

## MAY 09 - SUMMARY – My Path Leads to Tibet

by Sabriye Tenberken

Willie transfixed fifteen people as she shared her personal experiences visiting the school for the blind founded by Sabriye Tenberken and illuminated in ***My Path Leads to Tibet***. Again the power of first hand experience, not only at the site but also with the person involved, made this a fantastic book club meeting. Thank you Phylliss for suggesting it and Willie for leading our discussion.

Willie began by giving us a history of her seven trips to Tibet, five visits to the school and her three meetings with Sabriye. She passed out a handout from Braille Without Borders, the organization founded by Sabriye and that shows the status of the program to date. It now has two locations, Tibet and Kerala, India.

[www.braillewithoutborders.org/english/index.html](http://www.braillewithoutborders.org/english/index.html)

Willie's impressions of Sabriye are that she is a strong, independent, sweet, likeable woman. Fluent in English, if she is present when guests come to the school, she will give them a tour and speak about the work. While her manners might appear congenial to the western society, her directness at times might have put her at odds with the local people and government officials. Someone pointed out that her inability to see and interpret visual cues might have hampered her communication effectiveness.

From the book, we can tell she has incredible drive, as she was able to leave her country, the doubts of her critics, and fear of her teachers behind. In both China and Tibet, she overcame the obstacles of the government, religious, superstitions, societal pressures, and prejudices of women and the blind to achieve her goal of a school for the blind.

Willie says there has been quite a bit of change in Tibet since the school opened. Where 12 years ago there were limited cars, today cars are plentiful in Lhasa. Also the former diet of almost exclusively barley, yak butter tea and sampa is much improved with vegetables and a larger variety of choices. There appears to be more industry also developing with three cement factories in Lhasa alone and Chinese is now mandatory in schools. There is a dramatic decrease in the number of dogs. Many of these are most likely due to increased involvement by the Chinese government as they capitalize on the ever-increasing number of tourists. Also with the involvement, there appears to have been a change on how young men are chosen to be monks. Over time, Willie has found a decreased respect for the monks by the people of Tibet, in that, one requirement to be a monk is to denounce the Dalai Lama.

The students at the school learn not only Braille and how to navigate around the town, they also study a full curriculum as well as special skills such as massage.

People asked how is she funding the schools. There is no clear data, but after her appearance on Oprah as one of the most impressive women in the world, there must be on-going donors in place. Sabriye does spend part of her time each year in Tibet

and India, and a portion of each year in Europe and North America to raise awareness and fund raising campaigns.

What is next for Sabriye and the schools? There was talk of a movie being made of her life, but no definitive plans are underway. People wanted to know if she is still facing major obstacles. Now that she is up and running in the converted Tibetan-style home, there seems to be less concern, perhaps because the day to day running of the school is in the hands of local people.

Yak butter tea did not sound like something that most of our group would be interested in experiencing. People wanted to know about the environment and cleanliness of the traditional home in Tibet. Willie said that by western standards, the air is dirty (probably due to the burning of yak dung, which does not burn cleanly, for heat and light) and with no chimneys, the residue remains in the house.

Willie indicated that she found that the Tibetans will speak freely to western visitors about their lives and concerns, but that they may pay the price if a western guest behaves badly.

Why do Willie and Sabriye love Tibet so much? The people, geography and the foreignness of their religious, spiritual beliefs and politics.

As the group discussed the book, it was brought up that at times Sabriye's youth and naiveté got her into some sticky situations that might have been avoided. She kept indicating that she felt things were "unreasonable", but we wondered if her expectations and, at times her less than 'politically correct" communications, led to her situations. (i.e. Her difficulties with the dictatorial management from the German non-profit, her first land lord who took her money, the western photographer who wanted the children to pose.) My questions - from my recollection of the book, didn't most of these things happen before Paul arrived?

Some people mentioned that her writing and possibly her communication style appears non-emotional and stilted. Due to her blindness? It could also be that the book was originally written in German and then translated into English. Or, it might just be her style and her ability to write. Some felt that she only really expressed her emotions when she was speaking about the horses. I brought up that Annie Sullivan who worked with Helen Keller was also known for her "non-pc communication style". Perhaps this is an example of people who are outside of what is considered "normal" society, (marginalized) and they need to be direct and at times strident to be noticed and taken seriously.

Close to the end of the meeting, Willie asked the group to consider the question, are we as American's superstitious? Whereas the Tibetans believe that there are many evil spirits, they feel they can avoid them by knowing that they only travel in straight lines. The group brought up that because the U.S. is such a melting pot, that as a collective, we don't consider ourselves superstitious. Perhaps in communities where there are old neighborhoods of predominantly one ethnic group, there might be rituals or religious concepts that could be considered superstitious.

Willie also recommended the movie **“Blindsight”** for information on how Sabriye manages herself and her students. The movie shows the schools involvement along with sighted climbers in an adventure documentary led by Boulder resident and blind climber Eric Weihenmayer.

Thanks again to Phylliss and Willie for this marvelous read and meeting.

## **FUTURE MEETINGS**

	<b>Book</b>	<b>by</b>	<b>lead by</b>
Jun 8	Arabian Sands	Thesiger	David
Jul 13	tba - coming June 1, 2009		
Aug 10	tba - coming June 1, 2009		
Sept 14	tba - coming June 1, 2009		
Oct 12	tba - coming June 1, 2009		
Nov 9	tba - coming June 1, 2009		
Dec 14	tba - coming June 1, 2009		

**FOR THOSE NEW MEMBERS WHO WOULD LIKE TO LEAD A BOOK**, I have a list of a few books for the club to consider that were submitted at the meeting. If you want to suggest a book, please have the title, author, priced under \$18, a two sentence synopsis, make sure it is available in paperback and also in the libraries to me **by May 20**, so I can distribute the ballot to the membership. The list of proposed books will be emailed to the group with the deadline for voting of June 1. The books to be read will be determined and distributed before the June meeting.

## **UPCOMING TRAVEL RELATED EVENTS**

**MONDAY, MAY 18<sup>TH</sup>** – 7:30-8:45 PM - there will be a book-signing event at the tattered cover – Colfax location. Jane stanfield will be reading from and discussing her book, *Mapping Your Volunteer Vacation*.

**Serendipitously, the Tattered Cover give back program will be offering a 20% discount on travel books for may when you are a member of the program. Sign up at the cash register before you pay for your travel books!**

**The program is free and for every dollar you spend, a portion is donated to a local non-profit. You get to choose where to direct the donation.**

**THURSDAY, MAY 26** – 6:00–7:30 PM the Budget Treasurers Travel Club at the Ross UHills Library [www.budgettreasurerstravelclub.com](http://www.budgettreasurerstravelclub.com)

**EVERY TUESDAY** - CHANGES IN LATITUDE - in Boulder offer lectures on various travel topics. [www.cil.com](http://www.cil.com)

*IF YOU COME ACROSS ANY TRAVEL RELATED EVENTS THAT WILL HAPPEN BETWEEN NOW AND THE NEXT MEETING, PLEASE LET ME KNOW AND I WILL FORWARD THEM TO THE GROUP.*

**Thank you for your continued support and interest.**

I look forward to seeing each of you at our next meeting. Until then, travel in safety!

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