

Laurie Haller

Wandering into Grace

A Journey of Discovery and Hope

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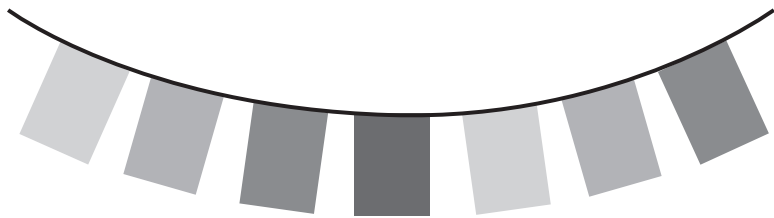
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Introduction

“Wandering” is not a waste of time. Wandering is essential to the understanding of our faith. Was it not Moses, leading his people in the wilderness, who proclaimed, “A wandering Aramean was my ancestor” (Deuteronomy 26:5 NRSV)? This declaration, even self-realization, became a defining credo of the Hebrews, who wandered for forty years in the desert before crossing over the Jordan River. Abraham was a wanderer. Jacob was a wanderer. I know that I am also a wanderer. However, I have never felt that I’ve wandered aimlessly. Rather, I’ve always had the conviction that I am wandering ever deeper into God’s grace.

I suspect that I began wandering into grace before I was even born, for I was always surrounded by love. Jesus called me as a child because of the example of my mother and father and the influence of the Mennonite church in which I grew up. I was undergirded from my earliest years by the prayers of my parents, grandmothers, and church members who nurtured my faith. From loving Sunday school, to reading books from the church library, to seeing God’s handiwork by wandering the woods and fields around my home, to taking lessons on the church organ, to attending Bible studies with my grandmother, to giving the sermon on Youth Sunday, my church nurtured me in grace and instilled a quest for God that has never left me. And Jesus? He kept calling me.

Jesus kept calling me even though women were not permitted to be ordained in the Mennonite Church USA when I was growing

up. Jesus kept calling me, even though no one ever encouraged me to consider pastoral ministry. After all, what would be the point? Jesus kept calling me, even though I never even met a clergy-woman until I was in graduate school. Still, Jesus kept calling me to wander into grace, for it is God who formed my inward parts and knit me together in my mother's womb.

It has only been within the past several years that I have found the word that fits who I am spiritually. I used to call myself a pilgrim, who is on a continuous journey into the heart of God and is led by the spirit toward holy destinations. But now I realize that I am really a *peregrina*.

Peregrinatio is a Latin word that comes from Roman law and refers to living, sojourning, or wandering outside of one's homeland with no specific destination. In Celtic Christianity, some *peregrini* were exiled to other countries because they broke laws, but other *peregrini* voluntarily chose to spend their lives in foreign lands, away from family and friends. Some of these so-called "white martyrs" were seeking personal fulfillment, but others engaged in missionary endeavors. Saint Columba, who left his home in Ireland out of a self-imposed penance, founded a monastic community on the holy island of Iona and converted most of Scotland and England to Christianity.

Jesus has called me to be a *peregrina*, to move outside my people, the Mennonites, to the once-foreign land of The United Methodist Church, and then to the episcopacy. And because of John Wesley, I now realize that the whole world is my parish, and all people are my people! As an itinerant preacher, my life has no destination other than to wander into grace, model the suffering love of Jesus, seek justice and reconciliation, offer hope to The United Methodist Church, and work to bring in God's reign on this earth.

In July 2018, I began a two-month renewal leave from my ministry as the episcopal leader of the Iowa Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church. I had been elected and consecrated as a bishop in August 2016 and hit the ground running on September 1. It didn't take long to realize that I would never last in this position unless I was proactive in caring for myself. United Methodist bishops are mandated to take leave time every four years in order to rest and renew body, mind, and spirit. I could not do this ministry without such a time of renewal.

