



Porters' Progress, APPA, and Elvis.

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Porters' Progress is a Nepali-based NGO that aims to reduce the number of crippling injuries and fatalities among trekking porters in the Himalaya. Porters are typically sustenance farmers searching to supplement their meager incomes at home by carrying loads for foreign trekkers. Porters bear the brunt of a great deal of social discrimination and neglect, and Porters' Progress has found great success in using Appreciative techniques to empower porters to improve their own lives and livelihoods.

The mission statement for Porters' Progress is "Facilitating the safe treatment, education, and empowerment of Nepali mountain porters through intimate and appropriate programs in Nepal."

Let's pick this apart. *Facilitating*. Porters' Progress focuses our efforts, terms of both philosophy and action upon helping to make the dreams of porters come true. Porters dream simple, realistic dreams – dreams of feeding their families, dreams of speaking to and learning from their foreign employers, dreams of working in an industry that will sustain them rather than kill or cripple them. There is something about the hard-working honesty of porters that has inspired me and, in turn, Porters' Progress, to believe in their strength and capability. Whatever this fire is that can propel 120 kgs of kerosene ten days across the corrugated landscape of Nepal, from Jiri to Namche, on someone's back, is a fire that can certainly bring these dreams within reach. For me, the loads that porters carry are a tangible measure of their appreciation and their wisdom. *Life is worth carrying 120kgs for*. Feeding ourselves and feeding our families has so much value, and this value is measured by porters in their steady footsteps, songs and sweat.

The safe treatment, education, and empowerment of porters describes our current program focuses. Through my own rough fumbling with Appreciative Participatory Planning and Action (APPA), we determined early on that porters want to learn English, safety, and cultural/service skills. Accordingly, Porters' Progress now offers free daily trekking-based English language classes for porters from our offices in Kathmandu and Lukla. We also give weekly trainings on altitude and cold-related injury prevention, basic health and hygiene, environmental awareness, and whatever else porters ask us to teach them about. So far the response among porters has been incredible, and in just two years, we have hosted classes with nearly 1,000 'porter visits' (one porter per class is equal to one 'porter visit'). Many of our classes and Empowerment (APPA) Meetings have had more than 40 participants crammed into our small office, laughing, sometimes singing, and repeating newly-found English words.

We also focus upon educating tourists and bringing them closer to porters. This is accomplished by keeping the doors to our offices open and encouraging them to hang out or, while a class is going on, to step in and teach a few words, or to be taught a folk song by porters in return. These impromptu volunteer sessions have resulted in many spontaneous soccer games, question and answer sessions, games, and science classes.

Empowerment. Intimate. Appropriate. All words that would make good hammers, paperweights, or door stops. Over used, clunky, dime-a-dozen. But, we're trying to reclaim them. Let's start with *intimate*. We are not a porter massage parlor, persay. However, to digress, we have offered porters massage classes. One of our impromptu volunteers decided that this is what they would teach porters. So we put up signs and told porters about it, the entire time I was grumbling about cultural appropriateness and wearing my skepticism on my sleeve. To my astonishment, twenty porters arrived in the office and within an hour were groaning and pounding upon one another's backs. These rugged men, built of leather and muscle, were all finding pressure points, rubbing one another's cracked hands, saying "Ooh, yeah, right there. That's the spot!" Porters never cease to amaze me.



Back to intimate. Intimate here means 'grassroots' or low-to-the ground. We want, and need, porters in our meetings, and the office peering over my shoulder as I write this. We need porters involved in every aspect of our work, and to view our office as their own. We plan for our eventual administrative structure to resemble that of a typical Nepali village in its best moments -- with a few definite leaders, many many individuals, and a common goal worth working together for.

Appropriate. We believe that our work should be useful, harmless, and helpful. Our office should be effective and one that responds to the true needs of those involved within it. This means keeping our eyes peeled for new ideas, and constantly evaluating those we are working with. This means remaining intimate with porters, and generating our idea and program base through empowering means.

Empowerment. I just did an internet search for 'empowerment' and found 828,000 hits. It's a popular word, and as worn as a one-rupee bill. To us, 'empowerment' means helping others to discover their own potential, and to harness the power of their own dreams. I believe that the potential for human harmony, for a world with a few more smiling faces, is something that is as inherent to this world as the winds are. Empowerment is simply showing people the designs to make a set of sails. This belief in this great potential, not just in porters, but in everyone, is the very foundation of our program. We run weekly "Empowerment Meetings" with porters where we employ appreciative methods of idea generation, and dance our own twisted two-step around the sweet notion of 'empowerment.'

Our experience with the appreciative (APPA) model is one that is based, to a great extent, upon winging it. The root idea behind APPA – which is seeking the root cause of *success*, and harnessing that energy to make change – is one that allows us to best approach true empowerment, and that small brilliant fire that sparkles in our eyes as we smile. If porters have taught me one thing, it's the value of song and laughter. The heavier a load is, the greater the chance that the porter underneath it will be singing. On the steepest hills one finds porters resting halfway up, telling and retelling the same funny story we've all heard many times before. Laughter lightens loads, as do songs.

I was introduced to this philosophy; be it theory; be it method during a one of the famous lunches at Mac Odell's house. Mac walked me through the ideas a few times, and then I did some research on the internet to further my knowledge base. From the first meeting I ran, the results were amazing. We usually begin our meetings with a small cooperative game to get the blood flowing and a little human contact. Sometimes we all reach across the circle and join hands into some great tangle, and then unwind to find ourselves standing hand-in-hand in a perfect circle. Other times we figure out how to eat a biscuit placed in our outstretched hands without bending our arm or using our other hand (the answer is to feed the biscuit to your neighbor). When time is short, we begin with tea and biscuit and I sip my tea slowly, watching the crowd. Once everyone is about finished, I raise my half-full tea glass and ask "Is this glass half full or half empty?" (thankfully the cliché doesn't translate into Nepali), and we proceed from there to discuss the importance of perspective.

