

January —March 2010



# Sabbatical Notes from India

## The Rev. Stephen V. Smith's Letters Home

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Dear Friends & Family,

After a long, but uneventful trip to India, we have arrived safely in Kerala in Kannur at the beautiful homestay of Nazir and Rosie and their two children, meeting up with Martin and Lindsey on Saturday. The last two days have been spent luxuriating in the natural beauty of the ocean which is right outside our door. We are surrounded by

waterways, rice paddies, and coconut groves. The Keralan people are extraordinarily gracious and friendly, and we have all felt embraced by their hospitality. We are slowly getting our heads above the fog of jet lag to recognize in the prism of paradox of India the great complexity in simplicity of things here, the richness in having little to distract, the novelty in ancient practice and

culture. We feel blessed to be here and offer our prayers and love to you from half-way around the world. We feel buoyed by your affection and well wishes.

Blessings and Peace,

Steve

January 4, 2010

### First Week

Dear Friends & Family,

We have been in India nearly a week, and feel like we have made a good adjustment to our surroundings. We had a wonderful experience with Martin and Lindsey in North Kerala

in Kannur, and were sad to leave a place we all have said we would like to return to. One of the highlights was attending a Theyyam, or an ancient sacred dance, that is common among Hindus here in Kerala. Dating to a time

long before written accounts, the dance involves actors dressing in elaborate costumes signifying legendary figures from the past raised up by the gods as saintly figures as (cont...)

### First Week cont...

well as gods themselves. Held in sacred groves or in the temples themselves, the actors are members of the lower classes who on this special occasion once a year are possessed by the divinities. This inverts the caste system for this occasion and the Brahmin or high caste members of the community are required to acknowledge in reverence those they oversee in ordinary life. In the theyyam we attended, the young man was dressed as a goddess with elaborate bright red costuming and make-up and long flowing hair. Drawn into an ecstatic dance by the five drummers and horn player who accompanied him, the theyyam dancer whirled in ecstasy while attendants whirled fire-torches and incense. It was truly a spectacle far from the comparatively staid liturgical practices we are used to, and plumbed a kind of worship that was both primal and alluring. It stirred many things in us, I think, not the least of which was the

realization we had arrived in a world that lives close to the elemental experience of this natural world, its wonders, its terrors, and its mysteries.

Yesterday, we travelled for 10 hours by train and car to our next destination in South Kerala in the Western Ghats, or mountains 2 hours west of Cochin. Here we are staying in the retreat of Matthew Joseph, a Christian. South Kerala is predominately Christian, and there are churches, monasteries, and other sacred sites in great evidence here, several of which that are Anglican. There is also the most popular national park in South India, the Periyar Tiger Reserve. Earlier today, we took a guided hike through the preserve, saw many birds, and smaller animals, and on several occasions came upon places recently visited by mountain elephants. It is no small spiritual practice, I think, to be quiet and still enough to take in such magnificent creatures through the senses of smell and hearing, if not sight i t s e l f .

There is a large Hindu

pilgrimage underway here and thousands of pilgrims are now walking barefoot and with their bedrolls on their heads to the holy temple, some as far as 150 kilometers over very hard terrain. It brings on a level of humility



and awe to witness this level of piety.

As we anticipated, our first week here has been a stirring awakening of our senses, and we feel acutely aware our own existence as we are confronted with the dazzling reality of the world that is India. Though we are far in distance, we feel your closeness, and we send prayers and blessings to y o u a l l .

Steve



"As we anticipated, our first week here has been a stirring awakening of our senses, and we feel acutely aware of our own existence as we are confronted with the dazzling reality of the world that is India."

## Second Week

Dear Friends and Family,

"Bring your mind to stillness. Be here and now. Be aware of your breathing. Be aware of your body sensations. Relax. Relax. Relax."

