Reflections from Nepal: Connecting with self, others and community through outdoor experiences

Part 1: Connecting with Self

This is the first in a three-part series of my reflections from this epic experience.

In December 2023, I embarked on an extraordinary journey through the Khumbu Region of Nepal, completing the Three Passes Trek—a 14-day adventure covering over 111 miles and ascending more than 44,550 feet in elevation. This outdoor experience not only presented epic trekking and landscapes; it offered experiential learning by connecting me with self, others and community.

Self-Discovery: *Every outdoor experience begins with a single step and the courage to say "yes."*

A friend has a sticky note that has become one of my mantras: "If not now, then when?" This opportunity found me through an outdoor guiding friend. And I said, "yes." After multiple international adventures, I understand that it is EASY to get yourself into a worry knot thinking of things that could go wrong. Research and be prepared. Get good travel insurance. Visit a travel clinic. Physically get moving and get onto living. Amidst doubts and uncertainties, embrace new experiences – big and small – that foster personal growth. Only we can push ourselves and choose to say, "yes."

Adaptability: *You can have the best plan, but "the mountains make the rules."*

Adapting to adversity and uncertainty becomes essential for turning physical and mental challenges into opportunities. In Nepal, we experienced life at 15K feet above sea level and summited four peaks over 18.5K feet. Basically, it is high and a gal from Northeast Ohio does not typically fare well up there. You cannot be sure how your body is going to adapt. Become comfortable with uncertainty. Control what you can – hydrate, eat, sleep and deep breathing. And, control how you respond to whatever hurdle you face. Fortunately, with all these measures and *a lot of luck*, I saw how I, and others, can adapt with perseverance and grace.

You have to hike SLOW! Each step is deliberate. It takes effort to breathe. For some (like me), slowing down is sometimes harder than powering through and going fast. A key component is acclimatization: "the process or result of becoming accustomed to a new climate or to new conditions." Climb high and sleep low. You cannot just hike straight up 18.5K directly from sea level. You go up and then come back down, then you go up and go back down. You inch your way up the peaks, acclimatizing in phases and building endurance. Progress may require a slow and deliberate approach, particularly when adapting to unfamiliar circumstances.

Resiliency: *Doing hard things builds confidence, growth and learning.*

Getting to the summit is only 50% of the journey – up is optional and down is mandatory. The physical aspect is only part of the experience. The psychological side calls upon mental toughness and pure determination. Confidence comes with doing hard things. One of the trekkers was sick for 3 days. She nevertheless rejoined with a renewed sense of confidence, saying, "If I can do this, I can do anything." We all deserve to know what not giving up on ourselves feels like.

One step at a time is truly one step at a time. Every peak we hiked, we got to what we thought was the peak, but there was more. When we thought it was the end, it never was. The best approach is to focus on each step, right in front of you. Looking too far ahead is just way too intimidating. This was also the approach for the trip – don't look at the 14 days ahead, just a single step right now. Big dreams are achieved through small, consistent steps. Break down your goal into manageable tasks and take one step at a time; before long, you'll see how far you've come.

Mindset Matters*: Humor and perspective are invaluable companions.*

At the first introductory meeting in Kathmandu, I shared my sweet spot for "type 2 fun": you don't necessarily have fun doing it, but you have fun remembering it. Many times throughout the expedition I asked, "Is this type 2 fun, folks?" The common response was greeted with laughter and a response of, "We will let you know later." You have a challenging situation that could be miserable, but when it is over (and sometimes much later) upon reflection, you discover a learning or growth moment.

Letting go of control and living in the present moment fosters a mindset of gratitude and acceptance. We can have a clear vision of what we anticipate will happen. Despite being prepared and adapting, things don't always go according to plan. Altitude sickness, traveler's diarrhea and physical injuries prevented several trekkers from completing the Three Passes Trek. Some things are just beyond our control. Your mind says go, but the body says no. At times we need a loud message

to guide us to make a mindful decision in the moment. Only when we let go of the plan and live in the moment can we hear the message.

One hiker returning early due to significant altitude sickness said, “I came to see the mountains, not climb them. And I did that.” Another trekker who was helicoptered out shared that a nearby helicopter was taking off with someone in a body bag. “It is all a matter of perspective.”

Slow Down for heightened awareness and gratitude. This experience enabled me to appreciate conveniences we often take for granted: clean running water, a flushing toilet, a washing machine, etc. My time in Nepal also gave me gratitude for stepping out of routine and creating intentional pauses. Having modern conveniences makes it easy to quickly complete a task and move onto the next. Outdoor experiences enable us to slow down. Our minds can wander, drift and dream. Whether a Three Passes hike or spending time in your yard or a park, taking time outside is essential to our physical and mental well-being.

My trek through Nepal's Khumbu Region has been a journey of self-discovery, adaptability, resilience, and mindfulness. From embracing new experiences to navigating challenges with humor and gratitude, each step in the Himalayas taught me valuable lessons about connection and personal growth.

You don’t have to travel to Nepal and trek the Himalayas to find your epic and connect with yourself. In founding All Forward, I am committed to designing outdoor micro experiences in the Cuyahoga Valley National Park and surrounding areas. These experiences focus on leadership, team building and well-being. Activities include hiking, navigation, kayaking and more. Learn more at www.allforward.us.

Check out Part 2: Connecting with OTHERS and Part 3: Connecting with COMMUNITY.