Spending my first week at Conception Abbey, a Benedictine Abbey in Missouri, I yearned to read, write, reflect, and worship. I brought with me *A Guide to Retreat for All God's Shepherds*, by Bishop Rueben Job, a book that I used for my two previous leaves in 2001 and 2011. Interestingly, Bishop Job served as the episcopal leader of Iowa, where I now serve, from 1984 to 1992. Job's book has been invaluable in identifying my own spiritual emptiness and leading me toward a healthier way of living and being in ministry.

I came to Conception Abbey in order to "come apart," to leave my home and regular setting to be able to see God more clearly and be more attentive to God's still, small voice. Job quotes Evelyn Underhill about listening to the One "who has nothing to learn from you but everything to tell you."¹

I wrote in my journal,

I am here to worship and sing with the monks and hear the voice of God. I will listen and be attentive to what God has for me. When I come away, I realize how empty I am. There is nothing to mask the silence, the despair, the loneliness. Yet, I can hear you very clearly, God, and I know that you are near. I know that you love me. I know that I am enveloped in your

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grace. I need to rediscover the power of your witness. I am totally dependent upon you.

I need to remember that when all I hear is silence, God is still there. I think about what lies ahead for the future of our church, and all I hear is silence. Still, I wonder. What will become of us? What will become of my friends if our church splits? I have so many friends on both sides of the divide. Will I lose them? What do I need to give up? What do I have to place in your hands, God? I worry about the witness we will make to the world if we can't find a way to live together and honor and even celebrate our differences.

Is dividing the church worth being right? I continue to knock, seek, pray, wonder, love, serve, and honor the differences. I relinquish all to you, God. I surrender all.

The rhythms of Conception Abbey nurtured my spirit. I decided to forego Vigils at 6 a.m. because of my need for sleep. I did, however, attend Lauds at 7:15 a.m., Eucharist at 11:45 a.m., Daytime prayer at 1 p.m., Vespers at 5:15 p.m., and Compline at 7:15 p.m. I was disappointed not to be able to receive the sacrament at Conception Abbey because I am not Catholic. Unfortunately, however, life soon intervened, and I became preoccupied by other matters.

On the second full day, as I was running through the Missouri prairie, I wandered into trouble instead. Deciding to run on a trail with heavy grass, I soon tripped over a hidden root and fell on my left wrist. I came apart literally. I sensed immediately that the injury was serious, so I turned around and ran back to the retreat center.

Just as Jesus went into the desert at the beginning of his

ministry and was ministered to by angels, so a staff member at Conception Abbey graciously came to my aid when I could not help myself. This angel drove me to the nearest hospital a half hour away, where an X-ray revealed a fractured wrist. I left with pain meds, a splint for my hand and wrist, and instructions to see an orthopedist as soon as I arrived back home.

I spent the rest of the week in silence with the monks, foregoing the pain meds so that I would be fully alert to the promptings of the Spirit. As Kathleen Norris writes in *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography*,

Silence is the best response to mystery. "There is no way of telling people," Merton reminds us, "that they are all walking around shining like the sun." New Yorkers are told a great many things by strangers on the street, holy fools and mad alike. But the monk's madness is one that shows in the quiet life itself, with its absurd repetition of prayer and liturgy. It is the "madness of great love," in the words of one monk, that "sees God in all things," which nevertheless may be safely and quietly carried out of the monastery, into the world, and back again. As Basil Cardinal Hume, a Benedictine, has remarked, the monk is safe in the marketplace because he is at home in the desert.²

I was devastated to think that my best-laid plans for renewal may have already been thwarted since I was planning to leave for a trek in Nepal a week later. However, I came to believe that through this injury, God was slowing me down from the frenetic pace of a bishop as well as teaching me humility and grace in preparation

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for all the learning that was to come. Participating with the monks in the daily cycle of prayer helped to anchor me spiritually during this first week of decompression from years of intense ministry with few extensive breaks.

