

Echoes



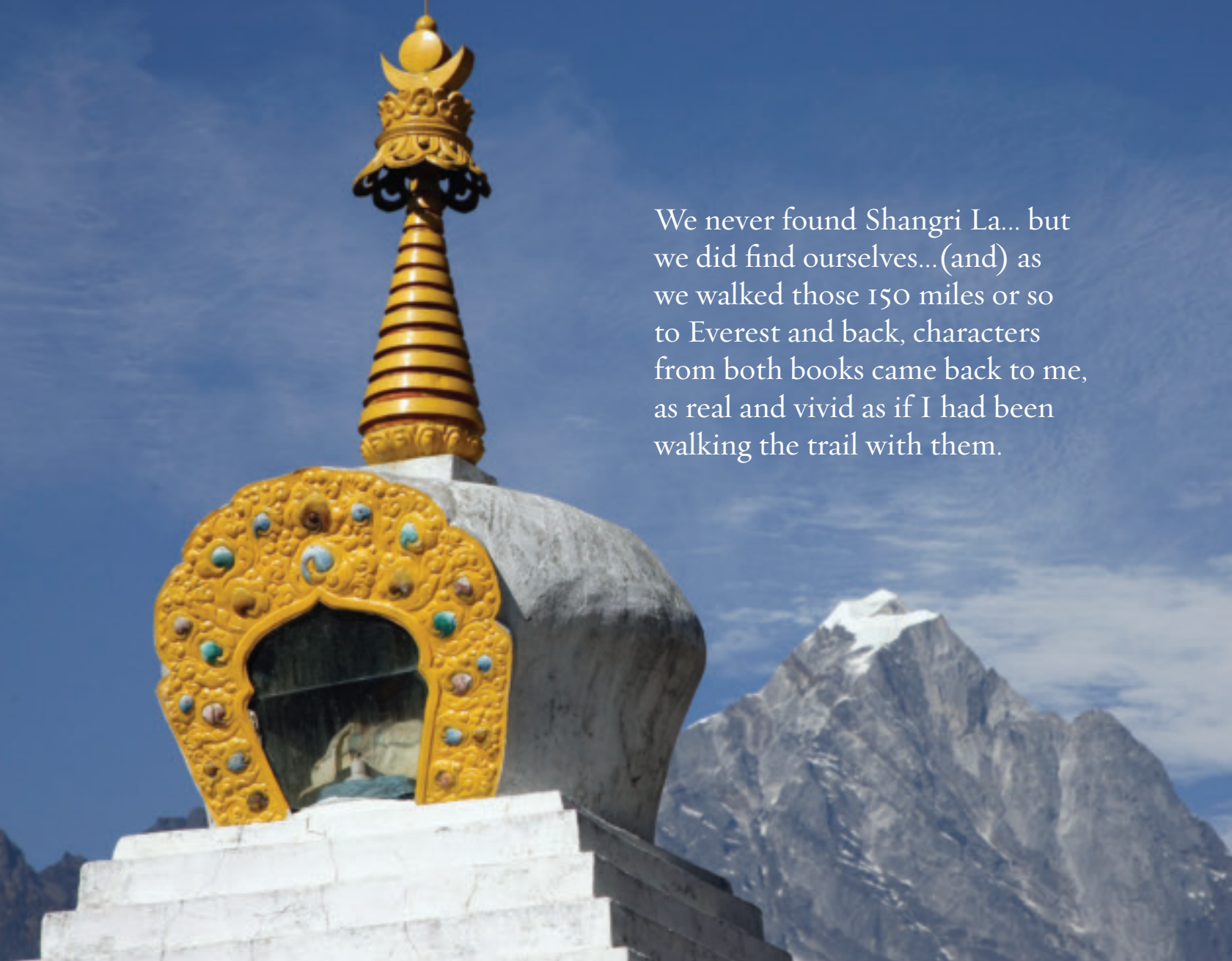
The older I become—soon to be 60, mind you—the more grateful I am for the incalculable gifts brought to my life by my teachers, and I still consider “teacher” to be the most noble of words in any language. As a boy at Georgia Military Academy, in a former life that seems both incredibly long ago and sometimes simultaneously not even as far back as last Tuesday or so, I was required to read and read and read: some 15 major texts each academic year, starting with the eighth and continuing through the twelfth grades, and an additional 10 texts each summer. Those English masters were convinced that literature, and only literature, would save our intemperate, male adolescent souls. Among those works were several that pushed me eventually to climb mountain peaks all over the world.

