

## MYTHIC LANDSCAPE

### Stalking the Snow Leopard A Reflection on Work

The secret of life is to have a task, something you devote your entire life to, something you bring everything to, every minute of the day for your whole life. And the most important thing is -- it must be something you cannot possibly do! -- Sculptor Henry Moore<sup>1</sup>

Halfway through the school year -- the bone weariness of work robbing the world of mystery -- I find myself reaching for metaphor, stalking an image that might give life. My desk is piled with papers to grade, rank and tenure files to review, scattered notes for miscellaneous research projects. Every year at this time the work expands as the space in my office simultaneously shrinks, becoming oppressive, confining. I push aside notes for tomorrow's classes, uncovering a photograph of the southern slope of Machapuchare in the Annapurna Range. It lies in sunlit splendor under the glass on the top of my desk. At this time of the semester I find it easy to fantasize about untaken trips to the Himalayas.

My eyes wander among the travel books on a shelf across the room, noticing the story of another man's work, a half-metaphysical reflection on vocation sliding under the surface of an adventure tale. Several years ago Peter Matthiessen set out on a trek some 250 miles across the Himalayas with biologist George Schaller. Ostensibly they went to study the migratory and mating patterns of the Himalayan blue sheep, a scientific investigation of reputable merit. But there was also the elusive possibility along the way of seeing the rarest and most beautiful of the great cats, the snow leopard. On that possibility hinged the author's deepest intrigue as well as his book's eventual title.<sup>2</sup>

The snow leopard is a symbol of ultimate reality, that fleeting beauty we see only in occasional snatches. Hiding behind gnarled trees and granite cliffs at four thousand meters, it may never truly be seen by any of us. As Schaller says, "Maybe it's better if there are some things that we don't see." Yet it's the seldom-seen snow leopard that

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