From the beginning of my renewal leave, I had to learn how to empty myself, let go of all expectations, and live in a continual sense of gratitude. I came to realize that other people will enrich my life if I surrender and allow them to become angels of grace for me. In the same way, as a leader who is also a Christ follower and *peregrina*, I am walking with and for others on the journey.

Our *peregrina/peregrino* God continues to call each one of the faithful to wander our world for such a time as this, as witnesses to God's redemptive grace, agents of hope, and bearers of the light of Christ. This Holy Wanderer tenderly invites us to come home to the heart of God by living in unity and freely offering shalom to our beautiful, frightening, and glorious world.

Wandering into Grace shares my story of discovery and hope on the high Himalayan trails of Nepal in the summer of 2018. If you're searching for me now, you'll probably find this *peregrina* wandering the roads and prairies of Iowa and the world, going wherever the Spirit leads and sharing the grace of Jesus Christ.

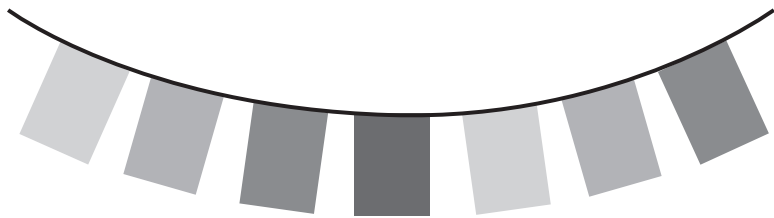
The God who has searched me and known me, the Holy One who knows when I sit down and when I rise up, the Creator who has fearfully and wonderfully made each one of you, the original *Peregrina/Peregrino* who continues to search our path and has led each one of us to this place—it is this God who continues to wander our world: calling, forming, shaping, weeping, listening, serving, suffering, and offering grace through you and through me. May we continue to wander with this God of grace.



Chapter 1

Waiting has always been one of the most challenging spiritual disciplines for me. . . .

When I have been forced to wait, I have often considered it to be wasting time rather than “waiting for the Lord.” Whenever I have been tempted to give up or give in to despair, I have remembered the words of the prophet Isaiah.



Chapter 1

Reflect, Adjust, Do

I have always been up for a challenge. Maybe that's why our first grandson used to call me Crazy Grandma! Having been a pastor for thirty-eight years, I have encountered almost everything in my ministry. I have been pushed and pulled in different directions. I have been challenged to the max in dealing with difficult situations that stretch my faith and cause me to doubt. I have been chastised, rebuked, and vilified for a variety of reasons. And I have been forgiven and deeply loved more than I will ever deserve.

Because ministry is such an intense calling, I have pursued an "alternate" life ever since I started pastoring my first church on January 1, 1982. I made a commitment to care for my mind, body, and spirit so that I would not burn out. Oddly, as I have grown older and my ministry settings have become more demanding, I have chosen to pursue physical and mental challenges that stretch my endurance, challenge my abilities, and confirm my craziness. No matter where I find myself, however, I discover that I am wandering into grace.

I was sitting in a hotel room in Nepalgunj, a large town in central Nepal, on a warm July day, waiting with my daughter Talitha and pondering to myself, "Why am I doing this, anyway?" A year before, I had talked with her about pursuing an adventure together, knowing that I had set apart some renewal leave

time in the summer of 2018. We were both in good shape and were compatible travelers. We had two and a half weeks and said, “Let’s go on a trek in Nepal!” Trekking in Nepal seemed like a great option because we both loved to hike, travel, and experience different parts of our beautiful world.

How strange was it that I broke my wrist less than a week before departing to Nepal? What was God telling me? Perhaps this: “You are a wounded healer, Laurie. And risk is part of your life. On this leave, you will carry both your pain and your decision not to be afraid.”

