Shirah Foy graduated from Belmont University in May 2012 with a BBA in International Entrepreneurship. One week after graduation, she gave away everything in her apartment and set off on a grand adventure to Nepal, where she spent three months teaching English at a Tibetan Buddhist monastery in the Himalayas. She arrived in Nepal seeking rest, renewal, community, and inspiration. What she found was everything she sought, and much more.

Join her in a reflection on some of her most memorable experiences in Nepal and some of the many lessons learned over the course of her journey:

1) More rice than she knew what to do with...
For Buddhists, "to prepare food for others is equal to preparing food for a shrine. If you feed others, you honor them." To feed is to nurture; to satisfy another's hunger is to show compassion; to promote compassion is to build karma; to acquire good karma is to ensure rebirth into a higher realm of samsara and brings one nearer to enlightenment. During Dumzi, I told an old trekking guide that I was interested in the overlap of Sherpa culture and Buddhist culture. "They are one and the same," Dorje told me, drawing his two index fingers together as if to illustrate their synonymy. No wonder Sherpa people insist on feeding you till you can't quite possibly handle another bite. Though filling up on the carb-centric Sherpa diet might not honor your digestive system, it does honor your soul.

2) A magical land...
The Solukhumbu is magical. It's like my home in the Pacific Northwest—only with a subtropical twist. With little Nima Tshiring Sherpa as my guide, I stepped off the trail to Gumla and silently pursued a bird with a particularly intriguing call.

The alpine forest gave way to a meadow of tall ferns—some even taller than I! This turned into a thicket of purple fly-catcher flowers, babies' breath, and tiny white daisies. We penetrated further

1 An excerpt from "I Taste Fire, Earth, Rain: Elements of a Life with a Sherpa" by Caryl Sherpa.
into the jungle high above our monastery, stepping over old, moss-covered logs as we went. After pulling back a rogue, gnarled manzanita branch, we suddenly stepped into the dim light of a covered trail, brimming with life. The sun was shut out by a thick canopy of trees covered in lichen, and its warmth was transformed into an intense humidity. The ground became spongy, covered in wet leaves and bright green moss. Everything was dripping—a veritable rainforest!

"Shamu!" I heard Nima cry, a few steps ahead of me, and I moved closer to inspect the stump hosting hundreds of brilliant orange mushrooms growing up its side. I'd given Nima my camera nearly a half hour ago—before we even stepped away from the trail we were taking to our destination at Gumla: the convent in the meadow on the plateau at the very top of the mountain. I almost thought twice about offering my expensive camera to a child, but then remembered how this exceptional ten year old had already saved me once—catching my hand when I started to lose my balance at the edge of a cliff—and I decided my camera would be safer in the hands of the surefooted little Sherpa.
3) **Tight-knit community...**

Pasang and I were in the kitchen working on the Tibetan alphabet after breakfast when Cook came in and told Pasang his assistance could be used at the woodpile out the back door. We peered out, and sure enough, a line of little monks with chopped wood piled high on their backs was queuing up to throw off their loads. From the rock walkway above, they tossed their firewood down into the wood-stacking area.

Everyone was quite involved and it was obviously a community effort. Naturally, Joanna & Nate (the other volunteers) and I were eager to jump in and get our hands dirty. It’s fun how every day here brings something new, sometimes an unexpected activity or tradition. I wake up every morning with a great sense of anticipation for whatever the day might bring.
3) A new perspective...
What I am going to miss dreadfully in the months to come are mornings around the kitchen fire, sipping milk tea with my favorite monks. I'm going to miss stacking wood, hand washing clothes, and the simple satisfaction of surviving off the land with almost nothing. It's not the "high life," if that's what you call the lifestyles of the rich and famous, but at 10,000 feet it's my definition of the high life. I've really, truly lived the past three months. The pure, simple life I've lived in Nepal will stay with me for the rest of my life. Nepal changes you.

