

COMPASSION, INNOVATION,
AND THE FIGHT AGAINST POVERTY

An Accident *of* Geography

FOREWORD BY JIMMY CARTER

RICHARD C. BLUM

with Thomas C. Hayes



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First Edition

*For Dianne
Annette, Heidi, Eileen, and Katherine,
and my seven grandchildren, that each in their own way
I hope will advance the work of global development*

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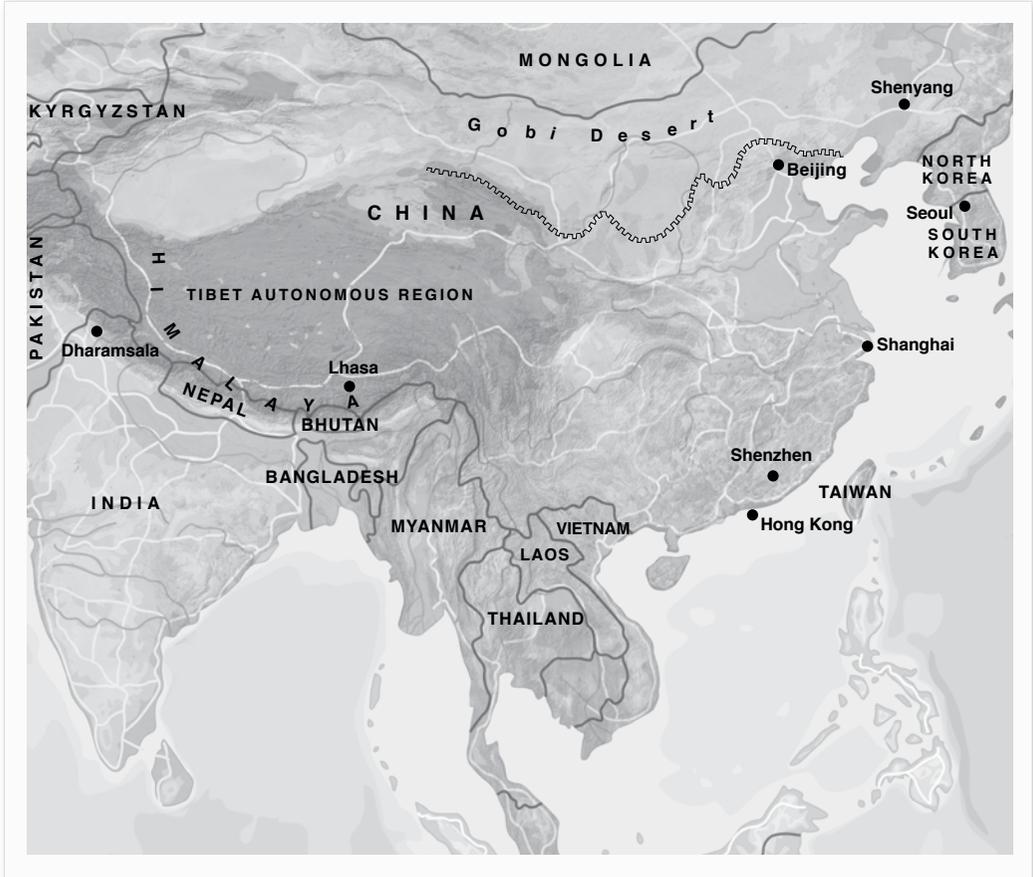
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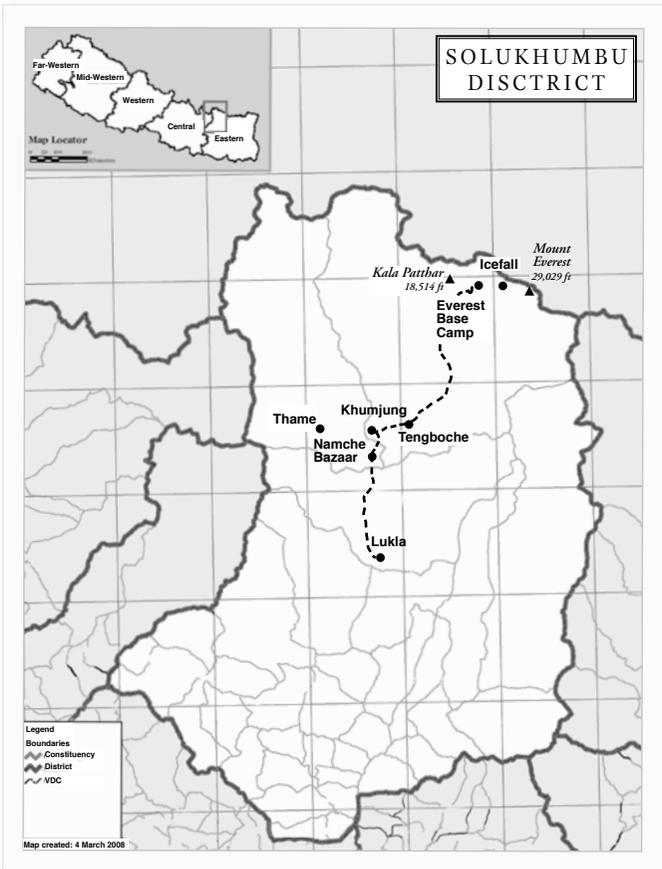
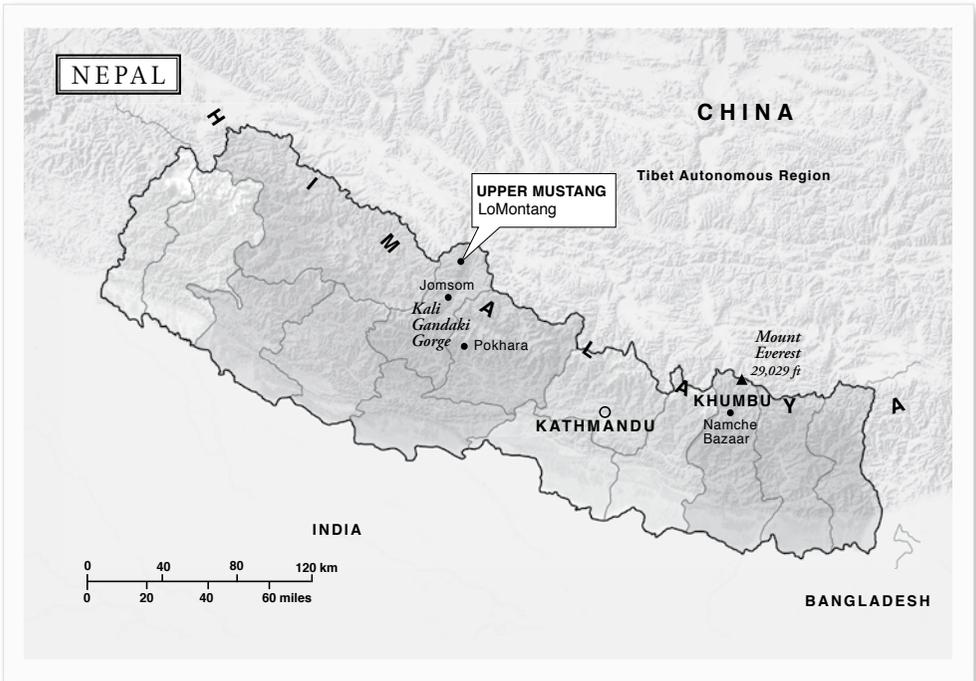
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Foreword

