

KELSEY TIMMERMAN

★ ★ ★ ★ ★  
New York Times Bestselling Author

WHERE AM I

GIVING?



Myanmar



Kenya



U.S.A.

India

A GLOBAL ADVENTURE EXPLORING HOW TO USE YOUR  
GIFTS AND TALENTS TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Includes discussion questions and a guide to giving locally and globally



Kelsey Timmerman has been where very few donors go, and has seen the positive impact of the highly effective giving I advocate, as well as the negative impact of less desirable forms of giving. *Where Am I Giving?* offers thought-provoking and often entertaining insights into the importance of thinking carefully about where we give.

—**Peter Singer, professor of bioethics,  
Princeton University, and founder of The Life You Can Save**

Charity should never be motivated by pity because that causes dependency. Charity must always be the result of compassion leading to constructive action making the recipient independent and productive member of society. *Where Am I Giving?* is a good guide to constructive giving. A must read for all charity-minded people.

—**Arun Gandhi, founder-president,  
Gandhi Worldwide Education Institute, Rochester, NY**

Kelsey Timmerman has written a compassionate and compelling book about the people who run the international charities many of us donate to. To do so, he visited these organizations in person, spanning the globe, and bringing to the fore the realities that shape the daily lives of both the helpers and those being helped. Along the way, he intersperses his own advice as to what charity should—and shouldn't—mean for his readers. An inspirational book that's also a fascinating travelogue, it deserves a wide audience. We'll all be better off if our friends and neighbors read this.

—**Pauline Frommer, publisher, Frommer Guidebooks**

I loved this book. Kelsey has managed to write an exciting adventure of a how-to book on giving, volunteering, and generally making the world a better place through his own thrilling and heart-wrenching tales. Kelsey has done it all and lived it all. *Where Am I Giving?* is hugely entertaining while offering practical, real lessons and guidelines that he has lived. He has seen success and failure and shares where we can be most effective. Kelsey shows us where we can offer our time and resources, large and small, to impact the planet. He takes us along on his adventures to meet the people, learn about the causes, and show us the long-term victories and failures so we don't have to make the same mistakes. It's the most entertaining how-to book I've ever read, and few books are more timely.

—**Conor Grennan, founder of Next Generation Nepal (NGN)  
and author of *Little Princes***

Traveling with Kelsey Timmerman in the pages of *Where Am I Giving?* will inspire you to do the most good you can do.

— **Will MacAskill, president of the Centre for Effective Altruism and author of *Doing Good Better: How Effective Altruism Can Help You Help Others, Do Work that Matters, and Make Smarter Choices about Giving Back***

**KELSEY TIMMERMAN**

**WHERE AM I**  
**GIVING?**

**A GLOBAL ADVENTURE EXPLORING HOW TO USE YOUR  
GIFTS AND TALENTS TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE**

**WILEY**

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*To Annie, Harper, and Griffin,  
who give me so much,  
including more reasons to give*





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# Introduction

## The Trash Picker, the Slave, and the Garment Maker (The World, 2001–2018)

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One of the most beautiful sights I've seen is an 11-year-old girl laughing in the worst place I've ever been.

She haunts me to this day.

Smoke and stench – fire and brimstone – surrounded her as she threw her head back, shoulders shaking. Her eyes closed to the hellscape of Phnom Penh's municipal dump. She had been sifting through previously picked-through trash looking for something of value. Treasure or trash? Discard or keep?

She and the other children earned a dollar per day, if they were lucky, by selling their findings while their parents picked through fresh trash brought by a parade of garbage trucks. Most of the trash pickers were former farmers.

*What must have life been like back on the farm?*

“Life in our village is tough,” I imagined the parents saying. “Farming is no way to make a living. I hear there's this garbage heap in the city where we could work and even the kids could earn a dollar per day.”

They packed up their belongings and moved to the city. My hell on earth was someone else's opportunity.

That thought coupled with the sight and the smell of the dump made me physically ill. I had to fight from puking. I didn't want them to see that what they did and where they did it disgusted me.

