

Building Resilience and Finding Joy
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The term Sherpa comes from two different words *shar* "east" and *wa* "people". So all together Sherpa means people who live eastern part of Nepal according to their ethnic Sherpa language.

Sherpa's migrated from Tibet. The Sherpa people embody power and humility. Sherpas are highly regarded as elite mountaineers and experts. They were immeasurably valuable to early explorers of the Himalayan region, serving as guides at the extreme altitudes of the peaks and passes in the region, particularly for expeditions to climb Mount Everest. Today, the term is often used to refer to almost any guide or climbing supporter hired for mountaineering expeditions in the Himalayas, regardless of their ethnicity. Sherpas are renowned in the international climbing and mountaineering community for their hardiness, expertise, and experience at very high altitudes. Because of this usage, the term has become a slang byword for a guide or mentor in other situations.

At the Nantucket Project, one of the Sherpa people called, Karma Sherpa came to speak to us, He told us that the Sherpa are a group of people, that it is not a job. Many are not mountaineers. Many are doctors, business people or even cooks.

Sherpa's often have a combination of strength and humility that is compelling. Sherpa's use the weight they carry to build their mindfulness. As you can imagine, they have to look through the same thing in many different ways in order to find and maintain peace and strength through it.

Climbing mount Everest presents one with many challenges: the weight, the altitude, the attitudes of the people one is guiding, the different leaders whose opinions vary with those of the Sherpas, the varying needs of the team, the weather and accidents that happen and one's own feelings and needs can all be crushing burdens for a Sherpa. And as Karma Sherpa said, they can all also be opportunities to face oneself, to look deeper within, to unlock a piece of the mind that keeps us from ourselves and each other.¹

Karma Sherpa spoke often of the need as he was on a trip to keep himself responding to those around him and to what was most alive in himself, to allow the weight he was carrying to move him deeper toward what mattered in himself and in others and in doing so, this allowed him to find peace and a sense of joy no matter what he was facing.²

¹ The Nantucket Project, Lee Nadler and Karma Sherpa, September 14, 2017.

² Ibid.

Listening to Karma, I was reminded of the book *Option B: Facing Adversity, Building Resistance and Finding Joy*, by authors Sheryl Sandberg and Adam Grant. They too speak of resilience and what it takes to find and maintain joy.

Sandberg and Grant in their book *Option B* discuss the study called the “Love Lab” in which 130 newlyweds invited to a bed and breakfast and were studied, “in the wild” so to speak. Psychologists made a prediction that was 83% accurate about which marriages would last. These predictions were not based on how much sex or laughter or affection or support or time away from devices couples shared. It was based on what they called answered “Bids for Connection.” For example, when one person said, “Are we out of butter?” And the other answered, yes or no or not sure or I’ll check, that is an example of a bid for connection that was met. Or, when one said, Did you see that bird?³

The other did not ignore or change the subject or talk about oneself and her own relationship to birds since childhood but looked at the bird and furthered the conversation, moved in, said, yes, what interesting colors on the wings or something that connected each person to the other. When we are able to hear another and meet them where they are, inside of their question or observation and so their lives authentically, we grow closer, we build the capacity to stay together.

Sherpas listen and respond and wait and watch. They know that not everything they see will be responded to by someone who sees what they see. Karma Sherpa said we are all at different points of wisdom.⁴

The point is to know where you are and to be at peace with the wisdom you have, and to meet bids for connection well. It is the business of the Sherpa. We all have a Sherpa Within as Lee Nadler writes who has spent much time with Karma Sherpa and was with him at the Nantucket Project. Can we all sustain challenges to our points of view and still know we are valid, important, worthy human beings? Can we meet another within their way of seeing and allow it while still feeling whole?

Somewhere inside of all of this lives joy because somewhere inside of all of this lives the essence of connection, the place that stories are built.

Sandberg and Grant who wrote *Option B* looked at a case study of those who in 1972 were in a plane flying from Uruguay to Chile and crashed in the Andes and for the next 72 days, 16 out of 33 survived in a journey that became known in the book *Alive*. Sandberg and Grant write, “We normally think of hope as something individuals hold in their heads and in their hearts. But people can build hope together. By creating a shared identity, individuals can form a group that has a past and a brighter future.”⁵

³ Sheryl Sandberg and Adam Grant, *Option B, Facing Adversity, Building Resilience, and Finding Joy* (New York: Penguin Books, 2017), 169.

⁴ Lee Nadler, “The Sherpa Path” <https://cms.megaphone.fm/channel/PPY4772637492?selected=PPY7885439824>.

⁵ Sandberg & Grant, 128.

Mutual respect is what makes getting to the top of Everest possible. Understanding other people's feelings, the imbalances around us, the motivations around and within us, the sensitivities and reasons that some are holding too tightly and others not holding on at all. How can leaders, on a side of a mountain, help everyone engage? By respecting them, meeting them where they are, says Karma Serpa.⁶

I think of so many of us who are struggling now with the world around us in these political times. So many of us who are engaged in experiencing what Cornell West in his convocation speech to Harvard Divinity School this year called a "Spiritual Blackout" which he defined as a time when criminality and poverty and blindness and moral catastrophe are the order of the day.⁷

And make no mistake West reminded us, it is not the current administration that has created this condition; they are a product of these times with deep roots in American tradition.⁸

In these times, when an indifference to human suffering tempts us to hide ourselves within ourselves, what we are called to do is to look deeper, to seek deeper, to ask ourselves deeper questions about what we are made of and what we are willing to give, how much we are willing to risk to make the connections we make to stay alive in our humanity.

