbu put it, "the drop in tourism." These Sherpas were divorced from the cycle of nature and now dependent on the cycle of the market, on Western money being brought into the Khumbu.

The worn and gentle face of Namche's most honored resident, Gyalzen Sherpa, was on the cover of the April 2003 issue of *Outside* magazine. Gyalzen was one of the high-altitude porters from the 1953 expedition. Only three of these porters were still alive in 2003.

As Hari and I walked the dusty streets of Namche to Gyalzen's house, Sherpani (female Sherpa) shop owners called our attention to their wares and a few young Sherpas played a game of dice on a street corner. We passed the Club Paradise, the highest pool bar in the world. The village was completely electrified and all the lodges, shops, and restaurants had running water. In 1998, I had seen the first light bulb in Namche turned on at the post office. In five years, Namche had been transformed. Tibetan traders still squatted on their haunches in the open-air market displaying yak hair carpets they had carried around the Everest Massif, but Sherpanis now sold batteries and plastic climbing boots from shops with stone walls, electricity, and running water.

I brought the *Outside* magazine with the cover picture of Gyalzen to his house. Hari and I spent

convivial two hours with the eighty-five-year-old Gyalzen; his wife, Pemba Lagi Sherpa; his sister Fur Diki Sherpa; and his youngest daughter, Ang Diki Sherpa. Our hosts treated us with typically warm Sherpa hospitality. Pemba Lagi kept our teacups full of salty yak-butter tea and kept insisting that we take another cookie from the tray she pushed toward us. Ang Diki sat on the floor beside my chair smiling up at me and nodding along with the conversation. Fur Diki sat in a corner, watching us contemplatively while fingering her prayer beads. Gyalzen was the center of attention and held court as the “monjo,” the “big man” and unofficial mayor of Namche.

Gyalzen told us that he loved working as a high-altitude porter for the 1953 expedition. He is the eldest of the expedition's surviving high-altitude porters. He went up to the South Col with Hillary and described that as “the best thing” he's done. “Staying in base camp was very nice.” He said he was very happy Hillary had come back to Nepal for the fiftieth anniversary, and laughingly showed us the personal invitation he received from Hillary to come to the Jubilee Dinner in Katmandu, cohosted by the king and Sir Edmund Hillary. He spoke of all that Hillary had done for the Sherpas. “We were very poor. Couldn't even speak Nepalese. There was nothing in Namche before Hillary. He brought schools, a hospital, and drinking water to Namche.”

I asked what Tenzing had done for the Sherpas, and he responded that Tenzing “helped the world to know Sherpa culture. We were only known as ‘people from the east.’ Norgay made us Sherpa and known to the world.”

Gyalzen related how the people from Namche followed “the white people” all the way to base camp just because the locals were so curious about these people with white hair (blonds) and who drank water from bottles. “They thought these people were very special and had special things. Some people followed the ‘tourists’ just to look at them.”

He assured me that “no bad things have come from the 1953 summit” and the tourism that followed. “So many good things for Sherpas. Now there is a doctor and a pilot in Namche. The Sherpa people are still very strong. Still very friendly.”

He was correct about the benefits of tourism for the Sherpas and that most Sherpas are still very strong and friendly, but there are now obese Sherpas who sit in shops and collect money; Sherpas who no longer look at white people with great curiosity but merely as a means for more revenue; and Sherpas who have grown up not learning the traditional songs, dances, and language.

The insidious power of consumerism has a leveling effect on all cultures. It demands uniformity. The same products are sold from Bangor to Bangalore. Nike, McDonald's, Hanes, and Starbucks goods are the same in Indianapolis and Katmandu. The assembly lines of multinational companies do not have the sensitivity or take the time to appreciate diversity among nations and cultures. Multinational media conglomerates spread the same “desirable” images around the globe. Beyonce is as big in Beijing as in Boston. Sherpas chose to transform their economy from a yak-based to a money-based economy, understandably. Despite the denials of most of my Sherpa acquaintances that their essential Sherpa character has not changed, I have found it difficult to agree with them.

Hiking to Khumjung the next day, we passed by the Everest View Hotel at Shyangboche. The hotel was built with its own helipad (the only private helipad in the Khumbu) in the early 1990s by Japanese entrepreneurs. The plan was that rich Japanese tourists would chopper up to a modern hotel with a view of Mount Everest without having to hike from Lukla. The story goes that all the guests in the first few groups to stay at the hotel became violently ill with altitude sickness because they flew from Katmandu at 5,000 feet to 12,500 feet without any time to acclimatize. The owners went bankrupt and all the locals lost their jobs. The restaurant at the hotel reopened a couple of years later but the grand but empty hotel stands as a symbol of the unfulfilled promise of never-ending economic development for the Khumbu Sherpas.





*View from the Everest View Hotel*

I took the accompanying photo at the Everest View Hotel restaurant in 2006 on what I thought would be my last trek in the Khumbu. The majesty of the highest peaks on Earth is forever memorialized in my memory, as are the gifts I have received from the Sherpa people of the Khumbu. My commitment required me to move on, to find a people and place in Nepal to which I could give back and from whom I could receive what the Sherpas living in a tourist economy can no longer give. I wanted to find a people and place in Nepal still living in harmony with the cycle of nature rather than living according to the market cycle and dependent on the tourist dollar.



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