

## BECAUSE IT IS THERE

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I always wanted to see Everest with my own eyes. More than 50 years ago, when I was 10 years old, I lived in England for a year, and I remember my mother taking me to see a film called *The Conquest of Everest* soon after the first successful ascent by Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay. I was fascinated by the story of their climb long before I began to climb mountains – or even thought about climbing mountains –and images of that extraordinary expedition remained with me in the years that followed. Last year, while living in Christchurch, New Zealand, I was looking through movie titles at a DVD store, and came upon a digital copy of the film I thought I would never see again, and I quickly purchased the only available copy. As I watched it there, and again on my return home, I could feel the same fascination I felt in 1954, and it provides me with a starting point for my story. It's not a great film, and it doesn't really have much good climbing footage as the British team worked its way up the mountain. But it does provide snapshots of early climbers, breathtaking views of the mountains, and descriptions of acclimatization process, and so offers a good overview of prior efforts to conquer Everest, and puts the larger story into perspective.

Westerners in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century knew there was a very high mountain in the Himalayas near the border not far from India where Nepal and Tibet come together. The mountain, of course, had a name. The Nepalese called it Sagarmatha, goddess of the sky, while the Tibetans called it Jomulungma, goddess, mother of the world, but the British, in their inimitable way, insisted on using their own terms and referring to it as Peak XV. Then in 1852, a major survey in India applying the technique of triangulation determined that it was 29,002 feet tall, making it clear that it was indeed the highest mountain in the world. A few years later, the British named it Everest after Sir George Everest, who had been surveyor general earlier. Over the past 150 years, better measuring techniques,

using Doppler satellite transmissions, have indicated that the mountain is really 29,028 feet tall, and growing slightly every year as geologic plates push against one another, but there has never been any question about its stature at the tallest on the globe.

At the time of the first measurement, both Nepal and Tibet were closed to outsiders. But in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Tibet granted limited access to explorers and traders, and Westerners began to dream of climbing the mountain. A reconnaissance team went to the region in 1921, and the first assault on the summit came the next year. Those making the first attempt reached almost 27,000 feet, and extraordinary accomplishment. The climbers on the second attempt went about 500 feet higher. In the third attempt on the same expedition, 7 Sherpas – local people living on the mountain who assisted the climbers in carrying supplies and navigating the terrain – lost their lives. But no one came close to the top.

Two years later, in 1924, Englishman Edward Felix Norton reached 28,126 feet, just 900 feet short of the summit, before succumbing to exhaustion and snow blindness. Slowly, the mountain was succumbing, but it was still not certain that success was possible.

Then, just 4 days after Norton's attempt, two other members of the same British team set out for the top. George Leigh Mallory, a veteran climber, and Andrew Irvine, a young novice, were determined to climb even higher than anyone had done. Mallory had been the driving force behind all the earlier expeditions, and while lecturing with lantern slides to an audience in the United States, he responded to an American newspaperman asking why he wanted to climb Everest with the classic comment that provides the title for this paper: "Because it is there." Blizzard conditions complicated their climb, but shortly after midday, the clouds broke and a teammate caught a glimpse of Mallory and Irvine, well behind schedule but moving deliberately toward the top. It was the last anyone saw of them until a few years ago, when Mallory's frozen body was discovered on the mountain. No one knows for sure to this day, speculation notwithstanding, whether they reached the summit and died on the descent, or whether they failed to get to the peak. But a successful descent is part of a successful ascent, and so for all intents and purposes Everest remained unconquered.

In the next decade, other climbers made their own assaults on the mountain. Climber Eric Shipton, one of those who failed, wrote in 1938: “It would seem almost as though there were a cordon drawn round the upper part of these great peaks beyond which no man may go. The truth of course lies in the fact that, at altitudes of 25,000 feet and beyond, the effects of low atmospheric pressure on the human body are so severe that really difficult mountaineering is impossible...” In the end, he noted, we should never forget “that the mountain still holds the master card, that it will grant success only in its own good time.”

Then, at the end of the next decade, Nepal opened its borders at just about the time China cut off access to Tibet. Shipton returned in 1951 on a reconnaissance mission. For the next three years, Nepal granted different countries exclusive access to the mountain. That meant that the Swiss alone could attempt to reach the summit in 1952, the British in 1953, and the French in 1954. The Swiss, climbing first, came close in their quest, but, like all other mountaineers, failed to reach the top.