Cornell West reminded those at the 2017 Harvard Divinity School convocation that the measure of our greatness now will be our compassion, our wisdom and our willingness to serve one another.⁹ The Sherpas know this well, the Sherpas within us all know this well.

In my role as chaplain on this island and at Brigham and Women's hospital and at a hospital in Dover NH before I began ministry, I have had many conversations with people facing death and making amends with life, so to speak. I remember a conversation with a woman struggling to come to peace with something in her past so that she might connect to her own story and so be able to reach out and create connection to others that she craved.

One day when she and I were sitting together and she was grieving what she saw as some misdeeds of her past. I asked if there was an image of anyone that she could surrender herself to, a hero, a saint, a mentor or a belief in god? Mary Magdalene came to her. I asked her to shut her eyes and imagine Mary Magdalene holding her in her arms, much larger and stronger than her, rocking her back and forth saying these words, "You are forgiven. Your transgressions in this life have been less than the love you have given. See yourself as I see

⁶ "The Sherpa Path."

⁷ Cornell West, Harvard Divinity School Convocation, 2017 <https://hds.harvard.edu/news/2017/08/30/cornell-west-prophetic-fightback>.

⁸ West.

⁹ West.

you, as a precious child of the universe, and forgive yourself. See yourself as I see you and have mercy on your sweet self.”

Whatever we can do to free ourselves from the conflicts that rage in us enough so that we can build the courage to know ourselves and others as worthy of our mercy, love and presence, we need to get to it.

Karma Sherpa told us that mountaineering is a hard, challenging life and that if you continue to look through sadness, fear and pain, you are stuck with the problems you have and you cannot move forward. But if you are willing to take the challenge he said, you can go to the next level. The challenge itself can lead you to the next level. It offers the path to the next level.¹⁰

This takes a lot of energy and effort and wisdom too. If you use your wisdom, it helps you endure he said. Whether you are climbing a mountain or running a family or facing a death, it can be overcome with the right wisdom and perspective.

What is the challenge in our day? The challenge as I see it is not to give in to despair and pessimism and unbridled critique of everyone and everything. The challenge is to lean into the work of our own hearts and minds and make room for the work of the world so that we may create a shared identity, meet a bid for connection that is not only about us and our story but that furthers a collective self, so that we might at last build hope, a hope that can sustain us and has the strength to build a future worthy of us. The challenge is to face the conflicts within ourselves so that we can connect to a story that is greater than our own, so that we can move beyond ourselves.

Karma Sherpa told us to expect that a difficulty might come on this road to achieve peace and joy and that we should not blame anyone for it but that we should “go as a team and face it.” He said, “Make it better as much as possible. We can learn from our mistakes but to blame each other is useless energy. It does not allow us to move forward with ease or grace.”¹¹

He went on, “If you do not make the summit, the failure is if you give up on each other and the journey. The summit is only part of the journey. As a team, we can find a solution through wisdom. We can build more skills and find the nature of the problem and face it and do better together.

“The Sherpas love what we do, he said. Accomplishments are different for us. We use our burdens and the weight we carry to bring us to a peace and ease and conditioning of our minds toward joy no matter what happens.”

¹⁰ The Sherpa Within.

¹¹ Ibid.

Karma went on, “The things you do in your life, you have to be happy with them. You have to choose to love your life, to see all of it as a choice you have made, not matter how you have come to this moment. This allows you to change other people with your joy. Live with this. Every step you walk, every step you take toward the mountain, every step you take toward the summit, it creates the possibility of the summit, it creates the summit you reach each day, and in this is life itself.”¹²

Someone asked Karma Sherpa: “How can you find joy in the struggle?” He said that he says the Shelap prayer before going up Everest.

It is a prayer for complete awareness, a prayer to the ancestors who have higher wisdom. It promises that you will be fine in any outcome, that you will endure, that you will be surrounded by well being no matter the outcome.

That’s it too isn’t it? No matter the outcome. The woman I was praying with in that visualization that led to Mary Magdalene was facing death. She had less than a few weeks to live. And yet, the need for peace and well being was still within her grasp and she did attain it before she died.

As Karma Sherpa told us, the summit is only part of the journey. Our minds can become attached to this final destination and bring negative energy for us and others. It is much more important to have a comprehensive experience. What is the importance of the summit If you forget the journey? You can’t live there anyway!

Consider each other my friends. Consider what is worthy of our lives today and devote yourselves to it. There is so much worthy of our lives and when we commit to it, when we move away the conflicts within us that keep us from those commitments and from sharing the stories that build resilience, we can know joy.

In this open heartedness, there opens a space as wide as the view from Everest from which to love and experience the freedom of deep connection and humanity.

May joy and peace be yours today and always. Amen.

¹² Ibid.