

In Nepal With Troy

Having just returned from the school in Sanitar I am pleased to say unto you, 'Namaste, congratulations, may the gods ever smile upon you.'

When Troy proposed I accompany him to his school in Nepal I was hesitant. I did not relish the idea of spending two of my remaining days at thirty-five thousand feet in an airplane going to the other side of the earth and back. But thank goodness I did.

I did not expect a holiday, and nor did I get one. Life possesses but few precious moments, and they should not be denied because of a little discomfort. Indeed, up there in the air Troy and I found a little nook on the flight out of Vancouver where we could stand up and peer out a small window, and saw below the land's-end of Alaska, the Bering Sea, and then the vast expanse of a desolate snow-covered Siberia sliding slowly beneath us. Then the drudgery of flying set in.

Landing to take on fuel in Seoul, South Korea, we filed off the plane, through security checks, customs, then back on the plane, up in the air, back down, onto a bus, and into a hotel room in Singapore. All I knew by that time was that it was the middle of the night, on which day I had no idea. We'd crossed so many time zones and datelines, and I was exhausted, in desperate need of sleep. My body told me it was the middle of the afternoon, yesterday, or maybe it was tomorrow, I didn't know which, but sleep eluded me, and I had to be content with merely lying down.

A few hours later brought dawn, and we were back to filing through customs, security checks, ticket desks, and then down airplane ramps. It was a good thing Troy was there to hold my hand, otherwise I'd still be standing in front of an airport monitor with 'gates', 'terminals', and 'departure times' swirling in my cerebral fog.

Back up in the air we flew over the island-strewn coast of Myanmar, which had been decimated by a storm a few months ago, then the Sea of Bengal, and Bangladesh. The strange thing was that I couldn't see a hint of civilization below, not a town, a road, an airport runway, and although I knew there were millions upon millions of people living below me ... there wasn't a sign of them. They must be hidden beneath foliage, I reckoned. And while this occupied my mind, Troy was at the back of the plane engaged in a conversation with a very cute stewardess about the chances of future encounters, and she was checking her schedule twice.

As we descended into the Kathmandu Valley, every passenger gawked out the windows at the jagged white peaks of the Himalayas. Off the plane and into the terminal Troy and I had to get visas before getting into the country. There to greet us was the kind of government official we all love to hate, the customs agent, or in this case the visa agent, who knew he had us by the knackers so long as it suited his pleasure. He was hilarious, exuding the power to deny us entry until we'd forked over our forty bucks to him; there was certainly no need to make eye contact, smile, say 'thank-you', or in any way be polite beyond tossing receipts in our general direction with a contemptuous sneer that he greeted a thousands foreigners with each day. That's the best way to build your tourist industry—make sure the first person you meet despises you. 'Keep moving,' he said impatiently. Troy and I smirked at each other, there being no place to go, stuck in the

line-up for the next four important officials who processed our visas ... one to open our passport, another to stamp it, another to initial the stamp, and another to ensure the stamp was initialed. They all sat beside each other, elbow to elbow.

Unfortunately Nepal is an undeveloped and backward country. The government is dependant on foreign aid, and anything they can extort from the few tourists willing to go there, and then to make it ridiculous they charge you again to leave. I have no idea what they would do if you couldn't pay that. They even tax schools built by foreigners. They tax education! As I said, it's a backwards country.

We discussed the state of the country many times over the next two weeks, and to put it in a nutshell: the country is an economic and political basket-case. Only recently has the fighting in the countryside stopped; and the monarchy has been dumped; and there's been a republic democratically elected with a Maoist coalition government trying to develop a constitution. Political stability is the first order of business, and maybe some progress is being made. As it is, no investor will go to Nepal with-out political stability, and the kind of development taking place in China, Vietnam, and India, is but a dream at this time. But the children of Nepal must be prepared, and that guy with the sneer at the airport will eventually be replaced with someone with a smile.

