

Diane SUMMER & Eric VALLI

Introduction

Gottlieb GUNTERN

We will now go one step further. This time it will be into the field of cultural anthropology. Diane Summers and Eric Valli have been involved for years in a very specific enterprise that, for me, belongs to the realm of cultural anthropology. When cultural anthropology was still in its infancy, field trips and direct observation were not fashionable at all. Frazer, the author of *The Golden Bough* never saw one of those 'savages' he kept fantasizing about. Freud, inspired by Frazer's book, began to speculate about the primordial horde, the *Urhorde*, and the ritual of slaying the father of the tribe, an atavistic slaughtering he viewed as the very beginning of human culture. The only natives Freud ever observed were a few hysterical ladies suffering from boredom, erotic neglect and resentment due to a life of chronic frustration in upper class Vienna. And then along came Margaret Mead with her book *Coming of Age in Samoa*. It became an immediate best seller because it exulted in the admiration of a *bel objet par excellence*. According to Mead, Samoa was an enchanted paradise in the Pacific, a dreamland rocked in the cradles of utter peacefulness and sweet harmony.

In contradistinction to her predecessors, Margaret Mead had at least spent some time on that island, but obviously not enough to read the newspapers. Had she read them, the gory tales of rape, slaying and murder would have eradicated, once and for all, her naïve idea that Abel was born without a brother named Cain.

Today's anthropology has bid farewell forever to sitting in a rocking chair on the porch of a colonial villa while nursing your whiskey and fantasizing about paradise lost or hell. Today's anthropology demands authentic field observation and precise recordings of actual events. It implies adventure, danger, daring, risk-taking and endurance - in the virgin forests of the Amazon, in the heat of the Sahara or on the ice-cold nights of the wind-beaten passes over the Himalayas.

Yet despite this dramatic turn of events, contemporary anthropology is able to motivate a lawyer from Australia and a cabinet-maker from France to quit their jobs, form a team, settle in Kathmandu and learn fluent Nepali in order to study the vanishing ways of life of little known tribes scattered all over the Asian continent. Diane Summers is an accomplished writer. Eric Valli creates unforgettable pictures. And both know how to approach human beings with subtle intuition, respect and cordiality able to open a heart without stealing the soul.

Diane Summers and Eric Valli have spent five years on and off with the Gurung of the Himalayas. Eric has clung to bamboo ropes strung across 400-foot-high cliffs while the fierce bees savagely defended their nests against the intruding honey hunters. He has climbed bundles of brittle-looking



vines lashed to a giant stalactite on the Malay peninsula. He had to wriggle his way through slippery, narrow tunnels whose ominous darkness filled his ears with the throbbing sound of his own heartbeat driven by the power of claustrophobia.

Diane and Eric have taken these risks and endured these dangers in order to observe, photograph and film natives gathering swifts' nests, translucent, porcelain-like constructions consisting of dried bird saliva glued to the steep walls of dark caves and coveted by the connoisseurs of a famous Chinese delicacy. Diane and Eric even took their young daughters, Sara and Camille, on a field trip to Nepal to accompany yak and sheep caravans of the Dobo-pa tribe who for centuries have been doing the same thing: trading Tibetan salt for barley and buckwheat from their villages on one of the highest inhabited plateaus of the world in Nepal to the southern flanks of the Himalayas near India.

Diane and Eric are creative leaders. They have left the beaten track to open their own trail, and they have a message for those who live and work in other walks of life. They have a message for those of us who are sincerely interested in the essence of creative leadership. Their message is one of courage, of pride, of existential fulfilment, and last but not least, of stress tolerance and conflict, because that is what creativity and leadership is all about.

Diane: Thank you very much, Gottlieb, for welcoming us. It's very strange to be coming all the way from Kathmandu, where we live very much in a third world, and being here in Zermatt. It's really a very big contrast.

