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Jeff Rasley: Mountains of Meaning

by Pam Richards & Jeff Rasley

October 15, 2012

I am pleased to interview a fellow Friend, Jeffery Rasley, about his experiences in the mountains of Nepal. Jeff Rasley is author of 6 books; his most recent book about Basa village is *Light in the Mountains -- A Hoosier Quaker Finds Communal Enlightenment in Nepal*. It is [available on Amazon by clicking here](#).

Jeff, can you describe what the conquest of mountains has meant to you personally?

I would never say that I or anyone else "conquered" a mountain. Some climbers use that term, but I find it disrespectful of the mountain. I pray for the cooperation of the mountain and nature to allow me a wonderful experience on the mountain.

I first went to the Himalayan Mountains in Nepal as an adventurer and mountain climber in 1995. After four Himalayan expeditions in five years I was forced to question what I was really doing in Nepal. In 1999 my climbing team barely escaped an avalanche which killed three Nepalese porters. Those men died carrying equipment for Western climbers. Was there any sense to make of the loss of three lives?

Even though there was nothing I could have done to help those men, I was plagued by guilt over their deaths. I resolved I would not go back to Nepal. There were other places to go adventuring, which would only put me in danger, not others.

It was no longer safe to visit Nepal, anyway. A violent Maoist revolution against the King had broken out. The Army was shooting demonstrators in the streets of Katmandu, and Maoists were blowing up buildings and bombing buses. SARS had broken out in Asia. 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. Nepal was put on the State Department's travel warning list. The allure of Nepal as a magical kingdom for Western adventurers was lost.

But I did return in May 2003 to join in the Jubilee celebration of the 50th anniversary of the first recorded summit of Mt. Everest by Sir Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay. My purpose was to research and write about the changes to Sherpa culture in the 50 years since Hillary and Norgay's summit of Mt. Everest in 1953. My friend and translator, Hari Pudasaini, and I trekked through the Khumbu region of Nepal along the Everest Base Camp trail up to Base Camp at 18,000 feet.

We met twenty members of the Hillary family who were making a pilgrimage along the Base Camp trail. Hari and I trekked with the Hillary group for a couple days. I learned much about Hillary's devotion to the Sherpa people from Sir Edmund's older sister, June, who was 86. After Ed 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. With the assistance of Sherpas employed by his climbing team, he had become one of the most famous people of the 20th Century, and he gratefully returned many times to the Khumbu, not to climb but to direct development projects. Hillary's 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."

When Hillary spoke about climbing Mt. Everest, he always emphasized that the effort had been a partnership. Hillary had partnered with Tenzing Norgay to make the summit. And the climbing team had partnered with the Sherpas who supported the team as guides, cooks and porters.

Hillary also considered his philanthropy efforts with the Sherpa people over the next fifty years a partnership. Hillary had gained much from the Sherpas – in part, his wealth and fame – but he had also gained as a human being from his exposure to their more grounded way of life. He became a more whole person by learning Sherpa ways. He responded by bringing to the Khumbu the benefits of Western education and medical care. As a result, young Sherpa's minds have been opened in ways unknown to their parents and life expectancy has increased by ten years in the Khumbu.

What were you seeking when you went beyond the physical challenge of mountain climbing and deeper into interactions with the people of Nepal? What did you find?

The Jubilee experience had a profound effect on me. I felt the pull of Nepal again, but it was more than just the mountains, the culture, and the need for adventure. My encounter with the Hillary family and my interviews of Sherpas compelled me to think about what I could do for Nepal and then to act. I'm not rich or famous, like Hillary, and I don't have the time or inclination to own and operate an expedition company, like Peter Hillary, Sir Edmund's son. But I have friends, and so I thought I could help to make a meaningful connection between Nepal and friends from the West. And, I could write about what it all meant. I decided I would organize Himalayan expeditions by contracting direct with Nepali expedition companies. All of the economic benefit from the expedition would go to local people hired by the Nepal-based guiding company. 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 for assistance to mountain villages was also part of the plan. I hoped the friends who would experience Nepal through the expeditions would want to support

projects to benefit mountain villages. By organizing worthy philanthropic projects for Himalayan villages and introducing curious and sensitive friends from the West to the culture of Nepal, I hoped that would help to develop a healthy exchange between cultures.

The third prong of my plan was to begin turning the journals I had kept into articles. If I could interpret the experiences I recorded in journal and photographs into a coherent essay, perhaps others would also find meaning beyond just the thrill of Himalayan adventures.

My plan was put into action the year after the Jubilee with a 3-member group. We raised \$1,000 for a water project in the Dolpo region of Nepal and brought over 65 pounds of children's clothes and school supplies. My personal essay about the Jubilee and the affect on Sherpa culture of 50 years of exposure to Westerners was published by *The Chysalis Journal*. Each year thereafter I returned with a new group, raised money for a development project, and continued writing articles.

