

## AN AMERICAN'S GAP YEAR SPENT TRACING HIS ROOTS IN NEPAL

I am an American national, born and raised in a small Wisconsin town. In the spring of 2013 I was living and working in Shanghai. My son Jake, who is now 20 years old, was living with a host family in a small village in Nepal near the Annapurna trekking circuit. Nepal, and particularly its capital city of Katmandu, expanded its presence into American consciousness with Bob Seeger's 1975 hit "Katmandu."

"Katmandu" Lyrics Excerpt:

But now I'm leaving and I can't be late  
And to myself be true.

That's why I'm going to Katmandu.  
Up to the mountain's where I'm going to.  
And if I ever get out of here,  
That's what I'm gonna do.  
K-k-k-k-k Katmandu.

The singer was going to Nepal to be true to himself. I think Jake's motivation deep down may have been something similar to the singer's. He, his two older sisters – Sarah and Anna - his mother and I spent three years living in Katmandu during the mid-nineties when I was the director of training for the U.S. Peace Corps program in Nepal. He was just seven months old when we first arrived. Over the years, whenever we have been together as a family, nostalgic memories and stories of the Nepal experience inevitably arise. Even though Jake didn't remember much\*\*, he grew up knowing that Nepal was an integral part of our family's and his individual history. I think that somewhere in his future view, he always pictured himself making a sojourn back in search of his roots.

Memory – Santa Claus Visits Katmandu

\*\*One thing that he did remember was the Nepali word for elephant, *hati*. One year at the international school which my daughters attended, part of the Christmas celebration in this mostly Hindu country (many Tibetan Buddhists have emigrated there) included bringing an elephant to the school and giving rides to the kids. Santa Claus actually rode the elephant into the school yard and so this huge and gentle animal became affectionately referred to as "Rudolph the hati." This led to many new variations on the famous song lyrics about Rudolph. For those of you who aren't familiar with it, there is a famous song about one of Santa Claus' reindeer, Rudolph, called Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer.

Another Family Memory

One of our favorite activities was taking drives around Katmandu. It was very exotic for us and our view of the seemingly chaotic hustle and bustle outside our car windows was like watching a movie. Jake was a toddler and had not yet uttered any intelligible words. One thrill for him and Sarah and Anna was the passing by of large commercial trucks. Many of the roads in Katmandu were gravel and very narrow. A large truck would rumble by us, kicking up a huge cloud of dust and rocking our small Toyota Corolla. Jake would squeal with delight and the girls would shout out for more trucks to come. We always told them when a truck was coming toward us by telling them that a TaTa truck was coming. TaTa is an Indian-made truck and most of the trucks in Katmandu seemed to bear that brand name. "Here comes a big TaTa! Get ready!" we would say. On one occasion, we called out the announcement and just as the truck was coming alongside our car, we heard a tiny voice from the back seat simply say in a matter-of-fact voice "TaTa". It was Jake speaking his first word. For most of Jake's childhood he said that he was going to be a truck driver when he grew up. This event may have had an influence.

A Luddite's Appreciation of How Technology Warped Time and Space

I have to admit that a large part of me is somewhat of a Luddite. In the following anecdote, you will see how technology softened my view.

Whatever his inner motivation was, Jake's outward reason for going to Nepal last year was to work as a volunteer with the Friendship Foundation of Nepal (FFN), a local nonprofit social service organization. He was introduced to FNN by Volunteers for Peace USA. They connect volunteers from the USA with local voluntary organizations in dozens of countries. I highly recommend them if you are interested in any kind of volunteer work in developing or developed countries. He took my advice of taking a gap year between high school and college and this is what he did during part of that year.

He rarely spent time in Katmandu, finding it generally too crowded, noisy and polluted. One of the few times he was there resulted in one of the best experiences of our lives. Through the advanced (advanced for me) technology of cell phones, we were able to bridge thousands of miles and the 15+ years since we had departed there.

Acting as his human GPS link - my phone in Shanghai to his phone in Katmandu - I guided him to the Katmandu house in which we lived. You can't really find houses in Katmandu using a numbered street address. He went through the gate and up to the house. The current occupants were home. When he explained who he was and why he was there, they graciously let him into the house to have a look around. So, here we were speaking to each other with thousands of miles between us while he walked around the house asking questions and making observations that brought back a flood of memories and made it seem like it was just yesterday that we were there:

--"Pops, is that the staircase I fell down and would have been seriously hurt if Saraswati [our nanny] had not caught me before falling too far?"

--"Is that the balcony screen door I was playing next to one morning and looked up to see a gigantic baboon standing on the balcony staring at me?"

--"Where was the garden I would water with the hose for hours?" "Where did Sarah and Anna [his sisters] sleep - what about Zoe [our dog at the time]?"

This interaction went on for perhaps 20 minutes. I can't think of a more poignant period of moments that he and I have had together, with the possible exception of the moments during which he was born. It would have been even better if Sarah and Anna had been with him. They too deeply desire going back to visit Katmandu. They already have the memories and now Jake has a visual of the place to contribute to his memories. Moreover, I think he has reconciled that desire to go back to a place that was so important to his formative first few years.

### A Reluctant Return Home

Jake did not want to return home after the volunteer experience. Culturally, he learned a lot in Nepal and much of it caused him to want to stay. The things he liked most were:

-Teaching English in a Nepali public school was a tremendous early professional experience for him.

Nepali schools are under-resourced to say the least, with over-crowded classrooms, few materials etc. He loved the challenge of it and succeeding, though not without many frustrations along the way. He learned of the needed perseverance in another culture where you frequently fail and constantly find yourself in very ambiguous situations with nobody to consult- "Oh man, what am I supposed to do now?!"

-He liked the slower pace of life and the relationship orientation over task orientation preference that Nepali people have. Here in the U.S., a fairly common answer to "How are you?" when asked of another adult is "real busy" said with a harried tone. In Nepal, when Nepalis are asked the same question (in Nepali of course), "*Costa cha?*", a common response is "*aram*" with a kind of mellow smile or serene look. I believe the most accurate translation of "*aram*" is "chillin" - really. Evenings after dinner he and his host family would sit on the roof and just stare out at a stunning view of the Himalaya Mountains, drink tea and chat.

-He noticed that people who have relatively little are often extremely generous with what they have.

-He appreciates and is very comfortable living in a culture that is more being oriented than achievement and doing oriented.

-He understands the concept of value orientations and how they drive social and work behavior- he significantly developed his intercultural competence level during his stay in Nepal, just as his sisters did 15 years ago.

-In Nepal, Jake went for long periods not using a phone or computer or watching TV/movies. He had time to actually reflect on life..... He seemed a lot more centered when he returned.

-And, as is often the same for all of us who have lived in other cultures for many years, he found it to be constantly stimulating. I am reminded of a line in the movie, "Almost Famous" when one character asks the other, "why do you spend all your time with famous people?" She answers, "famous people are just more interesting." For those of us who live in other cultures, at least part of our answer for why we do it must be "people from other cultures are just more interesting." That is how Jake feels.

The first time I went to Nepal was in 1982. I had just finished two years of living and working in Wakayama City, Japan and wanted to experience developing country life. Since that time 32 years ago, I have lived there two different times for a total of about four years, plus I shared Jake's experience with him. Memories of Nepal's life and its people are often at the periphery of my mind – just like Mt. Everest's (*Sagarmatha* in Nepali language) timeless presence looming over the land of Nepal and Tibet.

-Patrick Burns September 2014