I wondered why I was doing this, anyway, especially with my broken wrist. There were so many things that could go wrong. The risks caused anxiety, but I needed to push myself mentally and physically, just as I have been continually challenged in my role as a bishop in The United Methodist Church. I have been constantly learning about myself and my limits, about when to stretch and speak out, and when to hold back. Even when others have taken offense or criticized, I have remained committed to showing grace, yet I have needed to be true to myself as well. My flaws have kept me humble and centered in Christ. The broken wrist also reminded me of the help that I had received and continued to need from others. My time of solitude at Conception Abbey was deep and rich. No one knew who I was. But I knew. I am a *peregrina* and a pilgrim and am open to continual transformation.

Arriving in Kathmandu from the United States, the sights, sounds, and sensations of the capital city of Nepal immediately put me on overload: narrow streets, most unpaved, and people everywhere walking, riding bikes or motorbikes, and driving wherever they wanted. It was pure chaos! Kathmandu is one of the fastest-growing and most polluted cities in Asia. The pollution was visible, hanging in the air like a dark mist. The Bagmati River ran through

the city like a streaming sewer, and the majority of Kathmandu residents wore face masks, for good reason. Pollution resulted from ongoing infrastructure projects, emissions from industries, and a lack of green space where all of the dust could land and be absorbed. Garbage was everywhere, and the current infrastructure simply could not keep pace with the influx of residents.

Talitha and I were more than ready to head off into the mountains. We had worked for months with a tour operator to do the fourteen-day Lower Dolpo Trek in the isolated western part of Nepal. However, after flying from Kathmandu to Nepalgunj and overnighiting, we discovered that our flight into Juphal had been canceled because of high winds and rain. In fact, a plane had crashed at Juphal the week before in bad weather, but our tour operator in Kathmandu somehow neglected to inform us of the situation. After waiting four hours in this one-room airport packed with other travelers, we went back to the hotel for another night.

Waiting has always been one of the most challenging spiritual disciplines for me. I have not been very patient and have seemed to fly through life in a hurry. When I have been forced to wait, I have often considered it to be wasting time rather than “waiting for the Lord.” Whenever I have been tempted to give up or give in to despair, I have remembered the words of the prophet Isaiah.

*Why do you say, O Jacob,
and speak, O Israel,
“My way is hidden from the LORD,
and my right is disregarded by my God”?
Have you not known? Have you not heard?
The LORD is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He does not faint or grow weary;
his understanding is unsearchable.*

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*He gives power to the faint,
and strengthens the powerless.
Even youths will faint and be weary,
and the young will fall exhausted;
but those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength,
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary,
they shall walk and not faint.*
(Isaiah 40:27-31 NRSV)

Little did I know that more than once in the next two weeks, I would “wait for the Lord” to renew my strength as I grew weary and sore from walking.

In the midst of this time of confinement to the hotel, I read and reflected upon other times when I had no choice other than to wait for the Lord. In the summer of 2011, I was beginning my last year as a district superintendent in the West Michigan Conference of The United Methodist Church. I was very aware of the impending transition as I took a three-month renewal leave. Early in the leave, I traveled to Ghost Ranch in New Mexico for a weeklong spiritual growth experience called “High Desert Spiritual Quest.” Since being outside in nature is essential to my well-being, I was attracted by the mission statement of Ghost Ranch: “The Ranch is committed to spiritual development, peace and justice, honoring the environment, and exploring family through the celebration of art, culture and nature.”³

The Ranch is a 21,000-acre retreat and education center of the Presbyterian Church in north central New Mexico. Ghost Ranch was also the home and studio of Georgia O’Keeffe, one of the first female painters to be recognized around the world. I distinctly remember my prayers during that week: “God, I don’t know what’s next for me after my last year as a district superintendent. My

heart, mind, and spirit are open to your leading. All I want is to be your servant. What do you want me to do next with my life?”

Eight people from around the country were part of this group. My intention was to center myself in Christ. Through taking solitary hikes in the desert, participating in group exercises in trust-building, walking the Labyrinth, and studying scripture, my new friends helped me reframe the question. It was no longer, “God, what do you want me to do after my time as a superintendent is finished?” Rather, the question became, “God, wherever you call me next, who do you want me to be?”

