

Introduction

*“Though the search for simplicity is, at any time,
a difficult journey through a wilderness, we can
learn from guides ancient and modern.”*

— MARTIN MARTY

NESTLED HIGH in the rarefied air of the Himalayas, amid the towering ramparts of the tallest summits on Earth, lives a people unlike any other in the world. Adapted over the centuries to life at extreme altitudes, they go about their lives today much as they have since migrating here from ancient Tibet centuries ago. They tend to high-altitude yaks, hardy goats and specially bred oxen, till the thin mountain soil growing potatoes, barley and wheat, and move about toting back-breaking loads over steep mountain footpaths in the cold, thin air.

These are the Sherpas of Nepal, the Tigers of the Snow. No longer exclusively porters or mountain guides, they have evolved into the world's finest high-altitude climbers — bar none. More Nepalese Sherpas have been to the summit of Mount Everest than from any other nation on Earth — at the time of this writing, about 100 of the 700 or so climbers who have touched the top of the world. The Sherpas have also experienced the greatest number of deaths — 134 (on all parts of the mountain), according to Vincanne Adams, an anthropologist at Princeton University and author of *Tigers of the Snow*.

It is impossible to imagine the raw power and speed of a Sherpa until one actually sees one move with a load. Using a

wide-banded tumpline of cloth across their forehead and around the back of packs, they move with astonishing ease under burdens of up to 150 pounds. Some lowland porters (not to be confused with high-altitude climbing Sherpas) can carry loads up to 250 pounds – about the weight of your average refrigerator. But above 17,000 feet, the base of Everest, the strength and courage of the Sherpas is unequaled. Born and genetically adapted to life at 13,000 feet and above, they are as at home in Everest's rarefied air as most Westerners are in their living rooms. One Sherpa, Ang Rita, has been to the top 10 times. Another, Kaji, holds a world ascent speed record from the south side of the mountain in Nepal – an astonishing 20 and a half hours. Hans Kammerlander, of Italy, holds the current world record for the fastest ascent to date from the northern side of the mountain in Tibet – an amazing 16 hours, 45 minutes.

But to marvel only at their astonishing physical powers is to miss the true strength of these quiet, humble people. Isolated from the outside world, without the “luxuries” of automobiles, roads, bicycles, telephones, radios, televisions, microwave ovens, central heating, air conditioning, plumbing, running water, computers or the Internet, the Sherpas live in a world richly steeped in Buddhist culture. They have strong spiritual values and a sense of community all but absent in much of our “civilized” world. In the Khumbu region from which they hail, several hundred miles northeast of the Nepalese capital of Kathmandu, human beings are solitary figures against the vastness of nature's awe-inspiring backdrop. The landscape is not only breathtaking and the climate hostile; the region is also forbidding and empty. The unrelenting solitude can be as much a challenge as the thin air. What brings color to this world of rock, snow and ice is the Sherpa culture and especially, Sherpa compassion. The only way the several thousand of these resilient beings survive is by sticking together.

I met my first Sherpa in 1991 at the offices of “Tiger Mountain,” a large trekking, mountaineering and expedition

firm in Kathmandu, at the base of the mighty Himalayas, north of India. I had heard of them through books, photographs, magazine articles, and film documentaries. These painted them as superheroes of the snows, beings capable of colossal feats of strength and endurance. Imagine my surprise when the first Sherpa I met appeared in a baseball hat and jeans, weighing at most 120 pounds ringing wet. He stood a little over 5 feet 2 inches tall. Physically, he looked no stronger than my grandmother.

“How in heaven’s name,” I thought, “could such an apparently diminutive and self-effacing human being ever carry twice his body weight?” The idea seemed absurd.

I came face to face with the error in my thinking one crisp morning a little over a month later. As the mid-morning sun cast its warming rays across Tibet at about 23,000 feet, I found myself face first in the snow on all fours, panting uncontrollably and on the verge of vomiting.

As my heart raced at over 170 beats a minute, the massive North Col (“Col” is French word “mountain pass.”) slope of Mount Everest loomed around me. Below, it fell 2,000 feet to the East Rongbuk Glacier. Above, massive ice blocks the size of six-story apartment buildings teetered on the edge of reality. They clung to the face, threatening at any moment to “calve off” and crush me.

Despite years of heavy training, which included climbing more than 230 stories at a time in the stairwell of a Canadian office tower with my friend, Jamie Clarke, I had believed, erroneously, that I was ready for Everest. We had carried 85-pound packs for a mind-numbing three hours at a time up and down the tower’s 29 stories. I had supplemented this training with marathon runs of up to 26 miles long.

That morning on Everest was a rude awakening. First, I hauled myself up from the snow. Then, I squeezed out two or three excruciatingly difficult steps, panting uncontrollably. Next, I crouched down on all fours again and came face to face with the cold reality of my own inadequacy. Between hurried

breaths, I tried to hollow out a breathing hole in the snow with my hands.

