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Life After College (Nepal, 2001)

The mission / The responsibility of privilege

AS A 22-YEAR-OLD RECENT COLLEGE GRAD, I loved flying. Thirty thousand feet in the air, my book marked with a ticket to somewhere, was the only time in my life I knew where I was going and when I was going to get there.

I was on my way to Nepal – the next destination in a series of one-way tickets away from the expectations that surround a graduate who had moved back in with his parents. It wasn't that I had an issue with not knowing what I was doing with my life; it was that I had an issue with other people having an issue with it.

The maroon robe of the Tibetan monk in the seat next to me spilled over my armrest. He was in my space, and each time he moved his robe pulled at my headphone connection, interrupting the audio of the movie *Osmosis Jones*. Chris Rock was the voice of the white blood cell fighting infection on the streets of Bill Murray.

The monk would move; I'd sigh, and push my headphones in again. Occasionally we'd chuckle at the same point. I'm not sure if a white blood cell blowing his hair dry with a fart is physiologically correct, but

it was humorous enough in a cross-cultural sort of way to make us share a moment.

We were on a flight from Bangkok, Thailand, where I had spent a few weeks island hopping. For less than 10 bucks a night, I rented beachside bungalows accessed by water taxis.

Before that I was budget backpacking through Australia.

This sounds luxurious, and in all of the important experiential ways it was, but I traveled on the cheap. Ate ramen. Camped in my tent. I knew my budget would run out before my desire to keep going waned.

My grandma, Frances Wilt, gave all of her grandchildren $5,000 when they graduated from college. This gift was why when my peers at Miami University were talking about the jobs they landed and how much they were going to get paid, I was shopping for a one-way flight away. Gone. I worked a few months swinging a hammer after I graduated to earn some money to add to Grandma's so I could be gone longer.

I graduated in 2001 with a degree in anthropology or, as one *Cultural Anthropology* textbook that wrote about me put it, "With only a bachelor's degree in anthropology, he set out on a global tour … "[1] But I didn't *only* have a bachelor's degree. I had the curiosity that earning that degree inspired and the tools to pursue that curiosity. As someone who grew up in the rural Midwest at a school that had a "drive your tractor to school" day, I wasn't exposed to a lot of cultural diversity or diversity of thought. College, specifically my anthropology courses, introduced me to cultures I had never imagined.

College students are filled with potential. Seventeen years of building a base of knowledge and skills on which to build a career. As a first-year college student there is pressure to declare a major, to decide what you want to be when you grow up. Senior year is when all of the education and potential success and world-changing rubber meet the road. The "I want to be [blank]" becomes an "I am doing it!" or "I am not doing it because … " Potential and expectations are realized or they aren't.

In the eyes of many, I had not realized my potential, and I had not met expectations.

I envied the future med students and teachers and anyone else who knew what they wanted to do. Their itinerary was set. They'd have to go to school for so many years and then start a career with benefits. I didn't even know what I was going to do when I landed in Kathmandu.

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[1]Gary Ferraro and Susan Andreatta, *Cultural Anthropology: An Applied Perspective* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, Cengage Learning, 2017), 177.

I sort of hated arriving anywhere. I was more comfortable going – permanently in transit. My travels really didn't have a purpose and neither did I, but the monk next to me was about to change that.

Osmosis Jones ended. I took off my headphones.

We sat in silence. The monk chanted while turning the wooden beads of a necklace like my grandma praying the Rosary. A half hour before landing, our bond strengthened over stupid human tricks – a video of people spinning plates or juggling chainsaws, and one man who pulled a string out his ear after having inserted it into a small wound on his little toe.

"How to do? How to do?" The monk, whose name was Sange, laughed. His resting grimace turned into a face-swallowing smile.

"Is the airport close to the city?" I asked him.

"When you get to Kathmandu," Sange said, "where do you stay?"

I didn't have any plans or a guidebook or reservations, just an idea of wanting to go hiking in the Himalayan Mountains we were flying over.

"You come with me," he said. "If you good … stay longer … if not so good, we find you hotel."

