

Out of Despair Flow Blessings

Fourth Draft

In 1984, while trekking around the Annapurna Circuit in the Himalayas, I was faced with a situation that challenged my view and understanding of life and people. I was 35 years of age and already was very aware of human tragedy and pain: but I had never before been faced with it in such vivid and real terms. At the same time, it felt so dramatically at odds with the incredible beauty that surrounded me. How could I both hold this painful story and take in the awesome vistas that were unfolding as I made my way through one of the world's deepest and most spectacular gorges.

I had left Kathmandu with my Nepali guide, Lakhpa, and he had hired a young man as a porter at the start of the trek, which would take us about 20 days to complete. In the first few days of the trek, I had learned a few facts about Lakhpa. He lived in the outskirts of Kathmandu with his wife and two children. He hired himself out as a guide to trekkers and generally made just enough money each summer to sustain his family through the bitter winters when there was no work for him. He lived a harsh and tough life, but there was an acceptance of his continuing struggles and a spirit about him that, to my mind at the time, seemed so contrary to his circumstances.

After an afternoon of following a trail through a forest of tall rhododendron trees, we reached a picturesque little village. To enter it, we took a side path that crossed the river on a swinging bridge suspended from rusty steel cables. A rough pathway formed the main thoroughfare between the houses that had walls made of mud and wood. All of the small houses had practical thatched roofs that were essential given the rainfall we occasionally had experienced. At the far end of the village, there was a single tea house (Nepali hostel) where trekkers could stay overnight. We settled in for the night with the other trekking parties. While darkness fell, we hikers sat around in the communal area drinking tea, waiting for a simple evening meal, and talking about our days on the trails. Most nights, the guides would join us, which was great as they had interesting tales to tell: but not on that night.

This night, Lakhpa met up with some old guide friends whom he had not seen for some time. They separated themselves from everyone else and sat in a corner, which was unusual. I felt rather concerned when I realized that they had ordered some rice wine and Lakhpa was drinking more than his fair share. My concerns were heightened as their conversation appeared to take a much more serious tone and their collective mood darkened. I went to sleep that night feeling very uncomfortable and alone as I knew that I had become dependent on his expertise and companionship. I felt certain that I could return to the starting point safely on my own, but feared that my intended course forward required a good guide because I planned to navigate to a lake that was miles off the main trekking routes. I had learned of the lake years before while I was in college and it had become a calling for me. To think that Lakhpa may not be reliable was not a thought that I wanted to entertain, but I could not contain my doubts. I slept fitfully that night.

The next morning was somewhat unpleasant as he had a hangover and I had so many concerns and questions about this man that I had hired to be my guide. We continued trekking up through forests of pine trees that climbed high above us towards the peaks that remained hidden to us as we walked alongside the river at the bottom of the gorge. It's cascading waters carved the gorge even deeper with each passing year. Gradually the bottom of the gorge began to open up to small meadows where the blue skies and sunshine could lighten our moods and hearts. Lakhpa said that it had been a very rough night for him; he indicated that he had needed to share some very bad news with his friends. He apologized for his hangover and said that he had been surprised how sharing the story with his friends had affected him. I tried to ask him about the story, but he was unwilling or unable to talk about it, at that time.

The following morning, we were blessed with clear skies and a most glorious sunrise that magnificently shone upon the peak of Lamjung Himal as it floated high above us to the South West. It's upper snowfields lay like bowing knights in flowing white cloaks surrounding their king – the summit's rocky crags being finely drawn by the rays of the early morning sun. The trail began to widen as the miles passed and with it, Lakhpa seemed to relax and become more like the engaging character that I had

hired in Kathmandu. To my surprise he started to talk about the story that he had shared the night before with his friends. An hour later, I had heard his story and its impact disturbed my normally tranquil state of mind. I felt that my state was so unbalanced that I could neither think nor speak.