In 2008 it all came together. I found what I had been seeking. It was a village called Basa in the land of the Rai. The Rai believe that everything, whether animate or inanimate, has spirit and deserves respect. They extend the founder of the Quaker movement George Fox's "inner light" to everything in the world.

What values did you find in common with your friends in Nepal?

In 2005 I met Niru Rai on the Internet. Niru owns a Himalayan outfitter company called Adventure GeoTrekks. Niru's company became the expedition company my mountaineering groups used as our local outfitters. Niru told me that when he was a child he went to school one day. He had to walk two hours on steep mountainous trails from his home village of Basa in the Solu region to the nearest school in the larger village of Sombare. What he learned from his one day of school was that he would rather get paid for walking long distances than to walk to school. He left his village to find work as a porter with an expedition company and never returned to school. He worked his way up from porter to kitchen boy to cook to sirdar (head guide) to company owner. But Niru's heart remained in Basa village. He married a village girl, built a home in the village, and began hiring men from his village to staff his growing expedition company. And he did not forget that the children growing up in his village still had to walk two hours to the nearest school.

The success of his company led to connections with Westerners, and in 2003 he convinced a French-Canadian NGO to supervise construction of a one-room schoolhouse in Basa on land Niru donated. The Canadians were the first "white people" to enter the village of Basa.

I found a kindred soul in Niru. He cared deeply about giving Westerners a transformative experience in Nepal. And he hoped that some of his clients would be moved to do more for the people of Nepal than just spend money on a trek. As I came to know men from Basa who staffed our expeditions, I was deeply impressed with their sense of community and their exceptional

care and concern for our group members. I wondered what the village was like that produced men who demonstrated such a high degree of the virtues of hard work and consideration for others.

I had learned from Niru that there are eleven different sub-groups among the Rai people, each with its own local dialect. The deep valleys and high mountains of the Solu area, where most of the Rai live, have created separate pockets of people with different local languages and customs. Most Rai follow a religion described as a “middle way” borrowing from animism, Hinduism and Buddhism. Niru told me that the Rai around Basa believe in an ultimate Supreme Being unlike the other religions of the Indo-Tibetan Himalayas. There is a giant kapok tree outside of Basa village, which is sacred to the villagers and has become a place of worship. (Parallels to the Na'vi of James Cameron's *Avatar* are inescapable.)

What have role have you been led to take in improving conditions in Basa Village?

Niru told me about the need of the Basa village school for physical plant improvements, educational materials and, most importantly, to hire two additional teachers so fourth and fifth grade classes could be added to the school program. When Niru asked whether I would consider organizing a trek to visit Basa in conjunction with developing a fundraising project for the school, I immediately agreed.

In October 2008 as only the third group of “white people” to visit Basa my group found that the only teaching materials were chalkboards with no erasers and handmade posters; no books or tablets. There were a few rough benches for students to sit on; no desks or chairs. It pulled at my heartstrings to see such beautiful and eager children and to imagine what their classes must be like without any teaching materials or supplies other than the enthusiasm of their teachers and rudimentary posters hung by string on the patched walls of the little classroom. The floor of the building had a three inch crack running the width of the building wall to wall. The walls were bare plaster and the wood frames of the windows were rotting.

Friends and our 2008 trekking group donated \$6,500 to repair the school building, provide educational materials and more benches, create a playground with a safety wall (there is a 500 foot drop off behind the school), provide a compost toilet, and, best of all, hire fourth and fifth grade teachers. All of the labor was supplied by the villagers and the two teachers are women from Basa.

The creation of a special relationship with Basa village through the fundraising for the school and the experience of visiting the village impelled me to move beyond writing articles to produce my first book-length memoir. *Bringing Progress to Paradise; What I Got from Giving to a Himalayan Village* was published in 2010 by Conari Press.

I have returned to Basa each year since 2008 with groups of friends. We have raised funds each year for improvements to the school, smokeless stoves for each home, a hydroelectric system for

the whole village, and we are currently raising funds for a clean water project. Each year the villagers have turned out to welcome us with flower garlands and dancing. I had been lost on a Himalayan peak in 1999, but I had found meaning in relationship with a little mountain village in 2008. And, I have written three books to try to convey to others what I have learned about the happy communal way of life I have found in Basa. With friends, to receive the love and wisdom of Basa village and to give of our material wealth so the children would have the better lives their parents wished for them -- that was the answer I found.

Donations can be made to the Basa Village Foundation USA Inc. for the water project by contacting Jeff Rasley at jrasley@juno.com, through the Foundation's website at <http://basavillagefoundationusa.org/>, or sending checks to:

Indianapolis First Friends
3030 Kessler Blvd. E. Dr.
Indianapolis, IN 46220

with "First Friends Basa Village Project" as payee.