I brought only three changes of clothes to Nepal, which I hand washed and wore all summer. I brought one photo of my friends, a towel, and some face lotion. I ate rice three times a day and slept on mat over wooden planks. When I had to use the restroom in the middle of the night, I scrambled to find a headlamp, a rain jacket, and boots, and stumbled out into the drizzly fog, 50 yards down the side of the mountain to the outhouse, where bugs of all shapes and sizes buzzed in my ears, up my nose, and around my headlamp as I crouched over a hole in the wooden plank floor. My life in Nepal was not glamorous. And yet, I recall few occasions in which the discomforts outweighed my propensity to be happy there.

I learned that wealth is a relative concept. As a “starving college student,” I am, in fact, wealthier than some Nepalese celebrities. In a normal month in America I spend a whopping 37.5 times the average monthly Nepalese salary—over three times the average Nepalese salary. In one month! I learned that in the west our pursuit of peace is preoccupied with physical comfort, when in reality my experience suggests that peace of mind has little to do with luxurious accommodations and everything to do with community and relationships.

Upon leaving Nepal I moved directly to Finland, where I've begun to build my new life in Helsinki over the past ten days. The comments from my new roommates, classmates and friends have been identical surprised exclamations: “You've only been here a week?! You're so open and relaxed and not worried about anything!” Why should I worry? I have more resources at my disposal than I've had in a while. Though I might not have much money, I know I have enough to buy a bag of rice, which, at 1.25 euro, will last a 5-7 meals. I've become industrious because I had to be. I know just how little I need to survive, and this means I'm free from worry and stress; I'm confident in my ability to go without if I have to, and still be happy. I feel extraordinarily rich!
4) A new sense of time...
During the week of the Dumzi festival, and at many other points during my time at Pema Chholing, I lost completely all track of time. Time is a concept of little importance in Nepal. I seldom felt any sense of urgency from anyone around me. One day I wrote:
“I haven’t looked at a clock—much less a calendar—in weeks. When I illuminate my computer that’s been packed away since my last trip to the WiFi at Lukla’s Starbucks, the little box at the bottom of my desktop toolbar tells me it’s July 4th.”

5) Discipline...
Nyune is a festival marking the beginning of a one-to-two-month-long celebration of Buddha’s birthday.

Once the Rinpoches arrived (2 days and 4 hours later than first expected), the festival launched into full swing with 3 days of puja (chanting). Puja started at 4am on the first and second day, and at 3am on the third day. After a giant lunch on the first day, fasting began, continuing through the second day and ending the morning of the third day with bottomless rice pudding for breakfast at 6am. Devout worshippers who had come up to the gumba (monastery)--a 40 minute walk straight uphill from the nearest village—brought sleeping mats and were given blankets as they set up beds for the nights in the gumba’s upper room and in makeshift shanties outside. After puja ended at 6am on the third day, everyone went home or to relatives’ houses, dressed up, and came back around 4pm for the big performance.

I started out with the best of intentions and got myself up at 3:30am the first day, walked up to the smaller monastery above ours (10 minutes up the mountain) by 4am and earned a front-row seat in the monastery. I was under the impression that the morning session would be four hours long, and mentally prepared myself to sit cross-legged for that long without squirming, as stretching one’s legs out during puja is insulting. I had been given some bad information, however, because the morning session lasted until noon...EIGHT hours of chanting. I was exhausted and went home to sleep after a lunch of dal bhaat (lentils with rice).
6) Patience...

“I arrived at the monastery almost three weeks ago with many questions about Buddhism. I’d taken a World Religions course focused heavily on eastern faiths and have continued to read about the
Buddhist tradition in books such as those by one of my most beloved authors, Huston Smith, but with every question these texts answered they seemed only to provoke two or three more. I was disappointed, to say the least, when upon arriving at Pema Chholing I realized that no one here speaks English well enough to discuss with me the teachings of Buddha or the origin of Buddhist traditions. During my first few days, my mind formed questions at a pace so rapid I felt like the omnipresent pot of water kept over the open fire in our kitchen—bubbling faster and faster as it reaches boiling point, only to be emptied into thermos—a holding tank—and promptly refilled to boil more. Like those thermoses of *tato pani* that will be eventually used for tea, my questions must eventually be answered, I thought. I started to empty my questions into lists that serve as my own holding tanks. But how I need those questions answered now!”