In fact, we are not anthropologists. Eric was a cabinet-maker, I was a lawyer, and we went to Nepal for different reasons. I went thirteen years ago. Eric went twenty-two years ago, and he will tell you his story. As for me, I went to Nepal because I had a very strong intuition that I should go there. We were talking earlier about listening to this inner feeling; and the inner voice said I had to go here, so I left my job as a lawyer, travelled overland and arrived in Nepal. Then through a series of coincidences I met Eric. Getting inside the culture and understanding the people and their language was very important to me. Eric and I shared this same desire to be close to the people, not to photograph them from the outside, but to get inside their lives. So we worked for some time in Nepal, and then in 1989 we went to Thailand. There we discovered a clan of bird-nest gatherers who were making their living by collecting birds' nests in the vertiginous cliffs and enormous caves of the Andaman Sea. We're going to present this film to you, followed by a tray of slides, so that you can see something of our life from a visual point of view, and then we'll happily have questions and discussions.

Eric: I was really scared at the beginning of this film because I had fifteen people with me. I needed a large crew to do the lighting, carry the equipment and so on, and I was very frightened that one of



them might fall. The first time I went into the cave and saw them up there, I thought, "How can a man go so high into such an incredible spider web?" And five days later, I was one of them up there.

Diane: When we first proposed this idea, everyone said it's impossible. The impossible is usually possible, but you have to put in hard work and determination. When you come across obstacles, instead of saying, 'we can't do it', you get over the obstacle. That means that you really have to push yourself to your limit.

Eric: The first time it's very freaky. It's like being in an incredible nightmare. And then, extremely quickly, you become accustomed to the darkness, to the creaking bamboo, to the vines, to the cockroaches and so on. This almost surrealistic universe becomes yours. You just feel at ease after a while in these amazing caves. I chose Ip's family as characters, because they were the people I had the best relationship, the closest complicity with. He understood my work. He understood why I wanted to do it: because I wanted to make a testimony of his own life, his own knowledge, which nobody knew about.

Every year there are some who die because a bamboo breaks, because they get tired, because they push themselves to their limit and sometimes they slip. Their job is certainly very dangerous. But they have been doing it since the age of twelve, so they are used to it, they know the risk, and there is no idea of being a hero or anything like that; they are just regular, normal people.

Diane: We've become a part of their day-to-day life, not just because we want to take photos or make a film, but because that's what we enjoy: having contact with other people and people who live in a way completely different from our own. What you realize in the end is that we're basically all the same. We have different customs and different traditions, but our hearts are the same.

Sara, to us, is very important, and we never leave her at home; we take her with us wherever we go. When the people see us with a child, they see us as a family unit; a mother, a father and a child, and they can relate to us on that level as well because most of them have their own children.

Eric: When we were shooting Djawaderam, the cave on top of the sea, it took us five days to install all the equipment, the crane, the camera, the platform and so on. It was, in many aspects, the most dangerous and most difficult challenge. When you start early in the morning, you are frightened because you have fifteen people with you, none of whom is as skilled as you. Their life depends on you and they give you their trust. We used a very interesting technique that had never been used before. Every morning, after tea and breakfast, we would hook ourselves to a rope and use the wings of the boat to go up there. Everybody told me I was crazy to take such heavy equipment as 35 mm cameras up there. At first I thought it was impossible, then I thought it was crazy, and then we did it.



Diane: I think Eric is completely crazy. He does things that no other photographer, filmmaker, no other man would ever do. Seeing him work is terrifying, but I'm not going to be the person who stops him because that's him, that's his nature, he likes to live on the knife's edge.

Eric: When we were in the cliff and came the day of shooting after these five days of preparation, we had four cameras rolling together because we couldn't ask Ip to do the same thing twice; it was too dangerous. Of course we were very scared. But once you get up there, once you put the camera to your eye and things start rolling, you calm down and just forget where you are. You become an eye, completely taken by what you see. Then, when the roll is finished and you remove your eye from the camera and realize where you are, again you think, what am I doing up here? Am I crazy? Of course you understand, after a while, what you are doing up there. If we hadn't been crazy, we would never have got these pictures.

