

Sunday November 30<sup>th</sup>, 2008

It is 2:30 a.m., I have been home less than 24 hours and naturally my sleep patterns are a little off. This will be my last journal entry, it begins on the Wednesday evening, the 26<sup>th</sup>.

Kara and I were winding down our last day in Pokhara, getting things sorted and packed for our flight to Kathmandu in the morning. We get a call on the room phone and it is the front desk letting me know that Hari Gurung, the Damauli club president, is downstairs. Harry and I visit for about a half hour, sharing black tea and talking of the tourism efforts that he has become so interested in. He and others are trying to promote Damauli as a destination. I share how and what West Virginia has done to promote its wide array of outdoor recreation and natural beauty and agree to send him a guidebook.

In the morning as Kara and I get our showers, the breaking news comes on about the attacks in Mumbai. The terrorists have hit a number of targets throughout the city, specifically looking for American and British citizens and there is confusion everywhere. The reality of how fragile safety and security are in our lives is being broadcast around the world. What can be gained from such senseless killings and destruction? How much are we too blame for creating a world in which fanaticism holds us as hostages? When we move our luggage downstairs the staff and other guests are as stunned as we are. We are traveling thru major airports and know that security will be tightened and we will all have to be patient with the process.

We get to the Pokhara airport and get our bags checked and then have to open them for security. We go thru a pat down and metal detector and then into the waiting room where Hindi music is blasting from a Bollywood movie on TV into a large hollow room that further distorts the sound. We have nowhere to go and have an hour wait!

When our plane is ready for boarding, Kara is a little dismayed when she sees it. It is a small twin engine, as wide as a car with one seat on each side of a tight aisle, the cockpit is open and the stewardess offers us cotton for our ears from a large ball that everyone is pulling from. Kara isn't impressed. The flight is noisy but takes only an hour with a great view of the terrain below and the Himalayas in the distance. Today is the clearest day so far and the giant "fishtail" that is Annapurna is beautiful against the morning sky.

We collect our luggage in Kathmandu and have about four hours in this airport which has virtually nothing of services for the traveler. One note of interest is the Rotary International President had just completed his first ever visit to Nepal and his delegation is here. I didn't recognize anyone as DK Lee but do introduce myself to one of the Koreans, Young-Dong Lee from district 3630 and we exchange cards and brief hellos before he and the delegation rushes off. He was very smartly dressed in a well fitting three piece suit. I know I don't impress many of the better dressed Rotarians anywhere with my dress-down style, but then again clothes do not make the man!

When we are ready to go upstairs thru security I realize that I have a pocket knife on me. I have already gone thru the Pokhara pat-down and they missed it and at that time I didn't realize I had it on me. My bag has to go thru another scanning, and I have another pat-down. I don't want to lose the knife so arrange it in my pack aligned with the pens and markers and with my camera lying over top of that. It makes it thru w/o a problem and I vow to place it in the checked luggage in Kolkata, in London they would not miss this and I would be answering some questions especially given the current high alert.

Our flight to Kolkata is about 1 ½ hours and pretty uneventful and it is closing on dark when we arrive. We move thru customs, collect our luggage and head for the door. As I stated about the Kathmandu airport, Kolkata also has almost no services available. I had not made a prior hotel arrangement and the

few people that I did ask where of no help, most just said ask a taxi driver. I go out to speak with a driver who has some grasp of English, find one and explain that I am looking for a hotel that is close and has hot water. He appears to understand. When we load up and get going we arrive at the main road and traffic is at a standstill. The two policemen trying to manage the snarl are repeatedly blowing on their whistles and no one is paying much attention. The cabbie does a u-turn and says we will go another way. We drive the opposite way I have ever gone from the airport into a less developed area but not too far. We pull over to the side of the road and he says follow him, initially I asked Kara to stay in the car but she doesn't feel comfortable so we all head out. We cross a grassy area onto the main avenue that we couldn't get to initially. We dart across in spurts between the racing vehicles. We walk a short distance down into an alley way and then into a hotel. Well, an Indian version. I ask to see a room and we walk to the third floor (elevators are pretty much non-existent) and see a room that has a double bed that takes up most of the space and a bathroom that reeks of urine and the overall cleanliness ain't great. I ask how much and the reply is R1750 plus 10% tax. I flatly state no and walk out. I have stayed in much better places for less. We walk back to the cab and I say take us back to the airport and the cabbie asks how much we are willing to pay. I told him that R 1000 was too much but we needed a room. He calls the hotel guy (surprise...he knows him) and we get an immediate ok for the R1000. I tell the cabbie that we will drive to the hotel; we are not carrying bags across a highway! Neither Kara nor I are enthused about staying here but we have to be up at 2 am and be at the airport and it is already close to 8 pm. We suck it up and lay down to sleep. I keep an open pocketknife within my reach, the first time I am even the least bit anxious.