And so the British geared up in 1953. Led by a military officer, the expedition was a monumental undertaking. Hundreds of porters carried tons of supplies up to a base camp at just about 18,000 feet, where the Swiss had established their own outpost. One of the climbers was a New Zealand beekeeper named Edmund Hillary. Another was a Sherpa called Tenzing Norgay, now making his 7<sup>th</sup> trek up the mountain, whom the Swiss had named a full member of the climbing team, and who served the British in the same way.

Moving up the Western Cym, what the Swiss called the Valley of Silence, for the final assault from the South Col, climbers first had to cross the treacherous Khumbu Icefall. This glacier, a jumble of ice blocks of various sizes cracking and breaking up constantly, was terrifying to cross. At first, some climbers believed the icefall was impassable, until they discovered how to use ladders strapped together to cross. Even with the ladders, the crossing remained treacherous, for shifts as the day wore on and the temperature rose could lead the ladders to fall and leave climbers dead in a crevasse. Indeed, Hillary fell – almost to his death – prior to ascending higher up the mountain, and was fortunately rescued by Norgay.

Toward the end of May, a first British team came within 300 feet of the top. Then, on May 29, 1953, Hillary and Norgay set out on their attempt. The British feared an early monsoon on the mountain, but the weather cleared just enough for the two climbers to head for the top. Above the South Summit – not yet the summit of the mountain itself – they encountered what Hillary called “the most formidable-looking problem on the ridge – a rock step some forty feet high....The rock itself, smooth and almost holdless, might have been an interesting Sunday afternoon problem to a group of expert climbers in the Lake District, but here it was a barrier beyond our feeble strength to overcome.” Roped to Norgay below, Hillary wedged himself between the rock and a chunk of snow at its edge and inched his way up the tight crevice which has since come to be called the Hillary Step. Norgay followed, with Hillary tugging on the rope, and shortly before noon they managed to drag themselves just a bit further to the rounded snow cone at the very top of the world.

That story fascinated me then and continues to fascinate me. In the spring of 1996, while spending a year teaching at the University of Nairobi, my wife Sara and I went off for a weekend break in a cottage near Lake Naivasha. Our living room had a library of books that had belonged to the British settler who once lived there, and among them I found Hillary’s autobiography. I sat down to read, and hours later, as dusk turned into dawn, I was finally able to put it down – once Hillary and Norgay had reached the top. Reading that account was as riveting then as it is today, for now I have my own copy of a 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition. And it made me want more than ever before to go see Everest for myself.

For a time, I actually dreamed of climbing the mountain. I had, by then, climbed Mt. Kenya, Kilimanjaro, and Popocateptl, and Everest, I thought naively, was the next logical step. By the early 1980s, more than a hundred climbers had reached the summit, and commercial firms were taking up clients with limited mountaineering experience who could afford to pay. Why couldn’t I do it? There were just two problems. It was expensive. Expeditions with Rob Hall of New Zealand or Scott Fisher of the United States could cost as much as \$50,000. And it was dangerous. The mountain claimed one life for every four climbers who reached the summit, and those odds didn’t seem very good to me.

And so I dreamed instead of going to base camp and looking at the mountain from there. I began to talk about a possible trip, and to my great delight, my two children, Jenny, then 30, and David, then 25, said they wanted to join me. I planned to pay their way, but both are productively employed and insisted on covering the cost themselves. As we began to plan our trip, my stepbrother Kenny asked if he could join us as well, and so we made up a party of 4.

As we began to make plans to fly to Kathmandu and there join the tour company with which we had been corresponding, I suffered what could have been a catastrophic setback. In mid-December, I got a flu shot, as I had for the past dozen years. Two weeks later, in what turned out to be a freak autoimmune reaction, I found myself unable to lift my right arm. The nerves had shut down and it was totally paralyzed. After weeks of tests and multiple MRIs, an orthopedist at Miami diagnosed my ailment as something called Parsonage Turner Syndrome, or brachial plexus neuritis. That didn't help much, but literature on medline was more encouraging and indicated that the condition was likely to reverse itself. But as we were making our arrangements to climb, I wondered how I would manage to do any scrambling in the mountains if I couldn't even raise my arm high enough to comb my hair.

