

ALONE, NOT LONELY

By: Mary Anne Mercer

I was only a few months into my new life in rural Nepal when I realized that I was changing into someone I didn't really know. It had sounded like my dream job: two years working as a nurse trekking village to village in an exotic foreign land, leading a health team in a district with no roads, no electricity, and only one radio-telephone high on a hill. I was anxious to live a totally different life and learn about another culture, but I had no idea how much this adventure would teach me about myself.

My job was to go out for two or three weeks at a time with a team of Nepali staff who served as vaccinators and porters to conduct an immunization campaign and provide simple health teaching. One morning before starting the day's work, I decided to take a Nepali bath at the local water source instead of the usual sponge bath in my tent. I rose early, without the tea I was usually served before breakfast, and found Sita, one of the local women on my team, who said she would join me. We filed along a narrow path out of the camp and after a short distance came to a clearing.

Ahead of us, icy spring water poured out of an eight-inch square opening in a rocky bank covered with vines and vegetation, protected from view by surrounding bushes. The air was fresh, free of the dusty barnyard smells of the villages. Sunlight sparkled through the trees—enough for warmth, but without the unpleasant feeling that I was in a spotlight. *Here it is*, I thought, *my fantasy of living well with only simple, bare necessities without the trappings of civilization*. The spot felt peaceful, secluded. After weeks of feeling overwhelmed by crowds of people and constant activity, I was elated.

It was the perfect place to practice the public bath ritual that all Nepali women master, and two local women at the tap were happy to share their expertise. Wrapping a lungi under my arms and around my body, I worked my way out of the clothing underneath it, splashed icy water on the exposed parts, and then washed myself discreetly. With every chilling splash on my bare arms, neck, and legs, I could feel the tension lifting, my spirits rising. My flip-flops made sloshing noises on the rocky floor, and birdsong filtered down from the trees. I had learned that putting clothes on again over wet skin under the sarong was a challenge, particularly dealing with zippers. But it was worth it—the joy of feeling cool and clean, at least until the next hot afternoon of trudging up and down the trails.

I had nearly completed washing when I heard childish tittering from the rocks above us. I looked up and peeking through the bushes was a gaggle of kids ranging from about six to ten years old, delighted with their front-row view of this fascinating curiosity—me. They shrieked in delight when they noticed I saw them, preparing to flee and clearly savoring the excitement. These were the children I'd loved to tease and interact with when I first came to Nepal. But now, every muscle in my body tensed.

"Jesus! Sita!" I yelled. But then I lowered my voice. "Those kids are following me again. Will you get them out of here?" The momentary sense of peace was gone. *My blood pressure must be sky high*, I thought. *Why in the hell can't I get even a moment to myself?* That dull ache at the base of my rib cage was back in a flash, that feeling that I would never again be able to enjoy a relaxed, deep breath and the peace it brought. I couldn't believe how angry I was. *This isn't like me*, I thought. And once again I asked myself how long I would be able to do this work, live like this.

Sita whirled and gave her best schoolteacher admonitions to the group. "Kids! What are you doing here? You should be home helping your mothers!" They giggled some more, then seeing her serious expression, reluctantly drifted back out of sight.

With a scowl, I threw my washcloth into my bag and stalked back to camp. For the rest of the day, a porter was always on the alert, running interference with anyone who wanted to talk to me. He was polite but clear: “Come tomorrow morning if you need medicine, we will take care of you then. No, you can’t see Memsaab now.” Everyone seemed to be walking on tiptoes, hoping not to upset me.

That night a group of local young people were gathering with our porters in an impromptu session of local music and socializing. But I begged off and retired early, pleading exhaustion from the long day. I could enjoy the relative luxury of private “camping” within the four walls of the local school instead of the steamy confines of a tent, as classes were not in session. I blew out my lantern and settled into my sleeping bag, with the singing and laughter in the background a kind of comforting lullaby.

But a small horde of kids decided that the stranger camped inside the schoolhouse was more interesting than the music, even though there was nothing for them to see through the open, paneless schoolroom windows. After calling out a few times, they started throwing stones onto the corrugated metal roof, then giggling wildly, hoping for a response.

I’m just going to ignore them, I strategized. They’ll get tired of it pretty soon.

The noise of each rock was shattering, like an electric shock, but I lay motionless in the dark. *I can deal with this, I thought. They’re just having fun.* I’d always enjoyed the playful spirit of children that seemed to prevail in Nepal, no matter how constrained their circumstances or how few “things” they had. Eventually the noise stopped, and I dropped off into a light slumber.