Until visiting the dump, I didn't realize that people lived in places like this.

The adults wore rags across their noses and mouths, their vacant, almost lifeless eyes searching through the trash.

But the girl ...

The girl still had life and light in her eyes (see Figure I.1). I wanted to do something. I wanted to grab her hand, walk her away from the dump, and give her ... an education? A chance? A future? But there were hundreds like her in this one dump.

What could I do? We live in a world where 1.2 billion people live on less than \$1.25 per day. Where half the world's population lives on less than \$2.50 per day.<sup>1</sup> Where 21% of American children live in poverty.<sup>2</sup>



*Figure I.1 The girl at the Phnom Penh dump (Cambodia, 2007).*

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<sup>1</sup>United Nations Development Programme, "Sustaining Human Progress: Reducing Vulnerabilities and Building Resilience," Human Development Report, 2014 (February 2014) 19.

<sup>2</sup>Yang Jiang, "Basic Facts About Low-Income Children," National Center for Children in Poverty (January 2017).



I was just one man, researching my first book, traveling on my second mortgage. And she was just one girl.

I pulled out my Frisbee and tossed it to her. She threw it to a barefoot boy, who put down his burlap bag of trash treasures to catch it. I taught them how to throw a Frisbee and for 15 minutes we escaped into a world of throwing and catching, of laughing and smiling. Then they got back to work and I went to my \$11 per night guesthouse and showered three times until the stench of the dump lingered no more.

But no amount of scrubbing could wash away the memory of the dump. Are awareness and empathy treasures that can enhance our lives? Or are they burdens that would be better off discarded because awareness without action leads to guilt and apathy?

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When do we act? How do we act to make a positive difference?

I was faced with this same dilemma a few years ago when I traveled to Ivory Coast to meet cocoa farmers while researching my second book.

I never expected to meet a slave in my lifetime, but then I met a man named Solo who showed me a view of another world. He was from the neighboring country of Ghana and had followed false promises to a cocoa farm. He had asked to leave, but wasn't allowed to go. He told me the donkeys got treated better than he did because at least they were fed when they weren't working. He told me they do worse things to him than beat him. Solo called the guy he worked for "master."

For me hearing a human being call another human being "master," in this day and age, shook me to my soul. I knew modern slavery existed, but knowing about it and witnessing it were two completely different things. Sitting next to Solo, a living breathing slave and listening to his story, I felt compelled to act, to help, to make a difference.

I hatched a plan where I hired Solo as my translator away from the farm for the day. It worked.

At the end of the day, I paid Solo \$40 and asked him where he wanted to go.

"Home," he told me. "To Ghana."

Solo's master figured out what was going on and sent me a text, threatening to have me arrested. Solo was trying to figure out a way home when we got separated.

But the slave ...

Days later I learned Solo was back on the cocoa farm. Was he captured and taken back? Maybe. But it's more likely that he looked at the opportunities before him and chose to go back. Solo chose slavery.

When I learned Solo was back on the farm, I worried what repercussions he may have suffered from my actions. I acted. I did something, but I wish I had done nothing. Good intentions aren't enough; it's the results those intentions produce that matter.

I regretted not acting to help the girl at the dump. I regretted helping Solo.



I was a recent college grad when I met the man who made my favorite T-shirt outside the factory in Honduras where he worked. It was awkward. The T-shirt cost nearly as much as a day of his labor. There I was, skipping around the globe, and there he was in a sea of workers with a chain link fence and a long workday at his back, kind enough to stop and chat with me, puzzled as the security guard at the front gate had been.

*Why was I there?*

A degree in anthropology had inspired my curiosity and I left the flat fields of the Midwest to meet people who lived differently than I did. I'd save up money working a retail job or as a scuba instructor, and then I'd blow it all traveling. I started to write about my travels and would get paid a whopping \$10 from publications for stories like spending the night alone in Castle Dracula in Romania. I could go anywhere in the world and have adventures worth writing about. It was the world's most expensive hobby.