Outside the terminal we were swarmed by taxi drivers who figured they were in for a bonus from a couple of unsuspecting-out-of-towners, not knowing Troy knew the price of everything to the last rupee.

During the taxi ride to our hotel, as I looked out the window at the dust and fume clogged streets, at the thousands of people crammed into dented mini-vans, in crumbling old cars, donkey carts, pushing bicycles laden with stuff, or walking along broken sidewalks covered with refuse in front of dinky little stores, dark inside because of the power failure, I was struck with my first impression of Kathmandu since I had been there over thirty-five years before ... nothing had changed in the chaos and squalor except that it was now a bigger mess. There is nothing romantic about Kathmandu, (despite the sign-boards everywhere promising glamour and prosperity) except the name, and when you leave it.

We found our hotel and went out to stretch our legs. To think it had only taken two days to get there was astonishing. The last time it had taken me two years.

My first priority was to have some curried goat. I was ready to treat myself, so we went to the Tibetan Restaurant where I tried my best to keep Troy entertained with brilliant conversation, but he could only nod periodically, trying to keep his chin out of his curd. He was determined to be in bed by seven thirty. Me, I stayed up until quarter to eight, and awoke in the middle of the night to the barking of street dogs in the unbelievable silence of a city that size. I saw my first of many dawns in Nepal, something I am not accustomed to.

The next morning, refreshed, we went to work. Or should I say Troy went to work, because for the most part I was preoccupied with keeping the fog and cobwebs at bay. I'm sure you well know that the guy has phenomenal energy. He makes me tired just watching him. Every morning he was working in his computer before he even got out of bed. Me, I need three cigarettes, two cups of coffee, and an hour and a half to even get a dim light going. That guy doesn't even take a leak first. Very annoying.

Over coffee I scoured the newspapers, trying to decipher the political situation. It was inconceivable, 'a democracy'.

The airline schedule in the newspaper said Nepal Airlines flew to Rumjatar (our connection to Sanitar) on Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, and Thursday. As we were to find out, they did fly there on occasion, but only on the occasion which suited them. You could not simply phone them to find out when they flew ... someone had to be sent down to their office, hat-in-hand, to beg for information. To add to the controversy, if you are from 'out of country' you pay three times the price for the privilege of flying with them. However, accomplishing that, we spent the rest of the day going up to the Monkey Temple. That's an experience you'll soon want to forget.

No, the Monkey Temple is fine and interesting, it's the route you have to take to get there that's discouraging. I've been to Mexico, and Cambodia, so I know what sordid places can be like, but the road to the Monkey Temple in Kathmandu is the most depressing there is. The streets are paved with garbage and filth, and even the potholes have potholes in them. To cross the bridge over the river is a horrendous experience, you must hold your nose to escape the stench of a stream that is not much more than an open sewer. And along the banks garbage trucks dump their loads. There is no question Nepal has major infrastructure problems.

Every night at dusk we retreated to the rooftop of our hotel to make plans, and to muse over the happenings of the day. The rooftop is a pleasant place where you can see a few snowy peaks reflecting pink in the setting sun, and overhead thousands of Ravens, and flocks of white Egrets, fly east to the palace gardens for the night. High above in the deep mauve sky was an astronomical event the likes of which neither of us will every witness again. There was Venus, Jupiter, and a Crescent Moon within a few degrees of each other. Such as was, we'd discuss life over a couple of beers, and what to do next for the school, and then we'd go out to find a good restaurant. We knew dahl bhat (traditional Nepalese cuisine) was coming.

The next morning an unexpected and fortuitous development took place. Nobody knew we were coming, so it was a considerable surprise when Troy stuck his head into my room and announced he had just run into Mahindra on the street. What were the chances of that? What was he doing there? He must have been wondering the same thing about us.