I first met Dick Blum in the 1970s because of politics. He became a friend and advisor to Walter “Fritz” Mondale not long before Fritz became my running mate in our victorious 1976 campaign for the White House, and he then aided Fritz after the election in crafting our administration’s urban policies. But it was trekking with my wife, Rosalynn, and Dick in the rugged mountains near Mount Everest ten years later that first opened my eyes to Dick Blum’s expansive humanitarian commitment.

His initial acts of generosity in Nepal had accelerated, as I learned, through his friendship and work with Sir Edmund Hillary. Both men loved and admired the loyal, hardworking Sherpa people. These two Westerners—one the world-famous conqueror of Everest and former beekeeper from New Zealand, the other a private-equity investor from San Francisco with a long-held fascination for the Himalaya and an eye on Asia’s growing middle class—wanted to help the families and communities of their Sherpa guides.

It was the Sherpas who not only accompanied and cared for them but in fact made possible their personal adventures across

the Himalaya and, in the case of Sir Edmund's world-captivating achievement years before, to the very peak of Everest. So Sir Edmund and Dick asked the Sherpas, *How can we help you?* What they learned set their agenda for the next few decades: build schools and health clinics; restore Tibetan Buddhist monasteries, the wellspring of Tibetans' cultural identity; and introduce hydroelectric power, airplane access, and simple modern conveniences. All this became part of initial development work by Sir Edmund, Dick, and their mountaineering colleagues in Nepal's northeastern Khumbu, in the mountains and valleys beneath Mount Everest.

Following Sir Edmund's philanthropic lead, Dick and a few of his trekking buddies made a long-term commitment to helping the poorest people of Nepal, Tibet, and northern India when they established in 1981 a nonprofit organization, the American Himalayan Foundation. They and their growing roster of donors and volunteers have kept that commitment, often in extraordinary ways and especially in the months following the devastating earthquakes that killed more than nine thousand people and left nearly three million homeless in Nepal in the spring of 2015. Perhaps the foundation's most important work, however, is confronting the scourge of sex slavery by supporting the full-time education of 14,800 vulnerable girls, from early grades through high school.

Dick's American Himalayan Foundation and The Carter Center, our nonprofit organizations focused on improving human rights and health care and founded around the same time, share many principles regarding global development and how to combat poverty. The most important may be putting local people at the center of any project. If people have the right knowledge, encouragement, and skills, and if they have reason to hope, they can change their own lives. We know from more than seventy-five years of combined experience in confronting

poverty in Asia, Africa, and Latin America that focused, disciplined, science-led efforts do work.

Dick is a longtime trustee of The Carter Center. We often have traveled together over the past thirty years, with hours of opportunities to discuss our goals and share ideas. Dick has for many years helped guide our financing at the center. He has journeyed with me often to countries such as Nepal, Burma, Sudan, Nigeria, and Ghana to advocate for democracy, and to Sudan, Ghana, Ethiopia, and elsewhere in Africa as an advisor and funding partner in the center's projects to fight preventable diseases such as Guinea worm, trachoma, and river blindness.

Beyond our work at The Carter Center, Dick is a prominent activist and supporter of public policy organizations and institutions such as The Brookings Institution; the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs; the President's Global Development Council; George Soros's Central European University in Budapest; and the University of California, where he is a longtime member of the governing board of regents and served more than two years as its chairman.