I was looking for that next place to go, and my favorite T-shirt had a funny picture of a guy from a TV show in the early 1980s and these words: "Come with me to my tropical paradise." "So," I thought, "why not?" I put on the shirt and showed up at the factory half expecting the factory management to laugh at the randomness and silliness of it all and throw open the factory gates. They didn't, so I waited to the side of the factory to meet someone who possibly made my shirt.

When Amilcar stopped to talk with me, the randomness and the silliness faded, replaced by awkwardness and questions from a forgotten sociology course: Does this job provide a better life for you and your family? What are you paid? Is this one of those sweatshops?

Of course, I didn't ask any of these questions. I think deep down I didn't really want to know. Amilcar and I were the same age, but our lives were vastly different. I was traveling on a whim, following my curiosity wherever it led, and he was working in the factory that made

my T-shirt. I looked at myself through his eyes as I had once looked at myself through the eyes of a beggar in Nepal, and I saw the privileges and opportunities of my own life. I wrestled with the fact that people make the clothes we wear, and we have it made.

I went to Cambodia where my jeans were made and while there I met the girl. I wondered what life was like for her and other rural farmers who were leaving the fields for factories, and I traveled around the world to meet farmers. That's when I met Solo on the cocoa farm. One person, story, and question flowed into the next.

I'm privileged, but I'm not Batman's alter ego Bruce Wayne by any means. In the 16 years of travel covered in this book, at times I earned a poverty wage, once I was unemployed, but mostly I earned a solid, but very unpredictable, middle-class income. Yet I received an education. I have access to health care. I have not known hunger or war, nor have my wife and kids. There are privileges beyond financial ones. Being a straight, middle-class, able-bodied, white dude in Muncie, Indiana, certainly comes with its own privileges.

I've traveled to some of the poorest places on our planet, and there are people I wish I could forget, like the girl trash picker, Solo the slave, and Amilcar the garment worker, but I never will. These are people who live in circumstances that have often paralyzed me to the point of inaction. But from the very beginning, I began to feel the responsibility of my privilege, and of the opportunities in my life that I have, that you likely have, that most of the world's people don't.

This is something I've been struggling with for years.

My global searches for connection have inspired me to try to be a better giver, activist, and global and local citizen. They inspired me to cofound a community storytelling nonprofit, The Facing Project, which has engaged more than 200,000 people nationwide. But still, when I think about the girl and Solo and Amilcar, I feel like I'm not doing enough.

Awareness without action feels irresponsible. I believe I have a responsibility to act, to do something, and I believe you do as well. If you make \$52,000 per year, you are in the top 1% of global earners. Even if you live on \$11,000 per year, which is below the poverty line in the US, you are richer than 85% of the world's population.<sup>3</sup> If you graduated from college, you are more educated than 90% of the rest of

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<sup>3</sup>William MacAskill, *Doing Good Better: How Effective Altruism Can Help You Help Others, Do Work That Matters, and Make Smarter Choices About Giving Back* (New York: Avery, 2015), 18.

the world. If you are fortunate enough to have the education and time to read a book, you've probably been dealt a reasonably good hand in terms of privilege compared to the rest of the world. If you aren't convinced that you have a responsibility to make a positive impact with the opportunities you've been given and the privileges from which you benefit, part of my job is to convince you. I'll do that by introducing you to the experiences and people who've convinced me.

This book isn't about a middle-class, overeducated white dude, giving to the world or "saving the world" as overeducated white dudes are wont to do, but about the world inspiring and teaching that dude to be a better giver. And through my discovering the amazing opportunities I have to give and the benefits of giving and learning how to do so more meaningfully, I hope you will as well.

This book is about more than financial gifts. You don't have to have money to make an impact. In India I'll introduce you to a 26-year-old who lives in a slum and spent \$6 on a soccer ball that led to 3,000 kids going to school. In Kenya, I met a group of former gang members who risk their lives promoting peace in the most violent slum community in Nairobi. They each had much more to give than money.

