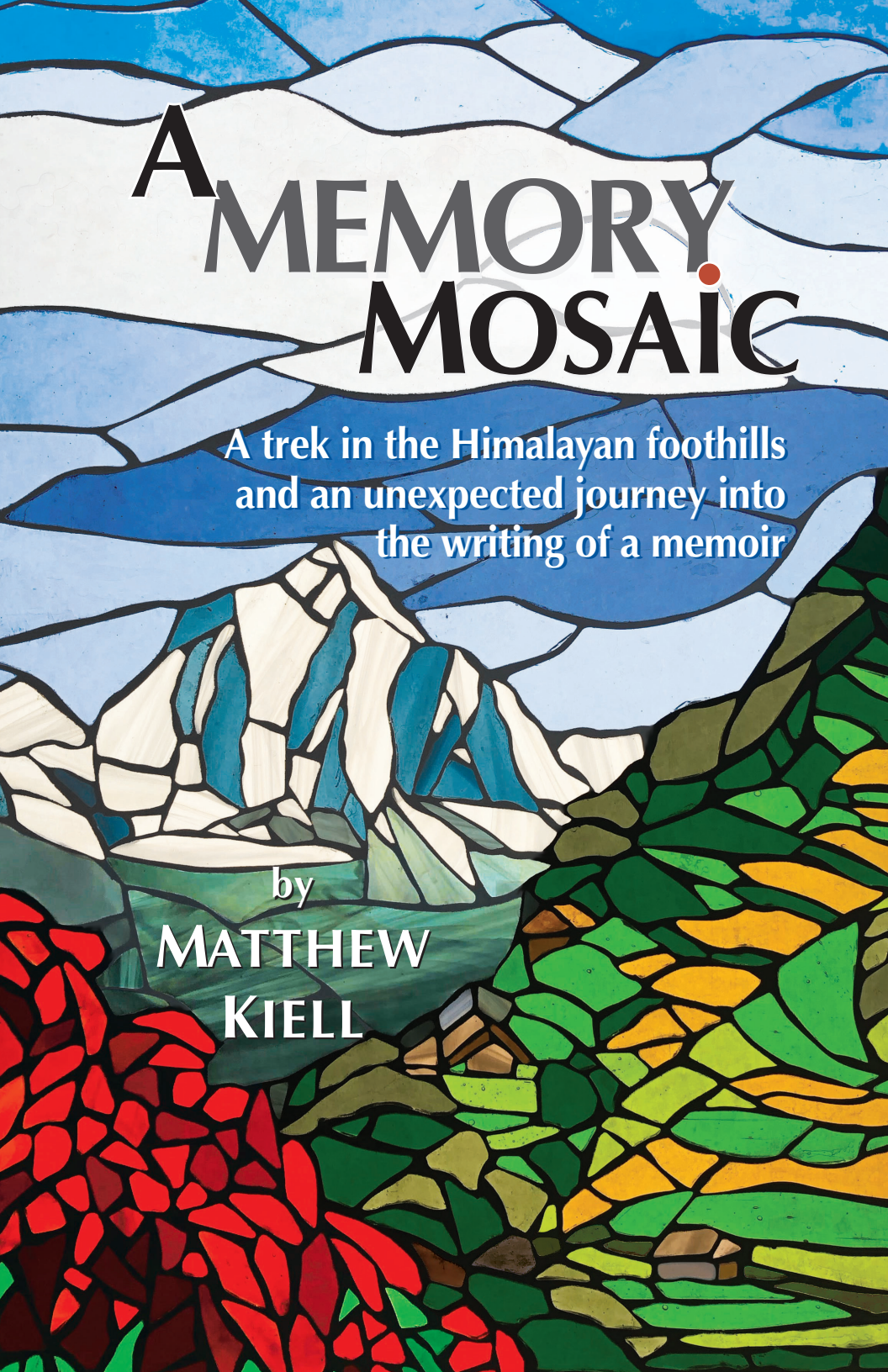
A MEMORY MOSAIC
A trek in the Himalayan foothills and an unexpected journey into the writing of a memoir
by
MATTHEW KIELL

"We tell ourselves stories in order to live."
— Joan Didion,
Line 1 of *The White Album*

An earth-shattering catastrophe takes place 10,000 miles away as America sleeps: A remote valley has been wiped out. For one American, who 35 years earlier visited this now-devastated faraway land, the news is a shock. This was "his" valley — the literal high point of a 10-day trek in the Himalayan foothills.

The report is seismic, setting loose a memory, followed by an avalanche of memories. The cascade of pieces, seemingly random and distant from one another, don't cause chaos and confusion. Instead, they coalesce in time, creating a mosaic of memories portraying much of an entire life, with his trek, an unlikely adventure of a lifetime, at the center of the picture.

A MEMORY MOSAIC does more than just capture one man's effort to piece many moments of his life together. It explores the nature of memory and how memories can turn into memoir. It shows how we all can gain new insights about ourselves and our own lives by revisiting memories, however old, however separated in time, and seeing how they connect.

We all have our memory mosaics that can enrich our lives and those of others. You, the reader, just need the inspiration and guidance to think about your life and tell your story.

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NICHE CUSTOM PUBLISHING
Loves Park, Illinois

Present-tense edition

FOR BECKY
in the ever-present

FOR MY PARENTS,
NORMAN & ADELE
in memory

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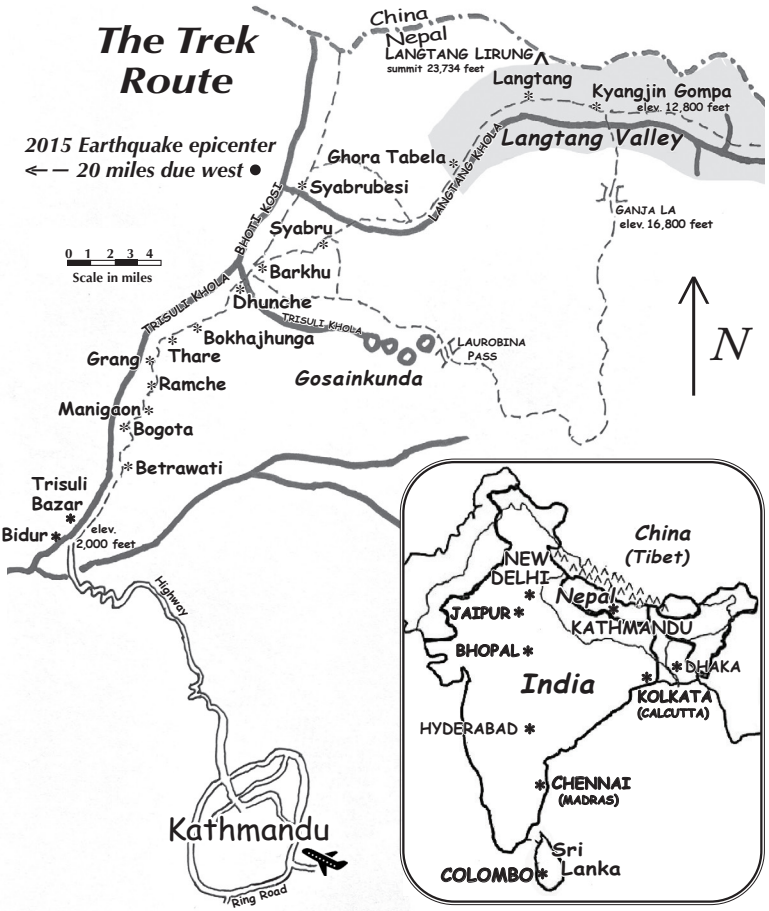

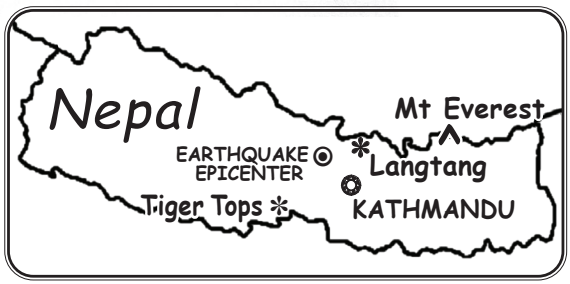

One further map, spanning the world, can be found on page 168.