Back when our daughter Colleen was a teenager, and we got into the inevitable tiffs that comes with that territory, and just as I was about to explode, she would look at me with her big blue eyes, and say: "Dad, breath. Just b r e a t h . "

It has taken me a long time to absorb this simple instruction, all the way to this time in India, where for this past week, here in Kuttikkanam at the retreat of Matthew Joseph we have been immersed in a practice of yoga, relaxation, meditation, and ayurvedic massage. Each day, Matthew has given yoga instruction to his guests. For Jeannette, who has practiced yoga for many years now, this has been a refresher, but for me, whose body is tighter than a fine tuned violin,

this has been a revelation. Matthew teaches Hadha Yoga, which integrates meditation into the practice, and it has given opportunity to step into this ancient spiritual discipline in the milieu in which it originated. Ayurvedic medicine is another ancient Indian practice, which sees the body holistically, and in nearby Catholic hospital we have been the beneficiaries of this wonderfully restorative healing art. You could think of it as Canyon Ranch on a beer budget, but I am doubtful Canyon Ranch can replicate the simplicity, the intentionality, and pure grace we have experienced here. It all seems a fitting preparation for the start of our retreat at the Ashram Kurisulama, which begins today, as we leave Mundax, for this Benedictine monastery an hour away. Kurisulama was the community in which Bede Griffith, the renown Benedictine, began his vocation, integrating Indian meditation into the

traditional prayer forms of Western monasticism. We are looking forward to our five days at the ashram and entering into the silence, the prayer, and simple practice of this community of monks.

Next week, we will travel to Tamil Nadu, the state and home of the oldest and most venerable of cultures of India, the Dravidians, dating to the time of the Romans and even earlier. We will spend time in Madurai, the location of the Sri Meenakshi Temple and a riot of Dravidian sculpture. It will be yet another journey into a world in this dazzling universe of culture and r e l i g i o n .

We think of you often and send our prayers and blessings to you!

Peace and Joy,

Steve and Jeannette



"Bring your mind to stillness. Be here and now. Be aware of your breathing. Be aware of your body sensations. Relax. Relax. Relax."

## Third Week in January

Dear Friends & Family,

For the better part of this past week, we have been sequestered in the beauty, austere silence, and radical simplicity of the Ashram of Kurimasala high in the Western Ghats of Kerala. Our retreat was with the community of monks who live in community at the ashram, on their large acreage which supports an active dairy farm. It is a fully sustainable farm, and most of what the monks subsist on comes from their own production. It was wonderful to see how, in this small microcosm, humans can live in close harmony with their natural surroundings. Living within a Benedictine rule, the monks are committed to a life of poverty, chastity, and obedience, but unlike my previous experiences in the States and Europe with "modern" monastic life, this was an introduction and immersion into something quite different, rigorous in its adherence to the simple life proclaimed in the Gospel. Jeannette and I stayed in separate quarters with the strict separation between the monks and nuns who live at Kurimusala. This segregation extended to our meals, which we ate

sitting on the floor, side by side in a row, our prayers at the various offices and masses of the day, and at other times during the day of work, rest, and contemplation.

The diet was strictly vegetarian, simple but deliciously prepared, and consisted mostly of produce from the monk's extensive gardens, composted and fertilized by the dung of the cattle, together with rice, that is the basis of the diet here.

What was extraordinary was the silence. Here in India, in the cacophony that marks so much of life, we were drawn into a quiet that was as startling as it is blissful. The liturgy of the monks draws from the very ancient practices of the Syrian church, dating back to the time of the primitive Christian community. Combined with this, the liturgy integrated Hindu practices, such as meditation and the ubiquitous use of incense, candle ceremony, flower ceremony, and the like. Much of what we experienced was as strange to us as the Hindu practices we have seen in the local temples, but it was equally alluring in its exaltation of the creative power and wonder of the Creator of all that is. Indeed, in so much of what we experienced in Kerala,

we have been impressed by the ways in which widely divergent faiths, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity, have melded into a common appreciation and worship of God.

We left Kurimasala deeply grateful and heartened by the simple witness and grace of this community, their vigilant attention to the care of the natural world as part and parcel of their creed, and the gift of being welcomed into their fellowship to learn at a more basic and immediate level the kind of freedom and joy that comes from living simply.

Being away from the outside world, the news about Haiti, as I know it has been for all of you, was devastating to us. It struck me hard that in the Indian papers, the story found itself buried in the middle of the paper. But as we left for Tamil Nadu, and into the stark human condition that marks so much of life in India, as in Haiti, it became clearer why this is so. Witnessing the vast numbers that live so close to death here, in a population where on a daily basis well over 200,000 die, many in deplorable and tragic conditions, brings us closer to the world as it is, brimming with contradiction, where life and death, joy and sadness, beauty and blight, poverty and grace exist as a seamless garment.