About a year or so before I had met Lakhpa, he had been home with his family while he looked for an opportunity to guide a trekking party. One evening his wife was cooking dinner and realized that she was missing an ingredient for the main dish. As she had several pots boiling on the stove and Lakhpa was visiting a neighbor, she told her eldest daughter, who was twelve, to dash to a local market stall, with which she was familiar, to purchase the item and gave her enough money for the purchase. Ten minutes went by. After fifteen minutes, Lakhpa returned, but there was no sign of their daughter. He rushed to the market where the stall holder said that he had sold her the needed item and seen her heading home. Lakhpa returned home distraught. He and his wife left their two other children with friends and went out to search. They scoured the market, they asked friends and neighbors, they went further around the area. It was all to no result.

When they returned home, a large group of frightened and concerned friends and neighbors had gathered. Lakhpa's wife found a couple of old photographs that had included their daughter. For hours, groups went through the area questioning anyone who was still out on the darkened streets and alleyways. All local police or government offices had closed for the day before she disappeared. By midnight, most people had reluctantly headed to their homes and bed. For Lakhpa and his family, there was no sleep that night – just soul-wrenching weeping, overwhelming fear, and a sense of utter helplessness.

Lakhpa and his wife knew that there had been similar incidents in the past. None of those daughters were ever seen again. They tried to hold this chilling and devastating thought at bay, but it was always present in their thoughts.

In the morning, some of their friends returned to the market, but there was no useful news. Lakhpa said that he was going to the police to report their daughter missing. But they feared that it wouldn't help. He walked to the local police station with some neighbors.

One police officer stood at the main desk. Lakhpa simply said "I think my daughter is missing. She didn't come back from the market yesterday evening."

The officer sneered and replied "So, what do you want me to do about it?"

"Can you send somebody out to try to find her?"

"What good would that do? If you know who took her, I will send an officer to arrest them. If not, it is not my problem."

Defeated and discouraged, Lakhpa returned home without his eldest daughter and without hope. As to whether it was hope of ever seeing her again, or saving her, or protecting her, it did not matter.

Lakhpa and his family, as well as his friends and neighbors, all knew the most likely reason for her disappearance. In the poorest neighborhoods of Kathmandu, an astonishing distinction in a city beset with poverty, gangs occasionally kidnapped young girls and very quickly smuggled them over the border into India where they were sold on the black market as sex slaves. There were rumors that the local police and government officials were bribed by the gangs to disregard such reports. This situation had been reported for years internationally and discussed at conferences, but little had been achieved. Lakhpa's family and friends could only make fearful assumptions about what might have happened.

As Lakhpa and I walked along that sun-drenched trail with pine scent tantalizing our senses, I was consumed with rage. I hated knowing that this was probably the action of other human beings. What had destroyed their humanity? I felt horror that these gangs could be so vile and violent. Even today, thinking

about this throws me into emotional turmoil. Humans have been given such incredible capabilities to bring good into our societies, but some see themselves as different where acts of cruelty and evil are justifiable. I will never understand those few and I am saddened by their plights and the heartache they create.

I felt totally helpless to be of actual help to this father. Words felt inadequate to me. Lakhpa could sense how upset I was and we simply walked forward, each step taking us one second beyond the time when he had laid bare his story. The walk did not remove the barb that I felt jabbing at my very soul, but hiking alongside Lakhpa, who had lived and still lived through the pain, grounded me. My desperate hope was that he and his family had found a meaningful way to hold this tragedy, even if there was no closure as I understood the term.

Over the next few days, we talked further about this whole episode. At times, I wanted to rant and rave, at other moments I plied him with endless questions trying to make sense of it all and, finally, I just listened to whatever thoughts crossed his mind. I had difficulty reigning in my feelings and thoughts for a meaningful way to continue the dialogue. My personal situation at the time colored my view of his story. I was a bachelor with no idea of the joy and the work it takes to hold a loving family together through tough times. I had no concept of how I would feel to have and to hold a young toddler who would call me "Daddy". I now look back and think about my reaction at the time and I feel compassion for the younger version of myself. I had not the experience of life or the resiliency that I have gained over the years. There was no way that I could rationally or reasonably comprehend or process all of the raw painful thoughts and emotions.

