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Ama Dablam mountain from Khumjung village in the Khumbu

PROLOGUE



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 Nepal-

ese 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 Himalaya 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?

I

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's 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.