

"Beautiful, powerful, and heart-warming."

— Robert Thurman

Founder, Tibet House, NYC

Journey from Zanskar

a monk's vow to children

Narrated by **RICHARD GERE**

Featuring **HIS HOLINESS THE DALAI LAMA**



Director's Statement

"How far would you go to save your dying culture?" "Sometimes you have to give up your kids in order to save them." These are the two different statements that serve as "taglines" to JOURNEY FROM ZANSKAR – single statements that describe the heart of the film. But the film didn't start out this way. As with many documentaries, the heart of the film had to be discovered after its own long journey.

The project began when an old friend from Chicago called me. Barry Weiss wanted to support the Stongde monks in Zanskar. He thought making a documentary about their good works would do that. In April 2004 he and I and Curt Jones met at my kitchen table in San Francisco and talked through the possibilities. The initial objective was to film Tenzin Choegyal's long-awaited visit to the seven ancient monasteries of Zanskar in July. Better known as the youngest brother of the Dalai Lama, TC (as he is called) is recognized as the reincarnation of Ngari Rinpoche – the owner of the monasteries of all of Western Tibet. As such, he is revered and beloved, despite his own deep skepticism on the whole subject. There was also the hope that the Dalai Lama himself would visit Zanskar in August.


None of this ever happened. I arrived in Delhi in early July with Curt Jones, his stepson Chris Kakowski, and my cameraman Nick Sherman. For reasons still unclear to me, TC cancelled his trip. We flew to Leh, the capital of Ladakh, and spent a few days getting acclimated to the altitude, thinking about what we would shoot. While still uncertain, we shot a little bit of Helena Norberg Hodge's wonderful Farm Project which I believe would make a marvelous separate documentary: <http://www.archive.org/details/julay>. Then we left relatively Westernized Ladakh for far more remote Zanskar.

After arriving at Stongde Monastery we began filming the monks and the environs. Conversations with Geshe Yonten finally made clear his intention to take 15 children to school in Manali by trekking overland that Fall. That intention crystallized the filmed story that now exists. We started filming his meetings with families to discuss all the issues surrounding their children leaving home. Those scenes are rich, complex, and absolutely heart-rending. With our film now finished the biggest sacrifice we had to make along the way is that we were not able to include more of those scenes.

After that initial month-long summer visit, Nick and I returned to India early in October for the trek. We were concerned about the dangers both for us and the kids (altitude, cold, dehydration, exhaustion...) but we trusted Geshe to take necessary precautions and make all the arrangements.

The story of the trek as it appears in the film is pretty much our story too. The uncertainties, the cold, the disappointments, the fears – those were ours too. At the same time the beauty, the generosity and concern, all the good humor – those were our delights too. Since we didn't have sufficient crew support, we had to have the fathers and the monks help us carry gear. No doubt we missed a lot of valuable scenes en route because our equipment and support were rarely in the same place at the same time. I had more difficulties with the elements than Nick but we both managed pretty well up to the day we attempted to cross the Pass.

puffing and hoping I'd make it over the Pass. The horses were understandably less inclined to carry me than the children. I was thrown three times before I gave up and resigned myself to walking. The thought "I'm too old for this" recurred repeatedly.



In Feb. 2005 we returned to film the scene of the children with the Dalai Lama. Ever since we began the project we had tried to get an interview with him. As with all the precarious Tibetan border region cultures - Ladakh, Spiti, Lahul, etc., - we wanted him to speak to the importance of saving the culture of Zanskar. Even while there we didn't know until the day before that it was actually going to be possible to film him. We had all of fifteen minutes to get the material I knew was going to be the capstone scene to the whole film. People ask me all the time what it was like to meet the Dalai Lama. I tell them I was working!

Translation proved to be one of our greatest challenges over the whole project. Since we never had an adequate translator with us in Zanskar, not only could we not speak directly with the families and the kids, we never knew with certainty what was happening in any moment. Geshe and Dhamchoe filled us in as best they could during down times but their own limited command of English sometimes made even our communication difficult. With 20/20 hindsight, my biggest regret is that I didn't learn Zanskari myself. This would've improved the film considerably. I could have made a film highlighting the children more - telling us more about their families and their back-stories.