In the end my questions weren't answered immediately; some weren't answered for months. I came to learn that almost nothing is ever explained in Nepal. Much was left for me to surmise. But I came to feel at ease in uncertain environments. I began to confidently navigate situations and events in which I knew I was way in over my head. And I learned to wait patiently for the agenda and motives to be revealed.

7) **Reconciliation between two spiritual traditions...**

After just a few days in the monastery it became apparent that the monks' proficiency in English (or rather lack of proficiency) was such that I could not expect to have many of my questions about Buddhism and Sherpa culture answered. Though I threw myself wholeheartedly into learning the Nepali language so that I would be able to ask and understand answers to my many questions, I immediately realized that I would never learn the language deeply enough to discuss philosophical matters. Due to this unforeseen language barrier I decided to turn back to the books for answers to my many questions. In doing so, I came across one book, Sogyal Rinpoche’s *The Tibetan Book of Living & Dying*, which illuminated the Buddhist tradition in a way that my Western, Christian mind can understand.

All the greatest spiritual traditions of the world, including of course Christianity, have told us clearly that death is not the end. They have all handed down a vision of some sort of life to come, which infuses this life that we are leading now with sacred meaning. But despite their teachings, modern society is largely a spiritual desert where the majority imagine that
this life is all that there is. (P.8)

We can begin, here and now, to find meaning in our lives. We can make of every moment an opportunity to change and to prepare—wholeheartedly, precisely, and with peace of mind—for death and eternity.

In the Buddhist approach, life and death are seen as one whole, where death is the beginning of another chapter of life. (P.11)

In these passages I began to see that Buddhism and Christianity share some common core beliefs. Though there is no question that these are vastly different traditions, it was important to me, as a Christian living in a 100% Buddhist community for such a lengthy period of time, to discover what beliefs I shared with my friends and neighbors. What could we celebrate together? Where could we find some sense of shared values, goals, or traditions? Through a group interpretation effort, with visitors to the monastery, and in books I came to find common ground at Pema Chholing.

8) Anything is possible – it's all about pace...

Trekking to Mt. Everest Base Camp was not something I had initially planned on doing in Nepal. But some friends convinced me that I had to take advantage of this opportunity: When again would I ever be living so close to this world wonder?

During the ten-day walk to Base Camp, I learned that it is quite possible to climb over 1,000 meters in a day. I learned that when I think I can't go on, I always do. When the mountain looks wickedly steep, it is. But even when it appears too steep, it's not. Pushing yourself hard for ten minutes (i.e. sprinting, running, or jogging) and then resting for twenty minutes to avoid a heart attack is neither the most pleasant nor the most efficient way up the mountain. By pacing myself and keeping that exact pace for hours, I was able to beat most others to almost every single checkpoint. And I've found this applies to many things in life, including the coursework for my next degree! No more 21 credit hour semesters; I'm going to pace myself and make sure I take time to relax and enjoy life so that I don't get burnt out!
9) A friend that became family...

I told my mom about my best friend Pasang's incredible artistic talent, his desire to take a break from monastic life after 14 years, his gentle patience with the younger monks and capacity to teach, and my silent wish that I could bring him to America as a master craftsman to share Buddhist art and technique with the West. I'm thankful because my mom is so passionate about others; she believes in their talents and dreams and has offered to help me help Pasang. She now is actively looking for schools, universities, art guilds, monasteries, and Buddhist foundations that may sponsor or host him.

Throughout my time at Pema Chholing, I offered to spend time one-on-one with individuals who wanted to progress quickly and intensively in English. Of the seven monks in their twenties, only Pasang showed an interest in this. And so we began working together every morning for three hours or more. We practiced pronunciation, reading fluency, conversation, catchwords and colloquial phrases. We worked on spelling, sentence structure, grammar, and “false friends.” Pasang confided in me that he dreamed of going to America, and I became determined to help him make his wildest dream come true.
During my time in the monastery Pasang and I became very close friends; we studied together, cooked together, organized games and activities for the kids, and even traveled to Katmandu and Chitwan together when my time in the monastery came to an end. Pasang became like a brother to me, and I met his entire family when we visited the capital. I've gained not a friend, but family!
10) Memories to last a lifetime...
I left Pema Chholing on August 9th and headed to the capital to sort out some business at the Finnish Embassy. Upon arriving back at the RCDP hostel in Kalanki, I was given a dal bhaat lunch, introduced to several new volunteers, and then told that not only was the hostel already full, but five new people were arriving from the airport that night, so the program was going to take me to the nicest tourist neighborhood in Kathmandu—called Thamel—and put me up in a hotel there for the duration of my last ten days in Nepal.