The scale and complexity of global and local issues can overwhelm us to the point of inaction, but I choose action. I'm choosing to make an impact and not just blindly accept that doing good or meaning well is enough, because it isn't. In a world where good intentions are no longer enough, where helping can hurt, how can I, a landlocked American with an average income and 2.54 kids (if a cat, hamster, and two goldfish add up to 0.54 kids) make a difference? We are about to find out together.



I'm not alone in my desire to make a difference. Ninety percent of Americans have donated money, goods, or services to causes.<sup>4</sup> Eighty-four percent of Millennials report that making a positive difference in the world is more important than career recognition.<sup>5</sup>

Trying to make a difference and actually making a difference are much different things. My volunteer opportunities haven't ended well. The boy I mentored through Big Brothers Big Sisters went to "kid jail." The cashier at PetSmart will ask me if I want to donate \$1 for

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<sup>4</sup>Robert D. Lupton, *Toxic Charity: How Churches and Charities Hurt Those They Help* (New York: HarperOne, 2011), 2.

<sup>5</sup>Bentley University Center for Women's & Business, "Millennials in the Workplace" (2011), 4.

orphaned puppies. What kind of jerk says no to orphaned puppies? Sometimes, me!

Ethicist Peter Singer believes, when it comes to giving of our time and resources, we are being immoral by not giving more. Singer believes that it is our moral obligation as Western citizens to give as much as we can to help save the lives of those facing extreme poverty and disease. In his eyes, we should be giving at least 10% of our incomes. Yet only 5.6% of Americans' donations go to global causes.<sup>6</sup>

Singer's work *The Life You Can Save* inspired a movement – effective altruism – that asks us not just to give more but to give better. In Kenya, I visited a nongovernmental organization (NGO) that is one of the darlings of the effective altruism movement. It simply gives cash, no strings attached, to people in poverty.

I address the aid debate highlighted by economists such as Jeffrey Sachs (if we gave more, we could end poverty) and William Easterly (we need to rethink aid and focus on development). Dambisa Moyo, who was born in Zambia and got her PhD from Harvard, said, “Aid has been and continues to be an unmitigated political, economic, and humanitarian disaster for most parts of the world.”<sup>7</sup> *A disaster*. Yikes! When I read that it almost made me want to give up on giving.

I visited a village where the United Nations and Sachs tried to end poverty. I think you'll be surprised about what the villagers had to say. I spent time with one of the world's largest NGOs and the biggest proponent of child sponsorship in the world, and sometimes they even let me get out of the SUV to meet the people whom they help.

I think we need a balance of head and heart, and local and global giving. We need to question our altruistic motivations, measure our impact, and work with – not just for – those we help. We need to empower people and at the very minimum do no harm in our efforts to do good. We need to explore how we've received gifts, our gratitude or lack thereof for them, and how we are putting them to use. Giving is so much more than writing a check; it's a practice that connects us to our communities and the world and helps us find purpose and meaning in our lives.

I want there to be a “Good Person Equation,” something to tell us how much we should give, volunteer, and engage in acts of local and

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<sup>6</sup>Giving USA Foundation, “Giving USA 2017: The Annual Report on Philanthropy for the Year 2016” (2016).

<sup>7</sup>Dambisa Moyo, *Dead Aid: Why Aid Is Not Working and How There is a Better Way for Africa*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009), xix.

global activism and altruism. Actually, you'll see that at times I was quite desperate to fill the variables of such an equation.

Throughout the book I'll share Giving Rules that can help guide your giving. Think of them more as suggestions, my takeaways from the narrative you are reading.

***Giving Rules: Gratitude first, then giving. When you look at your life, time, money, and talents as gifts, you will give more of them all.***

This journey is not about my travels around the world helping people – that would be pretty annoying – but it's about seeing the world and our lives through the lens of giving, and meeting people who have something to teach us about it. It's learning from a Hollywood executive who left a life of yachts and actress girlfriends for that dump in Cambodia where I met the girl. It's meeting a Burmese refugee who returned to see his country in a new way that changed his life. It's students time and again acting as agents of change, leading the way. It's sitting down with Gandhi's great-grandson and asking him, perhaps a little too desperately, how I should live my life.