In addition, it would've saved us many years of struggle to find proper translators for the 45 hours of Zanskari footage. Little did I know when we began that there are only a handful of speakers fluent in both Zanskari and English in the world. After three years of confusion and misfired attempts, the bulk of the translation was eventually completed by Geshe himself with the help of Tenzin Namgyal in a basement room at the Tibet Culture Center near Bloomington, Indiana. At the time, Geshe was on a fundraising trip through the US. In what became a game of telephone, he translated the spoken Zanskari into Tibetan. Then Namgyal translated each line from Tibetan into English, writing down the time code every few seconds. This painstaking process took about a month. Namgyal also translated the roughly 20 hours of Tibetan footage into English, along with a small amount of Hindi.

So it was only in April of 2008 that for the first time I could sit down with complete transcripts of our footage and discover what it was we had actually shot almost four years before! What a delight! I made so many discoveries that I had no idea existed in the footage. It was also fun to hear some of what Geshe and Dhamchoe had been saying about us!

Constructing the proper storyline took about a year, helped in no small way by co-editor Joanna Kiernan. I spent most of the summer 2008 putting subtitles on hours of raw footage and editing the first string out. In the Fall, Joanna edited the first rough cut, setting a basic structure for the story. Then from Dec. onward I brought the film home. Due to the usual lack of finances we didn't finish until October, 2009.

The journey that has been JOURNEY FROM ZANSKAR has been informed at every juncture by the wisdom, humor, and acceptance of Geshe Lobsang, Lobsang Dhamchoe, the gracious and joyful monks of Stongde monastery, and the amazing resilience of the people of Zanskar, from the youngest child to the oldest grandmother. There were times in the last few years, when, overwhelmed with anxieties and stress over how I was going to finish the film, I would drop my head to my desk and weep. The one thing that always pulled me through was the film itself. I would pick up the editing again and see Geshe laugh in the face of crushing disappointment, witness a starving mother weep bittersweet tears losing her daughter to a shot at a better life elsewhere, hear the children sing while riding into a dangerous and unknown future, observe Yangjor help Jigmed's blinded father cross a stream, watch Tsultim reach out to share his first ever taste of nuts with me. Their example fortified and inspired me. How could I not make this film?

Tagline, Logline & Synopsis

Tagline: How far would you go to save your dying culture?

Logline: Sometimes you have to give up your children in order to save them.

Synopsis: The Dalai Lama has instructed two monks from Zanskar's Stongde Monastery to do everything in their power to insure that the Buddhist roots of Zanskari culture are preserved through education. The monks are building a school to educate the children from surrounding villages in their own language, culture, history, and religion. Presently, the government school teaches none of those subjects, and is closed most of the year. The nearby private school also doesn't teach those subjects and is additionally unaffordable for the area's poor families. At Stongde, along with indigenous traditions, the children will be educated in the best Western curricula.

The monks are racing against the clock. While they complete the school they are also placing local children in other schools and monasteries in the city of Manali and beyond. This requires walking over a 17,500 foot pass. One such journey with 17 children aged 4-12 comprises the plot line of our film.

JOURNEY FROM ZANSKAR tells the heroic, remarkable tale of these monks and children: The monks carefully select the brightest, most capable children in meetings with the poorest of the poor families. The kids then must separate from fathers and mothers, grandparents and friends. At the last minute, one grandmother refuses to let her beloved granddaughter leave. The monks lead the children on foot and horseback on an arduous and dangerous five day trek. At less than 300 vertical feet from the pass the trek runs into crisis - the yaks and horses can't navigate the deep snow. Rather than risk anyone dying, the monks insist on turning back. Forlorn and dejected, one man snowblind, the whole party returns wearily all the way back to the starting point in Padum. The monks learn how an adult man died trying to cross the pass the day after their own attempt. Undaunted, the monks resort to a fallback plan. Renting buses and vans, the group travels on closed roads over even higher passes, first to Leh, then to Manali. Success! They make it. They bask in the lush greenery and warm, humid air. Tsultim, 12, stares in wonder at his first ever vision of monkeys. To further their education and accent their accomplishment, all the children are later brought to Dharamsala to meet His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

Photos of Zanskar & Production Stills



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FREDERICK MARX - CAPSULE BIOGRAPHY

A major talent in American filmmaking. All his work is imbued with power, intelligence, social concern, and utter dedication.

