

March 16th, 2007

The boarding area is slowly filling up here at Dulles. We still have two hours before departure. Kara (my daughter) and I left Shepherdstown at around 1 PM in a heavy snowstorm. The schools were closed and the side roads nearly impassable so we had to take the long way on the interstate. We saw at least 10-15 vehicles off the road, having slid off to either side. The traffic out of DC on I70 was at a standstill for over 15 miles as there was a major accident going that direction. It was a real treat to spend time with Kara before the travel. She is leaving tomorrow for Key West and spring break. I spoke with my son Kane in Washington State while waiting for the flight. These two are the light of my life and when you throw in the two grandsons it is quite the treat.

To arrive at this point in the journey has in itself been quite a series of events. My initial intention was to leave in November of 06 but there were paperwork complications in Nepal that took some time to settle with Rotary International. The additional time was used to schedule presentations to Rotary Clubs and others to gain more financial support for the projects. I want to thank each of the Rotary Clubs, individuals, and especially the members of the Ripley Rotary Club for the tremendous support they have given me over the past three years of providing service to our fellow citizens in India and Nepal. They continue to go beyond club support and dig deeply into their own pockets with dollars and donations. A special thanks to my friend Kathy from the Pt. Pleasant Club she has worked with Charles Humphries to elicit many donations from the banks in the Huntington area (again).

This is a very difficult time for me to leave the country. Many of you know of my documentation over the past six years of the Pentecostal "Signs Following" congregation, the "Church of the Lord Jesus", located in Jolo, McDowell County, WV. The pastor of 56+ years of the church, the Rev. Bob Elkins passed away on Wednesday. Bob was a very special friend to me and we came to love and respect each other very much. To not be there and celebrate his "going home" or be there to support his family is very tough. On a selfish note, to not document this moment is another loss. I did write my own small letter to the congregation that my friend Laura from NY will read at the service.

My Rotarian friends in India have assisted me in making the connections to travel from Kolkata to Purulia where I will stay for five days. I will be traveling by train, a short ride of just over five hours. It will be my first Indian rail experience. When I land in Kolkata it will be 1:15 Am on Sunday the 18th. A driver has been arranged by my friend Binod to pick me up and take me to the train station. The Purulia Rotary Club will have a rural eye care screening on the day I arrive so we will jump right into the projects. I am excited to meet the club members and experience that area of India.

From India the next leg of the journey will take me to Nepal and the rural villages of Bandipur and Sirubari. I will land in Kathmandu but spend little time in the capitol. My heart is in the rural mountains.

We leave Dulles on time and head out to London, seven hours away. I went on-line last night and was able to get a window seat in an exit row. If you have taken long flights you will understand the value of this, leg room, easy in-out w/o disturbing others and a view. As usual British Airways staff are friendly and go out of the way to assist you. They have surprisingly good food for an airline and the vegetarian is a better than average pasta and the dinner wine is gratis. I choose an in-flight movie, "The Departed" that is excellent despite the violence. I try to sleep and have small fits of what must be unconsciousness because I miss morning coffee before we land.

Once we de-board, it is easy to tell that things have changed in the world of England. We go immediately from our plane to a long line that leads us directly through a security check and most of have to lose a bag to "checked baggage" as the rules have changed and we scramble to figure out what we need on the next flight. The security guards are all heavily armed with machine guns and bulletproof vests. England has also been the target of terrorist aggression and like the US is unwilling to look deeply at the policies we have created, many to protect corporate rights/property in other countries, that also keep workers in poverty, align ourselves with unjust governments, etc. My point is that we are not blameless in this global mess.

The layover in London is about three hours and we are flying on a Boeing 777 that sets quite high off of the ground and probably holds about 200+ of us. We all board, get our carry on stowed, start to settle in and an announcement of a delay is given. It seems that the plane, upon landing with its last flight has suffered engine damage from birds. Now this of course throws everyone's schedule for Kolkata into the trash and the buzz is on with each of us having our own tale. In the end we are very lucky because there is another 777 available and it will take about three hours to get from the hanger, reload luggage and food. In all we have a 6-hour layover and they give us a 5-pound voucher for food. I still have not figured out pounds, pence, schillings, etc. I do know that our dollar is not worth enough here as everything is much more expensive. We Americans love to complain about this but revel in the inequity of the exchange rate in places like India and Nepal. I was able to get a veggie burger w/chips for the voucher and then added a small draft beer.....\$8!!! By the way Carmel, this is where we first met, the first of three times which has lead to a wonderful friendship.