Suddenly, I was startled awake by a small object landing on my chest with a thump. My heart pounding, I shrieked, not sure what was happening in the near-total darkness.

I sat upright, switched on my flashlight, and found the small round rock that had been tossed in by one of the children and had bounced off my chest. I could hear suppressed giggles coming from the open windows. Now, I was fully awake and very angry. *I’m going to kill those kids, every single one,* I muttered to myself. With that I bounded out of my sleeping bag and strode to the door, aware that the scrubs I wore for pajamas might look odd but were at least decent.

I threw open the door and could see a small crowd of kids, their grinning little faces full of excitement, lurking along the windowed side of the building. Grabbing the first boy I could see by his grubby collar, I charged with him into the middle of the crowd gathered around a fire on the other side of the building. Dozens of eyes turned on me and the music and chattering abruptly stopped, bringing an uneasy silence.

I broke into a rant in my worse-than-usual Nepali. “These kids are throwing rocks at me! What can I do? I have to sleep—you need to stop them, right now!” Immediately, everyone was apologizing, scolding the children, and promising me it wouldn’t happen again. Dil Man, one of our young porters, emerged from the group.

“Memsaab, OK, you can go back, we’ll make sure they don’t bother you anymore,” he assured me. But the faintly horrified look on his face told me I had overstepped the bounds of “annoyed” into something Nepalis were uncomfortable with—an open display of anger.

I shook my head in disgust, sighed deeply, and returned to the dark schoolroom. Already I could feel my temper slinking off like a chastised puppy, and an oh-no-maybe-I-shouldn’t-have-done-that feeling rising in my chest.

Damn, I thought to myself. I shouldn’t have gotten so mad, but how much longer can I take this? What’s wrong with me?

Knowing that sleep would be slow to return, I sighed and crawled back into my sleeping bag. Losing one's temper is not a good thing in most cultures but particularly so in this part of South Asia. Maintaining balance, the appearance that all is well within the community, is an important principle of daily interactions.

Five minutes later, the music resumed, but more softly. *No more harassment from the kids anyway*, I thought. The singing continued into the night. I turned, sleepless, from one side to the other, wishing my thin foam pad were a real mattress. *What on earth is happening to me, the "nice" me?* I wondered. *Where is that kind, caring, lover of children I'd been when I arrived?* This life was more frustrating, exhausting, and crazy-making than I could have imagined. I had never seen that angry, quick-tempered side of myself before. It felt like a mental illness, a total breakdown of the normal person I thought I was, as if some wicked alter ego was taking over. I was at once embarrassed and unable to stop my nasty reactions to regular, daily stresses. And when I thought of going on like this for days, weeks, months into the future, I felt my lungs collapse. There was only a dark, heavy space in my chest that wouldn't admit air, wouldn't open to the world.

I lay awake, going over and over the events of the day and the past few weeks. After only four months of fieldwork, I was emotionally exhausted. Being under continuous surveillance was something I hadn't expected, and I'd had no idea how badly I would react. I snarled at the first sign of being approached by anyone for *aushadi*, medicine, and frowned furiously at curious children observing my every move. The kids had been especially persistent, following me wherever I went and giggling at anything I did or said. I knew it was mostly because they had never seen a *bideshi*, an outsider, before, especially one with pale skin and blue eyes. But I felt like a hunted animal, and retreating to my tent wasn't an option. The heat required opening the flaps, and a mass of smiling children and curious adults would inevitably gather to stare at me, commenting on my every move.

With all the other stresses of life in Nepal, I was puzzled that the lack of privacy was the most upsetting. Not the heat, nor the exhaustion from hours of trekking up and down the hills every day. Not the flies, the fleas, the dirt, or eating the same food for every meal. It wasn't even the loneliness, as hard as that was. It was never having a moment to myself that was killing me—never being able to retreat from the world, to go into that private place inside me.

I had known about culture shock, and my brief orientation before leaving for Nepal included a rather vague explanation of the adjustments I would face with new food, the warm climate, and an unfamiliar language. But this was a different kind of stress, something more personal. I couldn't even explain it in Nepali since *ikhlaai*, the Nepali term for "alone," was also the word used for "lonely," with the subtle meaning that if someone was alone she was naturally also feeling lonely.