I went down to Troy's room to meet him, and found a quiet and unassuming man who spoke slowly and thoughtfully. He was there in Kathmandu taking a course at the university, and also because his mother was sick. Troy and he were well into discussions about the school, and later on that afternoon Rudra (the other major player in the creation of the school) appeared, and over the course of the next couple of days the school was the topic of conversation. Rudra is an articulate fellow with a refined sense of humor, so both he and Mahindra made for interesting company.

As for the contents of these discussions I cannot report much except to say that Troy and I had been fantasizing since we left Vancouver about the importance of providing the school with computers, thinking that computers were the cutting edge of the new future, and getting our hopes up when we read in the newspapers that China was putting in a high-speed fiber-optics line into Nepal, that we got very excited about the idea, and bantered about the issues involved. When we presented our proposition to Rudra he gave us a little smile and assured us that the first priority of the school was new toilets. Thus we fell from the lofty heights of high-tech into the pits of reality, no worse for the wear. (This issue is to be resolved in March 09 when it's dry enough to cure the

bricks, the present toilets being made of bamboo and unable to withstand the rigors of the wet season. Having said that I must tell you that Troy is the proud owner of the worst toilets in Nepal, and that's not saying much. I'll spare you the details.)

For my part I confined my questions to political and religious matters, and made enquires about the chances of seeing a leopard in Sanitar. Mahindra assured me he'd seen one in the very forest where the lumber had been cut for the schoolhouse. My hopes were up, and I was anxious to escape the horrors of Kathmandu for the quiet and peace of Sanitar, and an opportunity of seeing a leopard.

I'd been forewarned about the flight to Rumjatar, where the gravel airstrip stretches across a narrow peninsula with a thousand foot drop-off at each end, and it didn't help that people kept mentioning that a Nepal Airlines flight had crashed just a month earlier killing ten German tourists, and everybody else on board.

The flight to Rumjatar itself was quite remarkable, going up, and not really coming down again until we returned to Kathmandu. Out the window to the north you can see the Mount Everest Range. And it was on a good old Canadian Twin Otter, and was as much fun as I anticipated. Disembarking at Rumjatar was the beginning of our trip in earnest, and it turned out to be something I would never have imagined.

We arrived mid-afternoon, and there to greet us at the gate was Mitra, the vice-principle, along with five or six young fellows. Mahindra had phoned ahead to inform them of our coming. (I'm still convinced computers and the internet are not far away because people have cell-phones in Sanitar - which work so long as you stand in the right rice paddy field.)

Now, I decided before I left Canada that when I got to Nepal I would gladly pay someone to carry my pack, thus lightening my load, and providing an income for someone. When I saw these young fellows I assumed one of them would gladly do me the honor, but when I made enquires about who it was who might do so I was mightily surprised to have a little old lady, who stood about five foot two, weighing about ninety-six pounds, with a wicker basket half her size strapped to her forehead, pointed out to me, I was aghast. What was the good of these young lads standing around? It was ridiculous. How could I allow a little old lady the age of my mother carry my pack? But I was assured she was being paid for it, and should not deprive her of her wage. So we piled my pack, along with the camera and tripod, into her basket, and off we went. Little did I realize the kinds of loads the women of those hills carried up and down daily without pause. Troy for his part, being the self-righteous-independent-no-body-can-carry-my-pack-kind-of-guy, carried his own, a burden he'll ever have to bear. (See the film.)

We set off up the road for Sanitar, past orange trees laden with ripe oranges, and the populace gawking at the strange foreigners passing through their land.

There seemed to be some urgency in our trek, but the meaning behind it meant nothing to me, and I trudged along with my bearer, having no idea what to expect next. I was just along for the ride with Troy and not particularly concerned about how things unfolded, but I was in no way prepared for what happened next. There are times in one's life when manna falls from heaven undeservedly, and unexpectedly. Such was that which followed.

We've all experienced those moments that come without apparent reason, with out anticipation. They are truly sublime--perhaps when your first-born calls you by name for the first time, or a friend buys you a present when it's not your birthday, or a good

deed is acknowledged without your knowing anyone knew anything about it. It's when you receive an honor without knowing it's coming.