I took off my shoes at Ghost Ranch and stood on holy ground, convinced that most important for my future was not what I was going to do but who I was going to be. However, that realization didn’t guarantee smooth sailing, as I waited to see what God had in store for me next. I knew that as part of the appointive cabinet of the West Michigan Conference, the bishop was the one who would appoint me. I could only offer these words, “Here I am, Lord.”

The following eight months of waiting were the greatest test of faith, hope, and love that I have ever experienced. My husband, Gary, would likely be staying at the church that we had served together for thirteen years and that he had continued to lead for the six years I was a superintendent. Unfortunately, there were not many options for me unless we decided to live apart, serving churches in different communities. My hope was that I could be appointed to a church where I could make use of the experience and gifts I had for ministry.

I distinctly remember when the cabinet first began discerning a new appointment for me in January 2012. I was excused as the cabinet began their conversation. My appointment was not finalized for several months, but what I remember the most was a

serendipitous email that a friend sent to me on the first day my appointment was discussed.

He was recommending Richard Rohr's 2011 book, *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*. Rohr, a Franciscan priest, relies on the work of Carl Jung, who described the spiritual life in two stages. In the first stage, we humans seek to establish ourselves by discerning our life's work, creating an identity, surrounding ourselves with family and friends, and becoming successful.

In the second half of life, we come to the realization that there is more to life than recognition and financial security. There is also a deep yearning for meaning, spiritual connection, and wholeness. But that transition usually entails some sort of falling. The time will come in all of our lives when there is a crisis. It could be health issues, problems with children, the end of a relationship, loss of a job, or addiction. The reality of human life is that we don't always get what we deserve. Rather than "falling from grace," however, Rohr sees this stage as an opportunity to "fall upward," to begin to live with humility and thankfulness and let go of everything that prevents fullness of life.⁴

I was reminded of the words of Paul Brunton (1898–1981), a British theosophist and spiritualist who traveled the world exploring spiritual traditions. One of his best-known quotations is, "Many who ask for Grace would be shocked to hear that the troubles which may have followed their request were actually the very form in which the higher power granted the Grace to them."⁵

Could it be that I was encountering a "falling upward" from a "first half of life" into a "second half of life"? During those months of waiting for a new appointment, I wrestled mightily with God and finally allowed myself to fall upward into grace and hope. The appointment I received in 2012 was to two small churches

that had been struggling, one urban and the other suburban. I fell upward into a beautiful and amazing year of ministry that was one of the most gratifying and hope-filled experiences I've ever had as a pastor.

Sitting in our hotel room when not pacing the hallways, I reflected on my own helplessness. I marveled at how odd it was that I broke my wrist a week before departing for Nepal. My wrist still bothered me, even though I was wearing a splint twenty-four hours a day. I also experienced limitations. I could barely write because I was left-handed, I couldn't put my backpack in the overhead bin by myself, and I was developing trigger finger from the splint.

What was God telling me? Was it time to slow down? Was this another "falling upward" moment? Did I need to discover a different way of working and serving that would not destroy my body or spirit?

I was choosing to see my broken wrist as a constant reminder that I was a wounded healer and that my wounds kept me humble and centered. I would carry with me for most of this leave the consequences of my decision to take a risk by running on the prairie. At the same time, I celebrated that risk is a vital part of my life and that I carried with me both my pain and my decision not to be afraid.

My musings also led me to examine the nature of how I make decisions. Strategic decision-making has always been a key component of my ministry. My time has been carefully scheduled, and I continually have to make difficult choices. I could not do everything and was always asking, "What is most important for me to do in my ministry as an episcopal leader?" I have tried to keep a careful and prayerful balance between conference and general church responsibilities. Communicating regularly with the conference and connecting personally with clergy and laity have also been high priorities.

At the same time, I have not been the kind of person who plays it safe all the time. I have not been afraid to risk in my personal and professional life and have wanted to stretch my limits and go for it. I like to balance the difficult challenges I face as a bishop with equally difficult (or some would say crazy) athletic challenges, like marathons, triathlons, long-distance bike rides, and this trek. So why was I sitting in a hotel room with nothing to do except read, walk the hallways, and wait for the weather to break?

