

Far from Home

Not-knowing is most intimate.

By [*Henry Shukman*](#)

One day when I was a young man 5,000 miles from home, on a gap year in South America, I hiked with a friend out of the town where I had been working, up into the Cordillera Vilcanota of Peru, heading for a 17,000-foot pass. We wanted to make as much progress as we could that day, but we were also conscious that the better our progress, the closer we would be to the pass, and therefore the higher our camp would be. We didn't want to overshoot the day and find ourselves spending the night at an ungodly altitude at which our rudimentary camping gear would be of no earthly help. But that's exactly what we ended up doing.

With the mountain pass in sight, half proud of ourselves, half cursing our rashness, we at least had the sense not to attempt to cross the pass just before nightfall. As we made camp beside a stream running through mossy banks, hot and tired from a long day of climbing, we surveyed the vast, empty landscape around us. Across vivid green slopes the setting sun drew huge trains of shadow. We sat by our kerosene stove heating water from the stream for oatmeal and [tea](#). As dark came, the temperature dropped like a stone. In fact, up at this altitude, it was clear that we were indeed tiny creatures clinging to an all-but-bare stone hurtling through space. As the earth spun into darkness, we pulled on more clothes. By the time we climbed into our sleeping bags, we were wearing literally everything we had: long underwear, two pairs of trousers, all our T-shirts and sweaters, jackets, hats, multiple pairs of socks, even our boots. And all to no avail. We had overstepped ourselves, gone too high for the night: too high, too cold. Neither of us slept. All our body heat leached into the ground. In the middle of the night we realised it had become very quiet: the stream outside had fallen silent. It had frozen. The cold was taking us from the inside out. It was a night of unrelenting pain. When dawn finally touched the tip of our tent we crawled out and lurched up the slope into the sun, blinking at the golden star rising over a far brow. It was like seeing water in the desert. Our very bones seemed to know they needed the light and

redoubled their agony of cold, as if to make sure we moved toward it. We stomped on the ground and slapped ourselves, soon getting out of breath.

As we again heated up oatmeal and tea, three young boys materialised out of nowhere: Quechua boys in ponchos, open sandals, and short baggy pants that barely covered their knees, with glittering crystals of dried mucus under their noses, and sparkling black eyes. They stood about bare-legged and barefoot, showing none of the rigours of cold we were suffering from. They were friendly and curious. They didn't speak Spanish, but we gave them postcards and pencils from the city and offered them oatmeal, which they declined. Instead, they invited us up to their home.

We moved slowly, like insects in the morning. As we broke camp laboriously, they scampered from rock to rock impatiently. Then, as we followed uphill, they raced ahead and kept looking back, amazed that we could really be trudging so slowly. We were gasping for breath and we both had to pause every few steps, debilitated by the cold and the altitude. It was like wading through a swamp, with every step an effort. My brain was slow too. Where exactly were they taking us? Did they actually *live* up here? Sure enough, they did. We saw white alpacas dotting the green hillsides ahead. It all looked like the Scottish Highlands, with their scatterings of sheep, but hoisted up on trestles about three miles closer to the sky. Round a shoulder of turfy land three adobe huts came into view, with pointed thatched roofs like exotic straw hats. A line of smoke rose from one of them into an effervescent sky. We felt like Odysseus seeing the smoke of Ithaca: never had human warmth, the promise of a hearth and fireside, looked more welcome.

When the Andean boys ushered us toward the door of their home and we stooped into a darkness filled with woodsmoke, with one slanting beam of light athwart it from the chimney-hole, I saw an atavistic, immemorial life, a life that predated modernity and its severance of the soul from the land. We were offered the kind of hospitality that has ever been and is today common in premodern society. They let us sit near the earthen hearth in which wood coals were winking, and put on a pan for a strange and delicious drink, a kind of warm corn porridge. The wife whispered to herself constantly as she did things. It was a reassuring sound. Meanwhile a cloud of guinea pigs floated to and fro across the floor, drifting between

our boots. She poked some potatoes from the ashes and we ate them with our fingers, scaldingly hot but achingly delicious, dipped in a bowl of salty grey sauce.

When the woman leaned forward into the beam of light that bisected the hut, I saw that her eyes gazed alertly into mine, irises shining clear as a river. At the same time, I began to sense how strange we ourselves must have seemed to these people. We were flouting several of the axia by which they lived. We were far from home and family, for a start. To them, that might have seemed near-hellish. Therefore, we could only have been in search of treasure. Often in the remote Andes we were told we were clearly seeking treasure, as if the age-old quest of the conquistadors had not yet ended. We stood before their doors pale-skinned, clad in strange fabrics that weren't wool or cotton, taller than anyone with whom they had regular contact, yet shivering and incompetent, hopelessly unfamiliar with these lands, incapable of communicating with them on any reasonable level. What but the search for treasure could have brought us so far from home? We probably made sense only when we slurped from our hot drinks or munched greedily on the waxy little potatoes. Only then did we act as people should. Otherwise, we probably seemed lost souls. Perhaps we were. Gradually during that most welcome of meals my own mind began to seem less and less certain a thing. If these people's experience even of something so apparently nonnegotiable as extremes of temperature could be so different from mine, that meant that my experience surely wasn't as absolute as I took it to be. It wasn't the only way of seeing things.