Gerry Richman, Program Director, KTCA-TV (PBS)


Frederick Marx is an internationally acclaimed, Oscar and Emmy nominated producer/director with 35 years in the film business. He was named a Chicago Tribune Artist of the Year for 1994, a 1995 Guggenheim Fellow, and a recipient of a Robert F. Kennedy Special Achievement Award. His film HOOP DREAMS played in hundreds of theatres nationwide after winning the Audience Award at the Sundance Film Festival and was the first documentary ever chosen to close the New York Film Festival. It was on over 100 "Ten Best" lists nationwide and was named Best Film of the Year by critics Roger Ebert, Gene Siskel, Gene Shalit, and Ken Turran and by the Chicago Film Critics Association. Ebert also named it Best Film of the Decade. It is one of the highest grossing non-musical documentaries in United States history. It has won numerous prestigious awards, including an Academy Nomination (Best Editing), Producer's Guild, Editor's Guild (ACE), Peabody Awards, the Prix Italia (Europe's top documentary prize) and The National Society of Film Critics Award. The New York, Boston, LA, and San Francisco Film Critics all chose it as Best Documentary, 1994. Utne Reader named it one of 150 of humanity's "essential works," the Library of Congress recently added it to its prestigious National Film Registry and the International Documentary Association named it the Best Documentary Ever.

HOOP DREAMS (1994) is the first in Marx's planned trilogy of feature documentaries on teenage boys. BOYS TO MEN? (2004), distributed by Media Education Foundation, is the second. BOYS BECOME MEN, now in pre-production, will be the third.

JOURNEY FROM ZANSKAR (2010) featuring the Dalai Lama, with narration by Richard Gere, is being released worldwide this year.

In 1993, Marx received an Emmy nomination for HIGHER GOALS (1992) for Best Daytime Children's Special. Producer, Director, and Writer for this national PBS Special, Marx directed Tim Meadows of "Saturday Night Live" fame. Accompanied by a curriculum guide, the program was later distributed for free to over 4,200 inner city schools nationwide.

THE UNSPOKEN (1999), Marx's first feature film, features stellar performances from star Sergei Shnirev of the famed Moscow Art Theatre (Russian voice of Disney's ALADDIN), and Harry J. Lennix, most known for Spike Lee's GET ON THE BUS, Tim Robbins' BOB ROBERTS, Julie Taymor's TITUS and MATRIX. A hobbyist songwriter, in 1991 Marx recorded a number of his songs collectively known as ROLLING STEEL.



Having worked for a time as an English and creative writing teacher, Marx began his movie career as a film critic, and has worked both as a film distributor and exhibitor. He has also traveled extensively. He's lived in Germany, Hungary, and China. He's traveled repeatedly through Western and Eastern Europe, North Africa and Himalayan India. With a B.A. in Political Science and an MFA in filmmaking, Marx has coupled his formal education with foreign languages, speaking German and some Mandarin-Chinese. Along with JOURNEY FROM ZANSKAR, his interest in foreign cultures is reflected in PBS' international human rights program OUT OF THE SILENCE (1991), the widely acclaimed personal essay DREAMS FROM CHINA (1989), and Learning Channel's SAVING THE SPHINX (1997). He consulted on Iranian-Kurdish director Bahman Ghobadi's feature TURTLES CAN FLY (2004) and was a teacher of renowned Thai feature filmmaker Apichatpong Weerasethakul.

Three of Marx's films premiered at the New York Film Festival. His short films are distributed by Facets Home Video and ReFrame. All his films are available on the web at Amazon.com and elsewhere. Having dedicated his life to the making and promotion of independent films, Marx, a true maverick in the increasingly commercialized world of "independent cinema," continues to provide a voice of artistic and social integrity. He repeatedly returns to work with disadvantaged and misunderstood communities: people of color, abused children, the working poor, welfare recipients, prisoners, the elderly, and "at risk" youth. He brings a passion for appreciating multiculturalism and an urgent empathy for the sufferings of the disadvantaged to every subject he tackles. As his mission statement indicates ("Bearing witness, creating change"), his is a voice strong and clear, and profoundly human.