Through many vivid and often surprising accounts, Dick masterfully describes in this book guiding principles and examples of what we know works best in the field in the fight against poverty. Dick and his staff have a hands-on attitude. They know what's happening in these remote villages and communities among the people who are in need. They are efficient. There is minimal bureaucracy and waste. They concentrate, as we do at The Carter Center, on helping the people who are most deprived and neglected, and who suffer from the most correctable problems. I don't believe any nongovernment organization (NGO) can possibly do more with available funds than the American Himalayan Foundation does.

It's no accident that, in addition to serving on the board of the American Himalayan Foundation, I am one of the advisors

of the interdisciplinary academic and research center on combating global poverty that Dick helped establish in 2006. The Blum Center for Developing Economies on the University of California's ten campuses may well be the finest program of its kind in the world. It turns out legions of young graduates who are well prepared with expertise, humility, purpose, and a pragmatic optimism for combating poverty in the United States and globally.

The breadth of Dick's interests, knowledge, experience, and influence in practically every area of life in which he's involved is remarkable. He has been an impressively principled and successful investor. He is a prominent activist in several public policy institutions supporting global development and the spread of democracy. He and his wife of more than thirty-five years, Senator Dianne Feinstein, are longtime supporters of the Tibetan campaign for autonomy within China, with close ties to His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama.

Dick Blum helps improve the policies of each organization, agency, or program in which he's engaged. The heart of our humanitarian work together has always been helping poor people figure out how they're going to get out of poverty.

An Accident of Geography is a book you should read to learn more about progress in and pathways for fighting poverty. You will find many moving stories and concrete examples in the pages that follow. I hope they inspire you to find your place alongside Dick, me, and millions of other activists around the globe who are dedicated to making the developing world work better for its people.

—Jimmy Carter

Introduction

I wrote this book over the past few years with an increasing sense of urgency. While we continue to make progress in fighting poverty, significant challenges remain to raise living standards in the world's poorest communities.

Overcoming those challenges and winning this fight are crucial. Wherever poverty and ignorance continue to exist—and access to dangerous weapons is unchecked—the risk of more conflict and a more dangerous world will continue to threaten us all. Wherever we can help people improve their access to basic health care, food, clean water, and education, we will advance the cause of world peace.

* * *

When I was a University of California undergrad at Berkeley in the 1950s, I traveled by train and hitchhiked across much of Western Europe and northern Africa the summer before my senior year. I didn't really know much about the world. I'd hardly been outside the United States, and not often beyond the San Francisco Bay Area where I grew up.

I never realized how difficult life was for so many. From Vienna to Casablanca, I saw deplorable living conditions for

millions of people. Years later, trekking through remote villages of the Himalaya in Nepal, I realized even more clearly how fortunate I was: the random assignment of family, culture, and basic resources necessary to live a happy life is an accident of geography.

You can do the math in different ways, but the facts are billions of people alive today were born in villages, cities, or countries where they have had little access to the simplest necessities.

What has made my pursuits in business, public policy, and philanthropy deeply interesting *to me*—what I care about most—is the experience of joining with others to study and fight the causes of global poverty.

This book comes out of that cumulative experience.

It's organized in four parts. My particular passion has been helping people in the Himalaya, especially the Sherpa and Tibetan people, and in part 1 I introduce you to people I met in the mountains of Nepal more than thirty years ago who inspired me and my climbing buddies to found the American Himalayan Foundation. We were very lucky—a handful of scruffy climbers with a dream to do good—to have one of the best partners possible, our dear friend the late Sir Edmund Hillary, whose respect for the Sherpas combined with his intensely hands-on and practical way of working still informs our operating style.

AHF now touches the lives of more than three hundred thousand people each year, people throughout the Himalaya who are in need and have no one else—the poorest children, young girls in danger of being sold, destitute elders, refugees adrift, marginalized communities losing their culture.

In part 2, we turn to the importance of the private sector and finance in building scale for ideas and innovations, and building wealth. As a young private equity investor, I began to understand how to manage the dangers and rewards of risk, the importance

of investing for the long term, the role of innovation in growing companies (and economies), and the importance of capital, often foreign capital, in developing economies.

I was curious about why things are as they are, how they might be made better, and what I could do about it. I applied the essential lessons I learned as an investor to our philanthropic mission about how organizations operate best, and how they can spot trends for future growth and focus on core strengths to deliver the best products and services.

Those same essential lessons guided my experiences volunteering in local and national government, as well as multinational think tanks and policy advocacy groups, the focus of part 3. How can public institutions and public policy be better managed to improve the lives of everyday people? How can we better allocate resources? How can we build stronger partnerships?

You can't talk about development and poverty without talking about public policy. And you need to understand how these institutions actually work—and how basic business disciplines can improve them—if you want to develop informed opinions and build valuable partnerships. Understanding improves through action.

Finally, in part 4, we turn to the work that is now the most important in my life in taking on the challenges of reducing global poverty: The Blum Center for Developing Economies at the University of California.

The Center has tapped into a huge unmet, even unanticipated, demand. Our Global Poverty and Practice minor is the most popular on the Berkeley campus. Our multidisciplinary model has influenced unrelated departments at Berkeley and across the UC system in breaking down the infamous silos of academia. The students and faculty are an inspiration to me, tackling and solving real-world problems.

* * *

I'm a realist, and this book certainly covers some grim topics. But I'm also an optimist. Everywhere I look I see progress being made, with people participating at every level of society to solve our biggest problems. That is one message that I hope you will take away from reading this book: everyone has something they can contribute; everyone has something they can do to actively help others less fortunate.

