

Through a back alley I discover a quiet residential area that is poorer than anything I have ever seen. Even so, the sound of children's laughter fills the air. As I watch two little boys play with a stick and the discarded rim of a bicycle tire, I reflect that these children appear to have a sense of contentment and imagination that I don't see in children who have so much, back home. I notice two other boys, maybe five and six with dusty faces and matted hair, setting fire to the trash pile in front of their home. They stage a duel with their flaming sticks, then drop them on top of the burning pile before the flames can reach their hands. Their mother watches calmly as she does the day's wash in a basin of soapy water and with a large rock that serves as a washboard.

I notice that my mouth feels dry and reach to pull a green Life Saver from my skirt pocket. Immediately, I am surrounded by five girls ranging in age from one to ten. The older ones watch carefully over the bare-bottomed babies. I smile and say "Namaste." They giggle and shout, "Hello, how are you?" Five sets of eyes watch my hand as I bring the candy to my mouth. One of the older girls sheepishly holds out her hand. Fortunately, I have enough to share with everyone. I wonder what their lives hold in store for them. Do they have a school to go to like the girls on the other side of town who walk hand-in-hand on paved streets? What are their hopes, dreams, and aspirations?

Tourism

Later I learn about the role tourism has played in encouraging begging, and how the poor are turning away from traditional systems of support like the food and shelter provided by the monks at the temples, to the easy, and often profitable, act of begging. Knowing that Nepalese society has a system in place to support its poor helps me understand the placards at the airport which ask visitors not to give to beggars. Even so, I feel uncomfortable ignoring the desperate pleas of "Madame, please Madame" that follow me around the tourist areas. I don't feel the overwhelming desire to give them my spare change, and this surprises me. I

had expected to be outraged by the poverty before I arrived, and I am not. My lack of reaction concerns me. Yet, what bothers me more is feigning unawareness by walking past beggars without seeing them. I can't pretend that people are invisible, for to do so denies them their existence. Yet this is what we are encouraged to do.

Advising American students

I wonder how my short visit in Nepal will influence the advice I give students when I return to the campus. Can I check my own enthusiasm for this country and culture to provide students with an accurate understanding of the challenges? Could I explain accurately to a student with asthma the severe level of air pollution in Kathmandu, or will he only hear me when I talk about the flowers that manage to bloom in every garden? Will a student take seriously the information provided by the Center for Disease Control? Preventative rabies vaccinations seem unnecessary until you find your bare ankles just inches from the mouth of a mangy dog covered in blood and mud. The risk of exposure to tuberculosis is almost guaranteed, as is exposure to malaria when traveling in the Terrai. Will my students hear this, or will they only listen when I speak of the sense of community I experienced? When a young, inexperienced, yet determined student asks me what challenges she will face on the program, will she consider the social challenges of poverty, or will she cling tight to her visions of quaint mountain villages against a backdrop of the Himalayas? I hope that my time in Nepal will bring a richness to the student advising process that I wasn't able to contribute before.

One thing is certain, though. I will never be able to share adequately with my students the ways in which Nepal involves all the senses. Then again, I'm not sure I want to. Some things are best left unsaid, left to be experienced and felt, with no expectations.

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