"You can't follow somebody else's map because no one is starting from the same place that you are." — Adam Grant

OPENING:
Finding Our Story Along the Way

"What we call the beginning is often the end.
And to make an end is to make a beginning.
The end is where we start from. . . ."
— T.S. Eliot, Four Quartets, "Little Gidding"

I

You have my memoir in front of you. Part of why may be so that, someday soon, readers may hold *your* story in their hands.

When I first tackled this memoir, I had one simple mission in mind: Tell the story of my 10-day trek in Nepal in 1980 with my friend Chris, who I had known since 8th grade, more than a decade earlier. His work with the foreign service had taken him far from home to this part of the world. So meeting to go trekking was just a 4-hour flight for him, though I would have to fly halfway around the globe, for an experience that might bind our friendship in new ways.

It was a quirky escapade that people always enjoyed when I told them about it. Plus, I knew it held some insights about opening up one's worldview. I tried various ways to tell the tale, never completing the task . . .

Until now. However, given you've probably read or heard about the book (even if just the back cover), you likely realize that *A Memory Mosaic* did not stay a simple narrative. To my surprise, a central fact emerged about the tale I was unraveling: Entertaining and enlightening as it may be, what drove me to write was something more — indeed, several things.

I found myself exploring how the many events in my life up until then fed the story, like a stream fed by many springs and rivulets. This naturally led to how my trek informed so much of my life after — that stream itself a tributary feeding a whole complex of rivers and the ocean itself. On the one hand, this is natural to realize when creating a memoir.

On the other, for me, this was curious. This voyage midway through my life connected to little else. It was a complete tangent — a 20,000-mile detour I took when I was about to relocate from my youth on the East Coast as a child on Long Island and as a college student outside Philadelphia to my "adult" life in the Midwest and a career as an editor, a freelance writer, and eventually an independent publisher and novelist. Or so I always thought.

Yes, a memoir can be and often is simply a story, a narrative of events in your past, along with some reflection. However, I began to realize, it can also be more. For me, the passion in creating the memoir about this moment was to connect it all together — the events of the trek with what preceded it and with what would follow. And making such connections led to how memoir ties to memory, and memory to time. Something profound was taking shape.

I would assemble the bits and pieces — the past, present, and future — to create the fullest picture of that strange, brief time in my life. And I would take it farther, into a meditation on memory and time. And along the way, I found the metaphor of the mosaic. A memoir can be a mosaic.

Thus was born the second layer of *A Memory Mosaic* — thoughts and incidents that would inform and embellish the base narrative. Those are the subchapters that appear after I relate the events of each Day.

What I was writing told me to take it still farther. I found myself describing more than just 10 days walking the foothills of Nepal. I was entering a literary hall of mirrors, writing a memoir about writing a memoir.

As I uncovered the history — the facts of the trek — deeper truths unearthed themselves. And, at the same time, I was exposing the uncertainty, the possible lies or misconceptions I was telling myself. In this, my act of memoir writing was becoming crystal clear and simultaneously displaying the fog of memory and time.

My project became a meditation on memory and time . . . a path into the genre of memoir that may open whole new ways of viewing the genre in both the loftiest and the most practical terms.

Still, I was caught up in "I."

WE

Before I embarked on this deep dive into memoir — a dive I imagined at the start would be little more than a dip — I thought of the genre as a small corner of the writing world. I didn't think about or care about where I fit into that world. I just wanted to tell a story. I've come to see otherwise. Memoir is really the heart.

Now, as I plunged into the depths of my story, I no longer felt as caught up in a self-centered enterprise. I found that memoir as a literary form spans millennia — sometimes honored, occasionally looked down upon or even reviled, but today in a renaissance. The genre of memoir spread out before me with a long and storied history. Tales of trauma. Tales of adventure, exploration, and discovery. Tales of observation. Tales of introspection. This was a world that easily spanned back at least to one of history's most famous figures — Julius Caesar and his *Commentaries on the Gallic Wars*. And even earlier — 3 centuries earlier — to the ancient Greek soldier/writer Xenophon in his *Anabasis*.

And I plunged even farther into our past. More than 3,500 years ago, the ancient Egyptians in *The Book of the Dead* recognized the human need to keep the memory of oneself alive beyond one's lifetime. "People die twice," it said. "Once when they physically die, and the second time when people stop saying their names." In this oldest of efforts to preserve one's legacy came an important lesson. It means more than just being sure your name is remembered. If just that, you're but an entry on a genealogical chart. Or a name attached to a monument or a park or a 5K charity run. Or appearing on a plaque on a park bench. I want people in the future, long after I die, to remember my name. But there's more. I want to pass along my life's most vivid stories, not just my name.

In learning about memoir's long history, I could see myself merging into part of "We." And I could see my mission expanding: To find a way to help more people out there become part of that as well. Not only am I part of "We." *You*, my reader, are part of "We" as well. So, over the course of this book I sprinkle in some history. I examine how memoir can take many forms, and how there are rules but at the same time no rules. And I invite *you* to step into the world of memoir.

YOU

What should we make of all of the stories of lives told, and how you may fit in? As you read my story and as you read or hear mention of notable memoirs over the ages, don't be deterred. Let it give you a sense of your place, but also let it offer you the freedom to make it your own. This is the complex history of memoir, the rich tradition, the confusing mess that I stepped into without fully realizing. This is the world that you enter, where you can decide for yourself what it is, whether you want to join, and how you fit in. Join the club whose members include Julius Caesar, St. Augustine, Henry David Thoreau, Stephen King, Mary Karr, Joan Didion . . . and Snooki.

One of the most famous lines from Thoreau's *Walden* is "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation." If you search out the quotation online, you'll discover it continuing past "desperation": "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation, and go to the grave with the song still in them."

Thoreau sounds depressing if you stop halfway through. Continue past the comma and, though you can still read the despair, there is a note of hope, an inferred exhortation: Write your song! Don't remain quiet. Don't be silent and despairing.

This is the person I'm speaking to — most every person, all of us who have a song still in them. You. I wrote this memoir and especially the "Creating *Your* Memoir" sections with the average person in mind. A person with a story to tell, or many, who seeks a way to get that story told, not for commercial reasons but to satisfy an inner human need to be remembered and leave a legacy. Or you may not be seeking . . . until you read this book. Or . . . you may never put your story in writing or into any other form, but you will be sparked to reflect on a life filled with stories.

The potential for memoir is in every one of us. We all possess memories unless we suffer complete amnesia (a state far less common than TV and movies would have us believe) or are progressing deep into dementia. Is *anyone's* life so dull and uneventful that some tales from that life don't deserve reflection, retelling and passing along to the future?

In tackling a memoir, you become a participant in one of civilization's great activities — one that defines us as human beings. You are harnessing your ability to remember your past. You are organizing it into a coherent story. You are recording that story, making observations about it and drawing lessons from it. And — most important — in this act of writing in the present about your past, you are creating something to send into the future.

Readers in that future can then, in a seemingly simple act, go to a bookstore, a library, or a bookshelf at home, and pull out a volume. What a miracle! A gateway to knowledge and insight rests in their hands — from you and from a multitude of other writers — more knowledge and insight than they could ever hope to learn through their own experiences. In our electronic age, readers have yet other doors as options to open and walk through. A reader, who can also be a listener, with a few taps of icons and a few quick searches, can enter that same vast world of knowledge and possibility. This passing forward of what we have learned from generation to generation is what has unlocked humanity's progress beyond primitive existence.