We walked out of the airport and were greeted by signs held by his followers. There were flowers, and people came up to him with white cloths known as *khata*. They'd bow before him and then he'd place the cloths around their necks.

Sange was your exact mental picture of a monk – chubby, glowing smile, shaved head, and bright robes – but apparently, given the welcome, he was not an average monk.

I thought he must've been some reincarnated, black belt, sensei monk. Obviously, I didn't know much about Buddhist culture.

We went to Sange's brother's house, where Sange held court.

Young lamas filled a brass cup with Coca-Cola before a straight-faced golden Buddha on an ornately decorated shrine. All of this world is suffering, but Lord Buddha needed his Coke. They lit two sticks of incense, backed away from the shrine, bowed, and left.

I sat across from the shrine on the floor, a steaming cup of putrid, buttery, salt tea before me, jealous of Buddha, wishing I could get a swig of his Coke to wash down my heaping bowl of noodles.

At the head of the room, Sange greeted a steady stream of people coming to pay their respects. They called him Khenpo Sange or simply Khenpo. Think of the title Khenpo as a terminal degree in Buddhist teaching. The respect payers did double takes in my direction, bowed three times, and discussed matters with Sange. Conversations took place in Tibetan, Nepalese, Taiwanese, and, occasionally, even a little English directed at me.

Hours passed, each marked by a plastic cuckoo clock, which chimed out "Happy Birthday" pathetically as if its batteries were running low.

We sat and ate so much – he entertaining audiences, me bored out of my mind.

"Are you bored?" he'd ask.

"Just mindful," I'd respond instead of screaming.

When there was a lull in visitors, we'd chat. He asked about my travels in Thailand and I told him about a guy named Porn who said he would take me to the post office to mail a package and then took me unexpectedly to a whorehouse, which I promptly left. From his position at the head of a small gathering, he rolled in laughter.

My original intent was to go hiking in the Himalayan Mountains, maybe visit Everest base camp. When I told Sange this, he consulted his scrolls to see if it was a good day to start a journey.

"Not today," he'd say.

"Tomorrow?" I'd ask.

And then tomorrow would come, and we'd load into the SUV and see some sights before heading back home.

It was like I was being held hostage by hospitality.

At night we'd walk around the local stupa, a large multitiered structure with a dome in the center and a spire on top. He'd answer my questions about Buddhism. He never evangelized. His lessons were about understanding the world, not understanding a religion – a philosophy more than a faith. Sange was a Mahayana Buddhist. As he described it, our compassion and happiness promote compassion and happiness toward all sentient beings. All living things are connected, and our lives should be in service to them.

Khenpo Sange showed me a world and a worldview vastly different from the mental landscape of the flatlands of the Midwest.

He'd answer some of my questions by buying me books on our nightly walks to the stores surrounding the stupa. I read a lot. I wondered around the compound where monks would be lost in chants or creating intricate art using colored sand, only to wipe it away on completion – a reminder that everything is temporary and therefore attachment could only lead to suffering. Or something like that.

One evening Sange and I walked to the stupa with his nephew Dorjee. *Om mani padme hum*, a common Buddhist chant, droned from a speaker above. We were part of a mass of humanity walking clockwise around the local stupa.

As we walked the required three laps, we passed Internet cafés, tailors, bakeries, and souvenir shops. A legless beggar sat on a board with wheels and lashed out at my shin with her cane. She wanted me to give her money, but I had no money. I didn't need money. Sange took care of everything, even donating on my behalf when I lit 108 prayer candles.

Up to this point in my travels, I went the places tourists were supposed to go and saw what tourists were supposed to see. On the way to the stupa we had passed cows licking their calves, human and animal waste on the street, intestines covered with flies spread out on wooden tables, and a guy with a fridge strapped to his back. On the tourist path, I saw the world through my eyes; but in the eyes of the legless beggar, I saw myself through the eyes of the world, and it made me uncomfortable.

The thick smell of dirt and hot wax hung in the evening air as we finished our third lap and continued on to a fourth.

