

2/25/09

Dear Friends,

It feels like it has been a very long time since I have written you. I have been finding it very difficult to write because I have the feeling that so much has happened in the last month. I just don't know where to start. I don't know if it is relevant to anyone else but me. I am close to coming home and I feel like I have been here for just a few days. There is nothing like traveling by yourself to see things clearly. I can't say that I have been alone every day. That is not how walking works here. It is pretty funny, when arriving to a village, people want to know where you came from and where you are going and before morning there is a relative or friend that is going in your direction and that is how you get a traveling companion or companions for the next day. I am such a pleaser in much of my life that when I travel with others I spend a lot of time worrying about their experience. This trip has been special because I pick which trail to take and don't have to explain it or discuss it. I imagine that sounds selfish, but I have learned so many things. When I want to stay somewhere, I do. Some days I walk 12 hours and some days I don't walk.

I had plans to ride a motorcycle to India, and go to Kashmir. It has always been a dream of mine. But, I find myself spending a week longer than planned in a little village called Lingam and helping them with planning a library for their school, and learning how to make a bamboo roof. I sit in a smoky little room with a dung floor and watch the cooking fire until late night and then go look at the stars with Birkah, Sunita's uncle and one of Lingam's village leaders that reminds me of my uncles and father. We can only speak a few words, but I like being around him and I think he likes me. He gave me a knife called a Kukari that almost every man in Nepal villages carries. I like knives and these are really incredible. Kind of a machete, bowie knife combo. Every day I planned on leaving something would catch my eye or I just felt like staying. I was feeling that I was like the character that James Garner played in Support Your Local Sheriff. (I like old westerns.) In the movie he was heading to Australia but could never quite make it. I was heading to Kashmir and end up herding goats and chopping bamboo and butchering chickens with my new knife instead.

Sometime around the 20th of January, I was finally able to leave Khandbari. The plan was for Sunita to go with me toward the Makalu area and find a girl that we had heard about from this region. She was from a very poor family. She had scored at the top of the village kids and we were told she was very nice, bright, a hard worker and wanted to be a teacher. I hoped to add a girl to the hostel to make sure a few younger girls were started in the program and this sounded like a good candidate. We were going to find her and then finish what Josh Brody had advised me to do. Josh had advised me to see all of the villages along the upper Arun valley, which is one of the most primitive areas in eastern Nepal and goes to the Tibetan border. The villages are of the Bhotia Caste and are where

the hostel girls are from. My goal was to visit each family and meet all of the girls' parents. Sunita and I spent one night with her parents in Mani Benja and in the morning took a jeep north winding out of the Arun Canyon toward Num. I have walked this trail several times and was glad to be jammed in the jeep with 14 other passengers, climbing out of the valley gaining over two thousand, rather than walking this hard packed road. We were dropped in Chilchilla- a ridge top village that has views from Makalu to the Taplejung area to the east. Chilchilla is potentially a beautiful place that has turned into a roadside village. That is the funny thing about road building in primitive areas. When the so-called development comes, a few business people make quite a lot of money and the majority of others have to deal with the dust, smoke, and transient population that comes with change and increases in materials. In this case the increase is in crappy Chinese products and lots of wrappers and trash left on the ground, dirtier children than usual, and a lot of people standing around waiting for Jeeps to come rather than working in their fields. (Just my opinion.) Whoever you talk to says how great the new road is. I am waiting to see the improved lifestyle. Anyway we used the Jeep to bypass this section and by 11:00 A.M. on our first day of leaving we were walking toward Num. The village at the end of the road. Where my Nepal begins.

I cannot express what walking in this country is like. For me it is where I get healthy in mind and body and see people living with smiles and purpose. An underlying goal of Ten Friends is to help people stay in their villages to improve their education and hopefully live with a better quality of life than in the city. This goal becomes stronger to me every time I am in the mountains. Many people who have spent time in rural Nepal agree that children should be able to attend quality schools and live at home rather than either not get an education or must find a boarding school or a children's home in an urban area to get an education. Most of these urban areas have such sanitation problems and other issues of population density. Nepal is a rural country, which in many cases allows families to live sustainably, needing very few outside resources. Much of Nepal is at a latitude that it can grow tremendous self-sustaining crops; it reminds me of what my parents told me Southern California was like before the crazed development. Many regions are very fertile and able to grow a variety of foods. The steep elevation allows a lot of diversity in crops within a very short distance. Within a few hours my thoughts become very clear. We need to help people in the rural areas. That is where this country flourishes. Everyone here knows it, but of course the answers aren't simple. The education system is not working, specifically in the mountains and these remote villages have no resources. The ability for income is very small so the improvement of lifestyle or any new opportunities for young people are very difficult. That leads the young people to leave and head to the city hoping for opportunity that really doesn't exist. For about three weeks I wandered village to village. Zig zagging north towards Kimathanka the last village on the Nepal -Tibetan border-- each day we stopped to visit villages, schools and always working from one hostel girl's family to the next. Other than Sunita, the girls are all of the Bhotia Caste which is a high

