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An Enlightened Partnership

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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.

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.

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.

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. Each year a new group returned with me and we did a fundraiser or brought over school or medical supplies for a remote village.

But the best answer to my question of what were we Westerners doing in Nepal was given to me by a village called Basa in the land of the Rai in 2008. The Rai believe that everything, whether animate or inanimate, has spirit and deserves respect. They extend Fox’s “inner light” to everything in the world. (One might call the Rai Quakers on steroids.)

In 2005 I met Niru Rai on the Internet. Niru owns a Himalayan outfitter company called Adventure GeoTreks. Niru’s company has been the expedition company my groups have used since our meeting. 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 school house 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 Niru and men who demonstrated to an extraordinarily high degree 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.) A few families in Basa, including Niru’s, have converted to Christianity. They have built a little church with a dirt floor near the center of the 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.

When I returned to Basa in 2009 with a group of 17 friends and we were able to see the improvements to the school, the whole village turned out to welcome us with flower garlands and a dance program by the children. I knew I had found the answer as to why we were here in Nepal. To receive the love and wisdom of this village and to give of our material wealth so these children would have the better lives their parents wished for them.

Niru had dreamed for years of bringing electricity to the village and computers to the school. Mike Miller, a friend and retired electric engineer, offered to help develop a plan to do just that. In 2010 Mike, Niru, a Nepal-based engineer, and I developed a plan to build a hydroelectric system for Basa village.

The project work with Basa was first supported by friend Brad Bloom's nonprofit educational corporation and later by Indianapolis First Friends Quaker Meeting as the “fiscal agent” for the next Basa project. With the help of Mike's family foundation we cut the string of support and established the Basa Village Foundation USA Inc. Niru and other supportive friends of his in Katmandu organized our sister organization, the Basa Village Foundation Nepal NGO. The USA foundation raised $20,000 to purchase all of the materials needed to build a little hydroelectric system. The Nepal NGO supervised the construction and the villagers supplied all the labor. At the end of February 2011 the first light was turned on in Basa village.

Since then, the two foundations have worked with the villagers to supply and build "smokeless stoves" for all 62 homes in Basa. Cataracts and pulmonary diseases are rampant in Himalayan villages because cooking and heating is done over open fire pits in the center of village homes. Nimbus, the employer of one of our Foundation members, donated six laptop computers for the village school. A mountaineering group, including Mike Miller and me, delivered the laptops to the village school. The Basa Foundation has recently completed a $29,000 fundraising campaign to buy the materials for a clean water system for the village. For generations villagers have had to walk half an hour on a steep rocky trail to a nearby waterfall to collect all the water they use in buckets. Before the end of the year, God willing, they will build their own water system with outdoor houses to each of the homes in Basa.
The villagers have provided all of the labor for each of these projects. They own the end product. The school is run by a school board of village leaders. The electric system is operated by a committee chosen by the villagers as will the water system. Years ago, when Niru and I first discussed trying to improve the standard of living in Basa, we hoped that Basa village might become a model for culturally sensitive development. Perhaps other villages could look at Basa and see an example of how a "third world" village of subsistence farmers, with financial help from the outside, became a healthier and better place to live without losing its indigenous culture. We think we are close.

There are no toilets or system of waste disposal in the village. Volunteer doctors have set up temporary medical clinics, but the closest medical clinic is a two hour walk from the village. So, there is still work to do.

Of course there is the question of whether Basa will ultimately be better off with the exposure to Western culture and technology. There is a danger that such exposure will infect the village with the virus of consumerism. The insatiable thirst for more things is not part of life in Basa. In a subsistence but sustainable economy supported by a traditional culture which has lasted hundreds of years, what works is balance, not demanding and producing more, more, more. Niru and I have debated whether we are doing the right thing for Basa by bringing the modern world to the village. We hope that life in Basa can be improved without the village losing its character.

During the Colonial Era, the West brought the sword of conquest and imposed Christianity on “less developed” people. In the 20th Century the infection of capitalist-consumerism was spread into the “Third World” by Western companies. In the 21st Century we have the opportunity to work in enlightened partnership across cultures, so that both the "developed" and "undeveloped" communities benefit from the partnership.

We need to learn how to partner without fostering dependence. That is why it is important that Basa villagers do the work themselves to renovate the school building and that the teachers hired for the School are from Basa. We can offer improvements through Western technology without exploitation. And we can receive wisdom from Basa about how to live in communal harmony and closer to the rhythms of nature.

Anyone that would like to make a contribution to the Basa Village Foundation for future projects, or have questions, may contact Jeff Rasley at jrasley@juno.com. Additional
information is available on Jeff’s website at http://www.jeffreyrasley.com and on the Foundation's website at http://basavillagefoundationusa.org/.

The Basa Village Welcome
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=srMYJkD0kqs