"I thought that we were doing three laps," I said.

"You do something once," Sange said, "it is not a big deal. Two times, it is a little more important. But three times it is really important. Three laps good. Seven laps better."

I felt the chanting as much as I heard it. A group of robed men sitting on the floor gave life to the damp morning air at 5 a.m. The incense slowly burned, releasing musky overtones in long, black, rising wisps of smoke.

My room sat high on the hillside, overlooking the comings and goings of life in the valley below. From a down cocoon of warmth and comfort, I unzipped my sleeping bag and entered a place and culture that I barely understood.

We were at Sange's monastery south of Kathmandu in the village of Pharping.

Breakfast was ladled out of a smoldering cauldron on a terrace cut in the hillside.

Soon the monastery and its ramparts were swarming with local villagers, pilgrims from Kathmandu, and brightly robed lamas. All were here to welcome Khenpo's teacher, His Holiness Penor Rinpoche, and to dedicate a new shrine at the lamasery to Padmasambhava, an eighth-century Buddhist master who was born out of a lotus and often depicted giving the "rock on" sign meant to repel demons.

"His Holiness is very powerful," Sange explained as we waited for his arrival. "When Chinese forced us away from our homeland, he was one of the last to leave. He left with many men and women. The Chinese follow them to the mountains with guns. They shoot and kill many

people around His Holiness, but the bullets fall at his feet and their grenades do not explode until he has passed. The hike over the Himalaya is very difficult and others die of cold and hunger. His Holiness injures leg, which hurts him even today. Three hundred left Tibet; only 30 make it to India."

I tried to make myself useful during the preparation for His Holiness's visit. I helped lug a welder up the hillside, and, well, that's about all I did. Mostly I ate and played hackey sack and practiced kung fu kicks with the young lamas in training.

As the car of His Holiness Penor Rinpoche, the present-day reincarnation of a monk first born in 1679, came to a stop at the base of the monastery, the gathered crowd surged forward hoping to glimpse or touch him. A robed Secret Service emerged and cleared a tunnel for the short, squat holy man to limp through. *Khata*s were thrown at his head like panties at a rock star.

One by one we filed up to His Holiness, who was seated on an elevated throne. I knelt before him and presented him with a *khata*. He smiled warmly and placed his hand upon my head and ruffled my blond curls – I hadn't had a haircut in months.

The brightly colored walls, the smell of incense, the gold Buddha at the front of the room, the bulletproof monk with my friend Khenpo Sange at his side – it all was so exhilarating. It's not that I was caught up in the religious fervor and believed in reincarnation or bulletproofness; it was that I was a witness experiencing an ancient culture. I was a participant and I was an observer.

Participant observation is a research method employed by anthropologists in which a researcher isn't simply a fly on the wall scribbling in a notebook, but part of the action – sitting in prayer, lighting 108 candles, watching monks gift a gold Buddha Coca-Cola, and getting blessed by a smiling monk with a silk *khata* around my neck.

I felt like I was an anthropologist doing something I was meant to do, something important.

In my anthropology senior seminar we discussed a debate within the scientific community about how much an observer's presence impacts the data. The postmodern school of thought believes that when anthropologists go into the field, they bring back stories rich in context and meaning. The stories can't necessarily be quantified, but they can be appreciated for what they are: glimpses of people at a particular moment that provide value in the act of attempting to see, appreciate, and understand them.

If there is any anthropology occurring in my work, this is it. At least the authors of that anthropology textbook seemed to think

so: "Employing an anthropological lens as a journalist and traveler, Timmerman enables us to see and feel the impact the global economy has on people … "

It's weird now to be an example of applying anthropology. At the time, I was rudderless and felt like the classic example of what not to major in and what not to do with your college degree. I kept seeing anthropology consistently at the top of majors not to major in if you want to be a responsible adult.

Up until I met Sange, I was on the traveling circuit, ticking the boxes of all the things a backpacker should do. It wasn't until meeting him on the plane and his invitation and all the time he put into me that I had my first really amazing cultural experience. He showed me something so different from what I was used to. He made me fall in love with the world and writing about the people I met.