On the second afternoon in the hotel, Talitha and I decided to take matters into our own hands, knowing that, otherwise, we might be stuck for days. We did a “RAD” on the situation. RAD, which stands for Reflect, Adjust, and Do, is a technique we have used in the Iowa Annual Conference to assess both our decisions and actions as a conference. For several years, we have contracted with Spiritual Leadership, Inc., for coaching in order to create healthier ministry environments.

At the end of every meeting of our various teams, we have always RADed our experience. What worked and what didn’t? What do we need to let go of, add, or change? As Talitha and I assessed our situation, we decided that if we could not fly into Juphal the next day, we would instead fly back to Kathmandu and find another trek. Staying any longer in Nepalgunj would likely prevent us from doing any significant hiking elsewhere in Nepal.

Arriving very early at the airport the next day, we met two women who were also traveling to Dolpo. They said that if the flight was canceled again, we could rent a car and drive all night and possibly get to Dolpo this way. However, we would end up having to walk three hours with all our stuff to get into town. I forced myself to step back and wonder, *How is God teaching me at this moment?* We Americans have little tolerance for things that do not go as planned. The women explained that the Nepalese sense of time is

much different from the American sense of time. The Nepalese do not have much money, but everything is much cheaper, and there is more time for leisure, going out to tea, chatting, and so forth.

Finally, we reached a tipping point. One of our new Nepalese friends helped us book a flight back to Kathmandu because we still hadn't heard from our tour operator. Others decided to rent vans and drive to Juphal. Still others remained in Nepalgunj to wait out the weather. As we prepared to board the plane to Kathmandu, we were asked to accompany a young female Buddhist monk who was on the same flight, and we were glad to travel with her. Reflect, adjust, do. Wise words for our journey through life.

On the flight back to Kathmandu, I reflected on the obstacles we were already facing on our Nepal adventure. How were we going to navigate through our canceled Lower Dolpo Trek, find a new trek, and execute it within the amount of time we had left in Nepal? We were not battling giants. We were, however, battling circumstances. Clearly, some of the issues were beyond our control. Despite the waiting and language, culture, and water/food challenges, however, we focused on creative problem solving and adaptive leadership, which were within our control. The story of David and Goliath came to mind. Even people who are not familiar with the Christian faith have heard this story of how David, an underdog who was only a shepherd boy, found a way to defeat a giant.

The Philistine nation had been seeking to expand into Israel for three generations and was a constant threat to the Israelites. In 1 Samuel 17, the Philistines were assembling their troops against King Saul and the Israelite army on opposite sides of a valley. A nine-foot-tall giant named Goliath came out of the Philistine camp to challenge the Israelites. His armor alone weighed 125 pounds, and the iron head on his spear weighed 15 pounds.

For forty days the Philistines took their stand. Meanwhile, Jesse, David's father, sent him to the Israelite camp with food for his brothers. At the same time, Saul made known that he was going to reward whoever killed Goliath.

David asked questions like, "How can he get away with insulting the army of the living God?"

King Saul responded, "You can't do this. You're just a boy!"

"Look," David said, "I fight lions and bears as a shepherd. What's the difference?"

"Then, go," Saul said, "and may the Lord be with you."

I could just imagine David doing a RAD on Goliath. He reflected on the situation, adjusted his strategy, and then did what he needed to do. King Saul proceeded to put his own armor on David, but it just wasn't comfortable. "I can't walk in this because I've never tried it before!" David exclaimed. Whereupon David took five smooth stones from the streambed and put them in his shepherd's bag. After mutual trash talk, David took a stone, slung it, and penetrated Goliath's forehead. Goliath fell facedown on the ground, and David finished him off with the giant's own sword.