The main point is to keep marching on. As Nelson Mandela said, "After climbing a great hill, one only finds that there are many more hills to climb."

Part 1

*The Passionate
and Inspired*

Chapter 1

Life's Inspiration

“Nothing for me has been more rewarding in life than the result of our climb on Everest, when we have devoted ourselves to the welfare of our Sherpa friends.”

—Sir Edmund Hillary

When I was a boy, one of my most treasured possessions was Richard Halliburton’s *Book of Marvels*. I read and reread his stories—of riding an elephant across the Alps like Hannibal, of swimming the fifty-mile length of the Panama Canal, of flying in a small aircraft close to Mount Everest in 120-mile-an-hour winds. Halliburton wrote with awe about the three attempts by George Mallory to scale Everest and the mystery surrounding the disappearance of Mallory and his partner, Andrew Irvine, on the third try. I pored over the pages again and again, until the book’s large black-and-white photographs and drawings of the world’s great wonders were smudged by years of fingerprints.

So you might imagine how I felt when, in my final year at Lowell High School in San Francisco, I heard the news that

Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay had reached the summit of Mount Everest.

It was May 29, 1953. The impact was stunning—a mix of awe and astonishment around the world. For at least thirty years, millions of people like me had wondered, *If someone ever reached the top of the world, what would they see? Would they be able to breathe, to survive? How would they get there, and how would they get back?* I read some of the answers in the morning *San Francisco Chronicle*.

I was thrilled these two men had made it to the summit, but I was also a little jealous—my opportunity to get there first was gone. Nearly thirty years after their triumph, though, I was excited to lead the first foreign expedition on the only side of Everest that had yet to be climbed, the forbidding Kangshung Face on the east, in Tibet. Sir Ed was with our team, a great honor for me and the last time he ever was on Everest. (Bad weather forced our lead climbers to abandon this historic attempt, as I describe in chapter 11, but two years later six members of that team completed the ascent, aided by the same rope lines they had secured before on Kangshung and by warmer El Niño wind currents.)

When you carry a deep passion, what might seem like magical thinking can lead to something very real. My passion as a young man was trekking in the beautiful lands of the Himalaya. As the years passed, inspired by Sir Ed; my Sherpa guide, Pasang Kami; and other people I met on my journeys there, that passion evolved into finding ways to help the people of Nepal, Tibet, and elsewhere in those mountain ranges improve their lives. Now those activities have expanded dramatically into a much wider ambition and joining with legions of others in the fight against poverty.

Poverty problems are complex. They have to be addressed on multiple fronts to make a lasting impact. Ours include

developing multidisciplinary studies with a strong connection to engineering; helping fund and advise on scores of local projects for poor people in isolated towns and villages in South Asia, such as keeping fifteen thousand Nepali girls in school and safe from sex traffickers, and supporting Tibetan refugees; and assisting former presidents Bill Clinton and Jimmy Carter in the work of their nonprofit organizations. We also fund policy research on poverty and development at the Brookings Institution and advise government organizations such as the US Agency for International Development (USAID) and the President's Global Development Council, which I helped design and initiate.

Pasang Kami

After that astonishing news of Sir Ed and Tenzing's success, it took me fifteen years to make my first trip to the Himalaya, in 1968—and it was exactly the kind of life-changing experience I expected it would be.

Still carrying my dream of seeing Mount Everest and the breathtaking surrounds, I found a way to extend my first business trip in Asia to include Nepal. At the time, it was far from a common destination. When I asked a travel agent in San Francisco about flights to Kathmandu, he replied, "I'm sorry. Our expert on Africa is out to lunch."

In the four weeks I spent backpacking through rhododendron forests, giant bamboo ranges, and otherworldly vistas to reach Annapurna (the tenth-highest peak in the world) and beyond, I never saw another Westerner (other than the two friends who joined me for the first two weeks). It would take another decade for Nepal's reputation as a prized destination for trekkers and climbers to grow.

Our head Sherpa, or *sirdar*, was a polite, generous man named Pasang Kami. He was short and wore glasses but was

also strong. He spoke only when he needed to. On our journey, he looked after everyone, paying careful attention to how I labored through some of the narrow trails, high passes, and deep valleys. He was motivated not by the money we were paying but by the dedication of a devout Buddhist to show compassion for another human being. I liked him immediately.

We shared an obvious desire to learn what we could about each other. Everyone called him P. K.—including his wife, I discovered. He had first worked on trekking expeditions as a cook boy, rising in time to porter, guide, and finally *sirdar*. Trekking or climbing with foreigners offered a better opportunity to support his family than being an assistant cook in the Indian army, where he had earned a pittance of less than fifty cents a day. There were no schools in the mountains where he grew up, so he never had any formal education. But he had ambition and was a hard worker. He had taught himself to read, speak, and write in Nepali and English.

I didn't realize at the time that he would become one of the most important people in my life.

An Epiphany about Destiny, Opportunity

We started our trek from Pokhara, then a quiet town and today a tourist hub with a population of more than 250,000. We spent our first night at a Tibetan refugee camp called Hyangja. People living there and in many similar settlements in Nepal and northern India were among the many thousands who had fled Tibet with little money and few possessions after troops sent by the Chinese government mounted an increasingly ruthless invasion starting in 1950.