(cont. above right)

## Week Three (cont.)

The monks of Kurimasala reminded us that in this world, there is ample reason to entrust our hearts and purposes to the One who creates, restores, and sustains all things, and to measure our own existence by how well the least as well as the greatest of our fellow pilgrims journey through life.

Now it is on to Tamil Nadu, and even deeper into the heart of this strange, beautiful, maddening and enthralling land.

Blessings and Peace,

Steve



## Fourth Week—January 29, 2010

Dear Friends,

We are now in Mumbai, taking a few days respite in the warm embrace of the home of Lynne Gadowski, her husband Kiron, and their beautiful 5 month old, Lara. Since leaving Kerala ten days ago, our journey has given us a much different experience of this country, accentuated by the extreme contrasts between rich and poor and the degraded environment that defines so much of modern India. We left the cool and green of the Western Ghats and travelled due east into the hot, humid alluvial plains of Tamil Nadu. The people of Tamil Nadu trace their lineage back to the Dravidians, who were forced south when the Aryans made their conquest of the north nearly two millennia ago. Their language, their culture, religion, and social identity is markedly different from the rest of India, and they are proudly independent.

The plains west of Madurai, our initial destination, are ripe with

a plethora of crops: rice, sugar, corn, pineapple, bananas, tamarind, plaintains, coconuts, legumes of every stripe and color. There is a thriving agricultural economy that supports numerous small towns and communities. Madurai itself is a very old city dating back thousands of years. Its signature is a vast complex of Hindu temples and shrines, dedicated to Sri Meenakshi, the legendary daughter of a Pandyan king, who was born with three breasts. The king was told that the extra breast would disappear when she met the man she was to marry, and this happened when she met Lord Shiva on Mt. Kailasa. Subsequently, Shiva, the great God, came to Madurai in the form of Lord Sundareshwara to marry her.

The temple complex itself is breathtaking, with four entrances, and 12 great towers, each with hundreds of brightly sculpted deities and gods. In the bowels, thousands of pilgrims from all over India arrive to do obeisance and to take in

the spectacle. In a riot of liturgical color and sound and smell, they gather to celebrate and pray, bow and offer sacrifice. Truly a marvel to behold!

Outside the complex, Madurai is a cacophony of traffic, street beggars, and touts, all of which wore us down a bit. The air-conditioned hotel where we took refuge kept some of this at bay, but we began to see and sense that India lives with problems of infrastructure and socio-economic deprivation that are beyond our capacity to deal with. Like so many here, and so many who come to visit, the immediate response is to become desensitized, and to do this taxes the spirit.

After three days in Madurai, we took an overnight sleeper bus to Mamallapuram, just south of Chennai. (Martin, our son, safe and secure in London, thought this was really hard-core and rash for his parents to travel in this fashion!) Mamallapuram is a World Heritage Site, where some of the

(cont. next page—>)



"Martin, our son, safe and secure in London, thought this was really hard-core and rash for his parents to travel in this fashion."

## Fourth Week—January 29, 2010

(cont. from previous page)

greatest archeological rock carvings from the high culture of the 7<sup>th</sup> century A.D. Pallava kings of Kanchipuram are to be found. Indeed, the carvings are stunning, especially the shore temple overlooking the Bay of Bengal, the mandapams, or shallow rock halls carved out of the granite outcroppings in the center of town, and the five rathas, depicting the heroes of the Mahabharata epic carved during the 7<sup>th</sup> century, were unforgettable for the ingenuity and sheer physical prowess. We arrived just as their dance festival was ending, and saw some incredible displays of folk and tribal dancing from Tamil Nadu and the other regions of India. Throughout Mamallapuram, stonecutters continue the uninterrupted trade of their forbearers, creating massive and delicate statuary of seemingly endless variety.

We thought in being by the ocean, we would enjoy again the beauty and serenity of our seaside experience in Kerala. Unfortunately, we were disappointed. While the locals continue to fish the waters off shore, and we enjoyed terrific seafood to eat, close in the waters and beaches are suffering serious environmental degradation. It made us realize how precious these resources are, especially coming from an area that exists so close to the sea, and how quickly and easily these can be squandered and ruined

by human incursion. Cape Cod, no less than the shores of India, could very well share a similar fate if we cannot wake up to our place in the greater scheme of things.