My hatred and fury towards the perpetrators of this crime was so raw and so palpable that if I had ever encountered them, I have no doubt that the result would have been violent and dreadful. It now feels so unlike me to have such a vehement reaction to an event, but, back then, internally I felt totally out of control. The difference in my reaction back then to my present day reaction came about, in part, due to this time and how I ultimately processed it.

As we walked along the widening valley that was lined by magnificence that only views of large snowy mountains can behold, I eventually found the questions that seemed so needed in this continuing dialogue. I asked “Lakhpa, how can you lead what appears to be a normal life each day: how do you get out of bed each day and not go searching?”

He looked at me “This may be difficult to explain. I live my life every day as a practicing Buddhist and it guides me though each day. Indeed, we searched and asked around the area for a number of days. Later trips to the police and government were equally useless. There was so little that we could do and there soon came a time when hope was reduced to just about nothing. We had lost our child. We had no idea about her state. We had no control over the situation but we loved her, and we always will. At the same time, my wife and I knew we still did have two children in our home who needed our love and care, we had a roof over our heads, we had food on the table and I hopefully would have money for the winter. We had to focus on all of these blessings that we did have, and let go of the one that we had lost. It was better to hold one lost child in our hearts then than possibly need to bury two more later due to starvation or the freezing cold.”

I let his words wash over me. They felt so different to how I would expect a parent in England or the US to react. His comment about letting go reminded me of another Buddhist concept that I had read about in my preparation for the trek. I responded “I have heard something about impermanence in Buddhism. Does that really apply to members of your family too?”

He smiled “Ah, yes, in fact it especially applies for family members. If there is one undeniable truth about life, it is that life will end for everyone. Nobody escapes from that truth. Most peoples’ discomfort with death is not knowing when it will happen. And what is death? For Buddhists it is a parting of the ways: not a final end. Everything is impermanent: even the tallest mountains will crumble and fall in time. So to love someone totally is to hold unconditionally that they will die or, as in our case, be lost.”

These ideas seemed to open my narrow view of the life and expectations to a different and all encompassing perspective. That shift sent me meandering along unforeseen spiritual paths until, eight years later, I too became a Buddhist. Then two years after that I took “Refuge” which is the Buddhist equivalent of Christian Christening. I will confess that today I am not a conventional Buddhist: belonging to a Sangha, meditating regularly and receiving teachings. If I were to define my current spirituality, it would be as a Buddhist with an acceptance of interfaith philosophy. I consider volunteering as an interfaith hospital chaplain to be the manifestation of my Buddhist faith, which is my foundation. I do not want to convert patients to become Buddhists, and trying to convert others to become Buddhist is not a Buddhist concept. I use the strength of my commitment to Buddhist principals as an essential grounding from which I can openly join patients in their attempting to reconnect with or strengthen existing beliefs in their own faith traditions. Through this spiritual connection, I wish that patients will find meaning in their suffering, toleration of the misery, and the hope for another day. Whenever I face my own problems or those of patients, I engage with Buddhist teachings as my basis to find possible ways forward and then, for patients, I will try to find parallel paths in their tradition to discuss my thoughts in terms to which they can relate.

I suspect that, by now, Lakhpa has died of old age and I pray that he has been re-incarnated into this Human realm once again. Now, Lakhpa, wherever you are, I say this unto you “Thank you for the brief description of how you could carry on. It was instrumental in redirecting my life and through it, your loving karma has travelled through me to touch the hearts and minds of hundreds of patients I have seen over the years. May your family’s pain be transformed, purified, and create ongoing blessings for others.”

Thus, in our own individual ways, both Lakhpa and I did find ways to gently hold this tragedy and, finally, we each found our own ways to re-engage with day-to-day life. It reminds me of a message that I share with some patients. We may not have control over certain events in our lives, but we do have the choice of attitude we take towards those events and how we hold their memories.

Blessings