In 2013, Malcolm Gladwell was interviewed for *Forbes* about his new book, *David and Goliath: Underdogs, Misfits, and the Art of Battling Giants*. Offering new insights into the biblical story of David and Goliath, Gladwell said,

I started with the original story of David and Goliath because I became convinced that our interpretation of it was wrong; that it was a mistake to think of David as an underdog. He was simply someone rather who is using an alternate strategy and relying on his speed and his audacity, as opposed to size and strength, and I don't know why we think that.

We automatically assume that the biggest and strongest person at any contest is always the favorite. David was smarter, quicker, had the advantage of surprise and had an alternate strategy. Why doesn't that make him the favorite? The challenge is that the people who might appear to be underdogs or to be burdened with disadvantages actually aren't.⁶

Gladwell emphasized two lessons that we can take away from the story of David and Goliath. First, we humans can learn more from difficult times than good times, that there is opportunity in every crisis. He asserted, "I want people to understand that an incredible amount of what is beautiful and important in the world arises out of obstacles and adversity; that's the well from which a lot of what is beautiful springs in our world."⁷

The other takeaway is counterintuitive to much of what we have usually been taught: "The second thing is that we learn more from compensating for our weaknesses than capitalizing on our strengths. It's your weaknesses that define who you are and how you learn, and force you to do creative things, than making sense and working your way around your weaknesses, that we succeed."⁸

Clearly, Talitha and I were not engaging giants. Rather, we were confronting challenging circumstances where it was necessary to take the time to Reflect, Adjust, and Do. Despite the frustrations, we focused on positive problem solving.

We made the right decision to return to Kathmandu. After consulting with our tour operator, we decided to attempt the Manaslu Trek with a porter and a guide, just the four of us. In our original trek, we would have had four porters, donkeys to carry our food and tents, and even a cook. The level of complexity was now increased. I also realized that I was not totally comfortable with Manaslu since

the trails were officially closed because of the rainy season. In addition, because we lost two days waiting in the hotel, we would have to eliminate the two built-in altitude acclimation days if we were to finish in the allotted time. It was our only realistic option, however.

The stunning Manaslu Circuit treks around Mount Manaslu, which, at 26,781 feet above sea level, is the eighth-highest mountain in the world. The Manaslu Circuit is known as the ultimate off-the-beaten-path trek in Nepal and is truly a remote adventure. It is in a region that was closed to outsiders until the early 1990s, and, still today, tourism is restricted. In fact, we did not encounter a single other trekker during our twelve days in the wilderness. And we did not see a single car during those days either.

The Manaslu Trek became more popular when teahouses began to be built along the way in 2010. The trail features everything one would expect from a great trek in Nepal, including epic scenery, many suspension bridges, and the Larkya Pass. The Manaslu Circuit allows trekking from March to June, and September to November. Somehow, Talitha and I were granted an exception to trek in July, and after the first day, I knew exactly why the Manaslu Circuit was usually closed at this time. It rained all night every single day. Absolute downpours! This meant that the trails, which were unmarked (one reason to require a guide), were a perpetual quagmire of slippery rocks, mud, and fast-moving streams. I realized this was very dangerous. The high point of the Manaslu Circuit is crossing the Larkya Pass at 17,060 feet, which is the highest elevation I have ever experienced.

Little did I know that we would have to make use of creative thinking and continuous adaption every day of our trek. Just as David engaged Goliath with courage and innovation, so we would have to engage the Manaslu Circuit as well as our own capabilities in the rainy season and at high altitude.

I was wary about the trip but had to let go of my anxiety. I had one good arm, and the other had a splint that was, I hoped, preventing my wrist from moving so that it could heal. But I looked forward to the adventure. The one thing I was sure of is that we would need to continuously RAD (reflect, adjust, do) our decisions. If our all-day trip to the start of the trek was any indication, we were going to be in for a wild ride.

Talitha and I received a duffel bag from the tour operator in the afternoon, and we were instructed not to take any more than what fit in our day packs and the porter's duffel that he would carry for us. The rest we would store at the hotel to be retrieved at the end of the trek.