The pollution we experienced on a small scale in Tamil Nadu is magnified exponentially in the megapolis of Mumbai, perhaps now the largest city in the world. It is remarkable how adaptable Indians have become in coming to terms with this, but the cost to them, not to speak of the countless species who share this habitat, is staggeringly high. India perhaps has reached and surpassed the tipping point from which there is little possibility of return. One wonders how close we are nearing our own tipping point.

Today Jeannette flies home to America, and I move on to Calcutta and the north and east of India to continue my journey. We hold you very close to us, and feel your presence daily.

Blessings and Peace,

Steve



## Week Five



"A young boy appears, he is blind, sitting by a pyre of garbage, warming himself."

It is early morning, pre-dawn. As if in a dream, I am walking. In the thick of auto exhaust, incense, and smoke, hope burns and rises. Figures appear in the haze, first as apparitions, then as human faces. Here a woman is squatting in the ashes of last night's fire, chipping away charcoal to cook her breakfast. There a rickshaw puller grimaces forward with the weight of his fare, his bare feet echoing off the pavement. Men whisper their prayers in the mosque as I pass. A

baby cries. A newborn litter of puppies rustle in the rotting mess underfoot. A young boy appears, he is blind, sitting by a pyre of garbage, warming himself. I can smell chai masala and the sweetness of hot oil, honey and wheat. Beneath me, bodies of all sizes huddle under blankets, some still snoring peacefully in the chill and grey.

I am in the City of Joy, Kolkata, known by most by its Anglicized name, Calcutta, the last refuge of the wretched of the

earth. I arrive at Mother House, and already the sisters are singing. This is where Blessed Theresa came seven decades ago to discern her vocation. She suffered the affliction of a mystic. She saw visions. She heard voices. One in particular identified himself as Jesus and bid her come to Calcutta to "be a light among the poorest of the poor". And so, she began with a tiny, ragtag community of women to gather the wretched, the untouchable, the outcast.

To the maimed and orphaned, she provided a home. To the sick and dying, she gave comfort. To the crushed and abandoned, she gave hope and joy.

Blessed Theresa has been gone 13 years now, but her work goes on. In the vast city of 15 million, most of them living in indescribable squalor, her work, as she herself described it, is like a drop of water in the ocean.

But it goes on.

I have spent this past week volunteering at Prem Dan, or House of Love, a home for men and women of all ages and conditions. Some are on the verge of dying. Some suffer psychoses or from a variety of mental illnesses. Some have broken bodies, from amputation or paraplegia, or hydrocephala, or spinalbifida. Some are autistic, or blind, or deaf. All have come to Prem Dan from the streets. I have been one of the volunteers from many countries who come to Kolkata to offer in the simplest of gestures a human touch.

## Week 5 Cont.

That touch goes two ways. And it is transformative. Each day, I have bathed the men, I have shaved them, I have massaged their arthritic and palsied limbs, I have washed their clothes, I have fed them their meals.

The face of one old Bengali man comes to me now. The razor I was given to shave him had been used many times before. It was dull and rusty. And I was clumsy. I knicked his face and pulled hard on his white whiskers. But there was no complaint. Only a serene stoicism. His eyes assured me it was alright. Nothing in his life could harm him anymore. I told him I would see him when I returned the next morning.

The next day, however, when I looked, he was not in the courtyard. Searching for him, I found him lying on a bed, his eyes closed in the dormitory where all the men slept, hooked up to an i.v. drip.

Yesterday, when I arrived, a sister told me he had died overnight, that his body was lying in the chapel, and I could go in to say a prayer if I liked. He was covered in a bed sheet, his uncovered face was washed and glowed in the ambient light. On the sheet cover, the sisters had placed three small flowers, a simple gesture of dignity for one who received none in his life.

Kolkata is a dream of head-spinning ironies; where grace abounds; where, in this great inhumanity, great love and great joy is all the more brilliant, all the more shimmering. For these few days, I have had the unforgettable privilege of walking in the steps of Mother Theresa, who many times in her life said that the passion of Jesus is now to be found among the poor. In her light, in this mystery, Jesus had been very near.

Blessings and Peace,

Steve



"His eyes assured me it was alright. Nothing in his life could harm him anymore."