Still I persevered. Physical therapy kept the muscles from atrophying, and sure enough, after about three months, I began to be able to move my arm again. I can remember the joy in taking a shower and realizing that I had just reached up to get the soap – and succeeded. My arm wasn't strong by departure date, but at least it was usable, and I could wriggle in and out of a backpack, and that was a monumental relief.

Thirty-eight hours after leaving Cincinnati in May 2001, we reached Kathmandu. Our frequent flyer tickets took us on a circuitous route, but they were free. Our guide met us at the airport, took us to a hotel, outfitted us with the climbing equipment we needed, and gave us a day to acclimate and get over jet lag by showing us Kathmandu. And then we took first a small plane, then a helicopter, to Lukla, high in the Himalayas at about 9,000 feet, where we were ready to begin our trek.

As we proceeded along the trail that all climbers follow to base camp, we were aware, of course, of the tragedy on the mountain 5 years before. In May 1996, teams from a variety of different countries made an assault on the mountain when a terrible

storm blew in. As climbers struggled to get down, the wind chill reached 100 degrees below 0. In the end, 8 people, including expedition organizers Scott Fisher and Rob Hall, lost their lives and some of the survivors suffered serious frostbite. The IMAX team, on the mountain to make a film, documented the horror, and Jon Krakauer described it in harrowing detail in his powerful account *Into Thin Air*. I had read Krakauer's book, and *The Climb*, a book by Russian climber Anatoli Boukreev, who was likewise on Everest that fateful day, and had a healthy respect for the mountain after that highly-publicized disaster.

Even at the comparatively low height of 10,000 feet, we worried about altitude sickness. Jenny and David had both gotten ill on Kilimanjaro, and were determined to avoid being sick this time. And so we all took Diamox, or acetazolamide, as a prophylactic. It served as a diuretic, which meant we all got up 8 to 10 times a night, but outside of a minor tingling in our fingers and toes, it had no other side effects. We also determined, since we were seldom hiking more than 5 or 6 miles a day, to take it very slowly, no matter how many other people passed us on the trail.

There was an excitement in proceeding along the path that Hillary and Norgay and all the other climbers of the past had taken. We had one guide – Ashim – and an assistant, along with 2 Sherpa porters, each carrying between 80 and 120 pounds of gear. We had climbing boots, while the porters wore tattered sneakers, but they were always far ahead of us. We elected to stay overnight in tea houses, small lodges built by Sherpa climbers with the money they had earned from assisting various summit expeditions. It meant that we didn't have to pitch tents, or cook our own food, and it turned out to be an easier – and cheaper – way to climb. After a few days we reached Namche Bazaar, a tiny city, complete with telephones and internet access, where we promised ourselves we would buy souvenirs – and a beer – on the way down. For even though liquor was available at some of the huts on the way up, our guide told us that alcohol would make acclimatization even harder, and should be avoided at all costs. He also told us that even if meat was on the menu, to avoid it. The Sherpas believe that it is bad luck to slaughter an animal on Everest – it will offend the goddess – which meant that any meat for sale on the mountain had been carried up and might have been weeks old.

We proceeded past small communities with names I had never heard before – Thame and Khumjung – and then came to Tengboche, where nearly 50 years before, Tenzing Norgay had stopped at the Buddhist monastery there to ask the monks for permission to proceed up the mountain. We were able to attend a service, and to spin the prayer wheels to send our own prayers up to heaven, hoping that we would have the same good fortune as Norgay.

On to Pheriche, where we took a day to acclimate at around 14,000 feet. There was an emergency center there to deal with altitude emergencies, and that was encouraging until we learned that it was closed for the season. While staying in a tea house there, another hiker came in and told us about a Russian trekker who ignore the symptoms of altitude sickness and died a few days ago, and it made us realize that we all had to be careful. At just about the same time, as I was reading an account of the 1996 tragedy and reached the point where Rob Hall died, I looked up and there on the wall was a detergent advertisement, with Rob Hall's picture and signature – from one of his last climbs – on the poster.

Then on to Lobuche, where our tea house had a large dormitory room filled with noisy hikers, and the next day a final push to Gorakshep, at close to 17,000 feet. As we had breakfast in the clear, crisp sunshine, we readied ourselves to head up to Kala Patar, our goal at about 18,500 feet, where we would have a spectacular view of Everest and the entire Himalayan range.

As we hiked up what seemed like a near-vertical hill, we laughed about how slow we were going – even yaks passed us – but we proceeded deliberately toward our goal. At the top of this mountain, we had to scramble over big boulders, and felt the effects of the altitude, but then we had a breathtaking view of Nuptse, Lohtse, Amadablam, and of course Everest, majestic with its crooked peak, like a broken nose. As we sat on the rock, looking around and taking pictures, there wasn't a cloud in the sky. We could see base camp, and the Khumbu Icefall, and the South Col, and the Hillary Step. And as it looked so easy from that perspective, we had to remind ourselves that it was still more than 2 vertical miles from where we were to the summit, and that gave us pause.

The next day, after spending a sleepless night at Gorakshep – it's hard to sleep at that altitude – we hiked to base camp. It was a desolate place, with tents pitched on

rocks, for there was no loose ground to serve as a floor. What a miserable place to spend several months, I thought, justifying my default decision not to try to climb to the top of the mountain. Not many people were in base camp that day. It had been a difficult spring, filled with bad weather, and no one yet had summited. Indeed, a Japanese expedition had given up, and we passed the yaks, porters, and climbers heading down as we approached base camp. But the weather seemed to be improving, and, with the climbing season almost over, dozens of climbers were scattered higher up the mountain, hoping for a break in the weather that would allow them to make it to the top. Among those climbers was Eric Weihenmayer, a blind climber, whose tent we saw. Later, after we came down, we learned that about 20 climbers, including Weihenmayer, made it to the top while we were in base camp. In the process, another 4 lost their lives.

Then it was time to head down the mountain. As we climbed over rocks on the route out of base camp, my right leg began to hurt – I must have strained a tendon – but with a combination of ibuprofen and ice I managed to keep on trekking and eventually, after another 4 or 5 days, we got to Namche Bazaar, had a beer and then another, and eventually made it back to Lukla, where we had begun. After a last overnight stay, we were ready for the plane to the big city. The runway down the mountain tilted at a 45 degree angle, and we felt as if we were taking off on a ski jump, but our small plane managed to stay aloft after the mountain dropped off, and soon we were back in Kathmandu.

Our trek up the mountain gave me a profound respect for Everest. I had read a few years before about Babu Chiri Sherpa, one of the greatest climber of all time. He had summited Everest 10 times, had spent 21 hours without supplementary oxygen in the spring of 1999 at the very top, and had sprinted in the spring of 2000 from base camp to the summit in 16 hours and 56 minutes, the fastest time ever. Then, on April 29, 2001, just weeks before we began our trek, while on a trip that would have given him his 11<sup>th</sup> summit (tying the record), he left his tent at Camp 2 – up above base camp – to take some pictures, fell into an unseen crevasse, and died. Even the best climbers can fall victim to Everest's whims.

Everest is beautiful – and rough. The summit area – including the final 3,000 feet – is known as the death zone. At the top, there is only 1/3 as much oxygen in the air as at

sea level. If you were deposited at the top after breathing at sea level, you would be unconscious in a few minutes and dead soon thereafter. In base camp, you can hear avalanches roar 3 or 4 times a day. The mountain demands our respect.

My story began with a film and ends with a film. The 1996 IMAX expedition which was on the mountain during the terrible disaster and documented some of the chaos during the storm, featured a summit attempt by Jamling Tenzing Norgay, son of Tenzing Norgan, who hoped to reach the top of Everest 40 years after his father had conquered the summit for the first time. I had seen the IMAX film in Indianapolis, before it came to Cincinnati, when it first appeared. I had a copy of my own. And we watched it in on a generator-powered VCR as we trekked up the mountain, for some members of our group hadn't seen it and were delighted when a copy was available. It inspired us, and made us want to keep going. We took heart at the monastery in Tengboche, where Jamling sent word down following the disaster, after the IMAX team scrapped its own attempt to reach the summit and sought instead to provide whatever assistance it they could, whether it was wise for him to try again, and was relieved when the monks told him to go ahead. And we took heed of his comment, recorded in his book *Touching My Father's Soul*, that you need to approach Everest "with an attitude of respect, awareness, humility, and devotion." All Sherpas believe this, and so do I. The mountain has an elemental force all of its own and is worth climbing to experience its wonderful spirit, not just "because it is there."