The camp resembled a small Tibetan village, with stone buildings, flat roofs, and a small temple. People were incredibly friendly, in a way that, especially given their circumstances, was

spellbinding for a Westerner like me. Small children came and sat in our laps. Some even spoke to us in English. Many had been born in Hyangja or carried there over the mountains on somebody's back. Beneath the smiles and laughter that night, I felt uneasy, inadequate. Here in this isolated encampment was stark evidence of how the hand of fate works randomly across the human race, especially in shaping the lives of the very rich and the very poor, with absolutely no respect for innate talent or potential.

These bright, cheerful kids and their parents seemed trapped in the most forbidding circumstances. In contrast, I had had opportunities for a strong public education and career success, all within twenty miles of the middle-class neighborhood in southwest San Francisco where I had grown up. Barely scratching out an existence as subsistence farmers, the families here often were denied even the most basic needs—access to health care, education, clean water, and especially the wisdom that had passed down through their ancient Tibetan Buddhist traditions. Of course, I had never had to worry about any of these issues. I had accumulated many resources and other advantages by the young age of thirty-two. These children had been born into a place where poverty and isolation from the post-Renaissance world were simply a way of life.

This is all just an accident of geography, I thought. I was certain of that as Scot Macbeth, Ron Lawrence, and I stretched out for the night in our sleeping bags. I was tired after the day's trek from Pokhara and in need of some serious, restful sleep, but restful sleep was not in the cards that night. Many questions raced through my mind: *How can I possibly help these people? How soon can I get started? Who might join me?*

This simple altruistic reflex had been ingrained in me from a young age by two strong-minded women: my mother and my grandmother. Both were good women who were active with

local charities. Donating our time and sharing what we could was always a given in our house. My mother, Louise, known to most everyone as “Lou,” was our Cub Scout den mother when my brother, Bob, and I were young. When we were grown, she volunteered at various art museums and ran the gift shop at the local hospital.

During World War II, my grandmother, Cleveland Heil Hirsch, decided to do her duty and joined the American Women’s Voluntary Services. She was assigned to repairing airplane instruments at McClellan Air Force Base in Sacramento. I can just imagine my five-foot-tall, highly proper grandmother wearing blue jeans or coveralls, lying on her back under an instrument panel for hours every day. She was sixty years old. The grandmother Cleve I knew had never worked outside the home, yet once she signed up for the war effort, it wasn’t long before she won an award for suggesting how a cockpit instrument could be improved.

To me, that first night of the Himalaya trek, “signing up” seemed the obvious thing to do.

My understanding of the situation in the Himalaya was primitive, though. I couldn’t even speculate about plausible answers or solutions. This was the first of many, many fitful nights thinking about these people and their struggles. The injustices were baffling to me. I could not accept them. I do not accept them now.

Khumbu, Land of the Sherpas

I was enthralled by what I saw of Nepal on that first trip and anxious to return to the Himalaya. I had always wanted to see the Everest area, where most Sherpas live—in the Khumbu part, within what is known as the Solukhumbu District—even more so now because of our new connection with P. K.

The Sherpas originally migrated from eastern Tibet—the name

in Tibetan literally means “people of the east”—several hundred years ago through what is known as the Nangpa La, a pass at an elevation of more than nineteen thousand feet into Solukhumbu.¹ They share the Tibetan heritage in language, clothing, and Tibetan Buddhism. Sherpa guides and porters were vital to the success of the early Western explorers in the Himalaya. Their mountaineering skills and ability to tolerate extreme altitudes are emblematic traits of the singular Sherpa culture. So is their adaptability.²

In 1970, two years after our first trip, Scot Macbeth and I found ourselves hiking up the mountainside from tiny Lukla Airport toward P. K.'s village, an ancient trading center known as Namche Bazaar. We trekked along the fast-flowing Dudh Kosi River and through the Himalayan forest, passing small Sherpa huts and villages, each with dome-shaped Buddhist meditation and worship houses known as *gompas*. We saw prayer wheels—small cylinders bearing sacred written prayers that, when spun, are believed to bring the same benefits as prayers recited orally, and strings of colorful prayer flags rippling and snapping in the breeze.

Himalayan Buddhists believe spiritual beneficences etched on the prayer flags, known as *lungtas* or “wind horses,” are received by all who are touched by the winds that animate the flags. The most important mantra in Buddhism, *Om Mani Padme Hum*, is a prayer for protection from danger and a call to compassion, “the Jewel in the Heart of the Lotus.” You see it in Tibetan script adorning prayer flags, prayer wheels, and mani stones—large, smooth stones with this or other mantras etched into the surface—wherever you go in the Himalaya, but especially in the Khumbu. His Holiness the Dalai Lama tells us the mantra is best understood as six syllables embodying Buddha's teachings on the six realms of existence in suffering.³

As we neared Namche Bazaar, we could see Mount Everest for the first time through the trees. Chomolungma, “Mother

Goddess of the World” in Tibetan, or “Sagarmatha,” as Nepalis have called it for centuries, was more exciting than I had anticipated. We stood on a ridge above the village, enthralled by the wonderful vistas before us. Everest was in the distance; closer at hand were the soaring, snow-covered peaks of Thamserku, Kangtega, Ama Dablam, and Lhotse, the world’s fourth-highest mountain at nearly twenty-eight thousand feet. Glancing downward, we saw verdant forests and, thousands of feet below, rivers in the deep gorges of two canyons.

For us, arriving in Namche Bazaar was like traveling into the past. The tableau was rough and rustic. There were no hotels then. Most people lived in little huts—sheds, really—with holes in the ceiling for smoke to rise from fires lighted daily for cooking and heat. The rooms were smoky. Tuberculosis was widespread. Food was scarce.