The first question we typically ask porters is "What is good about portering?" The porters have an instinctive reply to this question – immediate and without thought they wince and reply, "Nothing. Portering is dukkha, (suffering)." This answer is then followed with "Well, if that is so, then why are you portering at all?" "For food," they reply, and there is the root of our success. From food, we work upwards each meeting. Discovering, time and time again, that portering brings employment, culture, comradery, travel, schooling for one's children, education, and the list then goes on for hours. We also have porters brainstorm about the things that they enjoy in their lives – about the moments in which they are most happy, about the elements of their lives about which they are most proud. The answers are always exciting, some porters speak in detail about how to drive a team of oxen, or plant millet, or how to make baskets and ploughs. Others tell short stories of getting tips or photographs from trekkers, or of easy treks with good friends. Now the momentum is really building, and the meeting tends to run itself as a discussion about portering. We sit back and listen until the conversation – as it often does – turns back towards



the problems that they face, and their frustration. This is the time to adjust the sails, and we then ask about how these skills that seem so distant from the trekking route – making a plough, for example – can be creatively harnessed to improve their own lives, and to make the easy and bright days more frequent. We also ask how we, as an office, can use our resources and skills to help facilitate these dreams, and to reach our common goal. The answers to this round of questions make up the philosophical and program base for Porters' Progress. As the meetings draw to a close, we also encourage the porters to do something right then, while we're all together, to ensure that we keep the momentum. And then we ask them to do a little something again tomorrow, and the next day, and so forth.

These meetings, when finished, sometimes result with little definite planning for the future. However, they always end with smiling porters; with porters proud to be who they are and what they are doing; with porters who insist on shaking my hand before we leave the office; with porters (and tall, foreign porter advocates) who linger and dawdle around the office, not wanting to leave a space so full of, and charmed with, hope and human spirit.

During these meetings, porters have proposed our now daily English language classes and Altitude Sickness Prevention trainings. Porters have also started and now run a small cottage industry project where they make amazing folk-art goods for purchase by foreign trekkers as souvenir. One of the most common items that porters make are miniature replicas of farm equipment – wooden ploughs, baskets, etc. Porters have suggested a kerosene stove lending program so that porters can cook at altitude, and remain warm while reducing deforestation. (Note: this program hasn't taken off yet because we still need to work together to figure out a way to get affordable kerosene for porters). Porters have started a small community development group ("The Lokhim Porters and Farmers Motivation Group), with plans to start a local nursery. Porters have also begun to bring in poems, drawings, songs, and stories for us to share, and to soon become a book. Porters in Kathmandu want to begin a sightseeing service for bored tourists, and to give cultural programs in our office. All of these ideas and many more have come out of our "Empowerment Meetings" and out of the space in the office between these meetings that still sparks with the air of positive change and possibility. The Porters' Progress offices, to our delight and to the blissful deterioration of our office work, have become social 'safe spaces' for porters where they can speak freely, brainstorm, drink tea and play together.

One quick metaphor. I had an idea. I wanted to make a community mural in our Lukla office -- one that everyone who came through the office could contribute to. The finished product, I was convinced, would be a porter Sistine Chapel of some sort and a great symbol for our cooperation and success. So, I bought a white bed sheet and went to the local monastery to have a monk sketch the outline of a pastoral scene (complete with porters) in light blue chalk on the sheet. The idea behind the blue lines was so that shy porters could color around and follow the lines if they wanted. I wish you could have seen this chalked outline. It was beautiful, and I fell in love. Soon, I was entertaining visions of a perfect color-by-number duplicate, complete with shading and confident brush strokes. I was lost in the potential of the project. Art magazines would soon be funding our office. As the porters began to paint, I watched over their shoulders like a hawk. "*Maybe a lighter blue there, yes!*" "*Oh, no no no, the THIN brush for that mountain!*" "*Perhaps a nice salmon or, no, coral for the sunset there.*" And so forth. I was the mural cop, and I was no fun. Once, when I turned my back -- I'll never forget this -- a porter ran up to the painting and scribbled a tree all blue with red polka-dots. It was hideous. I was crushed. As I slumped and slouched around the office, my dreams deflated, porters began to add yaks, houses, birds, flowers, outrageous symbols, colors -- decidedly ignoring the lines set for them. As a young porter began drawing a trekker that was twice the size of the highest blue-chalk mountain and had a very unsettling resemblance to Elvis, I realized the fault of my perspective. Who was I to dictate the course of this painting? This Elvis-trekker was *way* more fun, appropriate, and beautiful than any confident brush strokes and crafty shading. That was when I let go of the painting, and watched as the porters proceeded to make a mural that was beautiful, bizarre, and perfect. I consider my experience with this



painting a metaphor for many things, and among them, my experience with APPA. For it's not about the lines, is it? It's about the fingers and the paintbrushes.

Our skills are our visions. Porters' Progress cherishes our dreams as an organization, and our goals. It is our desire to turn the program eventually and completely over to porters themselves, and then to slowly back away, making room for Elvises of all sorts and colors. To accomplish this we will continue to hone our APPA skills and thus the efficiency of our thought and practice. To date we've given dozens of APPA meetings (once each week during the trekking seasons since September, 2000), and I feel that with greater realization, knowledge, and skill, we will inspire porters even further. The greatest element of my growth and the growth of this organization since those hopeful lunches at Mac's has been our perspective and approach. By giving the brushes to the porters we will achieve something, regardless of the shading and brush strokes, that has great meaning and worth to all who have been involved.