

Thursday – India

I woke this morning having been a feast for the night insects. It is the same each night but last night they were more intense. I had at least 20 major bites, raised and itching. Some windows have glass, some do not and no screens so when you have a light at night you have the welcome sign out. My bath this morning was the bucket and dipper method and is always a process because of the cold water. I begin slowly dribbling it over me to get used to it and then at some point say the hell with it and have my breath taken away and am thrust into the world of being fully awake, not spiritually unfortunately but it is a level of awareness!

Now to put my western whining into perspective, outside my door there are over 9,000,000 people in the Purulia district which covers an area of 11314 sq. kms. And ONE Rotary Club to serve the needs of this vast population. Most have no real beds, live in mud or other poorly constructed homes, and don't have access to clean water or medical care; there are few schools, they work hard thru the day, mainly in the fields for basic survival, and wish that a few bug bites were all they had to be concerned with. Through all they endure they are a happy people and even those with the least will give as openly as those with wealth.

Ok, let's go back to yesterday (Wednesday). Kara and Naffeza went to the hospital in the morning to be with their patients and I was off to the clinic in Lalpur with the club president Ajit Tarawgi and Pijush Mukherjee one of the most kind and friendly men I have met. They were going to meet with the architect and electrician and clarify a few of the wiring issues. The ride and visit gave us time to speak further about the needs of the clinic and how we can move forward on the matching grant to equip the clinic. For those Rotarians reading this I will be providing specifics and other data to support the application. That is fair notice that I will come seeking your support.

We arrived back at the hospital around 11 or so .Kara and Nafeeza had been with their patients on this day of their operation. Much of the afternoon was spent by each of us in various little tasks with some free time and we did go back to the hotel for lunch.

I had discussed a personnel situation with Raj yesterday and we acted on that today. It may be something I share in time. At one point Raj told me that he will miss me when I am gone and that I will be in his heart. Such honesty and love in relationships between men is difficult. The culture here makes it much more possible because it is their way with each other. I know my male friends back home love me but none would express it quite that way, nor have I to them. It is somehow implied and understood but it adds depth to hear it said.

The women were back at the hospital at 6:30 to check on the patients. We were initially going to attend the "Festival of Cows" in the evening but the plans changed so that we could have more time with some Rotarians in Fellowship. So about 8:30, eight Rotarians came to my small room to socialize. They brought two bottles of Antiquity Blue whisky and mixers, snacks consisting of chanachur, a mixture of nuts, beans, onions, peppers and spices; natr, puffed corn nuts; and a vegetables pakoda that was deep fried. So the scene is the Rotarians, me Kara and at times Nafeeza sharing information, jokes, poking fun at each other and breaking the barriers that sometimes separate us. Women are generally not a part of an affair like this but we are three together and it is a blending of the east and west. I cannot do justice to the evening, you would have to hear the mix of Bengali and English, the tonality of the words and phrases and the wonderful and honest laughter that came from our sharing. We moved upstairs for dinner about 10:00 before slowly going our ways. I got to bed at 11:30 and woke at 3....still struggling with continuity in sleep. It will have to come in time.

Peace

Friday itself was a slower day. Kara and Nafeeza saw their patients get their final checkup before leaving. Kara had allowed her patient; a woman in her late 50's to try on all of her rings and ended up giving her three of them that were not as personal to her. It will be something the woman remembers for a long time. Both Kara and Nafeeza got to know their patients well, exchanging contact information, etc.

I ended back at the hotel having a headache and needing to rest. I was there for most of the day as we had nothing planned until evening. I have a book that I'm reading that was loaned to me by Sanja Malpani, a physician that worked in Spencer before ending in Martinsburg, WV. We had stayed with her and her husband Vishal, also a physician the night before leaving the US. The book, "Shantaram" is by Gregory David Roberts and is set in Bombay, a decade or so ago. It is based on his living there and is filled with insights into the Indian culture. He is an excellent writer and the book has me captivated.

A scheduled meeting with the club president Ajit had to be rescheduled so in the evening we went to see the celebration of the Cow Festival, its last night. It was a carnival atmosphere with displays of Krishna and other Hindu Gods, attesting to their love of the cow and its sacredness in the culture. There was a small Ferris wheel, cotton candy, balloons, much street food vending, etc. There is a small area where a group of community businessmen keep about 150 cows coming from the streets and other places that are in need of care and treatment and once they are well and producing their milk is sold in the marketplace and a portion goes to charity work. There were probably several thousand people there and at one point we watched a small talent show with local kids, it was fun as they were very young and at times were clueless about their next move in a dance or song. Kara and Nafeeza have drawn crowds of boys, especially Kara being a Caucasian. We are very much a novelty here and the people are always introducing themselves with hello and then finding out that neither knows the others language. Knowing few words certainly helps, it is not conversational but human interactions are well beyond just words so there is always a level in which to connect.

After the carnival we returned to the hotel to spend a few hours with Raj. Raj is the key person in our visit as he has coordinated much of what we have done, attended to all of our needs, and it has taken valuable time away from his work as manager of the hospital. I know it will take him some time to catch up. We drank a few Indian beers, watched a little Hindi TV, and talked some before dinner came at 10:30....way too much food, way too late to eat. By then Kara had gone to bed, Nafeeza only wanted her mother's cooking, so Raj and I ate a little before saying goodnight at close to 11:30. Raj and I have become great friends and I look forward to our times together in the future. He has spoken of his desire to build a small school in one of the more rural areas and Kara and I have agreed to assist in seeking outside funding, a project that will be years in the completion.

It is now Saturday morning, the day we leave Purulia for Kolkata. The train leaves at 3:30 today, arriving about 9 pm tonight. I finally slept for a solid seven hours last night, not waking one time, the balance between body and mind finally coming together. I went to the hospital to meet with President Ajit and further discuss the needs we will address in a matching grant. He came with the grant completed, actually two grants proposals. I explained that one grant is probably what our district can handle. The proposal for equipment now totals \$29,000. That will be a challenge for us but certainly doable. We are a small district, lacking the wealth of large clubs. I will be coming to most of you to seek your support upon my return.

I also went across the road from the hospital to say goodbye to our friends who have a small food and coffee stand. I had met them last year and brought them photos from that visit. Panchanan and his wife Prabha have two small children, Haradhan the son and Sandhya the daughter. Kara and Nafeeza spent

time last night playing soccer with the beach ball that we had gave to them (thank you Marci) when we first arrived. An interesting note that several of the staff of the hospital (excluding Raj) have been somewhat surprised at our friendship with them and have tried to get us come back into the hospital. It is an obvious class distinction but being an outsider don't adhere to that (respectfully).

We have reservations at the Sunflower hostel. We will spend two full days there before flying to Katmandu and the service projects there. We will have no internet availability except as we pay so I'm not sure how much I will be able to fully describe that time but will do my best.

I trust each of you is well and send you thoughts of peace and new beginnings.

chuck