PHOTOS BY CHUCK PRATT '07

of books still loved

Trinity President James F. Jones, Jr., just returned from a trek in Nepal, reflects on the importance of his youthful reading





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As I told a beloved friend in 2001, when he asked why I was so persuaded that we had to climb Mount Kilimanjaro, “it was all Hemingway’s fault.” I was so taken as a boy with the exergus to “The Snows of Kilimanjaro” that I simply had to go to see that desiccated body of the white leopard for myself. Now, truth be told, we never found the leopard, which the Masai supposedly spotted on top of Kili, but the climb was worth every ounce of physical stamina it took from us all.

And then there was the duo of James Hilton and Somerset Maugham. In the summer between our eighth and ninth grades, the English masters had us read both *Lost Horizon* and *The Razor’s Edge*. I have been giddy ever since. Two of the central characters, Hugh Conway and Larry Darrell, were like some sort of real-time heroes, so vividly did they affect my imagination. Hilton, born with the century, was only 33 when he published *Lost Horizon*. The movie version immediately was nominated

for one Oscar after the other, and FDR, who took office the year the book appeared, named the Maryland presidential retreat Shangri La. I was mad at Ike, about the time we had to read the novel, when he jettisoned Shangri La and renamed that facility for his first grandson David!

At Home on the Trail with My Fictional Heroes

This past January, being still drawn to mountain peaks by the power of my early

reading, I joined 13 Trinity College students, one of my colleagues on the faculty here, and two of my old climbing buddies on a trip to Nepal. I told the students they had to read *Lost Horizon* and *The Razor’s Edge* to understand just why we were there: in the cold, trekking on yak trails as old as time itself, climbing and descending one high Himalayan mountain after the other, trying hard to catch our breath in the incredibly thin air. When we left Kathmandu for Lukla, where the trek to the base camp



of Everest begins, we boarded a twin-engine Otter, just like Conway did in Hilton's tale. I felt right at home and told our students how important the choice of plane had to be, ruled as it were by serendipity alone.

We never found Shangri La, although we saw a number of signs indicating the Shangri La lodge or the Shangri La restaurant. But we did find ourselves: in that there was no difference between the president of the College and the 19-year-old fellow trekker. We were all cold as hell, exhilarated by the vistas, worn out by the thin air. As we walked those 150 miles or so to Everest and back, characters from both books came back to me, as real and vivid as if I had been walking the trail with them. I fantasized about Maugham's ancient recluse who reveals the mysteries of the eternal to my fictional old friend Larry Darrell, as I also fantasized about Father Perrault and his counsel to Hugh Conway. I wondered if Conway ever did find his way back to the magic valley. And I thought that the French author Blaise

Pascal ("The eternal silence of these infinite spaces frightens me.") would have been right at home with us as we trudged along, lost in our own thoughts, glad we had each other.

Remembering a Trinity Poet and Teacher High in the Himalayas

We paused at Tengboche, the most venerable Sherpa monastery of the Solo-Khumbu region and the place where parties seeking the summit of Mount Everest have traditionally stopped, since Mallory's time, to be blessed by the High Lama. It was there that we held a memorial service for our colleague Hugh Ogden, poet and Trinity professor of English, who fell through the ice in Maine and drowned right before the New Year. We asked the Buddhist monks to offer prayers for him. There in the incredibly beautiful monastery atop one of the Himalayan peaks, the Buddha smiling

knowingly upon us all, conch shells blowing to draw us to morning prayer, bells ringing, monks chanting, we read four of Hugh's poems, including his "We Never Tire, But Flourish," which describes so acutely what it means to be a teacher. My mind wandered from his gift of language, which he gave to all of us at Trinity for more than four decades, back to the gifts my own teachers bestowed upon me, that gangly boy who loved books and whose own life has been so influenced by the power of words, those magic lanterns, upon the written page.

As I sat there in the monastery, I was very grateful that my military school teachers had made us read so many books, and that these books had made such a difference in our lives. Few of those teachers are alive today, but I bless their memories all the more for inculcating such magic echoes so firmly in my adolescent head. The echoes of those pages still resonate with me even today, and they have taken me to heights I never thought remotely possible. Looking around me that morning in the monastery—part of a circle of students and teachers drawn together in such a special place—I felt once again the ages-old power of books to move, to transform, and to inspire. And I knew that the Trinity students who were my companions on this journey would someday approach the eve of their own 60th birthdays pushed to climb their own mountain peaks, as I have been, by the books of their youth.