We were born into relative prosperity and a wealth of opportunity. When faced with global poverty statistics and local harsh realities, it can be easy to feel guilt. This book isn't about how to absolve yourself of your first-world guilt. It's about helping you recognize your own privilege and the amazing opportunity that comes with it for each of us to impact the lives of people in our communities and around the world and our own through giving.

***Giving Rules: We are products of the gifts others have given us.***

# **Part I**

**WHY GIVE (WHEN I HAVE PROBLEMS  
OF MY OWN)?**

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# Life After College (Nepal, 2001)

*The mission / The responsibility  
of privilege*

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**AS A 22-YEAR-OLD RECENT COLLEGE GRAD**, I loved flying. Thirty thousand feet in the air, my book marked with a ticket to somewhere, was the only time in my life I knew where I was going and when I was going to get there.

I was on my way to Nepal – the next destination in a series of one-way tickets away from the expectations that surround a graduate who had moved back in with his parents. It wasn't that I had an issue with not knowing what I was doing with my life; it was that I had an issue with other people having an issue with it.

The maroon robe of the Tibetan monk in the seat next to me spilled over my armrest. He was in my space, and each time he moved his robe pulled at my headphone connection, interrupting the audio of the movie *Osmosis Jones*. Chris Rock was the voice of the white blood cell fighting infection on the streets of Bill Murray.

The monk would move; I'd sigh, and push my headphones in again. Occasionally we'd chuckle at the same point. I'm not sure if a white blood cell blowing his hair dry with a fart is physiologically correct, but

it was humorous enough in a cross-cultural sort of way to make us share a moment.

We were on a flight from Bangkok, Thailand, where I had spent a few weeks island hopping. For less than 10 bucks a night, I rented beachside bungalows accessed by water taxis.

Before that I was budget backpacking through Australia.

This sounds luxurious, and in all of the important experiential ways it was, but I traveled on the cheap. Ate ramen. Camped in my tent. I knew my budget would run out before my desire to keep going waned.

My grandma, Frances Wilt, gave all of her grandchildren \$5,000 when they graduated from college. This gift was why when my peers at Miami University were talking about the jobs they landed and how much they were going to get paid, I was shopping for a one-way flight away. Gone. I worked a few months swinging a hammer after I graduated to earn some money to add to Grandma's so I could be gone longer.

I graduated in 2001 with a degree in anthropology or, as one *Cultural Anthropology* textbook that wrote about me put it, "With only a bachelor's degree in anthropology, he set out on a global tour ..."<sup>1</sup> But I didn't *only* have a bachelor's degree. I had the curiosity that earning that degree inspired and the tools to pursue that curiosity. As someone who grew up in the rural Midwest at a school that had a "drive your tractor to school" day, I wasn't exposed to a lot of cultural diversity or diversity of thought. College, specifically my anthropology courses, introduced me to cultures I had never imagined.

College students are filled with potential. Seventeen years of building a base of knowledge and skills on which to build a career. As a first-year college student there is pressure to declare a major, to decide what you want to be when you grow up. Senior year is when all of the education and potential success and world-changing rubber meet the road. The "I want to be [blank]" becomes an "I am doing it!" or "I am not doing it because ...". Potential and expectations are realized or they aren't.

In the eyes of many, I had not realized my potential, and I had not met expectations.

I envied the future med students and teachers and anyone else who knew what they wanted to do. Their itinerary was set. They'd have to go to school for so many years and then start a career with benefits. I didn't even know what I was going to do when I landed in Kathmandu.

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<sup>1</sup>Gary Ferraro and Susan Andreatta, *Cultural Anthropology: An Applied Perspective* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, Cengage Learning, 2017), 177.

I sort of hated arriving anywhere. I was more comfortable going—permanently in transit. My travels really didn't have a purpose and neither did I, but the monk next to me was about to change that.

*Osmosis Jones* ended. I took off my headphones.

We sat in silence. The monk chanted while turning the wooden beads of a necklace like my grandma praying the Rosary. A half hour before landing, our bond strengthened over stupid human tricks— a video of people spinning plates or juggling chainsaws, and one man who pulled a string out his ear after having inserted it into a small wound on his little toe.