I wake at 1:30 and don't fall back asleep, get up at 2 and take what I hope is the last of cold showers for a while. Surprisingly the desk calls us at 2:30 as promised for a wake up call. The cabbie had agreed to come back at 3 to pick us up and arrives 10 minutes early. The hotel manager says his sister lives in Mumbai and she is ok but he is worried, the standoff is still continuing this morning. It turns out that everyone involved in this small drama was very helpful and went out of their way to assist us, once again proving that India's people are mostly well-intentioned, it was me making up the thoughts of insecurity in the situation but caution is always common sense.

We arrive at the airport in plenty of time to check our bags and get our final boarding passes for the London to Dulles leg which you couldn't get online. I am carrying the boxed prayer wheel plus my small backpack and the signs clearly say only one carryon. No one challenges that but at security the guard asks what's in the box, I tell him and he begins to pull open the wood side. I raise my voice and tell him to look between the slats and he can see what is in the box. He seemed to be surprised by my own challenge and allows me thru w/o further issues. Neither my raised voice nor the knife incidents are wise moves in light of Mumbai and probably don't give me a lot of faith in either the Nepalese or Indian security measures.

The flight to London is about 10 ½ hours, two meals, a snack, two movies, a little napping, and about half of a new book that I bought for this end of the trip. I also recommend this book called "Holy Cow" by Sarah McDonald, based on her experiences in India. She gives a funny and honest look at a country and people that changed her forever. It changes me each time.

When we get to London and by the time we re-enter security (you go thru security when you get off the plane here also), and out into the main area, we have four hours before boarding time. We are in Terminal 5, the newest terminal here which serves the international flights. It is filled with very upscale and expensive stores and you must have British Pounds (or credit card) to buy anything. The spaces are huge with ceilings rising to probably four stories. There is a variety of seating from individual (and moveable) papa-san type chairs, bench seating and honest to God lay down curved sofa beds! American airports do everything they can to discourage your waiting comfort when it comes to furniture, this is great. I exchange some Indian rupees for pounds which allow us enough for two cups

of coffee. Later Kara buys a sandwich that is the best we have had in a month. It was on whole wheat bread with pine nuts, cranberry sauce, brie cheese, lettuce and mayo and NO WHITE RICE!

Our flight to Dulles is 7 ½ hours, two meals, a movie, more Holy Cow and some actual sleeping for me. Kara didn't sleep well. We are excited when we land. Nikki had driven my car up and I will take them to Kara's car in Martinsburg. It feels funny to drive in sane traffic. Kara and Nikki are staying on for a week to see her mom and then a few days at the beach. I am driving back tonight and by the time Kara and Nikki are dropped off its 10:30. I am feeling pretty good and head off into the western mountains of Maryland. The traffic is light and drops off even more by the time I get to Hancock where I-68 begins. I maintain the speed limit the whole way, not being in a hurry and not wanting to attract attention. In the Oakland area there is still snow on the ground, strange coming from 85 degree Kolkata a few hours ago.

As always when I get to the "Wild and Wonderful" West Virginia sign at the state line I lay on the horn to welcome myself back to these wonderful hills. I don't begin to feel tired until about an hour before the end. When I pull into home, across my little bridge, the night sky is clear, deep and twinkling with a billion pinpoints of light older than I can imagine. It is cold but I am home. Naturally I can't sleep and stay awake until 6:30 before finally feeling like I may doze.

Over the course of the coming months I will lay the foundation for another journey to continue the works of our current projects and see how our new ones evolve. There are reports to do, funds to be accounted for, funds to be matched, presentations to be made, and funds to be raised.

The journals are a way to share one perspective of this journey. I hope to have the photos posted in the next several weeks. Hopefully they will also inspire you to become more involved and aware of the world around you although I know that I am preaching to the choir. Thank you for bearing thru the little dramas that make up our lives at times. We could not do this small work with out each of you being a part of our support network.

In closing, here are 5 questions to ponder from the Dali Lama:

1. How do we address the widening gap between rich and poor?
2. How do we protect the earth?
3. How do we educate our children?
4. How do we help oppressed people and countries of the world?
5. How do we bring spirituality (deep caring for one another) through all disciplines of life?

Peace and Love to You

Chuck