



When the movie calls

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It's easy to spot my enthusiasm for movies in this column. Especially movies with a made-on-Maui component. But that can't begin to describe my feelings about "When the Mountain Calls Nepal Tibet Bhutan."

How can I sum up this locally produced documentary whose "stars" range from the Dalai Lama to Kris Kristofferson, and whose concerns stretch from global climate change to humans' never-ending, always elusive search for happiness?

Just to complicate things a little more, and in the interest of full

disclosure, I should probably mention that I, uh, wrote its script.

I first met Maui filmmaker Dr. Tom Vendetti several years ago, interviewing him about his work. Tom was a Maui County mental health administrator and world traveler whose movies mostly focused on his visits and treks in the Himalayan region of Asia.

Frequently collaborating with co-producer/editor/ cameraman Robert C. Stone, one of Tom's films followed a trip with renowned musician Paul Horn to play his flute in Tibet's Potola Palace. Another chronicled a pilgrimage to scatter the ashes of Maui Dharma Center's Lama Tenzin on Mount Kailish. Another included an extended interview with His Holiness The 14th Dalai Lama. Then there was the Page 1 story after he and his crew won two Emmy Awards for "Bhutan: Taking the Middle Path to Happiness."

That was our pattern. Tom would go off and have an adventure, then he would come home and I'd write about it in the paper. But the best part of the interviews never got written.

I call it the never-ending conversation. Tom and I discovered we had a lot in common. We both found it fascinating (as opposed to others who might prefer the term, boring) pondering, you know, the meaning of it all. We didn't expect to uncover answers, but found we were looking in lots of the same places.

Tom's travels kept bringing him back to Buddhist cultures. But in the never-ending conversation we realized that religion, psychology, philosophy, ethics, culture and spirituality might all just be different names for the same thing.

Tom's next project was going to be a documentary about climate change and culture change in the region, including interviews with Greenpeace China. But his plans changed after he was diagnosed with prostate cancer.

News like that causes re-evaluation of everything. But amidst the health concerns and the soul searching, he heard the Himalayas calling out to him again. Encouraged by his wife, Nancy, he decided to go, almost as a pilgrimage. "When the mountain calls, show up," was his mantra.

Back in Nepal on paths he had first walked decades ago, back in the thin air and dazzling blue sky, he relived his past visits. But then new things started happening, unexpected things that pushed the limits of what we call "coincidence" into a region of synchronicity more akin

to magic.

After returning to Maui, as he told me about his experiences, he seemed to be glowing. His health had been rejuvenated and his enthusiasm was infectious. I told him I couldn't wait until he got the film finished so I could give it some publicity.

"No," he corrected me: I wasn't going to write about the movie. I was going to write the movie.

I was honored. I was floored. I immediately agreed to do it. The return to reality came a little later when I remembered that a) I had never set foot anywhere remotely close to that part of the world. And b) I didn't have a clue how to write a movie.

Didn't matter, answered Tom. Which, as it turns out, is what "When the Mountain Calls" is all about. Surprising yourself doing things you didn't know you could do. Seeing what can happen when you get out of your own way. In this case, it was figuring out how to write the script as I was writing the script.

Tom credits me as the film's writer, but it's still absolutely his story. I'm just helping tell it.

The movie brings the never-ending conversation to the screen, following one guy traipsing around the globe and climbing mountains to keep proving the bumper-sticker truth: Wherever you go, there you are.

Through this process, we've had the sense that the project has a life of its own. There are no accidents. The synchronicity in the story has carried over into the making of the film. It just keeps surprising us.

On Saturday we'll see if it has the same effect on the audience.

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