SENSING NEPAL

REFLECTIONS ON MY FIRST VISIT TO ASIA

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In March 1998, I spent five days in Kathmandu, Nepal as part of a study abroad site visit organized by the School for International Training, Brattleboro, Vermont. Never having traveled to Asia before, I found this trip educational and personally rewarding. Nepal was an experience of the senses. The unfamiliar smells, sights, sounds, and tastes of Kathmandu were stimulating and overwhelming. Like many of the students I advise, my impressions of this region were visions of the Himalayas, tales of failed mountaineering expeditions, and Brad Pitt in Seven Years in Tibet (which wasn’t even filmed on location). Before my departure, I read every book about Nepal that I could get my hands on. I spent hours on the World Wide Web learning about the government, history, Hinduism, Buddhism, and food. I even discovered recipes for dahl bhat. In short, I tried to prepare myself the way I ask students to prepare, through research and discussions with people who had lived or traveled in Nepal. But nothing could have prepared me for the impact of this sensory overload.

Morning in Kathmandu

As sunlight begins to dance across my closed eyes, I perceive a world coming to life: the rhythmic sound of a straw broom as it sweeps across the path outside my window, the slow trickle of water poured from a watering can, the sharp snap of a match as it bursts into flame, a rustling of busy hands preparing the day’s offerings to an unknown god. A procession of singing voices reaches a crescendo outside my open window and slowly fades as the group begins its daily pilgrimage to Swayambunath. I keep my eyes shut, savoring the composition of this early morning reveille and think to myself, “This is morning in Nepal.”

Today is a free morning, and I explore Kathmandu. Greetings of “Namaste,” “Hello,” “What is your name?” “Where are you from?” “Where are you going” follow me. Young children catch my eye, smile, then quickly look away with a coy grin. I make my way, dodging cars and buses, weaving through tuk-tuks, men on bicycles, women carrying loads of grain on their backs, beggars, and the occasional cow. With my blond hair and pale skin, I stand out among the rich shades of chocolate, ebony, and coffee. There seem to be no rhyme or reason to the flow of traffic, and horns blow constantly. “Look out, here I come,” they warn. I round a corner and collide with a man on a bicycle. My western inability to discern any organization to this chaotic flow of man, beast, and vehicle has resulted in a young man sprawled at my feet, covered in dust and a bicycle. Fortunately, he quickly stands up, brushes himself off, checks to make sure the angle of his topi (cap) is correct, gives me a smile from ear to ear, and continues on his way.

Life lived outdoors

It feels as if all life in Kathmandu takes place outdoors. From sunrise to sunset there is a constant stream of activity. Women sit on store stoops popping corn in large metal bowls over an open flame, and men gather to get their hair cut from a street corner barber. The smell of popping corn mixes with the odor of burning butter lamps, after shave, urine, dust, sweat, and cows, not an unpleasant combination of smells. My senses are on full alert, and it is excitingly overwhelming. I simply don’t have the cultural understanding to provide an intellectual narrative to my experiences, so I take things as they come, without judgement or interpretation.
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 "Mamad, 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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