Within three hours we are loaded back on board. There is really very little grumbling, it is unusual for another plane to be available (especially for an international flight) and turned around so quickly. I have the same seat as the previous flight. The small amenities that BA provides are small touches that improve the flight. A small pillow, blanket, headsets, a pair of socks, small toothbrush/paste and eye covers. I mentioned the free wine. I really don't know what the difference is in the US airlines struggling for existence and BA or even Virgin Airlines. Both of these seem to be very traveler orientated and making money.

I borrowed a book for the flights that Kara loaned me called "Magical Thinking" and is a collection of short stories by Augusten Burroughs. They are hilarious and very creative

and it is difficult to know whether they are heavily autobiographic or some mixture of a wild imagination and his life. It is a nice diversion on the flight.

The in-air time to Kolkata is 9 hours from London. There are a few extra seats so the person next to me in the middle seat moves and there is more room for us all. It generally takes a couple of hours for everyone (including kids) to settle into a nice low mumber of sound that makes it more conducive to resting. I take in the movie “Casino Royal”, the newest James Bond and it is fair at best. I have not had any conversations of depth so far with anyone. Many times people just want their space and I can certainly relate to that. Between the movie, reading and trying to sleep the hours do pass and finally it is two hours to landing and the plane begins to waken. The smell of breakfast and coffee fill the air and the excitement of getting here is beginning to take hold.

After landing we have to pass through immigration, a painless but time consuming process. We have all filled out the required form while on the plane and now just need for the information to be punched into the system. I pick up my luggage that as usual no matter the airline, it is beat to hell. The zipper on a large duffel bag that I borrowed from Jeannie is busted. Luckily I had the bag strapped. Another large very sturdy Samsonite roller duffel has also taken some punishment. When you travel, do not skimp on a hardy piece of luggage. It won't last all that long but will protect your “stuff” well.

As I am in line to do the money exchange I speak with a woman that had been on the plane also. She works for Carbon Trade Watch, an international organization with many programs. She is here to help with the environmental aspect of the growing economy and the negative aspects of the pollution that goes with it. We talk briefly about the negative aspects of carbon trading and exchange cards so we can check out each other's website/work.

As I roll the cart outside, I look like a tourist that can't live w/o bringing his whole life with him. 95% of what I have are the donated supplies that will end up in Nepal. Although much of what I have could have been bought there, the difference in quality and the fact that someone cared enough to donate it is well worth the hauling. Binod's driver is there with my name on a sign. While in London I had purchased internet time and emailed the folks here in India of the delay and need for rescheduling of the train ticket. The driver does not speak English but has a note from Binod that I am do go to his home. It is just after 6 AM, the sun is a huge orange ball just above the horizon. Kolkata is just coming alive with the farmers converging on the many markets around the city. The traffic is still very light and the heavy haze and smell of pollution hangs in the air. It seems the price of progress in many developing countries.

The ride into the city and Binod's triggers memories of last year's visit. The ride also helps me to adjust to the driving conditions and manner in with you must approach this.....with pure reckless abandonment. It adds an element of excitement that no amusement park ride can match and you don't have to stand in line waiting for the ride.

We get to Binod's and I go up the five flights to his home. His wife greets me and settles me in a bedroom with hot tea and cookies. I initially spend time re-arranging and re-packing bags, two of which will leave here until the flight to Nepal. I pack another backpack with everything that I might need for the week and this particular project. It will be heavy but I will only have that and my camera. I finally climb into bed around 8 and sort of sleep until 11:30. I get up and shower with the bucket and smaller pitcher to pour the water over me. It feels great after being up and on the go for the past two days. It is already getting warm outside so it could be a sweltering train ride. I have chosen to ride in the general cars with everyone else, no AC car or first class private seating. I didn't come to live a western lifestyle but to better understand what life is like for the general population. Binod's wife, son and his wife and two children meet me at the table for lunch. It is a wonderful treat to eat such great food and catch up on their lives. They are warm and friendly, making sure of my every need. The daughter comments on how very un-American I seem to be because I am not overweight and appear to be interested in the culture. It seems we have not left a positive impression on her. They also are surprised that I am comfortable eating with my hands as per custom.

It is soon time to leave for the train station.....