That nightlong drop into unfamiliar fragility and vulnerability, from which our gear couldn't protect us, followed by this immersion in an ancient human home: I wondered if both the exposure and the recovery from it were not after all a momentary straying out of normal human bounds but instead a kind of return to something. But, then, would our striding off in our nylon clothes and gear back to our perceived norm, when we left here, in fact be a re inhabiting of some kind of aberrant life? What *was* normal

Maybe this was what "relativity" meant, I thought to myself: there was no final, objectively correct perspective, just different ways of seeing things. The idea brought a quiet and unfamiliar joy. In these alien circumstances I felt curiously at home all of a sudden, and a warm gratitude welled up—

for the kind family, for their dark home, and for the sun that I knew would be radiating its brilliance onto the fields and slopes outside.

When I heard the murmuring of the woman in the dark, and the scintillating aural quilt of the guinea pigs, and smelled the sweet, acrid smoke of the fire, and heard a rooster crow somewhere among the huts, for a moment it seemed that no one knew, and no one could know, how things really were, and there was no need to know. Instead, everything was just arising the way it was, and the certainty of a fixed centre of things was briefly gone.

Presumably that fixed centre would have been *me*—my ordinary sense of who I was. But I wasn't even sure of that just then. What if there *was* no normal, no right, and what mattered was the sliding away of certainty, of any knowledge of how things really were? Just then I *didn't* know, and it didn't seem to matter. Somehow, it was a blessed relief.

The food, the shelter, the warm adobe walls, the fleeces on which they made us sit, the quiet susurrus of the Quechua tongue in the warm dark: slowly we revived. Our night of exposure out on the bare planet receded, covered by a new tide of human connection. We finished up the food. We made inarticulate small talk composed of smiles and exaggerated sounds of appreciation, and offered some meagre gifts in exchange for the hospitality.

But the most memorable thing about that encounter was that somehow, against the odds, I felt we truly met these people. Somehow, in the condition of uncertainty that had swept over me, it was easier to be present and to feel their presence. The father had kind, bright eyes too, and in spite of our inarticulacy and youthful foreigners' shyness, when he looked at me as I nudged the little bowl of grey sauce toward him, I felt recognised.

When we shook hands and left, I felt an unexpected pang in my heart.

In the aftermath of my experience in the Andes and subsequent experiences as a traveling author, I had thought this was about a state of not-knowing that comes from a dose of unfamiliarity. In time, however, I began to realise it was actually about meeting people in a new way, a way beyond the confines of the ordinary self I knew so well. When I wasn't so sure of myself, of who I was, it seemed a new kind of connection could

happen. Years later, when I eventually found my way to Buddhist practice, the desire for immersion in alien territory dwindled. Instead, the practice itself in a sense provided it, by undermining my preconceptions. Slowly, I found I could start to meet my teachers—as well as life in general—in a space of not-knowing, and that it could be liberating to do so. And better than liberating.

Perhaps all humans—traditional and modern—have a longing to move past the confines of the quotidian self and feel themselves a part of the whole. Many at some point in their lives seek self-transcendence. One difference between traditional and modern societies may have been that traditional societies generally recognised transcendence as lying at the core of life's concerns, and sought, in Karen Armstrong's phrase, to live their lives "in the ambit of the sacred." All manner of activities—sports, art, agriculture—were invested with sacred significance. We moderns have not only emptied these activities of transcendent significance, we have even gone some way toward emptying religion of transcendence. But we still seek to escape from the prison of the self. Among other cultures and peoples who seem different to us, there is some measure of relief from the predictable patterns of the ego, some openness and fresh air. As long as the situation is not too threatening, encountering otherness pulls one out of the familiar and the world becomes bigger. As Zen master Chizo (Jizo) once said, "Not knowing is most intimate."

A sense of de familiarisation is a recurring feature of spiritual life, and it can come to us in many ways—in art, in travel, in practice. However it comes, it offers an opportunity for openness and intimacy, both, if one can allow oneself to fall into them. But it also speaks to a concern that is especially emphasised in Zen, namely that there is something miraculous in our ability to understand each other at all. And yet we do—not just in a literal sense, but sometimes in a complete and full sense of things. Tolstoy writes about how the writer's task is to convey to the reader the entire inner world of a character. How is it even possible that across so much time and space this can be done, and done with such power?

In the Zen tradition, many koans memorialise moments of intimate meeting. Some contemporary scholars refer to the koans as "encounter dialogues." In Zen training, each koan becomes the occasion for a meeting between teacher and student, an opportunity for an enactment of the kind

of encounter the koan enshrines: namely, one in which the reality of Zen's dharma—of the fact of our shared buddha nature, our intrinsic “infinite empty oneness,” as the Zen master [Yamada Koun](#) called it—is made clear.

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