Diane: So that was a film to show our lives behind the camera, and the actual documentary film that we made was nominated for an Academy Award in 1992. But the photos that we're going to show you now are probably kind of a retrospective of ten years of work. The first subject is *The Honey Hunters of Nepal*. The next subject will be *The Bird Nesters*, and after that we shall show you an area called Dolpo, that is in North-western Nepa. But first we'll start with *The Honey Hunters*.

It was on the way to their village that Eric and I met thirteen years ago. (shows slides) This is Mani Lal, the tall man standing up, and his brother, Shri Lal. Their village is located in the heart of Nepal, the central area. Eric had heard about some hunters who were hunting musk deer for various entrepreneurs in the perfume industry. We stumbled across this group of hunters who also hunted honey; that's why they are called honey hunters. We went with them into the jungle. They were carrying this long, thick coil of bamboo rope. Man Bahadur secured the rope - the ladder - around a tree trunk at the top of the cliff. The ladder itself weighs about 50 kilos. Man Bahadur uncoiled the ladder over the cliff face, and Mani Lal, who is the chief honey hunter, climbed down. As you can see, there's smoke coming up in the slide because they have to light faggots of leaves to chase the bees away from the nest. The bees themselves are very large, 2,5 cm long and extremely aggressive, and you see the size of the nest. Some of the nests bear up to 50 litres of honey. Around here, you see a cluster of bees. These are the ones that haven't been menaced away by the smoke. This is the honeycomb. Man Lal descends on the rope ladder. At that time he was 63 years of age - extremely agile, with absolutely no fear of heights or of the bees. Using the long bamboo pole, he gouged out the honeycomb. To take a break, he would just rest on his ladder, smoke a cigarette, with absolutely no fear.



We noticed this also with the bird nesters. Even though they are in incredible danger, they never think about fear; they don't utter the word 'fear' because it will attract the demons. They are completely focused on the work they have to do. Working together as a team is very important - their lives depend on it. Each man has his own task. Man Lal says bees have a way of working together that is far more incredible than that of man. They are so unified to produce the honey and to protect the nest from attacks. In the same way Mani Lal has unified these nine people who are in this group of hunters; it's a tradition. The man down here, Krishna, who secures the rope in the overhang, is also the son of a honey hunter; all of them are the sons of honey hunters. Down here, at the base of the cliff, are the people who keep fires burning so that the smoke disperses the bees. They take the honey that Mani Lal drops into a basket and lowers down to the base of the cliff.

There you see a three-hundred-foot-high cliff with Eric up here. Actually this was taken at the time of our first journey with the hunters. Mani Lal is here. To take this photo, I was on the other side of the valley, and as I was watching Eric going down the first time on his nylon cord, I noticed that there was smoke. A burning faggot of leaves had set alight grass growing on the cliff, and a fire was spreading towards the ladder. I was screaming and shouting, but they couldn't hear anything because my voice was drowned by the sound of a huge torrent. Fortunately the fire burned out before reaching Mani Lal's ladder.

Excerpt from discussion

Guntern: We have listened to your fabulous accounts. We have seen these marvellous pictures, and we would have liked to dwell more on each one of them, for each one opens a window to a completely different world. So since our topic is risk-taking and creative leadership, let's ask a few questions about them as they are linked to your life experience that is obviously Adventure with a big A.

When I looked at the face of Mani Lal, the old honey hunter, the chief of the tribe, I saw a very impressive face. There's a whole landscape in it. You would not doubt for a second that he's a true, authentic leader, able to inspire and motivate people and do what a true leader should do. Could you tell us a little bit more about how you experienced your first contact, your relationship with Mani Lal, and what came of it?