“How to do? How to do?” The monk, whose name was Sange, laughed. His resting grimace turned into a face-swallowing smile.

“Is the airport close to the city?” I asked him.

“When you get to Kathmandu,” Sange said, “where do you stay?”

I didn't have any plans or a guidebook or reservations, just an idea of wanting to go hiking in the Himalayan Mountains we were flying over.

“You come with me,” he said. “If you good ... stay longer ... if not so good, we find you hotel.”

We walked out of the airport and were greeted by signs held by his followers. There were flowers, and people came up to him with white cloths known as *khata*. They'd bow before him and then he'd place the cloths around their necks.

Sange was your exact mental picture of a monk—chubby, glowing smile, shaved head, and bright robes—but apparently, given the welcome, he was not an average monk.

I thought he must've been some reincarnated, black belt, sensei monk. Obviously, I didn't know much about Buddhist culture.

We went to Sange's brother's house, where Sange held court.

Young lamas filled a brass cup with Coca-Cola before a straight-faced golden Buddha on an ornately decorated shrine. All of this world is suffering, but Lord Buddha needed his Coke. They lit two sticks of incense, backed away from the shrine, bowed, and left.

I sat across from the shrine on the floor, a steaming cup of putrid, buttery, salt tea before me, jealous of Buddha, wishing I could get a swig of his Coke to wash down my heaping bowl of noodles.

At the head of the room, Sange greeted a steady stream of people coming to pay their respects. They called him Khenpo Sange or simply Khenpo. Think of the title Khenpo as a terminal degree in Buddhist teaching. The respect payers did double takes in my direction, bowed three times, and discussed matters with Sange. Conversations took place in Tibetan, Nepalese, Taiwanese, and, occasionally, even a little English directed at me.

Hours passed, each marked by a plastic cuckoo clock, which chimed out “Happy Birthday” pathetically as if its batteries were running low.

We sat and ate so much – he entertaining audiences, me bored out of my mind.

“Are you bored?” he’d ask.

“Just mindful,” I’d respond instead of screaming.

When there was a lull in visitors, we’d chat. He asked about my travels in Thailand and I told him about a guy named Porn who said he would take me to the post office to mail a package and then took me unexpectedly to a whorehouse, which I promptly left. From his position at the head of a small gathering, he rolled in laughter.

My original intent was to go hiking in the Himalayan Mountains, maybe visit Everest base camp. When I told Sange this, he consulted his scrolls to see if it was a good day to start a journey.

“Not today,” he’d say.

“Tomorrow?” I’d ask.

And then tomorrow would come, and we’d load into the SUV and see some sights before heading back home.

It was like I was being held hostage by hospitality.

At night we’d walk around the local stupa, a large multitiered structure with a dome in the center and a spire on top. He’d answer my questions about Buddhism. He never evangelized. His lessons were about understanding the world, not understanding a religion – a philosophy more than a faith. Sange was a Mahayana Buddhist. As he described it, our compassion and happiness promote compassion and happiness toward all sentient beings. All living things are connected, and our lives should be in service to them.

Khenpo Sange showed me a world and a worldview vastly different from the mental landscape of the flatlands of the Midwest.

He’d answer some of my questions by buying me books on our nightly walks to the stores surrounding the stupa. I read a lot. I wondered around the compound where monks would be lost in chants or creating intricate art using colored sand, only to wipe it away on completion – a reminder that everything is temporary and therefore attachment could only lead to suffering. Or something like that.



One evening Sange and I walked to the stupa with his nephew Dorjee. *Om mani padme hum*, a common Buddhist chant, droned from a speaker above. We were part of a mass of humanity walking clockwise around the local stupa.

As we walked the required three laps, we passed Internet cafés, tailors, bakeries, and souvenir shops. A legless beggar sat on a board with wheels and lashed out at my shin with her cane. She wanted me to give her money, but I had no money. I didn't need money. Sange took care of everything, even donating on my behalf when I lit 108 prayer candles.