If you're like most memoir writers, you won't write a memoir like mine. But presenting this deep dive into my strange, introspective mind — laying out my perspectives on the process, setting out the many mosaic pieces I've created — may motivate you to unlock your mind, to let loose your thoughts, and to set you on a path toward a memoir to share.

The memory mosaic model may appeal to you. Further, you may be inspired by the model of a single episode in your life as a foundation for an examination (if building outward) or a meditation (if gazing inward) on some aspect of our world.

With all this in mind, I've organized *A Memory Mosaic* to keep its structure exposed and in some ways unfinished. The mosaic form and its pieces remain visible. At the start, when it was simply a narrative being told, the plan was to fold the side stories and observations into that narrative. But that became too complex and confusing. I began to see that the narrative was just a seed. (New metaphor here.) The garden in its color and wonder was not the narrative about my trek; the blossoming garden was the collection of incidents that filled my early life and made

that trek a reality. It was the imagination the trek nourished as I later explored the world of fiction. It was all of the insights I discovered by examining that episode from 4 decades back and writing this memoir.

You may choose to weave your story all together into one integrated picture. (Another metaphor that I raise is a tapestry.) You will find your own voice, your own style, your own way of telling your story, even your own medium. Part of the process, if you take your own dive in, is to figure out how you want to tell your story. In this day and age, the possibilities are many. You don't have to consider a traditional written form. Just be sure it's not a form that's ephemeral, that will evaporate or be lost someday too soon.

Do you see what has happened just in the course of these first few pages? What began as me talking about myself and my story carried beyond that. It embraced the ages (before us and after). And it landed solidly in your possession — the book in your hands and the ideas it's meant to plant in your thoughts . . . while, admittedly, telling my story.

Everything comes full circle in inviting my reader — you — into the world of memoir. You may be an observer and appreciative audience of the literary form, or you may be inspired to take part in one way or another. You may already be struggling with telling your story. My story, my meditation would remain incomplete unless I've opened the door and invited you into the clubhouse, sharing the secrets and celebrating the successes.

This volume is my attempt to unveil the depths you may explore as you undertake, or even just daydream about, the act of writing a memoir. Have I created something entirely new here or, at the least, something revolutionary? I don't think so. But each new memoir adds something. And sometimes an alchemy occurs — a combination of thoughts and insights that provide a vision (if we wish to be grandiose) or a fresh perspective. I hope I have accomplished that here. And told an entertaining tale from my life. I hope the same for you.

The trek was a once-in-a-lifetime adventure. Exploring the memories of the trek and the universe of memory and time have become the adventure of a lifetime.

All that said, let me begin, not in the year 1980 but in 2015.

— LANDSLIDES —

2015 – The World Trembles

IT'S SATURDAY, April 25th, 2015, 11:56:26 a.m. Nepal Standard Time. In the Himalayan foothills 50 miles northwest of the capital city of Kathmandu, a displacement in the earth's ever-shifting plates 5 miles underground wells up to the surface and across that nation.

At home in Chicago, it's 1:11 a.m. on a quiet weekend. After 56 seconds, that terrifying tremor subsides. And I sleep, undisturbed and unaware. I don't know that sacred, beloved temples in the capital toppled. Nor do I know that, 100 miles farther east, on Mount Everest, have 22 perished, the mountain's deadliest day. My morning arrives and I turn on the radio to a story told worldwide: 9,000 people have died, making it the deadliest earthquake in Nepal's history.

The news hits me harder than many. I climbed the steps of those Buddhist temples, those stupas, in the days just before I set forth on a trekking adventure up to the Langtang Valley. Now, those steps and those temples that took many years to erect have collapsed in moments to piles of unrecognizable rubble. I think of the mandala art works that I saw in India and Nepal, circular creations carefully crafted in colored sands, then swiftly destroyed or blown away by the wind. I never thought that the sturdy stone stupas I scaled in Kathmandu's Durbar Square might face a similar fate, crumbled to dust and wiped away by nature in an instant.

I walked the crowded streets, thinking how unsteady the buildings to each side of me appeared, how a tiny tremor could topple them. It caused me to walk toward the middle of the street whenever I could, though I'd still be in the path of a toppling building. But I had no serious thoughts that such a thing might really happen. Travelers in a foreign land don't entertain such thoughts. I was part a tribe of

impervious observers of the faraway and exotic, as I'd been many times before in my young life, though never to this degree.

It's 9 days later, and a followup report pops up on the evening news. "My valley," 12,500 feet up in those foothills, so close to the epicenter, was also crushed. Several whole villages were obliterated. In the village of Langtang, where I walked and even slept a night, more than 300 residents have been buried, as likely have been dozens of foreign trekkers. No one is sure how many; doubtless, many body will never be found. Were they crushed . . . or never there?

Likely, the small abandoned stone building near Langtang village that sparked my imagination as a novelist is gone, turned into just a bit more anonymous debris mixed in with whole mountainsides of rock, mud and snow. And what of the Buddhist temple far into the valley, and the cheese factory that transforms the local milk into a delicacy?

The news reports don't mention the fate of one of Nepal's hidden treasures — its longest *mani* walls, made from large stones with prayers carved into or written on and them. I walked what felt like miles of trail strolling next to these Tibetan prayer walls, often adorned with prayer wheels and tall, thin colorful flags flapping in a brisk, steady wind. Have all those prayers been pulverized as well?

The walls, along with the stone hut and the temple, inhabited the Langtang Valley I created in my first novel just a few years after I saw them. Those walls snaking through an open valley were transformed in time by my character, a strange western sojourner. He climbed there to escape but discovered he had walked into the center of a giant labyrinth, a co-creation of nature and humanity.

Interwoven with my horror, I muse upon the memory of how my trekking companion, Chris, had the idea to buy some yak cheese from that factory. We bought a kilo to add variety into our menu for the 5-day descent, walking 6-8 hours each day. It was a welcome addition, much like a Swiss Gruyère, which was not surprising. The factory was a Swiss venture, one of many foreign aid projects to advance a culture that was decades, even in ways centuries, behind the industrialized West.

But Chris also decided to take some cheese back to share with

coworkers. It may seem like a worthwhile gesture. But the purchase wasn't a small sample; it was a 5-kilo wheel — 11 pounds. Moreover, Chris was working in Thailand, a 2,000-mile flight from Kathmandu. But, no worries; he didn't carry the wheel. That fell to our porters. Somehow, that 5-kilo wheel of yak cheese got transported not only 5 days back down from the high point of our trek, but to Kathmandu and then onto a flight back to Southeast Asia.

It's strange how my mind moves so swiftly from a monumental cataclysm to a wheel of cheese. Why did it being a "wheel" strike me as ironic? Why did the purchase seem so senseless then, yet now, so many years later, seem to make at least some sense? As recollections are apt to do, they bounce and ricochet unpredictably. A moment later, something else dawns on me — here in 2015, 35 years later — about a passing curiosity soon after we started the trek. Only now do I understand what we witnessed, early in April 1980, on our first full day of walking — a foreshadowing, the aftermath of an advance rumbling.

1980 – The Slippery Slope

WE'RE early into the 10-day Langtang trek — 5 days up to a Himalayan valley I imagined as Shangri-La, and 5 days back — we encountered something unexpected. Day 2, we can see by the altitudes given in the guidebooks, is going to be neither simple nor flat. Our trek has truly begun. My guidebooks tell us that we'll pass a trailside village every hour or two, each village surrounded above and below the trail by expanses of terraced farm fields.

We've already walked for hours, already begun to feel the awe of these mountains, the sorrow of the poverty, the monotony of lives lived walking dirt paths pounded by hundreds of years of bare and sandaled feet, the fatigue in our legs, the heat in our feet, the dryness in our throats.

