



CHASING THE PHANTOM

In Pursuit of Myth and Meaning in the Realm of the Snow Leopard

SINGING
DRAGON 

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PROLOGUE

THE COMMON THREAD—THE SEARCH FOR MEANING

We have always been looking. We are species of seekers. It is in our nature to wonder what is over the next horizon or what lies down in the opaque depths of our being. To begin an exploration of either of these requires leaving the zone of the familiar. The British climber George Mallory was once asked why he wanted to climb Mt. Everest. He famously replied, “Because it’s there.” What is less well known is that he also said, “If you have to ask, you probably won’t understand the answer.” Mallory seems to have been a man who was obsessively driven by a calling beyond himself.

Our civilization has been built on grand obsessions, perhaps not entirely dissimilar from Mallory’s. Columbus was determined to find a new route to the Orient and instead discovered a new world. A low level clerk named Einstein working in a Swiss patent office spent his spare time laboring away filling notebooks with obsessive scribbling that ended up revolutionizing science. Thousands of researchers have collaborated in recent decades in the search for the signature particle of the Higgs field, the all pervading cosmic molasses that keeps us grounded, and prevents the constituent atoms of our bodies from whizzing off at light speed. It took the construction of a nine billion dollar apparatus to finally catch a glimpse of the elusive particle, which lasts for only ten sextillionths of a second. At this point, although the sighting of the particle is a major confirmation for the so-called Standard Model of physics, pure science like this sometimes has little more immediate practical application than climbing mountains. So why bother? Because it’s there. Because it’s there to help show us the way to understanding the elegant and beautiful laws of physics that govern the universe. The search for the Higgs particle was also a magnificent collaboration between a number of nations and thousands of scientists. The search for the Higgs opened many minds and hearts.

When I began my search for the snow leopard in 1985 I knew all along that I was not just looking for a beautiful and rarely seen wild creature, but that the search for the animal was a metaphor for

a deep need within. Einstein spent the last thirty years of his life looking for the formula that would unify the laws of physics. He simply could not believe that there could be four separate laws that governed the forces of the universe. His search was no less than a search to know God, or at least as close as a human could come to knowing God. But some of the truths we find on our paths are not the expected ones. Columbus never accepted that he had run into an unknown (to Europeans besides the Norse) continent instead of the East Indies. Although Einstein was the father of quantum physics, he never accepted the uncertainties of its deeper mysteries. “God does not play dice with the universe,” he famously stated. To which the Danish physicist Niels Bohrs replied, “Quit trying to tell God what to do.” Indeed. We can’t tell God what to do. Whenever we solve one of her puzzles, we may find that it just leads to an even deeper mystery. And then we just have to plunge on.

This book is about my search for the snow leopard, both the animal and the metaphor. It is also about the searches of others. These are quests that have been undertaken in science and in art, and some that have been recorded in myth and history, and others that have entailed the pursuit, as with Mallory, of extreme physical challenges. The stories of these modern adventure epics are sometimes not too dissimilar from the ancient tales of the heroes who went out to slay monsters in order to rid people of an oppressive curse. We can still learn something from those old stories and even from some of the new ones. No one is completely fearless, and no one gets to a formidable summit without having to confront their demons. And fear is not the only foe that needs to be faced in the mountains, or anywhere else for that matter; often there are lust, greed, sloth, anger, and envy. Mountains can teach you who you are. Andrew Brash found out who he was, and so did we, when he gave up his lifetime dream of climbing Everest, turning back 200 meters below the summit, to help rescue a stranger who had been left for dead. These kinds of people teach us what we can be—what we should be. The forty climbers who walked past an individual in distress and left him to die on Everest that same season know who they are now too. They teach us what we should not be.

The metaphor embodied in the search for the Higgs particle is somewhat obvious in that it came to be known as “the God Particle,” a term coined by Nobel laureate Leon Letterman, in part, he claims, because his publisher wouldn’t let him call his book *The Goddamn Particle*. And, yes, there were times, when suffering her tricks and evasions, when I was tired and cold, I thought of her as “the goddamn snow leopard.” That creature who just wouldn’t hold still to have her picture taken, so I could take it back to Canada and put her image up on my wall, soak in a hot bath, and sleep in a soft bed with my warm spouse. But it wasn’t that easy. Nor should it be.

In this book I attempt to address the question that was asked of Mallory—why do we undertake these things? The question is worth exploring, even if there is no absolute answer. India is where I went to chase my metaphor because, in part, it is the place that has the oldest, and some of the deepest traditions of searching for the meaning of existence. That the philosophies of yoga and Buddhism have gained in popularity in the West in the last decades shows that this search has universal resonance. The exploration of the Buddhist culture of Ladakh became entwined with my search through its harsh terrain for the phantom cat. During my solitary wanderings through the mountains there, I saw abandoned hermitages and caves where mystics had spent years plumbing the depths of inner being. Many of these sages’ names will remain unknown to us, but others were the great teachers who helped spread Buddhism throughout Asia, and then later, in part due to the Tibetan Diaspora, to Europe and North America.

Mallory’s answer, “Because it’s there,” may be interpreted as glibness, or as something else entirely. We usually assume that Mallory was just overstating the obvious when he told us that Everest was “there.” But maybe he wasn’t. Maybe in his understated English way he was making a proclamation of faith—that there, the most difficult place on earth for a human to reach, was where he might find It. And perhaps he did, as he lay dying, enfolded in the arms of the mountain, whom the Sherpa people call Chomolungma, the Mother Goddess of the World. Mallory and almost all the members of his expeditions were veterans of the Great War, who had witnessed

and endured its almost unimaginable horrors. They were men who were accustomed to physical hardship. Some of them still carried battle wounds that gave them daily pain. We can only wonder what kind of psychological demons they went to the Himalayas, like so many others, to try to exorcise.

I have now been to the Himalayas seven times, in part to look for snow leopards, to trek, to climb, to study the cultures, but, underlying all of these, to fulfill a personal and universal human quest. Dr. Victor Frankl, the great Austrian psychiatrist, maintained that life was about the search for meaning and, if we find it, we can endure anything, but without it we are lost. He never lost his positive outlook on human nature, despite personally enduring the Holocaust and losing most of his family in the death camps. Dr. Frankl was a healer and a philosopher who found a way to walk the talk. Finding meaning is about finding purpose beyond and greater than oneself. When Edmund Hillary returned from the summit of Everest, his first words were, “We knocked the bastard off.” But the words of the tough-as-nails Kiwi belied the transformation that had taken place on the mountain. He was to return to Nepal many more times, not merely to bag peaks, but to build schools for the children of the Sherpa people, to thank them for helping him attain the summit—and perhaps to find himself.

This is the story of my search.