The people of Sanitar stood on the road awaiting Troy's arrival. Girls giggled and laughed out loud when Troy greeted one of them by name. We weaved our way along paths through courtyards covered with drying millet where people stood to watch the procession before we came to Mukess' house, where Troy had stayed the year before, and it was deemed their honor to receive him first. We dashed in for a quick glass of curd, myself thinking it would be a leisurely affair, but still not knowing what awaited us, and we were out again marching around the corner of the house, and there it stood--the school.

I cannot imagine what Troy's feeling must have been at that moment, but surely it could have been close to magnificent joy. To have created something out of nothing, in effect, for what was just another rice paddy a year before now contained a school. Who has accomplished that?

And not just a building of bricks and mud and timber, but there to greet us a throng of happy people putting wreaths of fresh flowers around our necks, smudging red paint on our foreheads, and smiling with hands pressed together in 'Namaste, Namaste, Namaste.' We were overwhelmed with good-feeling, and then, around the corner of the school, a sight to behold. There, along the front of the school were a hundred and thirty-two children in their uniforms forming two lines, each holding a small handmade bouquet of flowers to present to the patron of their school. Who could ask for a greater gift? No king deserved, nor received, a greater reception.

It was truly a wonderful thing to watch Troy go from child to child accepting from each their flowers, and to see the mixture of anxiety and pride which filled their faces as he accepted them on your behalf. It was all quite marvelous, and moving.

Then, at the end of the line, laden with these accolades, he came up to me, and said 'o.k., now it's your turn.'

My turn? I'd done nothing with my life but sleep and eat and hoard, and now I was being invited to receive this? I could not refuse. No, such moments in life are rare, very rare - but I would be doing myself a disservice if, as I made my way along that line of children bewildered by my strange appearance and skewed manner of saying 'Namaste', if I thought such a blessing was mine alone, or Troy's, we'd be sadly mistaken. You deserve it as much, and for a second, bath yourself in glory. Amen. Now pinch yourself. I had to.

Sanitar is built on a slope coming down from the mountains. To the east is a precipitous drop-off to a rushing river, and all around are mountains, or hills as they call them, as far as the eye can see, all terraced and interspersed with forest. There are no roads, nor cars in Sanitar, only footpaths. The houses are spread apart amid the fields, with the school, and it's distinctive blue roof, right in the center.

When we arrived the heads of the millet had already been cut off the stalk, and lay drying in the sun, after which it was beaten by long hard smooth pestles, and winnowed into piles of powder. The millet-stalks left in the fields were cut by the women at dawn, while they sang Nepali love songs. The stalks were given as straw to the animals.

The people of Sanitar are subsistence farmers, meaning they eat what they grow. They all own a few terraces on which they grow rice in the rainy season, millet in the fall, and potatoes after that. They also have gardens for spinach, onions, cabbage, and the best

radishes you've ever eaten. They each own two water buffaloes for plowing the fields, three goats, and four chickens. When they need a new shirt, or a flashlight, they sell a goat at the market. But to think of these people as being unsophisticated would be completely wrong. They are as intelligent, good-spirited, and knowledgeable about that which they need to know about as anyone. I, for myself, would be hard pressed to grow a dandelion. And the few things they did not know about I sort of envied them, for they had not heard of 'global warming', nor recognized the Queen when shown a Canadian bill, thinking she might be our prime minister. But to think their lives are simple and easy would be wrong also. Simple perhaps, but not easy. They work from dawn to dusk, they're tough, and don't seem to notice that everything is up-hill.

I suggested to Troy that he should pit one of his soccer teams against a team from Sanitar, except the field should be built on the side of a mountain, and all the players should carry a basket of firewood on their backs. I know where I'd put my money.

