

I Taste Fire, Earth, Rain: Elements of a Life with a Sherpa

Caryl Sherpa

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Contained within every airline ticket is the opportunity for a transformational journey, but often, the scope of that adventure depends on the traveler, not the destination.

For first-time author Caryl Sherpa, a trip to Nepal in 1991 changed not only the outward circumstances of her life, it also altered her inner landscape. As she shares the details and insights about that sojourn and her life since then, Sherpa provides an irresistible, rich experience for any armchair traveler. In being honest about the challenges of her own transformation, she proves to be an expert guide for people seeking such a journey.

Sherpa spent most of her life as a typical, stressed-out American with a high-profile job. After growing up in Michigan and becoming an interior designer, she worked on a lavish, career-making project just before the boom of the 1980s went bust. The disappointment of spending three years on a project that did not come to complete fruition sent her searching for meaning and the true definition of accomplishment. Since she had fostered a love of mountains, she decided to use her athletic skills and go trekking in the Himalayas.

While she takes on the Annapurna Circuit, one of her guides, Nima Sherpa (in the Himalayas, those with the profession of sherpa are also named Sherpa, along with their families), finds a direct route into her heart through his joyful, radiant presence. Although the author resists falling in love at first, the openness she feels in the country soon translates into trusting her romantic feelings and following a path that causes “her heart to finally shine clear.”

The ensuing marriage and the transition to life with Nima in America is fascinating for its insight into the immigrant experience—yet, the true value in Sherpa's work is the exploration of her emotional changes. As she lets the chaos of Kathmandu and the stunning beauty of the mountains work within her, the author's language becomes poetic and gorgeous, interweaving natural elements into her narrative.

“I am water,” she writes. “Nima sits on a rock along the shore. Nima is earth. Listen to the water, I murmur. Hear the stones, he whispers. Water and earth converse. It is time for us to move on. Together, we will spiral in one continuous migration, like the water that flows over stones.”

The fire, earth, and rain of the book's title are both literal and figurative. Sherpa walks in the mountains and sits beside waterfalls, but she also feels the fiery transition from her former life to one that is more open to every possibility. She finds solid ground, yet discovers how to flow with unexpected events. As she and Nima create their relationship day by day, Sherpa expertly describes how her life has become an amazing journey, without specific destination. Her memoir is sure to find many fans who are on life adventures of their own.

ELIZABETH MILLARD (January 30, 2012)

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