Then this. This isn't right. The maps and narratives in my guidebooks present a sense of certainty and knowledge. I relied on these books to help me plan this entire trip. They explain where everything is.

Each village on our route is a well-defined dot on the line that is our path. But this leaves me disoriented and anxious.

"Chris, look at this!" He's well ahead of me on the trails, so I have to yell. "Weren't we supposed to reach another village by now?"

He stops to let me negotiate the uncertain trail. I point to the map in the guidebook.

"Don't trust the guidebooks," Chris says. He's read them in the past day or two, but his skepticism about them borders on condescending. Easy for him to say, but hard for me to embrace.

Have I already lost my Western sense of time, distance, and space? I can't shake that those dots on my map that I consult too frequently each represent a village. It's simple and straightforward. They signal something certain. They provide security in their guidance, offering knowledge about where we are walking, each step into a new unknown.

But here we are, negotiating a rough, rocky stretch. For a hundred yards uphill to our right, the slope above the path is an expanse of gray debris. Down the slope to our left is a mass of large boulders and smaller stones. Evidence of terraces up the hill and down is sparse, little hints that until recently it all was orderly and ready for plant. Not now. We're faced with traversing a field of pebbles, rocks and boulders in an ashy moonscape through which a camouflaged trail threads itself.

Our Sherpa guide, Tashi, comes up from behind me, shepherding our porters over this rough section.

"Tashi, shouldn't we have come to a village?"

"Many paths in front of us," he says. Or so I interpret it. I can't get an explanation that makes sense to me. His English is minimal, mainly centering around words and phrases to help explain expected procedures. And my Nepali is confined to a dozen words, if that. We'll reach the village I expect soon, maybe as soon as around that bend ahead of us.

Or so I figure. But we never do.

Soon, we do reach the village. The dot on the map was just slightly misplaced. Except . . . this village is the next dot on the map.

In days to come, will I learn from fellow trekkers on their way down what Tashi can't explain? Will we hear tales told about the barren landscape we just encountered? That to me what was a lasting feature

in these hills was a landslide? That the mountains had spoken suddenly and recently, wiping a village away? That they learned the truth after their own initial confusion, told by descending trekkers who they met as they ascended? And those trekkers likewise? And likewise. . . . And likewise. . . .

Which makes me wonder these many years later, Where did the truth — or just a tale — originate?

— DAY 1 —
Eventually, We Start to Walk
Kathmandu — Trisuli Bazar — Betrawati

APRIL 1, 1980, has started early, very early. Are we fools to embark on this escapade? The reasons that it might fail are many. I rose at 5:30. Chris was awake at 4 a.m. We both had much to do.

Now, at 6:30, we stand in the lobby of the Yellow Pagoda Hotel in Kathmandu, Nepal. Our trekking gear is assembled around us. All of our belongings that we're not taking on the trek are stored away. Soon the taxi will pull up to the hotel. The time has almost come for Stage 1 of our trekking adventure.

Last night, Rajen Upreti, our Natraj Travel representative, met us here at the hotel. He's a young man, younger than Chris and me, neatly dressed and businesslike, sporting a smooth complexion and a neat haircut. At perhaps 5 foot 2 (1.57 meters) and at most 110 pounds (50 kilos), he's dwarfed by his Western clients.

"Let me introduce you gentlemen to our guide," he said, as he led us from the lobby. Standing by the Natraj car was a man much the same height and weight. But there the similarities ended. Every ounce of this man's 110 pounds was muscle, whereas the Natraj agent was thin and less muscular. Also unlike Rajen, the guide's clothing was rough, soiled and worn, his complexion was tanned and dried by constant exposure to the sun, his black, straight hair clipped in a rough, purely utilitarian cut. "This is Tasarb Sherpa, who we call Tashi."

"I please to meet you," Tashi said as he bowed. He took a few tentative steps forward to shake each of our hands, his feet seeming to be uncomfortable with the smooth pavement in front of the Yellow Pagoda.

"I'm very much looking forward to our trek," I said. "Neither of us has done anything like this before." Tashi seemed perplexed by my comment.

Rajen translated. Tashi smiled.

We asked a few more questions of Tashi. He smiled but said nothing. Rajen provided the answers. "Tashi will lead you along the way. He will keep you safe and not lost. He will supervise the porters who will carry your provisions. And he will make sure you are well fed and always have a place to sleep." Rajen paused. "Tashi, of course, will serve as your tour guide, explaining your surroundings as you trek toward Langtang."

I glanced over at Chris in a wordless exchange. "Tashi doesn't know much English, does he?" "Definitely a man of few words." "How's your Nepali?" "About as good as yours." No, our command of the Nepali language would be of little help.

When Rajen interceded and interpreted, we could see Tashi's expression brighten. He spoke with confidence, though even in Nepali his words were few.

He was experienced as a guide, we learned, having led Westerners on more than a score of Langtang treks. And no doubt he apprenticed on many treks before that as a porter. But here, standing in twilight outside the urban tourist hotel, standing next to the sophisticated Mr. Upreti, who after all was his boss, he was intimidated. He stood by the Yellow Pagoda, out of place and ill at ease.

"Before we leave you gentlemen for the evening, allow me to present you with some items," Rajen turned to the vehicle and pulled out a pair of down jackets, day knapsacks for each us, and a sleeping bag for me. "And let me give you these," he added, returning our passports to us. I breathed a sigh of relief.

We had relinquished them after Chris's arrival, so Natraj could secure the proper permits to travel beyond the Kathmandu Valley. This 38 hours without our passports in a foreign capital with an authoritarian monarchy and a penchant for bureaucracies and inspection stations made me uneasy. Nor, having been told back in New York that these all-important permits would be waiting for me upon my arrival, had I been particularly comforted upon arriving in Kathmandu a week earlier to find they had not yet been secured. So the return of the passports, permits attached, eased my mind dramatically. Chris was unfazed. "Perhaps you've read too many Graham Greene

novels," he suggested, which was true. I'd read all of them.

We bade goodbye to Rajen, thanking him for all of his help. The two Nepali men departed, and Chris and I returned to our hotel room. We packed our provisions for the trek in our backpacks and in the small daypacks. Our other provisions would stay behind in our suitcases. We showered and were asleep by 10 o'clock, an hour that seemed early last night, knowing our day today would begin before dawn.

We relished the sleep. That was our last in a traditional hotel and bed until we return to the Yellow Pagoda on April 10th.

Awaiting Tashi's arrival, Chris settles his debt to me, as I shelled out all the money until now arranging the trek. He pulls out a large wad of money — bills in about 6 currencies. He's a walking exchange. He counts out $500 US in cash. It's much needed, necessary along with my depleting supply of travelers checks to get me through the rest of my trip. At the front desk, we convert some of cash into Nepali rupees — 14 rupees to the dollar — and check out of the Yellow Pagoda Hotel.

Pulling up promptly at 6:30, Tashi loads our gear into the taxi. Stage 1 is underway. Stage 1, however, is not taking us to the mountains — not even to the transit point hours away, where we'll begin walking. The brief taxi ride delivers us to the bus terminal — a transit point from which to get to our trek's starting point — an adventure in itself.

Not as expected, we arrive at the "bus terminal," which is neither a building nor even an open shed. Instead, it's just an open square packed with Tata buses (Tata being the General Motors of India) and other buses of suspect reliability, as well as trucks and jitney cars that have been reji gered for human transport. All are painted with vibrant designs, some from religious sources, some just fantasy, some purely abstract, along with sayings about "Good Travels" and "Luck," the latter of which doesn't inspire confidence.

Tashi plants us near our bus. Then he disappears.

We stand still by our gear, uncertain and uneasy but mesmerized, at the center of a swirl around us. Amidst this chaos of humanity, we spy several other static people with bewildered looks, foreigners like us. Then Tashi reappears, with three Nepali boys — our porters.

