

“WHEN STRANGERS BECOME FRIENDS” LESSONS FROM THE DISTANT TRAIL

For two full weeks, I was simply called “John,” later nicknamed “the Padre Stick Machine.” I’ll explain that one later. My experience in Nepal, if nothing else, was certainly “outside the box,” and yet was an incredible experience. There were eight of us in our group, none having previously met each other, most of whom were half my age. Singles hailed from England, Brazil, and Norway. A married couple was from New Zealand, and finally a Louisiana Navy man stationed in Peru (whose wife joined him immediately after the trek) rounded out the group. My brother Andy made a great first impression when on the first day he fixed someone’s daypack, by means of the handy sewing kit he had brought. The stitched seam held the entire trip. It’s not easy bringing strangers together, eating three meals a day and living in close quarters throughout a grueling trek of 120 km, much of it over rough terrain.

While we gained an average of 500 meters of altitude per day, often the “rise” in altitude began with a 200 meter descent, only to have to make up that “loss” later in the day with a grueling 45-minute climb back up a natural staircase. The times in which we walked on level terrain provided much needed respite from the more typical up-and-down. We crossed the river many times over suspension bridges and steadily made our way from beautiful forests lush with rhododendron to a much less hospitable climate closer to Everest Base Camp. Some wore shorts as the nearly constant sun warmed us, only to have the temperatures drop rapidly in the final two days. Wondering why I packed my warm jacket, knowing that it added weight to the pack, I was grateful for its use in the end.

I learned many lessons on my two-week trek about the value of teamwork, about adversity in the midst of tremendous beauty and about how generous people step up to the plate to help others when they are down. My training up and down the stairs by the James J. Hill House was clearly the difference in my being successful. Had I not trained, I suspect that I would have opted for the (expensive) helicopter ride back to the point of departure. Going downhill was much harder for me than going uphill, and the irony of that was not lost on the group. On the third day, the Navy ensign announced to me— “You are a machine!” as I made good time going up steep inclines, gratefully absent of any breathing problems associated with the increase in altitude. But going downhill, I was tentative, fearing a misstep that might twist an ankle. The extra pressure on the knees going down large steps (often just huge boulders with an 18-inch drop) was significant. I was slow as molasses! My brother taught me a new technique for maneuvering downhill grades and I improved, but always used my walking sticks.

We were truly blessed with **two excellent local guides** who took our vitals each evening to determine our available oxygen and resting heart rate, and porters who carried our larger duffel bags, relieving us of the burden of carrying anything other than a day pack, which seemed heavy enough some days! There were no outlets in the rooms and usually just a dim bulb, as electricity is at a premium. The only heated room was the main dining hall, and people often huddled around the stove until warm enough to go to bed in frigid temps. This did not bother me, as I had a warm sleeping bag, though it was painful to get out to change or use the restroom down the hall! But the number of times that someone in the group offered a treat (a fruit chew or caramel) they had purchased or asked “Would you like some sunscreen?” was truly amazing. I encountered some of the most unselfish people I have ever met, each looking out for the other.

We had many and varied conversations on the trail or at meals. Other times, we walked alone as the group stretched out a bit during the day. I hit the proverbial “wall” in the days arriving and departing Base Camp, utterly exhausted, but through God’s grace, I persevered. When I stumbled into lunch one day, probably a good twenty-five minutes after everyone else, the group applauded! Two days later they were amazed at how I was in the front of the pack again. I lost track of the number of times I **prayed a Rosary** while walking, my sole “alone” time the entire trip. I cherished it, taking full advantage and on the toughest and most grueling ascents, I tried to offer up my aches, knowing how it paled in comparison to our Lord’s walk on the on the road to Calvary. “He holds in his hands the depths of the earth, and the highest mountains as well” (Psalm 95). Thankfully, my health was good throughout the trek.

On our final night together I was asked to lead grace at dinner, and was honored to do so. But it was very good for me to engage with people on a completely different level, without the obvious distinction of being a member of the clergy. I saw unparalleled beauty, especially from lesser-known peaks in the Himalayan massif. Mt. Everest is often hidden behind other large peaks, and does not stand out as much on its own as others, such as **Ama Dablam** (22,500ft.) or **Nuptse** (25,700ft.). The sheer majesty of the range is difficult to describe, as is the harshness of the landscape above the tree line, which became windy, rocky and grey, rendering the green trees, flowers and occasional mountain goats but a distant memory. The entire trip was symbolic to me of our journey in this “valley of tears,” both the joys and challenges of walking with the Lord. We are invited to walk with the Lord this Holy Week, and I encourage your full participation. I assure you that my next “vacation” will consist solely of sitting by Lake Superior, watching the waves come in and out.

- This year’s **Good Friday Collection** once again goes to support Christians in the Holy Land. It is a Pontifical Collection, meaning it is taken at the request of the Pope. According to Cardinal Leonardo Sandri, prefect of the Congregation for Easter Churches, this collection will help Christians who face “war, poverty, terrorism, violence, division.”
- Since the NHL announced it would not sponsor players to the 2018 Winter Olympics (the Games coincide with the NHL season) perhaps we can hope for the Olympics of old, with college players from the USA competing against the world’s elites in a repeat of Lake Placid, 1980? The USA Gold that year remains one of sports all-time greatest feats.
- **Pope Francis** recently called for making confessions a “pastoral priority.” I’d like to think he would be proud of the seriousness with which we take the sacrament here, offering it six days per week. We are doing our best to retain some extra confessors during Holy Week. Please see the attached Holy Week schedule.

Sincerely in Christ,
Fr. John L. Ubel,
Rector