As a bishop in The United Methodist Church, I was accustomed to packing because I travel a lot. I have a variety of packing lists depending on whether I am traveling for business, for a race, to visit family, or heading out of the country. I am particularly careful when traveling abroad to check and double check what's in my suitcase or backpack because it's not easy in remote areas to find what I might have forgotten. I've discovered from experience that I must carefully choose what to take and what to leave behind.

In the hotel lobby, we met Rajiv, our guide; Bishal, our porter; and the driver of the jeep that would take us to the start of the Manaslu Circuit in north central Nepal. After several hours of slow driving out of the Kathmandu metro area, we stopped for a break. It was midmorning, and I noticed that Rajiv, Bishal, and the driver were eating a big lunch. Meanwhile, Talitha and I walked around a little bit and took pictures. Amazingly, no one told us that this would be the only time we would stop for food until we reached the village at the start of the trek, which would be nine hours later. I bought three bottles of water, one for me, one for Talitha, and one for Rajiv.

Talitha and I had no idea what was in store for us! We soon began our ascent into the hills on narrow, winding mountain roads filled with ruts, huge boulders, and mud, mud, and more mud. Oh, and there were no guardrails. But the scenery was absolutely gorgeous! Lots of rice paddies and cornfields, beautiful vistas, and an occasional small village.

After five hours, we encountered a dump truck that was stuck in the mud in the middle of the road. Fortunately, it only delayed us for a half hour. It was fun watching our driver navigate the roads with a master's eye. It was the first of many times that I marveled at the skill of those who drove and guided us.

Twenty minutes later, high in the foothills of the Himalayas, after continuously escaping being mired in mud, we were flagged down by a farmer who warned us that there had been a landslide the night before, and the only road was impassable a half mile ahead. We drove until we reached the landslide, where it became clear that we could go no farther. This was, indeed, the only road, so we could not simply turn around and find another way.

We had no choice but to get out and walk. We emptied all our stuff out of the jeep and took stock of the situation. We had very little water, but we did have snacks. We put on our backpacks and said goodbye to our driver, who turned around and headed back to Kathmandu. Mind you, we had just met Rajiv and Bishal that morning. We didn't know one another very well, and it was brutally hot.

I innocently asked Rajiv, "How far do we have to walk to get to our destination?"

"I don't know," he replied. Oh my. This was not reassuring.

"Do you have GPS or a map, or can you make a phone call? It will be really helpful if we know how to manage our energy for the walk."

“There is no GPS or cell service here, and I don’t have a map. I think we probably have a few kilometers to walk.”

Hmmm. Somehow a few kilometers turned into ten kilometers (about six miles), over two hours of walking in the hot sun with fully loaded backpacks and virtually no water. After just a half hour, I told Rajiv that Talitha and I would not be able to go significantly farther without water. He said, “I’ll check at the next farmhouse.” The farm families were most willing to give us water, but it was tap water, and if we drank tap water, my daughter and I would surely become sick. All I had was one partially filled water bottle. Rajiv asked at each farmhouse until, finally, a family had a bottle of water that we purchased.

There was little talk as we walked. We were all lost in our own thoughts and were trying to conserve energy and avoid sunstroke. We finally arrived at a town where our guide wanted us to stay overnight. It was not our destination, however, and Talitha firmly insisted that we wait for the bus that would take us to the official start of our trek.

In retrospect, I realized that the harshness of our introduction to wilderness trekking was good preparation for the endurance and flexibility that would be demanded of us in the days ahead. Already, our experiences over the last four days had been amazing, and we hadn’t even started the trek yet.

RAD for the day: It took a lot of patience, fortitude, waiting, and grit to even get to the beginning of our trek. As it often turns out, the journey itself is the destination. Fortunately, everywhere we turned, we were met with grace. The violent rush of water from the Budhi Gandaki River right outside our room at the teahouse quickly lulled us to sleep.⁹ The adventure beckoned!