Credits & Acknowledgements

Animation	Digital Noodle, Inc. Raymond Wiggins Tiffany Hill
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Still Photos	Nick Sherman
Sound Recording	Frederick Marx
Post-Production Sound	Berkely Sound Artists James LeBrecht, Mixer Dan Olmsted, Mixer Alex Wilmer, Sound Designer April Rodriguez, Sound Editor
Score Produced by	Adam Schiff & Michael Fitzpatrick
Recorded at	MiraMusic Studios & Yadidit Studios
Score Engineering	Adam Schiff & Rami Yadid
Score Mixing	Adam Schiff at MiraMusic Studios Using KResearch.com plug-ins
Musicians	Michael Fitzpatrick - Cello Adam Schiff - Piano; Ghuzen; Hammered Dulcimer; Keyboards; Guitar; Percussion Christopher Komer - French Horn Lisha McDuff - Flute Rami Yadid - Guitar; Kalimba
Associate Producers	Amber Dodson Lura Calder
Translations	Tenzin Namgyal Geshe Lobsang Yonten Tseten Dorjee Lobzang Thinley Kim Gutschow

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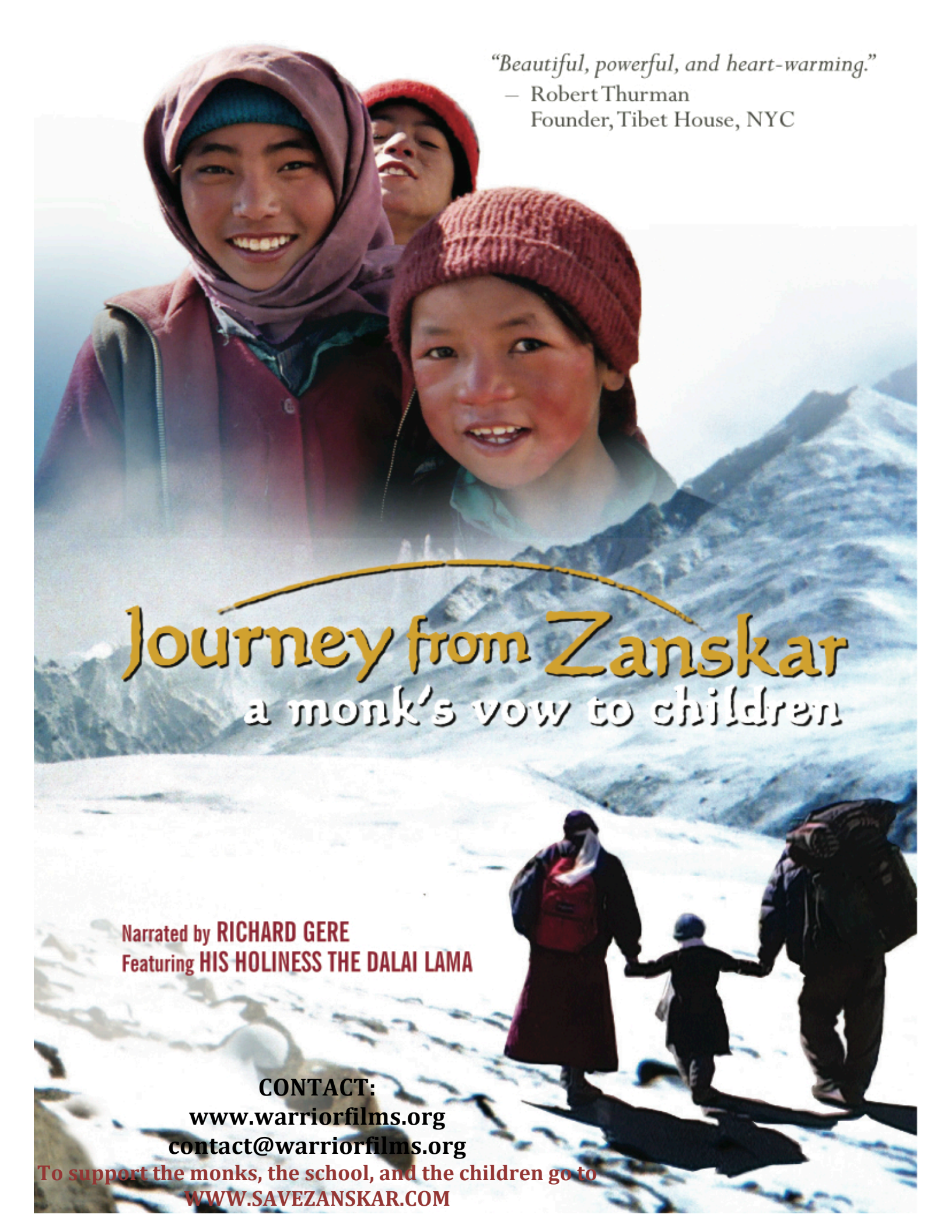
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