## Six Weeks in India— Mid February

Dear Friends & Family,

Imagine being stranded on a small airstrip in the middle of nowhere. Or imagine going on safari without a camera. Or imagine traveling a long distance on a toy train that travels at a snail's pace.

I have had each of these experiences this past week in India, in spite of my fastidious planning. Each typifies what it is often like in this land where Murphy's Law is *de rigueur*. And for someone used to schedules, efficiency, and predictability, this has marked for me a steep learning curve.

I left Kolkata last Saturday to fly to Jorhat, the far eastern boundary of Assam, in the Northeast India states. Assam has very much been in the news of late for terrorist activity, and foreign tourism has fallen off precipitously. The twin engined plane was not full, and it appeared that I was the only non-Indian travelling. When the plane landed and we all walked off the runway with our luggage, there

were only Indian army vehicles and soldiers manning the outpost. My destination was Kaziranga National Park, more than two hours away, and I felt very much like I was up the creek without a paddle. I must have seemed particularly distraught because a couple approached me, both of them tour operators, he from Rajasthan, she from Australia, and they offered me a ride to the park in their hired jeep. Guardian angels to say the least! But over and over again, in moments like these when the worst that can happen actually does, I have been rescued through the kindness of strangers on this journey, and the exuberant hospitality of the people here.

So we finally arrived at Kaziranga at a beautiful ecolodge, the one-time estate of a tea grower in the region. I had planned for three days in the national park, the first of its kind in India, and home to the last great herd of the one-horned rhinoceros on the planet, as well as tigers, elephants, water buffalo, and many other animals, as well as 480 species of birds. It was to be a photographic extravaganza, but I discovered my camera had bitten the dust in

route. A part of me wanted to stew in my own juice about this, but the next few days, with wonderful guides as my eyes and ears, I resorted to taking in the incredible display of natural wonder with no record of the experience but what I could conjure up in my memory.

As the other visitors searched for the best angle and light, and focused their lenses, dropped batteries and video cards in their cameras, and waxed eloquent at the end of the day about their amazing shots, I was forced to stand back and watch and in this watching was transfixed by what I beheld: elephants shielding their calves, rhinos bathing in the mud, water buffalo and boar and swamp deer grazing in the tall grass; and over 100 species of birds identified for me by my young guide, Gokul, who knew the class and call of every bird in the park. In this, I saw more than I could have possibly anticipated. Bad things happen frequently here, but grace is never far off.

My journey from Kaziranga to Darjeeling, pressed up against the Nepali border, and in the shadow of the Central Himalayas was no small ordeal. Seven interminable hours in a crowded bus watching b-rated Bollywood films at full blast! Then a night train, sharing my sleeping berth with a vociferous Bengali ...

(continued above right)

## Week 6 (cont.)

family. Once we arrived in New Jalpaiguri, I was ready to be whisked into the mountains as quickly as possible. But I was told that the way to make the trip was on the 150 year old narrow gauge toy train, built by the British to get them to their escape to this cool retreat. And so I opted for the 8 hour walking pace journey,

and it was simply amazing to take in this trip, my arm brushed by flora of great diversity along the way, being able to reach literally into the homes and lives of the people of this multi-ethnic region as we travelled. Being able to see and hear and sense and absorb all of this at a pace of human proportions. Again, a

significant reminder of the value in slowing down and being fully present in the moment.

Blessings and Peace to you all, my love, in gratitude for this wonderful sabbatical gift!

Steve



## Seventh Week - Ash Wednesday February 17, 2010

Dear Friends & Family,

The late afternoon sun burns warm and soothing on my neck, but the buffeting jet stream hitting my face is icy and unrelenting. At 12,000 feet, I drink in the pure oxygen. On this day, when my kindred far away take ashes on their foreheads, and remember they are but dust, I am standing before the greatest collection of dust on terra firma, the Himalaya. As far as the eye can see, east to west, they rise to the

top of the world standing sentry over the aeons.

Before me is Mt. Kanchenzounga, earth's third highest peak. Mt. Everest, visible to the west, and K2 may receive greater outside attention, but none is more sacred or venerated in the Himalaya than Kanchenzounga. The Tibetans and Nepali, who have been here for thousands of years, call it the Sleeping Buddha. And as I gaze, the resplendent body appears through

the rising clouds. In my mind, this koan arises:

"Is Buddha in the mountain? Or is the mountain in Buddha?"