Up to this point in my travels, I went the places tourists were supposed to go and saw what tourists were supposed to see. On the way to the stupa we had passed cows licking their calves, human and animal waste on the street, intestines covered with flies spread out on wooden tables, and a guy with a fridge strapped to his back. On the tourist path, I saw the world through my eyes; but in the eyes of the legless beggar, I saw myself through the eyes of the world, and it made me uncomfortable.

The thick smell of dirt and hot wax hung in the evening air as we finished our third lap and continued on to a fourth.

"I thought that we were doing three laps," I said.

"You do something once," Sange said, "it is not a big deal. Two times, it is a little more important. But three times it is really important. Three laps good. Seven laps better."



I felt the chanting as much as I heard it. A group of robed men sitting on the floor gave life to the damp morning air at 5 a.m. The incense slowly burned, releasing musky overtones in long, black, rising wisps of smoke.

My room sat high on the hillside, overlooking the comings and goings of life in the valley below. From a down cocoon of warmth and comfort, I unzipped my sleeping bag and entered a place and culture that I barely understood.

We were at Sange's monastery south of Kathmandu in the village of Pharping.

Breakfast was ladled out of a smoldering cauldron on a terrace cut in the hillside.

Soon the monastery and its ramparts were swarming with local villagers, pilgrims from Kathmandu, and brightly robed lamas. All were here to welcome Khenpo's teacher, His Holiness Penor Rinpoche, and to dedicate a new shrine at the lamasery to Padmasambhava, an eighth-century Buddhist master who was born out of a lotus and often depicted giving the "rock on" sign meant to repel demons.

"His Holiness is very powerful," Sange explained as we waited for his arrival. "When Chinese forced us away from our homeland, he was one of the last to leave. He left with many men and women. The Chinese follow them to the mountains with guns. They shoot and kill many

people around His Holiness, but the bullets fall at his feet and their grenades do not explode until he has passed. The hike over the Himalaya is very difficult and others die of cold and hunger. His Holiness injures leg, which hurts him even today. Three hundred left Tibet; only 30 make it to India.”

I tried to make myself useful during the preparation for His Holiness’s visit. I helped lug a welder up the hillside, and, well, that’s about all I did. Mostly I ate and played hackey sack and practiced kung fu kicks with the young lamas in training.

As the car of His Holiness Penor Rinpoche, the present-day reincarnation of a monk first born in 1679, came to a stop at the base of the monastery, the gathered crowd surged forward hoping to glimpse or touch him. A robed Secret Service emerged and cleared a tunnel for the short, squat holy man to limp through. *Khata*s were thrown at his head like panties at a rock star.

One by one we filed up to His Holiness, who was seated on an elevated throne. I knelt before him and presented him with a *khata*. He smiled warmly and placed his hand upon my head and ruffled my blond curls – I hadn’t had a haircut in months.

The brightly colored walls, the smell of incense, the gold Buddha at the front of the room, the bulletproof monk with my friend Khenpo Sange at his side – it all was so exhilarating. It’s not that I was caught up in the religious fervor and believed in reincarnation or bulletproofness; it was that I was a witness experiencing an ancient culture. I was a participant and I was an observer.

Participant observation is a research method employed by anthropologists in which a researcher isn’t simply a fly on the wall scribbling in a notebook, but part of the action – sitting in prayer, lighting 108 candles, watching monks gift a gold Buddha Coca-Cola, and getting blessed by a smiling monk with a silk *khata* around my neck.

I felt like I was an anthropologist doing something I was meant to do, something important.

In my anthropology senior seminar we discussed a debate within the scientific community about how much an observer’s presence impacts the data. The postmodern school of thought believes that when anthropologists go into the field, they bring back stories rich in context and meaning. The stories can’t necessarily be quantified, but they can be appreciated for what they are: glimpses of people at a particular moment that provide value in the act of attempting to see, appreciate, and understand them.

If there is any anthropology occurring in my work, this is it. At least the authors of that anthropology textbook seemed to think