P. K. invited us to stay with him, his wife, Namdu, and the four children they had at that time. As I came to learn, P. K. was known around the Khumbu villages as ambitious, even a bit wily, when it came to latching on to foreign trekkers. He was eager for the business at a time when there weren’t many Western visitors. Maybe that is why his homestead was better than most.

The family lived in a two-story house made of stone and coated with a plaster of mud and dung to fill in the cracks for warmth. The door was about five feet high and nearly as wide, making it easy for their livestock—a cross between yaks and cattle—to enter. The animals spent their nights downstairs; the family used the living area upstairs. Typical of the Sherpas and other Himalayan mountain dwellers, the family cooked indoors over an open fire. There was no chimney. Smoke filled the house, not to mention our nostrils, clothing, and hair. We retrieved water from a nearby stream and used the outhouse outside the front door.

Everything used in Namche Bazaar was either grown nearby or carried by yaks or porters long distances through

the mountains. P. K.'s house was constructed in Bhutanese style without a single nail, and the two windows had no glass. Instead, a wooden lattice holding two dozen small squares of thin paper filled each opening. These paper "windows" softened the wind and the cold, and allowed a little light in. The walls were built from rough, dark wood secured by jute rope. There was no electricity or interior lighting. We went to bed soon after dark fell, on Tibetan carpets rolled out in the main room. And we were deeply grateful for the hospitality.

During my early treks in the Himalaya, I quickly came to appreciate, as many Westerners have before and since, that Sherpas are exceptional people. Generosity and kindness are revered in their Buddhist tradition—essential conduct for ever-higher rebirth on the spiritual journey toward nirvana. The sacred nature of these traits no doubt is closely linked to, and magnified by, the harsh conditions of the high mountains. Years later, recalling our journeys in the Khumbu, Jimmy Carter said to me, "I have never met any people as admirable in their friendship, their unselfishness, and their eagerness to do what is right than the Sherpas who helped us in the Himalayan region."

Your Daughters Are My Daughters

Over the years, P. K. was my guide on many trips in Nepal. More than that, he was my close friend, and I was welcomed always as a member of his extended family.

P. K. eventually had six children—one son and five daughters—in an era when it was rare for any Sherpa girl, or Sherpani, to have an education beyond grammar school. The odds were not much better for Sherpa boys. One day in the early '70s, about to board a plane back to Nepal after a trip to the United States, P. K. said to me, "Dick, if my daughters don't get an education, and they don't get married, they'll spend their lives carrying loads up

and down their mountain.” For P. K., enrolling his children in school would mean having to send them to boarding school in Kathmandu. This was not something he could afford.

“P. K., from today on, your daughters are my daughters,” I promised him. “You get them into school. We’ll help educate them.”

When some of my climbing buddies heard of my promise to P. K., they wanted to do the same for the children of their Sherpa guides. It seemed the least we could, and should, do: an expression of thanks to these men who not only risked their lives to support our dreams, but were such soulful companions amid what were, for us, extraordinarily challenging physical conditions.

Thus was born my first charitable organization: the Sherpa Scholarship Fund. We helped support the education of hundreds of Sherpa children. I kept my pledge to P. K., helping to educate his children and grandchildren. All of his children attended schools in Kathmandu, three attended college in the United States, and one of his grandsons was a straight-A student at the University of San Francisco.

For me, the success of P. K.’s children shows so clearly that when children anywhere in the world are given the right resources, under the right conditions, many will thrive, and some will accomplish wonders. Poor kids are no less smart or capable than any kid with better access to education and opportunity. P. K.’s oldest daughter, Nawang Doka, is a shining example.

One year, we took a family vacation to Hawaii, and Nawang was with us. It was the first time Nawang had ever seen an ocean. She didn’t know how to swim. Annette, the eldest of my three daughters, remembers her leaping agilely across some nearby rocks, “like a mountain goat,” avoiding a shallow pool of water near the beach. I gave her a mask and snorkel and said, “Come on, you’ve got to see this! Just let me hold on to you.” As she floated face down, breathing through a snorkel, I expected her

to stiffen from fear, but she was completely relaxed—that Sherpa adaptability at work.

Nawang hoped to study dentistry after graduating college in Kathmandu, but she needed a program that was adapted for a cold-weather climate like the Khumbu. The only suitable training was at a small academy in Saskatchewan, 250 miles north of the Montana border. At times, Nawang's life there was difficult. She felt isolated, lonesome, a cultural misfit. Yet she persevered.

When she returned to Nepal, diploma in hand, she opened the first dental clinic in the Sherpa village, along the Everest mountain trail where she was raised. For nearly thirty years, she has been the only practicing dental technician Namche Bazaar has ever had. I am delighted that Nawang took her triumph in the Saskatchewan classrooms back to the Khumbu community she loved. She returned well-prepared, and has given hundreds of people the comfort of better health care—and more radiant, pain-free smiles—with advanced, modern techniques. That makes me smile, too.

Sir Ed and the Push for Schools

I was trekking once again in the Everest region in 1978 when I came across a tall, lanky New Zealander. I recognized him instantly. It was Sir Edmund Hillary. I introduced myself and told him I was a great admirer. He was gracious and humble even though strangers came up to him all the time to shake his hand and share favorite stories. I told mine—how thrilling and motivating his and Tenzing's achievement on Everest had been for me—and mentioned my modest efforts to help Sherpa children with the scholarship fund, and we continued on our separate ways.