But I am getting ahead of myself. A week ago, I arrived in Darjeeling a tired and happy pilgrim to a place unlike any other in India. Darjeeling is renown for its tea and with the British who brought the trade here. But it is the beauty of these steep hills and the cultures of the Tibetan and Nepali and their Buddhist religion that is its lasting legacy. (cont. -->)



"The Tibetans and Nepali, who have been here for thousands of years, call it the Sleeping Buddha."

## Ash Wednesday continued...

I had Darjeeling on my itinerary because our son Martin's companion, Lindsey, who has worked in Fair Trade Tea urged me to include Darjeeling in my sabbatical plans. She had a friend there to she put me in touch with, Nalin Modha, who for many years had been big in the Tea Plantations here.

I had expected my stay to last a few days, but recently, the Government of India has imposed visa restrictions on foreign travelers leaving the country and then returning again. This in response to the Mumbai terrorist attacks of 2008, and the kind of terrorism suffered in Pune earlier last week. I had expected originally to go to Nepal in my original plans. Now I wondered if trekking in Darjeeling and Sikkim made sense.

When Nalin met me, he gave me a big bear hug, and immediately whisked me off to the nearest tea shoppe for some of Darjeeling's best brew. Nalin is a connoisseur and he ordered the best in stock. As we sipped the light honey colored

nectar, I told Nalin about my dilemma concerning Nepal, visas, etc., and he said: "Then you must stay here. I will take care of everything." And with that I decided to do my trekking from here, and work with Nalin to include Rajistan as a substitute for the remainder of my India travels. Little did I know how much support Nalin would be in the coming days.

As I explored Darjeeling, its great zoo, and temples, the Tibetan Refugee Center, and sampled its diverse cuisines, Nalin worked his cell phone and arranged the rest of my itinerary. First a trek to Singalia National Park straddling the Nepal border and then a second to Sikkim before heading on to Varanasi, Agra, and Rajistan.

Then, last Friday, I came down with the flu, and couldn't get out of bed. Nalin was undeterred. He brought me a Nepali doctor to see me in my hotel room, ran for my prescriptions, sent for a blood tech to test for malaria, brought me water bottles, delivered fruit and water, and over the next three days nursed me back to good enough health to send me off on first trek Monday morning.

After a long jeep ride, I rendezvous with my guide and porter, Sukman and Pimba. As we began our steep ascent, they told me their stories.

Both are of the Nepali lower castes, Tamang and Sherpa. Both are married and have young children. Both are subsistence farmers, who augment their incomes with trekking work. For the next few days, they will carry my pack, cook my meals, bring me tea and hot water to wash in the morning before we set out, arrange my lodging, guide me in this unfamiliar territory...all for about \$5 a piece per day.

"And how old are you," Sukman, my guide asked. "How old do you think I am?" I responded. "You maximum energy," he says, "You my age, 35!" When I tell him my actual age, he laughs and says, "That is maximum joke you tell!" I know we are off to an auspicious start.

The next hours and days are, even now, rich with memory: watching young Tibetan monks, home on holiday, their maroon robes flowing, playing cricket in an open field; drinking rice beer specially made for the Tibetan new year with their families huddled around an open fire; sitting in the candlelit kitchen for two hours of Nila, a formidable Nepali woman as she

## Ash Wednesday 2010 (from previous pages)

orchestrates a true culinary extravaganza for us from her assortment of clay ovens, stoves, and tandoori; at each stop along the way being invited into a world that has not changed in a thousand years as we entered the homes and lives of the simple folk who lavish upon us their hospitality.

And then, there is the trek itself, through towering magnolia groves festooned with moss, through rhododendron reaching into the sky, through bamboo forests, magnificent oaks, and teak, and strangler figs, through cloud kissed blue spruce, higher and higher until we arrive at Sandupur, and this promontory where I stand on Ash Wednesday afternoon.

I wonder about this koan that stirs in my thoughts, this mantra rising to my lips. As I gaze at the splendor before me, this greatest of sleeping Buddhas, I realize it is a question without answer. I

only know that, in a literal sense, this is as close as I will ever be to heaven, on this side of death. I am dust and to dust I will return. Dust and death is ever before us. Even as we approached at this idyllic destination, we learned of another terrorist attack in Calcutta, twenty six policemen killed by Maoists, most of these young men are Nepali, many of them are from Darjeeling. Still, in this dust there is something that glitters, like gold.