All the vehicles are filling with passengers. Baggage and baskets — and people — piled onto the roofs of all the buses. Looking around, at our bus and others, a strange characteristic common among many is obvious. Their wheels were recessed at least a foot.

It's still early morning. Why did we have to leave so early, at 7 a.m.? On a map, our destination — the town of Bidur in the Trisuli River valley due west, and specifically to the town's commercial center, known as Trisuli Bazar — is no more than 20 miles as one of the thousands of crows we've seen would fly. Or as a helicopter could cover in minutes. We've seen a few of those, too, on their way up to the mountain valleys with tourists. The road, the books say, is winding — about 45 miles. Yet our bus from Kathmandu, according to the itinerary, arrives at about 1 p.m., 6 hours from now. We pull out, dodging crowds and cows and vehicles, at about 7:30.

The initial miles leaving the city slide by quickly. But now, as we get beyond the outskirts of the capital, the answer why so early and why such a slow trip becomes clear. We're leaving the Kathmandu Valley and its flat straight roads and starting on the serpentine, narrow treacherous "highway" that hugs hillside after hillside. The bus seems too wide to fit the road. At times it *is* too wide. Which is why the wheels are set in. As the bus hugs the hillside, passengers on that side have to watch out for twigs from bushes sweeping along the bus. If a window is too far open — and it needs to be kept open because the bus packed beyond capacity is already stifling, even in the cool April air — the flailing branches become punishing whips. Sometimes the bus carriage scrapes along the hillside itself.

On the side of the bus away from the hillside, it's more terrifying. The bus hangs over empty air, over a cliff or steep hill plummeting 50, 100, 200 feet down. There seems to be no room for vehicles to pass one another. Yet somehow they do.

We're traveling just 45 short miles. But military chekpoints (that's how they spell it more often than not) dot the route. A routine chekpoint stop, Rajen told us, could take a half hour or more. Any time the soldiers spot foreigners among the passengers, the time can stretch out more, and we're the most obvious of passengers. I'm broad-shouldered and 170 pounds, standing 5'9". Then there's Chris — 100 kilos and 1.90 metres (that's 220 pounds and 6'3"). But that's not all.

He sports unruly red hair and a bushy red beard. No hiding. We're told to disembark — left to wonder whether the bus will wait or abandon us. Our passports, visas and trekking permits are grabbed away, the sentry sauntering inside to "inspect the documents." Tashi follows. Long conversations ensue between the soldiers and our guide. Are we seeing money pass hands? I think so. Tashi might hint to us later that money always passes hands. But for now, he doesn't explain.

Somehow, the bus arrives at Trisuli Bazar at about 1 p.m. — another open square with numerous buses. Though I never noticed passing or getting passed by other buses on the way, there they are, each releasing its haul of many Nepali and several foreign travelers. Swiftly, people are climbing the buses, finding their belongings, tossing them down, then scattering. Among them are a couple of our porters, gathering our packed and secured trekking baskets. Clusters of trekkers, guides and porters stand around mountains of supplies.

Now we're on our way? Alas, no. Tashi — the one person among the assembled who knows what's happening — vanishes . . . for 5 minutes, then 10, stretching to 20. He reappears and, though we've been told our trek has 3 porters along with our guide, Tashi is leading 2 more porters — straggly guys hired somewhere beyond the open square. Some spot Tashi knows well, and will teach to our oldest porter, who we realize is being groomed to be a guide. Some spot no foreigner will ever know.

Now, truly, the trek begins. But not as expected. The walking is easy. All the easier because, at least for this first day, Tashi hasn't allowed us to fill our backpacks tight or attach our sleeping bags underneath. We're carrying just the few essentials we need to keep close — water, sunscreen, medications, our pocket knives, our documents. No need to catch up to a porter — yes, we usually have to catch up to them, not wait for them. Our water bottles are the most crucial — filled and treated with purifying pills.

We're walking with many others on a wide, flat macadamized road next to the Trisuli River, which is often contained, canal-like, flowing down toward where we came from. The scene reminds me of a recurring image in an art film I saw a few years ago — Luis Buñuel's *Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* — in which the 6 lead players walk resolutely,

sometimes talking, sometimes in silence, along a country road in the middle of nowhere.

As our contingent walks, we're passed by occasional bicycles, motorcycles and small trucks, and we pass locals guiding ox-drawn carts with goods. As the canal upstream transforms to a natural river, we reach the edge of a town, Betrawati. The flat, navigable surface of the road ebbs away as we reach a suspension bridge across the river — a pedestrian bridge. The road has ended here in Betrawati.

The bridge feels a bit rickety. It sways. But it's a large bridge that accommodates several people passing each other in opposite directions. The guidebooks speak of this bridge as one of great significance. We'll be crossing many bridges on our trek, but this is probably the finest bridge in all the region.

We cross the bridge, and wheeled transportation is gone. We step down onto a dirt path perhaps 10 feet across at its widest. With our first campsite nearby, in a fallow farming terrace just beyond Betrawati, the path is often narrower. Tomorrow, we'll be off on this trail taking us toward the Langtang Valley.

Having crossed the bridge, we know it's the end of the easy walk. It's not to be the only bridge we'd encounter over the next 9 days; we'll walk dozens spanning small streams, coursing rapids and empty ravines. However, this one was the largest and most trafficked, the gateway.

For 9 days we won't see a truck or car or motorcycle. We'll see neither a bicycle nor the trishaws so ever-present in every South Asian city. We'll pass no more carts being pulled by oxen, horses, mules or human beings. We'll spot no tractors in the fields. We won't even see a wheelbarrow. Not until we retrace our steps down from our high point of Langtang and cross that bridge again in Betrawati.

3 Pairs of Trekkers

How unusual were Chris and I? In many ways, we were special and rare indeed. Few people will ever undertake a trek in the foothills of the world's highest mountains. Few people have the back stories we had that brought us there. In certain ways, however, we were a standard type.

Yes, Chris and I arrived in Kathmandu from two opposite directions

at the end of March 1980. Our trek was carefully arranged from thousands of miles away, but not finalized until entering the Natraj office in Kathmandu less than 48 hours before we were to set off. On the 1st day of April, we began our 10-day trek after a perilous 6-hour public bus ride to Trisuli Bazar, looming large over our fellow passengers, standing out from them not only in our size but my L.L. Bean wear and Chris's Country Road attire. They viewed us with passing curiosity but were unconcerned. Soon, we were walking 6-8 hours a day, Nepali porters carrying all of our gear and supplies, eating food prepared by our cook/porter, and sleeping in our tent in a village yard or fallow rice terrace each night. All on our way toward our destination of the Langtang Valley, and back again.

Turn back a dozen years. A pair of counterculturists, a bit more adventurous than their comrades from Europe or Britain or America to Kathmandu in the late '60s, were bored. They hung around with fellow hippies amidst the thick, harsh ganga smoke permeating a grungy side alley known as Freak Street. Their wanderlust was flaring up. An itch possessing them for more, they discovered the small office of a nascent company—Natraj Travel—on another street. Hastily, a trek was arranged. They'd have a Nepali guide, but no porters. They'd weather a perilous 6-hour public bus ride to Trisuli Bazar, their guide seated elsewhere in the bus, nonplussed, while they hung on for dear life. They loomed large over the other passengers. Their old tie-dyed clothes had a totally different quality from the well-worn clothing of the natives. They were viewed with unrelenting curiosity and more than a touch of fear.

From Trisuli Bazar, they began their 14-day hike, eating in basic village lodges. They slept under the sky in old sleeping bags, which they rolled up and strapped onto their backpacks each morning and lifted onto their backs. Their guide stayed close, but mostly served to keep them on track and to get past military chekpoints. On Day 7 and 8, they reached the Langtang Valley.