Eric: We had heard about him and the honey hunters and that he was the old man - the only one - carrying on the tradition. The first time we met him I just asked him very naively, "Can we go with you?" He said, "If you want honey, I'll bring it back to you." I said, "No, no, no. I want to learn and I want to see." And he said, "But how are you going to climb with me? Nobody climbs down the cliff with me." I showed him my rope and he said, "A rope like that? It's tiny, it slips, how can you...?" So it



was very tough to go with him and I really had to push to convince him. Fortunately, we speak the same language, and finally he accepted us; he accepted us only when I went down the cliff with him. That was the picture that Diane commented on. At the beginning these people don't understand why we come; we are just a curious beast for them, they don't exactly grasp what we want. But we make them understand that they are our teachers, our masters, and that we want to learn from them. Mani Lal is not so well regarded in his village. He is considered a kind of outcast, somebody who is a bit strange, very poor, and so on. So he didn't quite understand our motivation. But when he realized that we were interested in his tradition, that we really wanted him to be our teacher, our master, the door opened. But it took months and months and months of being stung, of eating nettles, of sleeping in caves, of running in the forest... of having a great life, actually. What I have to say about this life, is that as an adult, I am making my childhood dream come true. That's it. When I was ten, twelve, thirteen, I dreamt of roaming the forest, of hunting bears, - I didn't know about the honey hunters - but I wanted to explore the world like Tintin. And in many ways we are Tintin. Well, perhaps not quite.

Guntern: No, not quite. But you said Mani Lal is not very much respected in his village. From what I saw - I watched your film several times, and I studied his face and his behaviour - what struck me was that in his group, with those people, he is the undisputed leader. This was my impression.

Eric: In his group he is, but not in his village.

Guntern: Not in his village. What do the other villagers live on?

Eric: Agriculture. The honey hunters are honey hunters because they don't have land enough to feed themselves. So they go into the jungle, which belongs to everybody, harvest the honey, and trade it for grain. The honey supplements their shortfall: it's economic at the beginning.

Guntern: One of the many traits a true leader has, and creative people all have, is autonomy. The ability to decide, to be, to think, to proceed, to do on your own. It struck me that in one of your publications about the Dolpo pass you write that a child assumes responsibility as early as the age of four. Here we live in a culture where you see mothers accompanying their twenty-year-old daughters to the piano lesson by car and bringing them back home again. Now that's not exactly how children should be brought up. Could you tell us more about the education of autonomy, independence, pride and self-confidence?

Diane: What you say is true. From a very young age children assume what you call 'adult' responsibility. They are such a vital part of the family, that there is no real distinction, that it's adult responsibility. Like all children all over the world, they play, they have imaginary games, they have



fun. When they do their chores, like fetching water or looking after their little brothers or sisters, it's done with other children; it's their idea of fun and it's also a way of preparing them for more adult responsibilities. The thing that struck me was the relationship between parents and children. In our society we discipline our children, we tell them what to do, we guide them. There, it's more reciprocal, I would say. Parents respect their children. Their children have certain tasks to do; they have to look after the sheep, they have to bring them down on time, so the children have respect for themselves because they know that they're really needed in the family for the family to survive. But there is a negative side: Nepal being a very poor country, children start to work at a very young age to earn money. The Dolpo people are part of an agricultural community, so they have their tasks as part of that family unit and agricultural life. But what is happening in Nepal is that, as there's a shortage of land and people are very poor, they have to send their children out to work. They work on road building they work in carpet factories and so on. We've done a couple of social stories about this. The children don't have the opportunity to go to school, which is very sad. It limits their opportunities. But they have self-respect, because they know that their income is vital for their parents. I see children in the West who have materially a lot more, but may not be as happy as the children in Nepal, in the sense of self-respect and maturity.

Guntern: Could you add, from your vantage point, from your observations, something to the question of how to educate somebody towards autonomy?

Eric: Actually, the Dolpo people talk to their children as we would talk to adults. The families in the village are also very close - as they were here not so long ago, I am sure. It occurs very often that the children of one house go into the woods for two or three days to fetch some kind of leaf or something, with some other family, without any questions being asked. I would like our daughter to do the same, in a way. The children are much more self-confident, much more independent, they take responsibilities more quickly. I am going to be very un-diplomatic, but here in the West you see twelve-year-old children who are still very childish, whereas over there, a child at six is already a little man or a little woman. There are some good aspects to it, some bad. I'm not going to judge, but I think it's rather good. The children take responsibilities; they have their own world, their own friends; quite a lot of autonomy. You look at them, they are little men and women, it's great.