At the beginning of our trek, we stopped at a monastery perched on a hill. There was not a soul around, all had left for the Tibetan New Year, so we climbed higher to a stupa on the overlook. There on the shrine were inscribed these words of Lord Buddha:

*"Like earth and  
the great elements  
And also the vast immensity  
of space  
Let me be  
the living ground of love  
For innumerable beings."*



As the sun sets on Kanchenzouga, and as I take in this glorious moment back down the mountain, to return to the dust again, it is these words I bind to my heart.

Blessings,

Steve



*"And then, there is the trek itself, through towering magnolia groves festooned with moss, through bamboo forests,... and strangler figs... higher and higher until we arrive at Sandupur."*

## Ninth Week—March 1, 2010

Dear Friends & Family,

If, as the adage goes, the way to a man's heart is through his stomach, then India's gastronomy has captured me completely. I have loved Indian food for some time now, but being here, and sampling the fare from dozens of venues, from street vendors to home cooking to 4 star restaurants, has left me enraptured.

The sense of taste, and its immediate connection to the limbic part of the brain, has great power to connect us to the earth. A transformation occurs when we eat, especially when we eat mindfully. We are, or we become what we eat. Food can restore us to us to our true selves. Indians, because of the attention and passion they devote to eating, understand this implicitly.

Just here and now is a case in point. Here I am, in a mountain hut, some 14000 ft. up the flanking side of Mt.

Kanchenzouga, in the fabled kingdom of Sikkim, now India's border state with China. My sole companions are Suraj, my guide, Deepak, my cook, his assistant, Predeep, and Tashie, my yak driver, and his three hybrid yaks, Joes, which have carried our gear up the mountain. Unlike my first trek last week closer to Darjeeling, it took a lot of work to get here: ten hours of travel up hairpin turn roads to arrive in Yuksom, Sikkim's most sacred location; then two days ascent to arrive here at Dzongri, this desolate alpine retreat.

It has turned dark, it is about 20 degrees inside and out, the silence is deafening. I am tired and cold and my stomach is a growling tiger.

To the rescue, Deepak fires up the kerosene stove on the hard dirt floor of our makeshift kitchen, lights some candles, and works his magic. With Predeep,



he starts meticulously chopping, noodles, beets, red onions, peppers, green beans, cabbage, and tomatoes, garlic, ginger, and chiles, eventually producing an amazing chowmein. Then he rolls dough, and fills them with onions, cabbage, and spices, and serves up Tibetan momo's, something like Peking ravioli, but infinitely better. Then a curry with chipatis, then ginger tea.

By the time I have finished, I am a person reborn. Suraj heats a water bottle, places it in my double sleeping bag, I crawl in, and as I drift off, all I can think about is the food I have eaten throughout my stay in India. From dosas and coconut milk curry in Kerala, to prawns and red snapper served up in



"It has turned dark; it is about 20 degrees inside and out, the silence is deafening. I am tired and cold and my stomach is a growling tiger."

## Ninth Week (continued)

exquisite presentations in Tamil Nadu, to Bengali cuisine that fires the palate, to subtly spiced Assamese dishes, to mouth watering masalas, to thalis, to paranthas and rotis and chipati, to fusion fare combining Nepali and Tibetan traditions in Darjeeling, to dals and biriani and tandoori. The fact of the matter is there are as many different cuisines in India as they are cultures and palates. And the food, most of it vegetarian, all of it local and fresh, and my great delight in eating it, has been as much a part of my spiritual experience here as anything else.

My stomach is full, the chill dissipates, I half hear Deepak singing softly as he cleans up after his culinary extravaganza. He loves what he does, and when he is not joining treks up the mountain, he, like the other young Nepalis with me, are home on their farms, cutting grass for their cows, tilling the fields, planting and harvesting, conserving their soil and water. So it is no wonder that for them, and so many others I have been with in India, food is sacred, it is part of puja sacrifice and adoration. It is not something to consume glibly, as we are wont to

in our fast food culture, but something to eat, to relish, to bless, and enjoy. For this brief time, it has been my singular pleasure to eat what I love, and love what I eat, and to know that my soul is the better for it.

