

# Aama's Journey

## Between Cultures and Continents

A photo synopsis of Broughton Coburn's  
50-minute illustrated presentation,  
"Aama: From Nepal to America"



In the early 1970s, Broughton Coburn lived and taught school in a subsistence farming village on the edge of Nepal's Himalayas. It is there that he met and developed a unique friendship with a septuagenarian widow named Vishu Maya Gurung, fondly known to her relatives and locals as *Aama*, or "mother." Coburn's own mother had passed away, and Aama had never given birth to a son—a stigma in Hindu society. She felt he was the son fall from the heavens.

Fifteen years after he first met Aama, Coburn returned to her remote village with his future wife Didi and invited Aama to join them on a trip to America. At eighty-four, Aama believed she had become a burden to her grandchildren. "It is good to die promptly when you're no longer able to support yourself," she had always said. "I already tried to die, and it didn't happen, so why not go to America with you?" Besides, the village priest had prescribed that she undertake a pilgrimage—a strenuous journey, during the final stage of her life, which provides an opportunity to gain merit.

But her 12,000 mile journey became more than a pilgrimage. It evolved into a search for the meaning, and the soul, of our country...



**Top:** Aama's village of Danda, in the hills of middle Nepal

**Top left:** Vishu Maya Gurung, or "Aama."

**Bottom left:** Aama with Broughton Coburn. A Harvard graduate, Coburn presently lives in Wyoming with his wife Didi, daughter Phoebe and adopted Nepalese son, Tenzing.

# From the middle hills of Nepal...



Aama in her kitchen with her granddaughter, Maita.



Aama mends a time-worn pot.

*"Hare Ram, I come home at night and who can I say I'm tired to, who can I say I'm hungry to?"*



Feeding the water buffalo.

*"By all accounts, I should be dead now. I just might be—everything I see is like a dream sent from the afterworld."*



In Kathmandu. Before going to America, Aama must get a passport and visa.



# to half-way around the world...



With the author in Seattle.



En route to America

*"You think it's funny that we don't have this sort of thing in our village?" she asked as she tucked a sixth tub of butter in her long sash. Didi gave Aama a mother's look, then smiled. The interior of the plan felt strangely like a holding area, a manufactured limbo between cultures and continents.*



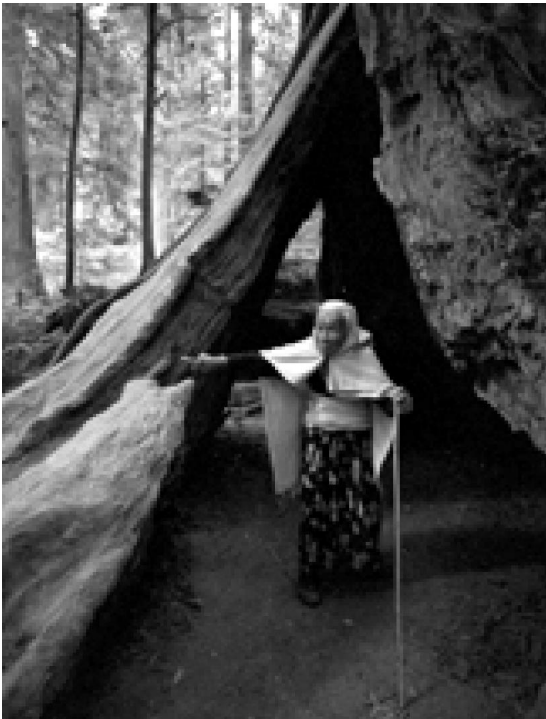
The Grotto, a Catholic sanctuary in Oregon.



With the author atop Seattle's Space Needle.

*"May all people have the fortune to be informed of this sacred place, and to come and make offerings and take blessings."*

# ... an 84-year-old Nepalese woman



*“Don’t let that ingrate, scoundrel, alcoholic son-in-law of mine into this place!”*

**Top left: The Redwoods.** “Okay, let’s walk under this tree and chant ‘Stomach ailments *go!*’—especially you Didi, because you haven’t given birth yet.”

**Top right: Agriculture shock.** “In our village, kids study and work the fields, both. Here, young people study while the machines do the work.” At first, she felt the wheat combines were making a mockery of her labor-intensive, subsistence lifestyle. But later in the grain elevator she warmed up, and with Didi she checks the grain to see that it has the proper moisture content for safe storage.