At that point in his life, Sir Ed had dedicated himself to the Sherpas for nearly two decades. He was determined to improve

their living conditions and opportunities, and he often remarked that what he did after climbing Mount Everest—giving back to the people who had helped him and Tenzing—was more important than reaching the top. The Sherpas came to regard Sir Ed as their greatest modern benefactor.

The spark that started it all was the answer he got from a Sherpa friend when Sir Ed asked what he could do to help. “Our children have eyes but they cannot see,” the friend replied. They needed schools, he said, to open their eyes to the world. Sir Ed immediately went to work with local Sherpas to build a school in Khumjung, a village above Namche Bazaar.

At the time, in 1961, most people in Khumjung and the neighboring villages were illiterate, and the local agricultural economy was barely at subsistence level. More than fifty years later, there are sixty-three schools in Solukhumbu, with over six thousand students in classes from nursery school through tenth grade. The flagship, Khumjung Secondary School, has 317 students, mostly from surrounding villages and some from farther away who live in a hostel. Khumjung’s students are remarkably successful: 97 percent pass their school leaving exams—double the national average for public schools.

In recent years, there have been changes in the Khumbu as many Sherpas, now much more prosperous, have moved to Kathmandu and beyond, and other Nepali ethnic groups have come to make the Everest area home. As a result, the student population is more diverse, and schools are merging as enrollment has declined. Once again there is a push to improve the quality of education.

Access to education is crucial for all Sherpas and Nepalis who dream of lives beyond subsistence farming or bearing heavy loads for neighbors, tourists, trekkers, or others. The country’s population is fast-growing, now at twenty-eight million, and as Internet access improves, most young people understand more

clearly than ever that education is critical for their future. They increasingly have role models who show what can be accomplished. Many students from remote Nepali villages have become foresters, engineers, and teachers.

Building the Khumjung school was just the beginning for Sir Ed. The Himalayan Trust he founded in 1960 in Nepal pulsated with his energy and commitment. He believed the climbing community owed a large debt to the Sherpas, who made their mountaineering expeditions possible at great risk to their own lives. The Himalayan Trust went on to develop not only schools but also clinics and clean-water projects all over the Everest region.

“To many Western eyes, the Everest region is a place of great beauty and high mountains to be conquered,” Sir Ed said when the Himalayan Trust was created. “For the Sherpas who live there, however, life has few privileges. Medicine and education are scarce, bridges and paths are often destroyed, and the forests on which they depend are rapidly depleting.” Later, he told an interviewer, “I suddenly decided that instead of just talking about it, why didn’t I try and do something . . . I was brought up to believe that if you had a chance to help people worse off than you, then you should do it. Plus I really enjoyed the work.”⁴

LIKE DRIVING INTO A PARKING GARAGE AT 80 MILES AN HOUR

Sir Ed had scouted the area below Namche Bazaar for a landing strip before his 1953 expedition, but came up short in finding a suitable field or pasture where he might be able to fly in loads of equipment. He knew after the expedition that if he were going to build schools and clinics, the Khumbu would need an airport. Airlifting construction materials and equipment in a matter of hours instead of having them ferried up narrow mountain trails on the backs of Sherpa porters for eighteen days would sharply reduce the cost of and time required for any project.

This time he spotted a place that seemed right, but the Sherpas misunderstood him and started building along a moderately sloping hillside at a place known as Lukla. Lukla was not even large enough to be called a village. There were a few herders' huts and potato fields. That was it.

Landing at Lukla today is like driving into a parking garage at eighty miles an hour. The airstrip is one of the highest, most dangerous in the world. The paved runway is just fifteen hundred feet long (or one-fourth the length of typical runways in US airports) and slopes upward for incoming flights at an unusually steep grade of 12 percent. On their approach, pilots first must fly across a canyon, avoid a steep left-to-right hillside where the ground is so close that you can see trekkers' footprints in the dirt as you pass above, and then nearly stall the aircraft to descend rapidly.

Once on the ground, the pilots can't relax. In the trekking season, up to forty small plane flights arrive each morning from Kathmandu, all within a few hours. Each aircraft has only a few minutes to disembark incoming passengers, load outgoing passengers on board, and get airborne again. The sequence has to be rapidly, carefully choreographed. Flying in and out of Lukla is always hair-raising.

Sir Ed's main motivation for building the airport was to better connect the Sherpas to the outside world and aid local development. In reality, the airport's largest impact was in luring many thousands of tourists, most of whom arrived after a thirty-minute flight from Kathmandu. By the 1990s, tourism had easily become the biggest contributor to the Khumbu's economy.

P. K. was early to spot the economic opportunities that tourism would bring to the region. He founded a trekking company and participated in expeditions to Everest, Dhaulagiri, and Annapurna, among other places. He helped introduce

hydroelectric power to Namche Bazaar and built one of the first travelers' lodges in the area: the Khumbu Lodge, now managed by P. K.'s son, who studied business in Australia. Nearly fifty of these inns now stand where dozens of Sherpa huts once dotted the terrace farmlands near Namche Bazaar. P. K. and Namdu's original house is the only one that remains.

Partners for Impact

Sir Ed was an inspirational figure and a tremendous organizer, but not a fund-raiser. Some months after our chance encounter in the Himalaya in 1978, we arranged to meet in San Francisco. Over lunch at the Fairmont Hotel, we explored how we might collaborate to do more for the Sherpas.