Despite my waning funds, I was happy to forego the cockroaches and dal bhaat meals in Kalanki (since, after all, I've been living on dal bhaat for three months now) and instead venture out to make friends, use wifi, and feed myself in Thamel. I realized that my standards have changed when I became outraged with one fruit vendor who tried to sell me seven bananas for 150 rupees (USD $1.74). I haggled him down to 50 rupees (USD $0.58) and still felt ripped off.

I've been enjoying my time in Thamel. The weather here in Kathmandu Valley is much warmer than up in the Himalayas. Whereas it averaged 50-70 F at Pema Chholing, it's upwards of 85 F in the humid capital. The non-existent Nepali constitution, which was supposed to have been written and approved back in May by whatever chaotic group of people now constitutes the governing body, never was. So the strikes continue, and continue to thwart the plans of my fellow volunteers who'd like to move around the city. Public transportation doesn't run during the strikes, and if you're lucky enough to find a taxi driver who'll risk it, you'll pay upwards of 5-10 times the normal fare. Fortunately, since my trip to the Finnish Embassy last Wednesday (I'm now officially a resident of the EU!), I haven't needed to leave Thamel.

I've spent my days here wonderfully... taking my morning café au lait (oh, how I've missed coffee!) in breezy rooftop cafes high above the hustle and bustle of morning traffic; catching up on work, emails, and research while enjoying the company of fellow travelers (it seems that everyone who comes to Nepal is interesting—after all, people don't come here from the West for the comforts of a luxurious vacation; it's neat to explore the different motives that bring others to this beautiful yet impoverished land). I spend the late afternoons and evenings wandering the streets around Thamel, browsing stores full of trinkets I want to inspect but don't want to buy; trying on hats and saris and traditional shoes because it's fun to dress up (and the vendors have fun with me too), and just watching people on the busy streets.
In Nepal, life in Thamel is the polar opposite of life at Pema Chholing. Yet I’m happy here. After travels in 30 countries, experiencing both the perks of life as a US diplomat in Russia and the lows of Nepali outhouses; organic home-cooked meals from Trader Joe's as well as a 3-month pure rice diet; the beautiful ocean views from a ritzy apartment in Helsinki and a $1 per night mattress-on-the-floor hotel in other places....I'm starting to think that there's nowhere I won't be happy.

I don't think it's completely sunk in that this will be my last week in Nepal, and yet on some level I know it: I've been collecting my photo souvenirs—the best kind—they don't cost anything, won't be a hassle to stuff in a bag, and won't incur any additional luggage fees. I'll post them, print them, gift them, and look at them whenever I long to relive Nepal...

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A collection of stories from Nepal and other countries is available at www.shirah.mobi
POST SCRIPTUM

The Foy family looks forward to welcoming Pasang into their home starting summer 2013. Pasang looks forward to being home-schooled by Shirah's mom, alongside Shirah's youngest brother, Raam, in seventh grade. The family will support him in obtaining his GED in America, and throughout his studies at a trade school – the Northwest Lineman College – where Pasang will learn valuable skills enabling him to become a leader in improving the infrastructure in his home community of Solukhumbu, where electricity was introduced in 2009.

Shirah hopes to return to Nepal with her parents and five younger siblings in 2014. She will introduce her American family to her Monk Family at Pema Chholing. The entire family will trek to Mt. Everest Base Camp with Shirah's Sherpa friends as guides. Following the trek, the family will volunteer as an 8-person team of English teachers in the monastery, where – Shirah is certain – everyone will become enchanted with the young boy monks she’s come to know and love.

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_I’m joyous because I live on top of the world, and at this moment I wouldn’t trade the breathtaking view from my bedroom for any of the First World comforts._

_I’m thankful because I can’t imagine a more blessed life than this._

-Shirah Foy, on life at Pema Chholing Monastery

_Peak View from Pema Chholing Monastery_