**Center: Supermarket.** “Do the people who own each of these items stay here in this bazaar all night, or do they take it all home and then bring it all back in the morning? So much stuff for sale—where are all the people to buy it? Maybe word hasn’t yet traveled that a bazaar has been set up here”

**Bottom:** “Are you selling all of this? This looks like a shop front. So where does the shopkeeper sit?”





# embarks on an American odyssey...



**Top left:** Didi dressed Aama and bathed her. “That’s what we say: If you are greedy, nothing comes to you, but with the right attitude, everything comes naturally on its own.”



**Top right:**  
**The California Coast.** “This ocean is sacred, for the river Ganges has flowed into it. My Gurkha nephews spoke of a beautiful island in the middle where devout yogis live, beneath a magnificent temple covered in jewels. Can’t we go?”



## San Francisco

*“I’ve heard that people who make eyeglasses ask you what your age is, then look at a list of what power you need. Now I’ll return to the village looking like the mother of a wealthy British Army recruit.”*

...She ran her hands slowly through his hair, and he relaxed his head and arms and settled into the comfort of her fingers. The boy’s mother and bystanders stood immobilized as if observing a new species of wildlife, suspended in the extended, timeless instant that the boy and Aama had released themselves into. *“Once I see and know someone, I have love for them and will remember them as long as I draw breath.”*

*“It is especially the young children who like to see me—the ones who haven’t yet reached the age when they learn not to love people.”*

# ...and completes a pilgrimage of the



**Top left: Togwotee Pass, Wyoming.** “Abhai. Abhai Abhai,” she uttered softly, the sound of a new thought registering.

**Top right: Blessing for a killer whale.** “May you be healthy, have many children, live to be a hundred years old, and live in peace and harmony with all the fish and animals of the sea. May you not eat people—and in turn not be eaten by people.”

**Center left: The Taos Pueblo.** “Aama,” the pueblo elder said, “I can see that you live as we live. We share the same blood.”

**Center right: Blessing for the “King of Mice.”** “Don’t disturb things as you pass, and may your days be auspicious. Protect everyone, forgive everyone. I am sorry that I was not prepared for this audience with you, that I have come empty handed...”

**Bottom: An Illinois corn field.** “The land here is crying...It is a sin to leave grain on the ground to rot like this—and whole ears are being trampled here by the machines meant to harvest it. We pick up even a single kernel when we see it spilled on the ground and say that for every grain we waste, we must forego eating an equivalent amount.”





# heart. Then Nepal beckons her back...



**Old Faithful.** She remained in prayer for nearly 20 minutes after the eruption of the geyser had subsided.

*“These overweight, red-cheeked people sitting here look like high ranking army officers. How can they eat food during this display of power and beauty of the gods? If your ancestors knew what was underneath the ground—here and throughout America—this generation shows no indication of that knowledge. A shrine should be built at this place.”*



Aama was petrified. “People are taking milk from these sacred cows without invoking the name of the deities—how can life happen this way? Cows are Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth. Where did the people of our ancestors’ time go wrong to allow this situation to develop?”



**The World Trade Center.** Aama looks in wonder.

“How do people find the courage to work in such tall buildings? Do they get dizzy? Do such buildings ever fall over?”



Aama cries, remembering her daughter. While napping, she had a dream that her only daughter Sun Maya had died. It is time for her to go home.



**Top left:** With Didi's nieces, before returning to Nepal.

**Top right: Village Reunion.** Aama finds her daughter Sun Maya alive. "...I'll keep my relatives from their work, telling stories. I'll have to make extra room for them all to stay at the house so they can hear my tales."

**Left: Aama's funerary ritual.** Votive lamps are prepared as offerings to the effigy, while llamas blow trumpets made from human thigh bones. Aama's son-in-law disrespectfully sits on the edge of the plinth—just as she foresaw—occasionally rising to drink millet spirits and smoke cigarettes.

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*"Nature, and spirituality, are what endure. And family—and especially children, are what provide us with hope."*  
—Aama



*"I went to Nepal to teach, but I ended up learning. Aama came to America to learn, but she ended up teaching."*  
—Broughton Coburn