Or move forward 35 years, instead of back 12. A pair of well-healed foreigners from who-knows-where have arranged a well mapped out trek,

everything to the letter, with Natraj via their website and email. Arriving from Europe or Britain or South Africa or Australia or America, they depart Kathmandu on April 22nd or 23rd, to begin their 7-day trek, 4-5 hours walking at most per day, staying in lodges and hotels, simple but kept up to standards of cleanliness and hospitality that Westerners will accept, all reserved. It comes after a slightly dicey 5-hour drive in a private 4-wheel-drive Jeep, passing packed narrow-wheel-base public buses filled with Nepalis but few if any foreigners. The Jeep skirts Bidur, drives through Betrawati, dodges trucks on the highway worming north toward the Chinese border, and reaches the town of Syabrubesi.

Three very different pairs of travelers, in very different times. But we are exactly the same. To the Natraj trekking agency in Kathmandu, Chris and I in 1980 were travelers using their services, racking up an exotic travel experience to be able to tell people about for the rest of our lives. No different than any two who had Natraj or another agency arrange a Langtang trek in 1968 or in 2015. Clients added to a long list over half a century of serving the wanderlust of Western travelers — some of them grateful, many of them boorish and xenophobic, most of them overwhelmed with wonder. Every one of these journeyers knew that in another few weeks they would be back from where they came, with this adventure having evolved from a desire to a daydream to a plan to a journey to a set of memories for a lifetime.

Surely none of us knew of the devastating earthquake that slammed Nepal back in 1938. None of us knew that the tectonic plates beneath the country, relieved of their stress, were slowly building that stress back up year by year. The ground underneath them was the same ground.

The only difference among these three pairs: The two who left in April 2015 never descended out of the Langtang Valley. At the pinnacle of their trek, just before noon, they may have been looking about them at the magnificent mountains. They were likely marveling as the spectacular peaks as they were swallowed up by the morning cloud cover, as those peaks are almost every morning. Then something unfathomable occurred. The ground trembled. The mountains moved. The mountainsides shifted and slid. And, moments later, they were swallowed up and

crushed under millions of tons of rock, mud and snow.

That could as easily have been Chris and me. But it was not.

Unexpected Inspiration

In a sense, this whole adventure started with a song.

> *"I think I'm going to Katmandu.*
> *That's really, really where I'm going to.*
> *If I ever get out of here, that's what I'm gonna do...."*

Bob Seger's song had come on the car radio as my girl friend, Denise, eventually my wife, was driving me to Union Station in Washington DC for my Amtrak ride back to Philadelphia. I turned up the volume, the only way to fully enjoy a song like that.

It was the summer of '79. She was home with her family outside DC before her first year of grad school at the University of Chicago, studying music history. I came down to visit her and her family for a weekend break from my job as a copy editor with *TV Guide* magazine, headquartered in the northwest suburbs of Philly.

We had met my sophomore year, her freshman year, at Swarthmore College, southwest of Philly. When I graduated in 1978, I moved nearby and lucked into the job copy-editing for *TV Guide*. When she graduated the next year, we understood that I would settle in Chicago with her. But I wasn't ready to leave this first post-college job. So I stayed back in Philly until early spring.

"Katmandu" (Seger used an alternate spelling) was a favorite song, one I discovered 4 years earlier with my sophomore roommate, Warren Emerson. Playing Seger energized us, especially this song. Most memorably, we played it before leaving our dorm room after studying through the night for our Economics 101 midterm exam, both of us bolstered and confident for the test.

The place meant little to us other than "an exotic, faraway place." It could have been Timbuktu, which would have fit the meter and rhymes.

Emo got 100% and became an economics major. My grade? 44%!

I dropped the course the next day, sealing the deal that I would

become an English and philosophy double major, avoiding anything math and science other than astronomy for the rest of my college career. Why astronomy? Yes, it was considered the science course for the non-science inclined. But I didn't take it for the easy pass. I was entranced by the campus's Sproul Observatory and its 19th-century telescope, by the mechanical dome, by the anachronistic allure. I was enthralled by the stars. There was romance to the stars; there was metaphor; there was myth and mystery.

When "Katmandu" came on the car radio we were in the midst of a conversation about my desire to travel after quitting my job and before moving out to Chicago. I'd traveled a huge amount as a child, teen and college student. I wanted something different, something challenging. Then the song started playing.

> *"That's why I'm going to Katmandu.*
> *Up to the mountains where I'm going to.*
> *If I ever get out of here, that's what I'm gonna do...."*

"I know!" I declared over the music. "I'll go to Kathmandu!"

"Oh, no!" Denise exclaimed, managing to maintain her composure as we negotiated Dupont Circle. "Can't you find someplace more reasonable?"

It was a spur-of-the-moment, outside-the-box thought, like one that my mother and I had at the start of my junior year of high school that changed my life dramatically.

I regrouped swiftly. "How about if I don't do it alone? I'll write Chris and ask him if he would like to meet me."

I already knew that a popular activity of travelers going to Kathmandu — beyond smoking a lot of pot (which I had never done, wasn't going to do, and haven't once done to this day) — was to go trekking in the Himalayan foothills. Of course, at this point, I was thinking the foothills leading up toward Mount Everest. Go big, or go home.

"I'll see if Chris would like to go on a trek with me."

"You haven't done much hiking."

"True."

"You don't particularly like camping."

"True."

"Does Chris like camping and hiking?"

"I don't know. . . . But, hey, this will be different!"

At this point she assumed I was just riffing, just daydreaming. But I wasn't; this was already real. A stop in Manhattan, at the Nepal Tourist Bureau, the only place in America in 1979 to find travel information, would make it all the more so.

Much research, planning and luck was required to keep this adventure from descending into a debacle instead of ascending to Langtang. We knew that, given the job Chris had, I would have to arrange everything. Chris's responsibility: Show up; make sure to land in Kathmandu 2 days before our trek. As he would put it, "I'm just along for the walk."

So the cultural adventure started as soon as I began. I delved into the guidebooks to learn where we might go once we met in Kathmandu. I learned of an exotic side trip I could take before we met. I arranged to meet people in Britain and Sri Lanka to make the trip even more worthwhile. I talked with travel representatives from a culture so different from mine that sometimes I thought they were planning a completely different trip than I was requesting. Or they were just spinning wheels and never going to make it possible for me to create the trip.

Yet, in the end, on April 1, 1980, Chris and I set out together to start our trek.

Incognito, *Chapter 23*

By a couple of years after my trip, Nepal was more than just a vacation and a memory. It became part of my first novel, *Incognito*. This is the opening of Chapter 23, when Nepal entered the narrative. Picking up the novel recently, I noted elements that didn't come from the Journal I kept during the trip. They came from then-recent memory — elements that 40 years later I would never be able to recall, except through what I found written in this work of fiction:

> *KATHMANDU, NEPAL: 10,000 miles from anywhere this story has as yet carried the reader, but as central a spot as any on the globe, a spot to which the reader will be transported again by the time this history ends. All travelers to this long-hidden capital soon find the Durbar*

Square, where they see many temples of various sizes, a fountain used for drinking water, for washing, and for laundry, a steady stream of tourists from East and West, and, within a courtyard of one of the old buildings, the young girl who is the Kumari, the Living Goddess.

A few minutes' walk west of that important square one may find a small, back-street establishment called the Chi & Pie. By most western standards, it is a rathole — a tiny hideaway with a low ceiling, uneven wood chairs and cheap, unstable wooden tables crudely topped with third-rate formica, nothing exactly at right angles to anything else, nothing new. Nothing seems even second-hand, neither in this small pie shop nor in the entire nation of Nepal.

This is a country entirely crafted from third-hand materials. The air is old; the circulation is deficient. Anyone who enters will smell the unmistakable, disagreeable remnants of fumes from a Nepalese cigarette — a powerful, funnel-like stump of strange tobaccos — still hanging in the air, even an hour after the smoker has departed. There are many ghosts hanging in the air, much as the odor of the cigarette lingers.