Suddenly, my panting was interrupted:

“Good morning Alan!” came a cheerful voice from behind me. “Are you okay?”

Like a scared rabbit with its head buried in a hole, I peered out between my legs. I was amazed to see “my grandmother” strolling up the slope below me like he was at a Sunday school picnic. The diminutive figure I’d seen in Kathmandu was, in fact, Da Nuru Sherpa, who at 30 was one of the strongest Sherpas with whom I would ever climb.

“Yeah...(breath)...yeah...(breath),” I struggled to say.

“Good,” he replied.

In the next moment, he and his four Sherpa companions blasted effortlessly by me. Without missing a step, they dispensed with the traditional “jumar” braking devices usually used to move safely up anchored rope. Instead, they “batmanned” flawlessly hand-over-hand up the line like so many kids pulling in perch on fishing filament. The damage to my ego was severe. What made it worse was when I realized moments later that the Sherpas were carrying packs more than twice the weight of mine. I did eventually make it to the top of the slope, but not until hours after the Sherpas had not only reached the spot, but already returned to the camp below.

Looks can be deceiving, especially when it comes to the Sherpas. This was the first of many lessons they would teach me. Over the next six years or so, the Sherpas of Nepal would so change the way I looked at myself and my world as to inexorably alter my very outlook on life – how I viewed success and failure, what I knew of teamwork and commitment, and my whole concept of effort and achievement. Silently and almost imperceptibly, these gentle men stole their way into my heart and shook the foundation of who I was. They guided me in a completely new type of adventure -- one deeper into my soul.

“The Sherpas do with a lot less than we do and they think about the greater interaction with society versus just a ‘me’

approach,” says Jason Edwards, climbing leader of the Colliers Lotus Notes Everest Expedition. “If something bad happens to you while they’re around, they think it’s their fault. Every day is Sunday for them. Religion and spirituality is a way of life.”

I wrote of some of my experiences with the Sherpas in my last book, *The Power of Passion — Achieve Your Own Everests*, which I co-wrote with Jamie Clarke. *The Power of Passion* was the story of our first two expeditions to Everest in 1991 and 1994 and some of the lessons of life we learned along the way. It became a national best seller. This book is the story of our third Everest expedition in 1997, the further lessons I learned and, most importantly, how I changed as a person in the process. The expedition became more of an inner Everest than an outer expedition.

During my three Everest expeditions, besides the constants of Jamie and “Chomolungma” (Mother Goddess of the World), as the locals refer to Everest, there were dozens of Sherpas on our trips. Some worked as cooks, others as mail runners and trekking assistants. Most helped carry me – or more accurately, my equipment — to and from the top of the world. Amid my struggle against Everest’s adversity, there was their ever-present loyalty, inestimable strength and limitless spiritual resilience. I could not possibly have climbed Everest without them.

The most well known Sherpa is Tenzing Norgay. On May 29, 1953, at the age of 39 (the same age at which I summited), he stood on Everest’s summit with Sir Edmund Hillary of New Zealand. Together, they became the first people to successfully reach the top of the world and return alive. The book of Tenzing’s life, *Man of Everest*, by James Ramsay Ullman, tells the stirring tale of Tenzing’s life, his struggles against Everest and his even-greater struggles to come to grips with his personal transition from a once humble load-carrier to an equally humble international celebrity.

At the time of Hillary and Norgay’s historic ascent, there was considerable debate about who had reached the top first, even though both were roped together and as such, it is really

an irrelevant question. The uninitiated came to know Tenzing simply as “the other guy,” perhaps because, as Buddhists, the Sherpas believe one should suppress the ego, not flaunt it to the world.

One member of our 1997 expedition, Dr. Doug Rovira, has his own theory:

“I have little doubt Tenzing Norgay arrived on the summit of Everest on that blustery day in 1953 a full hour ahead of Sir Edmund, had a hot pot of tea waiting, and lightened his load for the trip down.”

While Sir Edmund has explained that, at the time, he just happened to be leading the rope to the top, anyone who has witnessed the strength and speed of a Sherpa knows that if you happen to be tied to one, you’d better be ready to run uphill. Blind patriotism and egos aside, in sheer numbers, the Sherpas stand alone at the apex of the world high altitude climbing community.

I wrote most of this book many months before I was given a copy of *Man of Everest*. But in reading Tenzing’s story, I came to see many dramatic parallels with my Everest experience. I have, therefore, included many quotations from *Man of Everest* here with the goal of re-inforcing some of the key lessons the Sherpas have taught me.