mountain Caste of Mongol origin that migrated from the the Tibetan side of the Himalayas the same as the famous Sherpa's from the Khumbu region to the West. Their culture, dress, housing and lifestyles are very similar to the Sherpa culture . The difference is that their villages are primarily about 30 miles to the east of Mt. Everest. They are on the Eastern flank of Mt.Makalu 28,000 ft, which is the 5th highest mountain in the world. It was interesting for me to see the villages and schools in this area. The villages are out of a story book. Stone houses with very few conveniences. It is hard to believe that high mountain villages like this still exist. I love seeing them. I have always dreamed of seeing things that existed in history. I have always glamorized the thought and this area is it. Although just a few days from jeep access, these villages still exist pretty much as they have for thousands of years. They are beautiful and sit in the most picturesque places that I have seen. But as I find with much of this country, beauty and ugliness usually are in close proximity. My worst days and best days are usually within one sleep. As I went through the checkpoints, I could see the lists of visitors. To the Singsawava region there had been three foreigners to register in the past two years. One surveyor and two tourists. It is interesting that compared to the Khumbu region, (Everest region, merely seven days walk from Khandbari to the East) no one visits here. In the Khumbu region, Edmund Hillary began the wave of support. Schools, business, hospitals, health posts, tons of tourist dollars etc. The Singsawava (upper region where Bhotia villages stit) region, even though with a similar culture it has received very little foreign assistance. There are none of the famous tourist tea houses to visit in this area. No menus or other tourists to ask questions, no book stores, clothing shops, or other conveniences that are found on the Everest Trek. Makalu sits only 14 miles away from Everest yet the villages just to it's east have been left relatively untouched. Good for sustaining culture, bad for positive development and opportunity like school improvement, village sanitation.

That brings up my old issue. Isn't it interesting where we fall out of the womb. Why are we born in one of the wealthiest countries in the world, compared to people that are born in the animal stalls under their house, without any health care? My thought is that it is all chance. In about one week I will be teaching Sisters High students who have computer access, straight teeth, cell phones, food three times a day or they get a head ache, sports, art, books, clean water, TAG, I.E.P.s etc. (I had to throw in the last two for my humor.) Yet, the kids I am seeing live in one of the most beautiful places on earth where the schools that exist are falling down, one in ten children die before they turn two (usually from water born illness(Nearly every child has a cold, cough, scabies, water disease, diaria etc. It is hard for me to put my mind around these differences. Why our kids have so much and these so little. Yet, these kids never complain. They can walk all day on two bowls of rice, lentils, and a few potatoes. They can carry more weight than I can dream of carrying. The boys and girls can start a fire with soaking wet wood and cook a pot of the tastiest Dal Bhat in a tin can in twenty minutes, they can make a basket from bamboo for carrying in less than a day, can plow a field by hand or with an oxen, they can sleep on the ground in flea

infested blanket, they don't whine when palm sized spiders crawl across their legs at night. They wipe with their left and eat with their right. They can water their family garden, take a shower, make tea, water the goats and cook for me with less water than we brush our teeth with. They have never read a book, because there isn't one in their village or within 15 days walk. Their schools have maybe a ten year old set of beat up paper back subject books. These class books talk about airplanes, buses, bicycles, oceans, animals and countries that they will never see. Nothing in their minimal schooling, discusses their culture, growing high mountain crops, health programs, family planning or anything that would be locally helpful. When asked what they need they say an education. Yes, my mind is messed up every time I see this. It is difficult to make sense of. Why am I more comfortable here than at home. Are these kids unlucky or lucky? Can we help them or can they help us?

My worst day was followed of course by my best day. That is always how Nepal is for me. I do best when I have no expectations. It is funny that I have been on trails here many times. Yet, I have to learn the same lessons over and over. It is not until I let myself drop in that I really relax and enjoy. I worry too much over my filtered water, or semi clean sleeping area. It is when I forget about habits and live like the people around me that I really enjoy my daily time. When I start eating with my hand and wiping with my other and going barefoot. That is when I really enjoy things. After visiting Kalica and her family, we went to Lingam an amazing Gurung village and then moved up through Golo and on to Hatya, Hungung and then Kimathanka. Then we circled back down through more the Bhotia villages of Chemtang, Chepua and back to Hatya.