Indeed, I believe Troy knows full well how tough those people are. It was while we were in our 'computers first' mode that he came up with the brilliant notion that he would film some of his students, who come from a neighboring village, on their journey to his school and back. It sounded like a good idea. He'd get up early, go to their village in the morning, follow them to school, and then back at the end of the day, capturing it all with his camera. Ha!

We started by following them home one afternoon.

Well, you know the old joke about how, 'when I was a boy and went to school it was up-hill both ways', well in Nepal it ain't no joke. It is up-hill both ways.

Those kids, aged four, five, six, and seven, marched out of that schoolyard and immediately started picking up speed. Troy rushed ahead and got shots of them coming and going, going more often than not, while Mitra and I straggled behind. They were soon out of sight as they climbed up the side of a mountain, and down into the valley of the rushing river. Mitra kept calling for them to slow down, but they didn't know what that meant. They were going home, and that was the speed they went. Mitra and I struggled down to the river, or should I say I struggled while Mitra kept me company, and half way up the other side of the mountain, perhaps fifteen hundred feet, before giving up, and we stopped at a house for tea.

Imagine it. Without a word of a lie, it's akin for those kids to be climbing Mount Finlayson twice a day to go to school.

We found Troy coming down the hill, and ready for a cup of tea himself. Then the bad news arrived. We were invited up to their house for a repast. There was no escape. So up we trudged. But it was well worth it, for we were served the best curried-fried potatoes I've ever eaten. When you go, do not miss them.

We got back to Sanitar just before dark, and a couple of days later I asked Troy when he was going to go back up to film the kids 'coming' to school? He raised his eyebrows with askance, saying: 'that's not going to happen.'

'Western jam-tart', I thought.

Troy and I were accommodated in a spare room of the school where they had built us a couple of extra long beds with slate mattresses. It was actually quite comfortable, and gave us a place to speak Canadianese, the English spoken in Nepal being more 'similar to English' than English, if you know what I mean? But still, one of the great advantages of building an English speaking school is that there are people you

can communicate with. I've traveled some, but always on the tourist circuit, so when you really get to meet the locals it is very instructive, and most interesting.

The first thing that strikes you about the inhabitants of Sanitar is how courteous and friendly they are. Hospitality is obviously an important part of their culture, and for Troy, the cause of many obligations. Everyone wanted him over for tea, and he could not refuse. We had tea with milk, with honey, with sugar, with cinnamon, with salt, and black. Ah, the obligations of being a dignitary. Often I was able to escape, but not Troy. For the most part I'm not very friendly, and prefer my own company. (One thing I did appreciate though, was that on our arrival they discovered I was Troy's uncle, and addressed me as such from then on, a moniker I had not gone by for many years.)

Sleeping in the school we went to a teacher's house for breakfast and dinner. Such as it was, it was with this teacher, and her husband, with whom we socialized the most, and got to know the best.

Sashe, as is her name, is a primary-grade teacher, which according to Troy's designation, is a 'teacher in training', meaning she does not have her degree yet.

All I know is that she is the most beautiful woman I've ever seen. I was afraid to look at her for fear I might not believe it. And I don't mean she is just beautiful to look at, for that she is, but in all the other ways you might think of in declaring a woman beautiful. She is intelligent, modest, amusing, and courteous, but frank, and hardworking.

And her husband, Valcumar, well, he's an unabashed scoundrel!

They were a delightful pair to spend time with, although we never ate dinner with them. In Nepal the guests are served first, and the hosts eat later. Troy and I pleaded with them every night to eat with us, explaining that's what we did in Canada, but it was to no avail. They promised to have dinner with us one night, but it never happened, and they always sat there watching, asking if we wanted more of this or more of that.

Sashe is twenty years old, and Valcumar is twenty-four. They met in collage, and theirs is a love-marriage, a situation more common than I thought in a culture where most marriages are arranged.

"What did your parents say when they found out you wanted to marry each other?" I asked.

"They would not allow it," Sashe replied. "They disapproved, but we got married anyway, and after a year they changed their minds, for what was the use of opposing any longer?" (Indeed, Valcumar's father had dinner with us practically every night, and you could see the affection he had for her.)