A Sherpa’s idea of success, for example, is very different from ours. It relates more to an individual’s ability to put key values into action in their lives – values like compassion, humility, a lack of ego, and being true to your own path in life. These are just some of the lessons I have learned from the Sherpas. Although I am a long way from rising to the peak of these ideals, I aspire to them much as I aspired to climb Everest. Ironically, the achievement of that goal has led me to a whole new understanding of true greatness and it has nothing to do with physical achievement, the “conquering” of mountains, or the “victory” of human beings over nature.

You have to be born a Sherpa. You cannot “become” one. Yet in many ways, the Sherpas differ little from any of us in the

world. They desire to live a quiet and happy life, one as free as possible from disease, strife and heartache. But that's where the similarities end and the differences begin.

"They [the Sherpas] wouldn't write about greatness," says Steve Matous, the organizer of our Colliers Lotus Notes Everest Expedition and a man who has been in business with the Sherpas for five years. "They're too humble. They'd push others to the front. ... They summit Everest four, five and six times and then laugh all the way down the trail. The wives and mothers would be the heroes. Women hold the family together."

The ultimate goal of a Sherpa is to pass into the next life having made the lives of as many others around them as rich as possible. The virtue to which they most aspire is not financial wealth, material possession, position, power, or fame. It is compassion for all living things. In that sense, although we can never become Sherpas in the literal sense, we can still aspire to some of their more admirable personal and social qualities, while understanding that they are just as human as the rest of us. They too have their faults.

"Westerners are lulled into ascribing an egalitarian ideology to the Sherpas that simplifies, if it does not downright distort, the ethnographic facts," writes James Fisher in *Sherpas: Reflections on Change in Himalayan Nepal*. He explains that in many ways the Western romantic myth about Sherpa society is an image of how Westerners would like to be themselves. We seem to ignore that Sherpas are equally prone to such vices as alcoholism, drug abuse, crime, violence, and sexual promiscuity.

In spite of these short-comings, I still believe there is much we can learn from the Sherpas, if not how to better program a computer or run a company, certainly how to better program ourselves and run some aspects of our lives. A case in point:

A few days after I dragged my sorry butt to the top of the North Col slope that morning in 1991, I managed to corner one of the Sherpas, Ang Temba. He had summited Everest the previous spring as part of the first all-Sherpa expedition to the mountain. I asked him why it had taken his people almost 40

years after Tenzing's ascent in 1953 to finally launch an Everest expedition as a tribe. Everest was, after all, the world's tallest mountain and it was literally in their backyard.

"We didn't need to climb Everest," Ang Temba explained quietly.

"Why not?" I asked. "It's right here. You're right here. All you had to do was climb her."

He looked back at me like I didn't know anything (which, of course, I didn't). Then he paused and smiled.

"Everest is beautiful and it's there. What more do you need?"

These and other "whacks upside the head" have helped me to understand that there is far more depth and breadth to the Sherpas than their climbing ability. The only reason any Sherpa Everest expedition had apparently been staged was because a few supporters in the West (one of whom was Steve Matous), arranged financing for the expedition. Were it not for this injection of foreign capital, the Sherpas might still not have climbed Everest as a group. In their isolated world of solitude and silence, the land of the Yeti, of savage winds and colossal snows, they have managed not only to carve out a unique existence, but they have also gained a truly unique understanding of life.

I believe we are all Sherpas carrying loads of one sort or another. And, we find ourselves struggling up our own mountains – whether they are professional, personal, marital, emotional, interpersonal, parental, medical, or financial. At times, some of us cannot seem to find the strength to bear our burdens. The path we're on seems brutally steep and unrelenting. Sometimes, "we just can't take it any more." We sit exhausted and disillusioned by the side of the trail and hope that somehow the crushing weight on our shoulders will magically be lifted, or at least lightened. Our hearts are heavy, as are our souls.

Whatever path we have chosen in life, climb we must, for to do otherwise is to relinquish our own self-respect and give in to our frailties and fear. This is the story of my own climb as a

white-faced “Sherpa” – one against the weight of my own personal fears, insecurities, and self-doubts, past the pain of my past and upwards to a true personal triumph. Were it not for the Sherpas, not only would I have not have made it to the summit of Everest, but I could not possibly have been able to see what I did from that new vantagepoint. It was a new view of myself and our world – of the price of success and the true value of people in our lives. The Sherpas helped point the way to a new life path for me – and perhaps for you. The expedition became far more than a physical ascent of Everest. It became a spiritual journey and awakening — an adventure of the soul.

So now, let us climb together not only to the highest point on the planet, but to the depth of ourselves – into the dark crevasses of our own inner Everests, past our deepest fears and out into the searing sunshine and breathtaking view at 29,028 feet. This is a story not just about climbing a mountain, but about the mountains we are all climbing in life.

“Never bear more than one kind of trouble at a time. Some people bear three — all they have had, all they have now, and all they expect to have.”

– EDWARD EVERELL HALE
(1822 – 1909)