It's the age-old story. Injured traveler meets monk (see Figure 1.1). Monk takes traveler to lamasery in the foothills of the Himalayan Mountains, consults prayer cards, blesses traveler, and fills traveler's belly with rice and lentils. Traveler gets better – and 16 years later realizes the importance of it all.

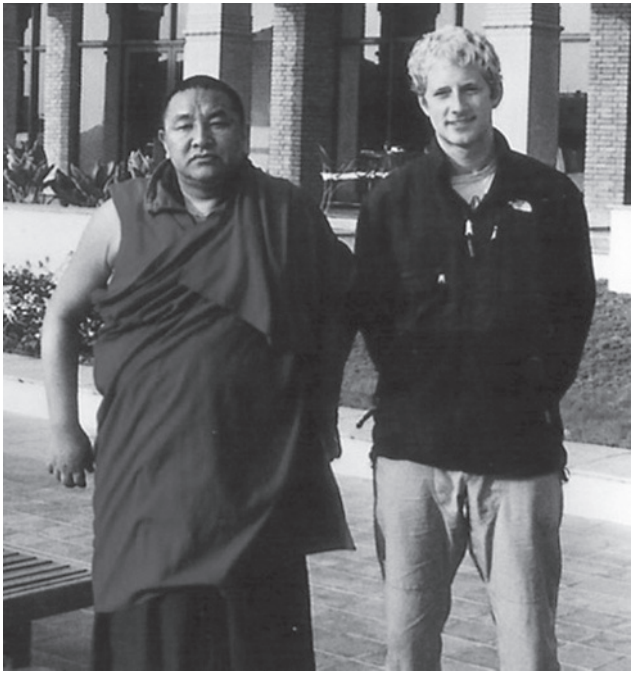

Figure 1.1 Khenpo Sange and the author.

Sange had accepted me into his world and, although I didn't recognize it at the time, helped me discover what I was meant to do. My studies in anthropology weren't going to waste. He had given me the gift of purpose.

In hindsight, his impact is immeasurable on my life.

His wasn't the only gift to influence my trip. The trip was paid for in large part by Grandma's gift, and I wrote about it in the journal my Aunt Cathy gifted me.

In *The Gift: Creativity and the Artist in the Modern World*, Lewis Hyde encourages readers to "think of the gift as a constantly flowing river" and that we are the channels. The river shapes the channel and the channel defines the river. The time, talent, kindnesses, and resources we share – our gifts – don't stop; they are passed on and shared. They flow through us and connect us.[2]

Our lives are shaped by the gifts of others, people making small and large impacts that seem to embed into our DNA and change the course of our lives. Unless we recognize the people who have shaped our journey, we'll think we arrived on our own.

"I have a lot to be thankful for," I wrote in my journal on Thanksgiving Day when I was at Sange's monastery. "Over the last four months I have been living a dream, but also I have seen children in such poverty. I cannot imagine that they will ever have the gift of dreaming. When one has to dream about life's necessities anything else such as traveling seems superfluous."

I had witnessed global poverty, had a beggar whack me with a cane, and was wrestling with what it meant to live in this world of haves and have-nots. I didn't recognize all of this when I was 22 traveling alone. I had a long way to go, and probably still do, but I can see an awakening of gratitude and struggle with privilege in that entry. I began the search for the Good Person Equation. I left Nepal different.

My aunt had written a quote by Sue Ebaugh a few pages ahead of my Thanksgiving post: "Within our dreams and aspirations we find our purpose." "I am a better person for having met Khenpo Sange," I wrote in my journal. "And I will become better in the future."

We have to have gratitude for what has been given to us before we can give in an impactful way. If it weren't for Sange, my grandma, and so many other people, maybe even Osmosis Jones, I wouldn't have had the opportunity to follow my curiosity around the world to meet the people who've helped give my life purpose.

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[2]Lewis Hyde, *The Gift: Creativity and the Artist in the Modern World* (New York: Random House, 2007). 9.