Sir Ed remembered my brief mention of our Sherpa Scholarship Fund, which, he said, was why he wanted to follow up in person. He needed money to pay villagers in Khumjung who could provide room and board and other help for kids who lived too far away to walk every day to and from his school. He wondered if I could help. If those kids' families didn't have the money to cover room and board (and most did not, he told me), the school would never reach its potential. Nor would those kids.

"Sure," I said, "I'll be glad to provide funding for room and board." And I had a request to make of him in return.

Those scholarships my friends and I were funding were going to the kids of fathers who had been our guides, but not necessarily to the most deserving or motivated students in their communities. But we had been mulling over doing something bigger and more organized. We wanted to get our funds to where they would do the most good, but we needed someone near Namche Bazaar, someone who knew the families and the kids who might

benefit most, not just Sherpas we had befriended. I said, “We’d like to do more, but we want to do it in a fair way.”

Sir Ed immediately signed up to be our agent. He would tap the most promising kids in the Khumbu to receive help from the Sherpa Scholarship Fund. In turn, climbers in our group had the option to continue supporting their guides’ children on their own, which is what I did for P. K. and others. A win-win.

And that is how, in 1981, I joined with several friends and colleagues to establish the American Himalayan Foundation. Over the years, we have been quiet partners continuously with the Himalayan Trust. The handshake agreement with Sir Ed at the Fairmont laid the groundwork for what I consider a classic model of effective partnerships in philanthropy. (I’ll come back to this in chapter 3.) The tally of infrastructure and environmental support overseen through the Himalayan Trust, as of mid-2014, after more than three decades, was twenty-seven schools built; thirteen medical clinics and two hospitals established; numerous monasteries restored; clean-water systems provided to villages; and two million trees planted to reforest the mountains.

Nearly a quarter century after he and Tenzing Norgay summited Everest, Sir Edmund Hillary became one of my closest friends and a true mentor. Even after his passing in 2008, he remains one of my great inspirations. Tenzing Norgay’s eldest son, Norbu Tenzing, has been a friend and valued colleague as vice president of the American Himalayan Foundation for more than twenty years.

Every year, the American Himalayan Foundation (AHF) touches the lives of three hundred thousand Sherpas, Nepalis, Tibetans, and others throughout the Himalayan range. From our headquarters in San Francisco and our regional office in Kathmandu, we have raised tens of millions of dollars, and join with local partners on more than 175 projects that we help fund in this part of the world. You’ll find AHF projects in the remotest

far west of Nepal, throughout the ancient kingdom of Mustang, with the Sherpas in the Khumbu at the foot of Mount Everest, and throughout the Kathmandu Valley down to the jungles in the Terai region bordering India. AHF also supports many Tibetan refugee communities in India.

There are more than 2.3 million charitable organizations operating in the United States, and more than 1.5 million registered with the Internal Revenue Service, according to the National Center for Charitable Statistics,⁵ but we have not come across another charitable organization with a profile quite like ours. We work in a country—Nepal—where government has little ability to assist in what we do. We consult with a government in exile: the Central Tibet Administration in Dharamsala, India. And we work in Tibet, which has been ruled by the Chinese since the 1950s takeover.

We help people who have nowhere else to turn with education, care for the aged, surgeries and rehabilitation for children, restoring deforested lands, and reclaiming monasteries or building nunneries, which are important Tibetan Buddhist cultural centers. We know the territory and work closely with local partners to create the greatest impact with the least possible cost. And we have succeeded in ways we never imagined when we started more than thirty years ago. Over the next few chapters I'll describe our approach in greater detail, as well as the wide impact of the work of our partners—proof that progress is possible.

P. K. and Sir Ed's Tremendous Influence

In 2003, at the American Himalayan Foundation's annual dinner in San Francisco, we celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of Sir Ed and Tenzing reaching the summit of Mount Everest. Looking out on the faces of hundreds of people gathered before him, and

reflecting on four decades of service that had helped improve the lives of many thousands, Sir Ed spoke with characteristic grace and humility:

I have been fortunate enough to be involved in many exciting adventures. But when I look back over my life, I have little doubt that the most worthwhile things I have done have not been standing on the summits of mountains or at the North and South Poles, great experiences though they were. My most important projects have been the building and maintaining of schools and medical clinics for my good friends in the Himalaya—and helping with their beautiful monasteries, too. These are the things I will always remember.⁶

Pasang Kami and Sir Ed Hillary were role models for me, each in their own way. P. K. taught me many things both subtle and sublime about compassion, kindness, and courage. When he visited us in San Francisco in the early 1970s, he carved a mani stone in our yard, and that stirred me to build a meditation center nearby. He was more than a friend; our lives were bound together in many ways. Sadly, in 2000, he was diagnosed with a liver ailment. I brought him to the United States for treatment, but there was nothing doctors could do. He passed away a few years after the millennium at the age of sixty-two.

These two men changed the course of my life, inspiring me first to do whatever I could to help poor people across the Himalaya and then to broaden our efforts to reduce global poverty. This work has been so rewarding to me personally that I can't conceive of letting up. Roughly half of the world's population still lives on \$2 a day or less. I know that if each of us will choose to play a role in fighting poverty—wherever we are, however we can, whatever our age or station in life—there is no doubt we

will cut that ratio dramatically over the next twenty years. What ratio will reporters be citing then?

My motivation as a young man in going to Nepal was the mountains, but in the end it was P. K. and Sir Ed who inspired me to serve others.