Still pondering what my behavior was telling me, what I could do about it, I eventually slipped into a restless sleep. The next day, I thought guiltily about the previous night, trying again to analyze the sources of my discomfiture. Certainly the work was more challenging than I'd expected. My main job wasn't meant to include providing clinical care, but I couldn't refuse to talk to the ailing or injured people who came to our camp. The small local clinics that should have provided care for the most common problems were often closed, and, if open, were frequently out of the most basic medicines and supplies. There were frustrating limitations to what I could do, although often a fairly simple remedy was all that was needed, such as recommending hot compresses for a wound infection. From the moment we started out on a trek until we got back to our field base, there were always eyes on me, people telling me their symptoms, asking for help and medicine, waiting for a response.

The very novelty of a stranger in the village might warrant a surreptitious trip to our camp in the hope of sighting the foreigner. The only time I wasn't aware of eyes following me was when I discreetly went off into the trees to relieve myself. They all understood what that meant—so only then would they grant me privacy. Otherwise I was the hottest show in town. I was reminded of the cry of

the reclusive Greta Garbo, the famous Swedish movie star of the 1930s, “I want to be alone.” Now I was she, a celebrity hounded by the public, and it was the worst fate I could imagine.

The other nurse in the program, who led a separate team, was excited about every aspect of this life, exulting about how amazing it was. Why couldn’t I just “be here now,” as the gurus instruct, in this fascinating once-in-a-lifetime experience? How could I even admit to being such a dull, limited character? It was a guilty secret I could only acknowledge to myself. I was too ashamed to even talk about it, to write about it in my letters home. The feeling that I was failing to fully appreciate this amazing opportunity was a secret burden lodged deep in my chest, and thinking about it made me close my eyes and take a deep breath. I wanted to exhale it out of my life.

Those first months in Nepal were devastatingly painful for me. I discovered a side of myself that I didn’t like. Confusing things, unsettling things. It was as if I had met someone I didn’t know, and only much later did I look back and find I liked her again. However, over time I was able to adapt by making full use of the quiet time that was available at the house in our field base, on trips to Kathmandu, sometimes even in my tent. All I needed was a room to myself, time to reflect, to write in my journal, and I felt renewed. But the pain of those early days stayed with me, a kind of blot on my recollection of my time in the field.

For many years, I was at a loss to understand why my equilibrium had been so disturbed during those first months in Nepal. Then years later, in a workplace seminar, I heard a lecture about the importance of personality types in determining an individual’s reactions to life events. I listened to the speaker describe introverts as people who may be social and have fine interpersonal skills, but need regular time alone, quiet and unstimulated, to energize them, to recharge their batteries. When they don’t have that, they feel anxious and off-balance.

I was suddenly alert. That’s me! I thought back to my childhood in a family of seven children, remembering the times I’d pull away from my siblings to find a quiet place. The need for “alone places” became acute when I was an adolescent. I’d sit against the weed-carpeted side of my grandfather’s weathered ranch house, next door to ours, and contemplate the horses in the pasture, the neighbor’s small house and windmill half a mile away, and the badlands beyond. I dreamed about other worlds, places where I would someday go and the exciting life I would lead. When the Montana winter set in, rather than brave the chilly outdoors, I’d escape by curling up on the sofa and feigning sleep, with a blanket pulled over my head. Even then, needing my space.

As I recognized in myself the classic picture of an introvert, those early days in Nepal came back. Vivid memories emerged of the unrelenting attention of those endless crowds, and the bliss that encompassed me when I could finally go into a room and close a door on the rest of the world. It had been a perfect setup for making someone like me half crazy. Cut her off from the possibility of that interior, alone time; make her the undivided center of attention; surround her with an unfamiliar culture that values constant social interaction. No wonder those first months were so difficult. I gradually came to the understanding that that painful time was, for me, a normal reaction to being thrust into a totally new environment and culture combined with the assault on my introverted nature.

But those months in the villages of Nepal, immersed in the daily life of its people—their beauty and their pain—had many lasting benefits. My team became my family, bringing all the complexities and joys of family life. Challenging as it was, that time convinced me that work with people in other cultures was what I wanted to do. Since then, it has taken me to several continents where I have seen more of other places and other ways of life than I ever imagined possible.

Over the years, I’ve found ways to appreciate and nurture my need for space, for alone time. Although I treasure being with family and friends, time spent in my own company often provides my most creative and centered moments. What I learned from Nepal is something I cherish now, not as a guilty secret, but as a gift that allows me to embrace who I am.