

Pasquaney *archives*



So there I was, the glory of the world before me spread out like a feast, in that rugged land where the earth stretches out to kiss the heavens and humanity lives on the verge of annihilation, clutching to life by the teeth. There was I, a child still green to the daylight, a boy filled with a father's dreams and a mother's sense, a man waiting to take shape like thunderclouds pressing in on some western peak. All of this and more was in the moment, all of me and more was there, and I was about to die.

I was seventeen, I stood over sixteen thousand feet above the seas, the Himalayan mountains of Pakistan rolling out before me like so many waves of granite in every direction. I had come here with my father to help him fulfill a lifelong dream of hiking to the base camp of K2, the world's second largest mountain, and perhaps its most fierce. Thousands of miles and dollars and hours of preparation lay behind us, nights of restless anticipation, years of ambition and a constant, interminable fear.

Since our arrival in Pakistan two weeks earlier, and as we had ascended into the higher regions of the north, I had become ill. For those of you who need refreshing, as you increase your altitude from sea level, that is, as you climb higher and higher, the amount of oxygen available for you to breathe becomes lower and lower. This fact can become rather problematic for your body. The air you are breathing now is passed through your lungs into your bloodstream, where it is transferred via your heart to other vital organs, like your brain, which need oxygen to function properly. Now, when there is less oxygen in the air, your body will usually compensate for that inconvenience by speeding up your blood flow, thereby supplying your organs, and your brain in particular, with a decent amount of oxygen.

My blood would not speed up.

I had developed altitude sickness, which is often only temporary; however if it persists and worsens, it can result in cerebral edema and death. Edema can perhaps best be compared to drowning on dry land – after a period of what amounts to suffocation, your body simply collapses. We didn't yet know if my sickness would get better or worse, however if worse, then I would have to leave the mountains quickly, or die there.

So we had come to an event horizon of sorts, a point on our hike where, should we press forward, we would be unable to turn back should my condition become worse. We had taken a day to visit lake Sapara, the highest lake in the world, around which the Himalayas unfold in their full splendor. About the lake rise ridges which offer spectacular views of the mountains for miles. It is the closest thing to the roof of the world that I have ever seen. I had decided to hike one of these ridges as a test for myself, as a barometer of my health, for if I could not do this hike, then the rest of the trail to K2 would certainly be beyond me.

I set off under the noonday sun, climbing higher and higher, watching the lake and my father below me grow smaller and smaller. Everything within me burned to crest that ridge, to stand atop the world and lookout over it, to not let myself down, to not let my father down, to conquer the earth below my feet and the sickness within my body.

Upwards I pressed, my body aching, my head dizzy until at last I had to stop and sit down for rest. I will never forget that moment, looking down at the lake, the crest rising up to my left only a quarter mile, less even,

away. I could barely breathe. My body was numb and distant. I was dying.

I knew then that I had to turn back. So I left the mountain unbeaten and untrod, and within a few days, my father and I would leave Pakistan having never made it to K2.

All of you will live this experience in one form or another. All of you will raise yourselves up to meet challenges, set out with all of your acumen and passion to build a tower of accomplishment higher than the highest clouds. And all of you will see this tower crumble like dry sand.

And when that moment comes, when what you have lifted up has fallen, when what you have created is destroyed, when what you have put everything into has become nothing, when your world collapses about your ears and the tears stream your face in torrents – at that moment, I have only one bit of advice for you.

Fall to your knees, stretch out your arms, and thank whatever higher power you choose for the opportunity which is now before you. For in that moment, in that instant, in that second you will find the clarity of your true character.

The clarity of your true character.

A mirror will spring up before you, a window into your soul, in which a reflection of your truest self will appear.

Now, what you see there may frighten you. Some people turn from that mirror in shame, their failures overwhelming them, and they spend the rest of their days trying to forget and ignore what they saw.

On that ridge in Pakistan, this option was very tempting.

However, life is nothing if it is not a choice, and when in the heart of conflict and hardship you see within yourself, you have yet another option.

If you are lucky enough to find yourself in a moment of anguish, then that can become a moment of pure revelation.

Let me illustrate this point with another story. On the road from here to there, a man in the full of his life went bustling along. Without realizing it, he walked straight towards a gaping hole in the middle of the road and fell in head first. Initially he was panicked, and only felt the bruise on his arm from the fall. As he lay on the bottom, his gaze drifted up the walls of his hole, and his heart sank at the depths to which he had fallen, for he feared he would never get out. However as his eyes moved upwards, he saw something that he had never seen before. The sky. Somehow his whole life he had managed to ignore or avoid looking at it, because he was too busy with this or that – but now there it was, glowing down on him in all its beauty, and he felt a peace and sense of self-awareness that had always been missing from his life.

On that ridge in Pakistan, I was in quite a hole.

But what a view of the sky.

That is why I left that mountain not with despair but with joy. I left not fearing death, but overwhelmed by the beauty of life, by what still lay waiting for me. Nothing to me was worth dying for, yet everything was worth living for. I left not with shame, but with pride, not with despair, but with hope, not with regret, but with

expectation.

Looking inward I saw not what I could not do, but all that was still to be done. I saw friends arms waiting to embrace me, I heard laughter and music yet unsung. My cup was not half-empty, neither was it half-full, rather was it running over.

I have spent much of my time in this life trying to find meaning in it. I've fallen into hole after hole after hole – some so big that it astounds me that I didn't see them coming. However each time I fall, I am grateful for the opportunity I have to step back from myself and examine where I was going in the first place and what was I doing there. Often times the hole I fell into stopped me from traveling down the road to self-destruction unawares.

All of you will find conflict in life, and all of you will be given the chance in conflict to discover yourselves. What you find there, and whether you make of it good or ill, is up to you. I hope that all of you find the strength and courage to make good.

Thank you.