Western standards are easily left behind, even forgotten. They rapidly lose meaning so far from where they were born. There is a charm – seedy, one must admit, but definite nonetheless – in this small restaurant serving its strange selection of pies, cakes, and brownies made from recipes taught by US AID wives in the 1960s. By mystic transformation even the annoyances and threats of the place assume an allure.

CREATING *YOUR* MEMOIR 1
What IS a Memoir & Why Do We Write?

"A library has burned."
— *What Senegalese people say on the death of an elder in their community.*

Simply stated, a memoir is a narrative, most often viewed as book length, focusing on an episode or period in your own life or an aspect of your life. Things do get more complex as we explore memoir further. But that's a good starting place.

I don't mean to recap a thorough history of the genre. It's been done, many times, most notably by *New Yorker* writer Ben Yagoda in his 2009 book, *Memoir: A History*. But it does help to recognize the categories of stories that are often confux`xsed with memoir as well as the variety of ways one can present a memoir. This will help you figure out how you want to tell your story.

That word *memoir* means many things to many different people. Still, we have useful related terms that carry their own particular meanings, which can relieve some of the weight people burden *memoir* with. There's *biography*, *autobiography*, (the confusing term) *memoirs*, *journal* and *journaling*, and *diary*. Then you move into academic, literary, and critical circles, finding labels like *autofiction*, *autobiographical fiction*, *autobiografiction*, *nonfiction novel*, *roman à clef*, and *hybrid memoir*. I try to preserve the differences of these many terms. At the same time, let's not force a strict definition or step through a looking glass of semantics, definitions, and pedantry.

By *memoir*, I don't mean a story telling all or broad sections of your life. That's autobiography. Books labeled *Memoirs* usually mean the same thing, even if the word resembles the one without the *s*.

Diaries and journals have a sense of immediacy. They capture the writer at the time of the events. Anne Frank's *The Diary of a Young Girl* and *The Journals of Lewis and Clark* are perfect examples. The journal writer may be introspective, but they carry no hindsight. It doesn't benefit from the author looking back over the years at their story. That is left to the reader, who knows the contours and outcomes of the history — horrific in one case here, majestic in the other.

Keep in mind, however, that journals and diaries can be important tools. As Chris and I progressed day by day on our trek, I carried a volume with me, documenting our progress in 2 ways. The story I tell here relies heavily on that document. I quote it and refer to it often. But my 1980 journal and this memoir 40 years later tell very different stories and serve very different purposes.

What gives memoirs their significance and power over the years? Readers relate to a person who is, as the popular expression puts it,

"in the room where it happens." Memoir and autobiography draw the reader into the narrative, providing a guide to navigate it and interpret it. You are walking with a participant in the events, not an outside observer. This imbues it with an immediacy and an emotional impact. Memoir is first-person, direct testimony. That carries great weight, though it does come with some baggage, which we'll get to.

Memoirs don't have strict boundaries. No memoir police exist to dictate laws or rules. Okay, critics and commentators may appoint themselves "guardians of what's right." But in the end, they are simply readers like you.

Categories, naturally, overlap. You'll find autobiographies by a thoughtful, introspective author who astutely analyzes the meaning of their story. And you'll encounter many memoirs that focus on story-telling without introspection. They leave the analysis to the reader.

Complicating matters, memoir and fiction often overlap. Many authors over the years have veiled their memoirs; they write it as a novel, even presented in the third person. The author weaves in some fictional elements and/or veils identities and events. It may be to "protect the innocent" (and perhaps some of the guilty as well) or to enhance the story. The novel *On the Road* by Jack Kerouac is barely fictional. Likewise *Remembrance of Things Past* by Marcel Proust and *My Struggle* by the Norwegian writer Karl Ove Knausgård.

An author may use the contours of their life in their fiction, but diverge from their biography. When a fair bit comes from the author's imagination, it comes to be known as a "semi-autobiographical novel." Many consider Dickens' *David Copperfield* the first of these.

As Sherman Alexie said of his YA novel *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, "The book is my story. If I were to guess at the percentage, it would be about 78% true. Rounding down."

We need to consider when a published work slips below that 78%. Using a popular fictional trope, an author often frames their work as a first-person, true account — that is, a novel in the form of a memoir, journal, diary, letters, found manuscript, or the like. It's one of many devices in an author's toolbox to add realism to their fiction.

One of the most famous works of fiction is presented as a memoir,

although readers rarely think of it this way. "Midway through the journey of our life / I found myself in a dark wood," writes Dante to open *The Inferno*. It's the start of his trek through Hell, with the Roman poet Vergil guiding him and keeping him on the path.

But what of the reverse and the consequences it causes for the genre of memoir, as well as nonfiction in general? Most notorious was *A Million Little Pieces*, by James Frey, a memoir of drug addiction. It got him onto *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, rocketing him onto best-seller lists and great acclaim. Things turned sour, tarnishing the genre of memoir for years, when the book was found to be unreliable in its facts, perhaps verging on outright fiction.

Sometimes, even when the author stays solidly in nonfiction, categories overlap or mix within the covers of one book, with memoir just being a component. Here hybrid memoir comes in, mixing and crossing genres. For a perfect example of hybrid memoir I give you *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft* by Stephen King, which appears on many Best Books About Writing lists.

King starts by looking back at his childhood, with some focus on how it shaped him as a writer: memoir. Later, in the part called "On Living: A Postscript," he recounts being struck by a van while walking near his Maine home, about his rehabilitation, and about how it affected his life and his perspective as a writer: more memoir. Sandwiched in between is the part called "On Writing," with 3 sections — "What Writing Is," "Toolbox," and "On Writing" — referring in passing to King's own life: insights, how-to, and advice. Then come 4 "Furthermores" — the first dissecting King's editing of a draft of one of his short stories, including a facsimile of his hand-edited pages, followed by 3 book lists. Finally, in the most recent edition, we get an essay by novelist son Owen and a conversation before an audience between King and his other novelist son, Joe Hill. Stephen King gives us a little of everything. (A British edition even includes a short story by the winner of an *On Writing* contest.) Whew!

I myself break many of the bounds I establish here. At its core, *A Memory Mosaic* is indeed a memoir — a tale tightly focused

on a couple weeks in my life. But the tale of the trek still bears many elements of its journal foundation. Moreover, by the time you finish, you'll have visited moments in my life from as early as age 6 and as recent as lying in bed deep in the night at the age of 66. Those sections intentionally connect to the trek or more subtly echo themes or motifs. Plus, the "Creating *Your* Memoir" sections at the end of each Day never fall into pure how-to. By interweaving these sections of the book, I hope to keep you close by, walking the remote Himalayan-foothill trails with Chris and me. Then, as Chris and I slip into our tent and our sleeping bags, reflections and thoughts take over. Then comes a chance for you to take a more active role.

Any narrative into which a writer injects even a few personal anecdotes about themselves has an element of memoir. In the end, you as the reader must decide whether the work lands under the category of autofiction or memoir/autobiography and how comfortable you feel with the mixing of fact and fiction. You as the writer must make similar decisions and choices. Readers will always ask, "Is the writer being honest, even if everything may not be factually 'true'?"

Or consider this provocative thought. The dichotomy between memoir and fiction isn't real. It's a continuous spectrum of the written word — from personal to pure fancy, from just-the-facts to 100% imagination. But the honesty still needs to strive to 100%.

Why do we write memoirs? In answering that, I focus on memoirs outside the realm of celebrity, business and politics. I'm speaking to Thoreau's "mass of men [who] lead lives of quiet desperation."

As I pointed out in citing the Egyptian *Book of the Dead* from 3,500 years ago, the strong impulse to preserve one's name and story spurs memoirists and writers of all sorts, whether royalty or ordinary people. Neil Gaiman refers to it as "writing my name on the wall." It may spur you. Memoir can serve as a form of immortality that we human beings, all so very mortal and here for such a short time, can embrace and employ to extend our presence in the world. Undertaking a memoir lifts the writer, organizes the chaos, immortalizes oneself and one's thoughts.