We pushed hard for several days and crossed a pass to get to Kimathanka at the border. This was an amazing place. I was very excited to gaze across the river at Tibetan villages. With all of the news and knowing the history it is something to look at the Tibet villages 400 yards away. The bridge is guarded on both sides by Nepali's to the South and Chinese to the North. Nepali traders can cross but the Tibetan's are not allowed to cross anymore. I made friends with the Nepali army captain. He was a sturdy guy that was a bit intimidating checking papers with about 15 guys standing around with rifles in the cold. I am quite a point of interest, since they do not get tourists in this area. Also it is winter so there is nothing for them to do but stand around and be cold. The whole situation is pretty fascinating. I had to go through three check-posts to get to this point and usually after explaining that I was visiting local families and trying to improve schools they were pretty receptive. This final post was the one I was curious about. But, the captain was not a talker. I have learned a few things and luckily I know what topic to bring up with the military guys. They love to talk guns and so do I. The first thing I noticed was that they had pretty old guns that had mauser actions similar to my first rifle. I asked what caliber and that opened things up. I got a whole display and all the men unloaded and showed me their rifles starting with the captain. He was impressed that I could work the action since you have to keep it moving to close the bolt, slamming it forward. I quickly took out the bolt

and adjust the peep site. Hunting with my dad I would always practice swinging the gun off the sling into a shooting position and when I did this they all howled. It was really funny that after 15 minutes of talking about their 303 calibers and me explaining that I owned a 257 Roberts and how far it could reach with a 100 grain bullet I had new friends. They even offered to let me shoot with them. After this the captain gladly answered all of my questions. First he was not happy that the Chinese were supplied with full choke automatic weapons. Then he explained that that it was quite regular that the Tibetan's would sneak across the border, but the last year that had come to a complete stop. The Chinese guards brought food across and they even had soft drinks some time. I guess I really didn't learn anything important other than the life of these mountain borders is very different than anything we usually see. The captain gave me some food and made me promise to stop at his home when I went back through his village.

After leaving Kimathanka we circled to more Bhotia villages and I slowly worked back toward Khandbari, stopping again in Lingum and spending more time at Birkah's house. Each village was unique in it's setting with some similarities. Some of these things I noticed and others were pointed out when I interviewed families. I asked everyone that I stayed with what they liked about their village and what was difficult. All of the answers were similar. The people explained that the good thing about their village was that that everyone looked after each-other. Many of the villages had only one person at home. Part of each family walks to Taria (the lowland on the Indian border to farm or sell high mountain herbs or hand made items) in the winter. While they are gone the villagers must work together even more than usual. They liked the farming and lifestyle. What they didn't like is that they knew that sanitation was bad and the schools were not good. The low functioning schools were due to teachers that did not show up a lot of the time or no supplies, or that their children had to walk to another village to go to school. Most of the schools have a 1st-5th grade school with two secondary schools in the region. The distance the children walk each day is amazing. I found school attendance at about 40% of their enrollment and the schools were falling apart. The government seems to give about half of the money necessary to build a school and depending on the community organization and motivation, each village varies in what they do with the school. One thing was common, everyone wants to improve the education for their children and no one likes sending their kids away to boarding schools or children's homes to attend school.

There were some major differences in the villages and what they did with their limited resources. It was so interesting to see Birkah's village and watch how they had organized and had local working groups on village tasks. It was exciting and gave me many ideas on how and who to help. This village of Lingam is totally willing to meet help half way and after many late night talks, created plans for sanitation, changing water supply, building a library for children etc. I realized that for a small amount of assistance what could really be done to improve life to level that could sustain and make a place that kids could learn the

way's of their culture and get the skills needed to survive in the outside world. I feel this should be a target for us. If we can assist village improvement it is the best of every world. I loved staying in Lingam, every year there is one village that stands out, and is a place I would like to visit again and in this case, I would like to live for a longer period of time. It was a true village. People working together with the land and taking the best care they could of the environment. Five generations of Birkah's family had lived in the same houses. They had to manage community resources of bamboo, crops, water. Everything was done for the improvement of the village. I have never been so comfortable in a place. I really did not want to leave, but I knew there was a lot to do in Khandbari and we must find a new home for the teacher training center. Each day I planned on leaving Lingam and kept finding things to do so that I could stay longer. Watching the peaceful lives of Birkah and his family was perfect for me. Each day watching and being a little help to this mountain family did me a lot more good than anything I gave to them.

After staying in Lingam, I busted it back to Khandbari and went to check on the hostel. My plan was stay a few days and then back to Kathmandu.