Blessings and Peace,

Steve



"The Taj Mahal is an architectural elegy to death, or as India's poet laureate Tagore described it, it is "a teardrop on the cheek of eternity."

Week 10 March 8, 2010

"All we go down to the dust....."

Dear Friends and Family,

My journey west across the North of India via night trains has brought me to the country's most iconic destinations, the Taj Mahal in Agra and Varanasi. Both places, in sublime and jarring ways, have stirred many things in me: about mortality, about how ephemeral human existence is, and about how all of life in due course runs headlong into the jaws of death.

The Taj Mahal is an architectural elegy to death, or as India's poet laureate Tagore described it, it is "a teardrop on the cheek of eternity." What is widely considered to be the most beautiful building in the world was forged in the crucible of grief. In 1631, the second wife of the Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan died giving birth to their 14th child at the age of 35. It is said that, in his terrible grief,

## Tenth Week—March 8, 2010

the Emperor's hair turned grey overnight. Construction on the Taj as his wife's mausoleum began shortly thereafter, and was completed 23 years later. Ironically, upon its completion, Shah Jahan was overthrown by his son and forced to spend the rest of his days watching his beloved creation from a prison cell at the Agra Fort some distance away. Only at his death did he return, interred beside his wife.

Like all of us, I have seen countless photos of the Taj, but only in its presence is its magnificence truly experienced. Soaring into the heavens, it is a monumental testimony to the power of death, the resilience of the human heart, and profound longing we have for those we love but see no longer.

If the Taj elevates the soul, Varanasi is a kick in the gut. It has always been this way for those who come to this most holy site by the Ganges. Mark Twain in his visit to the city said that "it is older than history, older than tradition, older than legend, and looks twice as old as of all them put together." Death here is not apologetic, nor is it generous. It is stark and unremitting. In the burning ghats, day and night, families gather to immolate the bodies of their loved ones. As the fire is lit, as the flesh smolders and disintegrates, as the

smoke billows and spreads noxiously, as the hours linger on, and as the family members finally gather the ashes to commit to the Great River forever, death is met with a kind of grit and unvarnished honesty that is rarely touched in our funeral ceremonies in the West. And if this were not enough, pilgrims by the hundreds and thousands wade into the waters, cupping their hands to receive the blackened fluid, immersing themselves, diving deep into all that is left when the body is gone and the heart beats no more.

This was not the first open cremation I have witnessed, but the images seared into my mind's eye on Ganges' bank I expect will stay with me forever. Just another reminder for this wandering pilgrim to suck all the marrow out of life while I am living it, to keep alleluia ever on my lips, and to hold eternity ever in my heart.

Blessings and Peace,

Steve



"If the Taj  
elevates the soul,  
Varanasi is a kick  
in the gut."



## Last Entry—March 12, 2010

*"You can't go home again..."*

Dear Friends,

As I prepare to leave India, after this long, exhilarating pilgrimage, it is the words of America's quintessential novel that come to mind. I have been to a world where history and tradition is everything to return a place whose citizenry has difficulty recalling what happened yesterday, much less last year, or last century. I have visited a land whose high culture, religion, art, and language date to a time when my ancestry still huddled in caves around fires. I have met a people whose memory and practice is rooted in the profound awareness that "all things flow, nothing abides." These words, in fact, were the insight of Greek philosopher Heraclitus, written some 2500 years ago, at a time when India's primordial civilization was already well over three thousand years old.

It is true that the river of life flows, and you can never put your foot in quite the same place again. If I have learned anything in my time away, it is this. This past week I have been to Rajasthan, India's Land of the Kings, marking the far western boundary with Pakistan, fabulous home to maharajas, majestic forts, and opulent palaces. In the desert kingdom of Jaisalmer built in the nexus of the ancient camel trade routes between India and Central Asia, in the pink city of Jaipur in the shadow of its massive 18<sup>th</sup> C. Mughal Amber fort, in the fairy tale lake setting of Udaipur, and the blue city Jodhpur, with its towering Mehrangarh, still run by the descendants of the maharajas, the glory of India's more recent past blazes on. But take a few short paces outside these cities, and you step into an unchanged world that has survived each successive conquering empire, from Aryan warriors to Alexander the Great, from the Mughals, to the Arabs, the British, and the modern Global Economy. Here thatched huts dot the hillsides and dunes beneath looming wind turbines. