

Sunday April 27, 2014

The little men who put their lives on the line

By Jim Taylor

For the first time in more than 50 years, there may be no one reaching the summit of Mt. Everest this spring.

May is traditionally the best month for climbing. There's less wind – although anything on Everest is relative – and the monsoon snows have not yet arrived.

But after the tragedy earlier this month, when an avalanche on the infamous Khumbu Glacier Icefall killed 16 Sherpas, the surviving Sherpas have threatened to boycott all summit attempts.

And without the Sherpas, no one will get up the mountain.

Sir Edmund Hillary usually gets the credit for the first ascent of the world's highest mountain. We often forget that he was partnered by Tenzing Norgay, a Sherpa.

Today, when aspiring climbers pay up to \$100,000 for a chance to climb Everest, they are always accompanied by Sherpas. One of those Sherpas, a man called Apa, has climbed to the summit more often than anyone else in the world -- 21 times!

Accepting the risk

The loss of 16 lives on a risky mountain climb has been somewhat overshadowed by news reports about the 300 young people drowned when a ferry capsized in South Korea. And in Canada, by the stabbing deaths of five students at a graduation party. And by the renewal of the Cold War in Ukraine. Mainline news media don't bother reporting death tolls in Syria, Libya, Yemen, and Afghanistan any more.

I admit to a personal bias here. I spent my early years attending a school in the Himalayas. I grew up reading the exploits of early climbers – Tilman, Shipton, Odell, Smythe, Herzog, Noyce... I dreamed of following their footsteps into the heights.

But I think the Sherpa fatalities matter for another reason. The victims of civil wars, the students in South Korea and Calgary did not expect to risk their lives. The Sherpas did. Every day.

"This is our job," explained Jeewan Ghimire, a seasoned Sherpa. "There is always a risk of death."

The Khumbu Icefall has been a notorious hazard ever since the first expedition tried ascending Everest by that route. George Mallory, who died while headed for the summit of Everest, considered it too dangerous even to attempt.

The glacier, the world's highest, crosses a lip of rock, and crashes like a frozen waterfall into the valley below. Imagine, if you can, ice cubes the size of a ten-story building toppling in slow motion. Now imagine trying to build a safe passage through those constantly moving and grinding ice cubes for some 600 climbers a year.

That's what those Sherpas do. Every day.

Then one day in April, the ice cubes shifted. And 16 Sherpas died.

When a glacier calves

The Sherpas knew the Icefall was dangerous that day. They had restricted their paying clients to base camp, until a party of 40 Sherpas had fixed ropes along the safest route, and placed aluminum ladders as bridges over cravasses that plunge into measureless depths.

Passengers on cruise ships to Alaska – if they're lucky – can watch a glacier calve, as huge chunks of ice break away and crash down. The Sherpas were unlucky – a glacier calved on top of them.

The hazards they face led Grayson Schaffer, in *Outside* magazine, to call them "The Disposable Men." The National Institutes of Health list commercial fishing as America's most dangerous occupation. Nepal's Sherpas, Schaffer noted, are ten times more likely to die on the job.

Yet Everest is far from the Himalaya's most dangerous mountain. Until this year, the death rate among Everest climbers has run around five per cent. By comparison, over 40 per cent of mountaineers attempting Annapurna have died. Kangchenjunga, K2, and Nanga Parbat all have death rates around 20 per cent. All four of those "lesser" peaks present far greater technical challenges for climbers.

Everest's relative safety – despite the horrors described in Jon Krakauer's 1996 bestseller *Into Thin Air* – results mainly from the services of the Sherpas. Compared to other Himalayan super-peaks, fixed ropes and ladders are almost the equivalent of a chair lift. In 2010, 169 climbers reached the summit in a single day. An 80-year-old man, a 13-year-old child, and a blind man have all made it to the top. Such achievements would be utterly impossible on K2 or Annapurna.

A better deal

Climbing has changed the lives of Nepalese Sherpas. A seasoned Sherpa may earn \$3,000 or more a year – roughly eight times the Nepalese average. But if they're killed, they get only the equivalent of \$400 death benefit. The same for medical coverage – when a helicopter rescue can cost \$15,000. High altitude helicopters don't come cheap.

Western climbers pay \$75,000 to \$100,000 for an Everest attempt. The Nepalese government takes \$11,000. The rest goes to the companies who hire the Sherpas.

But it's the Sherpas who put their lives on the line. Literally. They deserve a better deal.

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YOUR TURN

I didn't want to turn last week's column about the Bolivian women knitters into a commercial, but I knew some of you would want to know what you could do about helping those women. Elizabeth Collicott, June Blau, Marie Bercier, and Charles Hill all asked if there was some way they could buy sweaters on line. I referred them to Bev Edwards-Sawatzky.

To summarize Bev's response, there is a website <http://www.minkhasweaters.com> developed by the volunteer group in Calgary. It has a good selection of sweaters displayed there. You can custom order through that website, or Bev invites you to get in touch with her directly: telephone 250 548 6808, or e-mail bev.e-s@shaw.ca

The column earned a slightly back-handed compliment from John Willems: "Commercials usually do not keep my attention, but you have brought it to a whole new level. Didn't see it coming but if I was close, I would show up and buy."

Isabel Gibson picked up the main theme of the column: "At our best, we do pretty well, eh? Giving people a hand up rather than a handout."

“This is the same thinking behind Kiva, an online micro-lending site, which aggregates numerous \$25 donations to lend business capital to the poor, while also holding them accountable to repay their loans.”

As an aside, I would add that “microcredit” seems to be one of the better – that is, more responsible and more helpful – programs to help alleviate poverty. It was started in India, by Professor Muhammad Yunus, who launched a research project to study how to provide banking services to the rural poor. Based on his positive results, in October 1983 the Grameen Bank was founded. In 2006, the bank and its founder were jointly awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

Isabel continued, “You mention the simplicity of knitting. I’m beginning to think that the simpler we keep it, the better we do, in many areas of our lives, from theology to economics.”

TECHNICAL STUFF

This column comes to you using the electronic facilities of Woodlakebooks.com.

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You can access several years of archived columns at <http://edges.Canadahomepage.net>.

I write a second column each Wednesday, called Soft Edges, which deals somewhat more gently with issues of life and faith. To sign up for Soft Edges, write to me directly, at the address above, or send a note to softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca

PROMOTION STUFF...

If you know someone else who might like to receive this column regularly via e-mail, send a request to jimt@quixotic.ca. Or, if you wish, forward them a copy of this column. But please put your name on it, so they don’t think I’m sending out spam.

For other sources worth pursuing, try

- Ralph Milton’s HymnSight webpage, <http://www.hymnsight.ca>, with a vast gallery of photos you can use to enhance the appearance of the visual images you project for liturgical use (prayers, responses, hymn verses, etc.)
- David Keating’s “SeemslkeGod” page, www.seemslkegod.org;
- Alan Reynold’s weekly musings, punningly titled “Reynolds Rap” -- reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Isobel Gibson’s thoughtful and well-written blog, www.traditionaliconoclast.com
- Wayne Irwin’s “Churchweb Canada,” an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>
- Alva Wood’s satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write alvawood@gmail.com to get onto her mailing list.