I especially like *Walden* as an example of memoir, as you'll see over the course of this book. *Walden* focuses on a year spent living a simple, secluded life in a small cabin on Walden Pond in Massachusetts. He writes of his daily tasks and routines; he describes the surroundings; he thinks about what it all means.

Thoreau's main aim was philosophical, using his story as a foundation to ask large questions about people and the world. Memoirists write for many reasons. Often, they share their lives so others similarly situated can see they aren't alone, whether it's in grief (Joan Didion writing *The Year of Magical Thinking*), in dealing with illness or disability (the recent memoir *The Beauty of Dusk* by Frank Bruni), in facing a traumatic childhood (*The Liars' Club* by Mary Karr, *Angela's Ashes* by Frank McCourt, and so many others). Sometimes helping others similarly situated isn't exactly their aim, but that's what makes their stories resonate with thousands or even millions of readers.

Memoirists often write to expose the truth about an injustice. Solomon Northrup's *12 Years a Slave*, perhaps the most famous "slave narrative," is a notable example.

Memoirs do play big roles in the business world, the celebrity universe and the political arena. In a sense, these are genres of their own and garner much media attention. There's nothing wrong with these books, and often much that is right. The intentions span a spectrum.

Some do so because their followers/fans want it. Many want to aggrandize themselves, bolster credentials, or cash in. Some need to tell "the true story" behind the public image, in order to instruct and guide others. A million examples can be found of each. But celebrities sometimes use their fame and the spotlight they command to tell important stories, not feed a fan base, their wallet, or their reputation.

Barack Obama wrote his first book, *Dreams from My Father*, before his meteoric political rise. Did he write it to help his political career, his first political office coming 2 years after the book was published? Perhaps that was one motive. But it was not a policy book the way his next book, *The Audacity of Hope*, was, published as he was launching his national political career.

As you find your place in the universe of memoir and autobiography, you need to understand why *you* are writing. Plus, you have to get a sense of how you want to present your story, because memoir isn't always straightforward in its presentation. You may create a hybrid memoir, which is discussed a bit more farther down, mask it in fiction, or move into another media than writing, such as film/video, audio, or art.

You need a mission. So do as organizations do. Write a mission statement. Provide yourself with a direction and a focus to set your right course with clarity. That means you need to make it realistic and specific. "To change the world for the better" is a admirable sentiment, maybe even motivating. But where do you go with it?

This is not a one-time task. Return to it often, honing and polishing. If necessary, change it. Keeping on the right course may mean maintaining the straight and narrow, but it may also require course corrections.

When I started, my mission was simple, maybe too simple: *To write a memoir about my trek in Nepal.* It did contain one vital element that fixed my course; I was definitely writing a memoir. Until then, through a decade of wishing to write about the trek, I was wandering from novel to memoir and back. Once on my way, with my intentions evolving, my mission grew to this:

To write a memoir about my trek in Nepal.

To write a work about piecing together
the memories feeding that memoir.

To write a meditation on what that memoir means to me
and says about larger questions concerning memory and time.

To write a work about writing that memoir.

To write a work that can help others create their memoirs.

Now, write your mission. Which brings us to the lines you see on the next page. My first intent was very practical. I am providing the literal space for your mind to plunge into your own story, where you can write your first thoughts.

But those lines carry multiple possibilities. They serve a purpose for the reader who has no intention, immediate or ever, of writing a memoir; they create a space to pause and think before jumping back into the narrative — much as Chris and I, each night, slipped into our sleeping bags to rest, dream, recharge. Those lines also whisper that there is always more to be written. They express my own fears as a writer, afraid to stop writing and afraid to leave any part of a page blank. And those lines, taken at their most abstract, could be the farm terraces along the trail we walked for 10 days.

Still, that very practical intent remains. Lines for you.

— DAY 2 —
Learning How to Walk . . . A Lot!
Betrawati — Ramche

THOSE FIRST couple of hours of our trek, yesterday, were a warmup, simple and flat most of the way. By the end of the day, our elevation above sea level wasn't much higher than it had been at Trisuli Bazar. In fact, Kathmandu is at 4,600 feet above sea level, and Trisuli Bazar and Betrawati are at just 2,000 feet. Our ascent to the far end of the Langtang Valley, starting this morning, will, in 4 days, take us 2.4 miles up, to 12,800 feet.

We're up early, having fallen asleep last night by 8 p.m. I awoke between 5:00 and 5:30. Chris has been long awake, as he had been yesterday in Kathmandu, which already seems another world.

A rattling comes on our tent at 6:30. "Sirs . . . your breakfast," Tashi announces. Nearby, on a flat rock in the middle of the fallow terrace, one of our porters is placing our breakfast. "Sirs . . . your breakfast," he mimics his leader. Hot tea, biscuits and a porridge are laid out before us on a round wicker tray that also serves to cover one of the baskets the porters carry. We aren't hungry, but we eat.

"Ready to go!" I'm brimming with an enthusiasm that belies some trepidation. We're geared up, though not as geared up as I hoped. Six days ago, I lost much of my clothing for the trek, including my better pair of shoes for long hiking. I'm trying to put this behind me, though it isn't easy. Chris and I are fit and strong, both in our mid-20s. In the past 2 years, I've become a follower of Jim Fixx, indoctrinated into the new cult of running stoked by his *Complete Book of Running*. I run 3-5 miles daily, documenting each day's exercise in a running diary, my second volume, published as an adjunct to the book.

Our porters are a contrast. Neema Sherpa, the oldest porter at 17 and our chief cook as well as a guide-in-training, is a couple of inches over 5 feet and at most 110 pounds, like Tashi. Mani Kumar Rai, the middle

porter, 15, from the Rai ethnic group, a neighbor to the Sherpa, is an inch or so shorter and 10 pounds lighter. The youngest porter, working his first trek, is Darwa Sherpa; we call him "Red Cap" for obvious reasons. He's 13 or 14 and still smaller and shorter. His youthful excitement is obvious. Will it still be by the last day of the trek? All hail from the high foothills of the region around Everest, noted for their skills and endurance as trekkers and mountaineers.

The 2 day porters that Tashi hired in Trisuli Bazar, now with us for a second day, stay off by themselves — a mystery to Chris and me and seemingly to our core troop of porters as well.

By 7:10 we finish breakfast, and Tashi and the porters break camp. They assemble the gear, filling 5 cone-shaped wicker baskets. Chris and I put items into backpacks, attaching the sleeping bags, and prepare to put them onto our backs. But Tashi won't allow it. He hands Chris his day knapsack, lightly filled. The sleeping bags are tied on top of two of the porters' baskets. Tashi takes my knapsack. I'm assuming he's switch and take Chris's later in the day.

It's the start of Day 2, our first full trekking day. As soon as we begin walking, it's clear. We aren't walking a wilderness path. It's not like the continuous descent into followed by the continuous ascent out of the Grand Canyon, with spectacular nature and no people except other hikers and campers. It's not like a walk along the Appalachian Trail, walking for many hours, sometimes days without touching a town, again only crossing paths or passing other hikers.

Though not as dense as India, Nepal is a populous country. Not just in the valleys, but thoughout its foothills. And, this is nothing new. In the year 1700, while the population of the American colonies was barely 250,000, there was 12 times that in Nepal. Chris and I are traversing a territory that has not dramatically changed in hundreds of years — transport by foot, transporting what one can carry, growing their foods for their own consumption, for their village's consumption and at most to trade with those within a manageable walk. Until recently, contact with people beyond the foothill valleys was rare. Once we finish this day of walking, we'll be nearing Dhunche, the administrative center for the area. To its residents and those of the villages in the hills beyond