As with many couples, and families, in Nepal, they are faced with a dilemma caused by economics. People must go to where they can make a living, and therefore are often separated from each other. Sashe has her teaching job at the Everest English School, but Valcumar is employed as an accountant far away in the Terai Region, and was only in Sanitar on a leave of absence, due to return to work in about two weeks. It was a stressful situation for them to be in, but that did not stop them from being cheerful. The banter was always amusing.

"Valcumar, look at Sashe," Troy would say, pointing at Sashe, who was down on her hand and knees scrubbing dirty dishes, "she's been teaching all day long, and then she comes home to prepare dinner for everyone, and now she is still working. You should help her."

“Yes, yes, I do. I help her all the time. Even now I am holding the flashlight,” he’d reply.

“But she works so hard all the time,” Troy continued.

“I know, I know, but she likes it, she likes it,” he assured us.

We all stood there, and chuckled. It’s a man’s world in Nepal.

One day I told Sashe that her husband was a scoundrel.

“A scoundrel?” she replied. “What is a scoundrel?”

“He does not play fairly,” I said, and then related what had transpired that day.

Valcumar and I had gone to Rumjatar with Troy to eat oranges with everyone, and Valcumar would not leave me alone. He felt obligated to go everywhere I went to make sure I was safe. It was not a new problem for me because Mitra had been the same way, watching my every step, and almost having a heart attack every time I tripped on a stone. They did not understand I am an experienced hiker, and quite enjoy being alone, and not to worry.

Coming back from Rumjatar I insisted on leaving the main road to come back through the fields, along a ravine. Valcumar could not understand why I would want to do such a thing, but followed reluctantly. I explained to him it wasn’t necessary for him to come if he didn’t want to, and that we would be all right without him, Troy not caring what route we took back. But he would not leave us.

So along we went, Valcumar confused by this odd agenda, and constantly watching my every move. All I wanted to do was get rid of him for a while. Then the perfect opportunity arose, Troy had to rush back to the school for a meeting, leaving us behind.

“Look Valcumar, Troy is going back to Sanitar. Why don’t you go with him? I will be just fine here alone,” I said, reassuring him.

“No Uncle. I am not like Troy. Troy is selfish. I am not selfish, and I will never leave you alone.”

All I could do was roll my eyes. Then a few minutes later as we sat on the edge of the ravine I tried again.

“Why do you insist on staying here with me? Why don’t you go back to Sanitar?” I pleaded.

“Because Uncle I love you so much.”

What was I going to say to that? There was no reply, and it became a running joke for the rest of the trip.

Every night Troy would ask Valcumar if he had told Sashe and I, that he loved us.

“Yes, yes,” he’d reply, “I tell her every day, and Uncle I love the more the more.”

The guy was an unabashed flatterer. But I could hold my own.

One day he said he wanted to ask my advice about what he should do about his situation.

“Well,” I said, “if I was you I’d jump off the ravine into the river.”

“No, no. I could never do that,” he moaned.

Typical, I thought, people ask for your advice, but never take it.

And there are many other anecdotes I could relate about our trip to Sanitar; about how we eventually got Sashe not to serve us dahl bhat (rice and spinach) twice a day, but instead got her to serve us bread and potatoes, with the occasional egg thrown in; about how the chickens are kept inside at night so the Jackals don’t get them; about how I never

saw a piece of chicken larger than my thumbnail, which makes me wonder what happens to our chickens that they get so fat; about how aghast they were when I told them I come from a place which grows the best tasting beef on earth; about our trips to the market; about the toilet paper situation; about the baths we took out of a thermos; about how the flowers are still blooming in December; about the butterflies, and bumblebees, one which was black, three inches long, and an inch around; about the sacred trees protected from woodcutters, and the little shrines tucked away in forests and rocky enclaves; about the waterfall; about the monkeys, and how I saw troops of them on three different occasions; about the point where you can watch the sunset; about how many times I hit my head on a doorway; about the card games after dinner at night; about what happened to all the beer in the store; about how uncomfortable Troy was without his back-pack on; but let me say a few words about the most important thing—the school.

