

AMONG THE RHODODENDRONS

A healing journey in the Himalayas.

By Paola Pomponi

A few years ago, my life run into a difficult patch. I don't know if it was an existential crisis or simply midlife announcing its arrival not by making its appearance with wrinkles in my face, rather by wrinkling my soul.

When I felt that I could bear no more I decided to break away in order not to break down. I booked a flight to Kathmandu and left, in search of a new path.

I went on a six day tea house trek in the Annapurna region of the Himalayas. I left Kathmandu on a day when a general strike had been declared and no cars were allowed in the street. Instead of being driven to the beginning of the trek I had to walk all the way there: five hours under the scorching sun. Before I had even reached the real start, my feet had blisters, my shoulders were sunburnt and I was completely out of breath.

As I walked and walked following my guide, I had started asking what was to become the most frequently asked question: *how long before we get there?* I never got a reply, and soon enough I learnt that all I could do was to embrace not-knowing and keep going.

I don't remember much of that first day and what the trail looked like. I vividly remember my body screaming in pain, heat and near despair. I don't remember what the tea house looked like or whether I had any food that night. Exhaustion brought me into a deep sleep and I woke up the following morning surprised and somehow disappointed to be alive.

As we left in the early morning the air was fresh and the sky devoid of even the smallest cloud. I remember walking uphill, stone step after stone step. Sometimes counting my slow paces, sometimes listening to the sound of my heavy breath. At times, very often, I would stop for a few minutes to drink a little water and recover. Only then I allowed my gaze to wonder around and see how far I had gone. I would sit on a rock and look down: a peaceful scenery of emerald green fields, women working bent forward in their colourful saris, children beside them, babies wrapped tight around their shoulders. Cows and dogs grazing and running around without a care in the world. As I looked up I could only see yet more steps to be conquered and occasionally an eagle circling high above.

I walked through rhododendron forests that would be blossoming in spring, but were now providing just nurturing shade. I walked along streams and rivers and a sudden waterfall would appear around a bend to then follow my tired presence with the lingering sound of its jumping water.

I could not talk, because the walking took all my breath away, but inside me a dialogue was taking place that felt not as real as spoken language, but as loud as a screaming argument. I had engaged on my most crucial internal debate, assessing and analysing, dissecting and piecing together, imagining and adjusting, going through everything that had happened in my life. I sat in the loft of my being and looked around. I blew on the dusty boxes there and for a while I was blinded. I opened boxes, looked inside and replaced the lids. I moved and shifted items making space. I left some in a corner, to be dealt with later on. When the dialogue

became too much to bear, I reverted to counting, steps, breaths, stones, trees, anything that could be counted.

Whilst my mind was occupied in that exercise I was aware of my body struggling, sweating, dehydrating. I could feel every muscle tensing, aching, and then relaxing and releasing when I stopped to rest. At times I think I lost consciousness, sitting, my eyes closed, holding my head between my knees. I cried, I rebelled and refused to go on, under the concerned stare of my patient guide. But then, after a while, I somehow came back and by some miracle was able to get up and get going.

In the evening, when we had finally arrived at the tea house and the day's work was done, a sense of relief, of near ecstasy, would overwhelm me and the happiness resided in just sitting in a chair, at a table, waiting for food. The simple things in life had assumed a value they never had at home. My sleeping bag on a wooden bed in the freezing cold night was like my mother's womb all over again, holding me in a safe warm world that for a few hours would keep my body and my mind intact.

I travelled for six days up and down the beautiful hills of the Annapurna trail, at the foot of majestic mountains, among the tallest in the world. A world with no cars, no telephones, no television. I travelled inside myself because of that uncontaminated world, where children would hide behind a bush or a rock, waiting for trekkers to pass by, so that they could sing a little song, or give a wild flower, smiling with their missing teeth smiles, waiving with their dirty hands and wiping their runny noses.

And what a pleasure it was to be approached by them, knowing that they were not there expecting anything in return, no begging and no asking. There is a special pride in Nepalese people as they teach their children that poverty does not need to take their smile away.

By the time I came back to Kathmandu I had stopped talking to myself. There seemed to be a new order in that loft, my mind was peaceful and my body had stopped aching. I, somehow, was healed.

I had worked through my pain by making my muscles painful. I had sweated out my fear through my pores and my breath had exhaled the fatigue of looking for solutions to practical issues. I had been able to focus on all that inside and at the same time outside, as my body and mind connected in the trekking. It's as if my body was able to express physically what needed to be done psychologically and in the end all was quiet and harmony set in.

It's not easy to rationally explain how this happened, nor to try and make it into a discipline that can be taught and learnt. It can only be experienced, and each time it will be experienced in an individual way.

I am told that in spring the rhododendrons blossom. It only lasts for one week; the forest becomes all red with flowers. Wild orchids come out as well and millions of wild flowers join in. Apparently, it is a miracle that happens every year but it does not have a specific date. Some times the forest blooms earlier, some times later. I have been back to Nepal many times since, I try and plan it so that I may catch the miracle, but, as yet, it has eluded me. I have caught the odd tree here and there, as if it waited for me to pass by to reassure me that the blossoming does indeed exist. Not that I ever doubted it. Every time I repeat the experience I come back recharged and soothed.

The healing works its own magic and inside me the rhododendron forest is in full bloom.