It's difficult to appreciate from the other side of the earth what has been accomplished, but it should make you proud to be a part of it.

Smiley happy faces abound. Around nine o'clock they start gathering in the school yard, with the first few boys rushing up to the office to get the football, taking off their shoes and asking: 'may I enter sir?' The soccer match begins, and what appeared to me at first as simply a few boys kicking a ball around I actually came to recognize as a very well organized, and structured game with new arrivals being assigned to one side or the other, and the game played through-out all the other children in the yard, who were welcome to kick the ball if it came their way. The girls entertained themselves with skipping ropes, a volleyball, and badminton rackets.

When the teachers arrive at ten o'clock all the children line up in four rows from the smallest to the tallest, and the teachers put them through their paces. They do calisthenics to the beat of a drum, say a prayer, sing the national anthem, then Laxi Didi, the teacher's assistant, rings the gong, and they all march into their respective classrooms to begin their lessons. It's all very impressive.

When I happened to go into one of their classrooms they all jumped to their feet, and in unison hollered: 'please come in sir.' Then when I asked them their names they jumped to their feet and said 'my name is ---- sir'. Then when I left the classroom they all jumped up and said, 'thank-you for teaching us sir.' At least they are being taught manners and respect.

And although I know very little about teaching, nor anything about curriculum, I know enthusiasm when I see it.

Everyday that I was there dozens of children, morning and afternoon, were at the school for 'tuition'. 'Tuition' being extra classes offered to any of the local children, regardless of whether they are registered in the Everest English School or not. (And in truth it was a little disconcerting for me to see how many kids turned up for extra classes on their own time. When I went to school I thought the threat of not being able to go out on the weekend, no bike, no desert, no t.v., if I didn't do my homework, was sufficient effort on my part as extra schooling.) Perhaps it should also be noted that two principals from local government schools send their own children to the Everest English School, which may tell you something.

I must also say that I was impressed by the teaching-staff selected by Mahindra and Rudra.

Mitra, as mentioned, is a young man of twenty-six, and quite extraordinary. He is hard working, conscientious, good-humored, and obviously has an excellent rapport with both his fellow teachers, and with the students. (To think that I would have been capable at the age of twenty-six to run a school with a hundred and thirty-two students and seven teachers would be ridiculous.) Unfortunately, Mitra is leaving at the end of the term to pursue his masters' degree.

Tonka, a native son of Sanitar, is twenty-four, and a 'teacher in training'. He gets up at four-thirty in the morning, hikes down to Rumjatar to take classes at the collage there, hikes back up to teach at the school, goes home to do his chores, eats dinner, and studies until mid-night. That's dedication. My observations of the other teachers were likewise positive. (I might also add that it pleased me to see so many male teachers on staff at the school. I think perhaps the lack of male teachers in our own system may be a failing.) Put simply, the school is excellent, and deserves our continued support.

Well, to end, I can only say it was a terrific experience. Happily I was just along for the ride. It fell to Troy to carry the load, and there was a lot for him to do. Schools come with people, and with people, come politics. While he was in meetings, and solving the issues that arose, I was out watching monkeys, and hoping for leopards.

Still I know, as do we all, that in life one of the most important things is the pursuit of truth, and that truth, perhaps, is most easily found through knowledge, and that knowledge is most easily found through education--though the ability to read and write. I agree with Troy that the best hope for ourselves, our children, for the world itself, surely must start with education. Education confronts confusion, despair, and pessimism. There is nothing better we can do than that.

On the day we left we gathered in the schoolyard, speeches were made, and fresh garlands given. It's a wonderful thing to know that somewhere on the other side of the earth you are not only welcome, but appreciated. And that means you too.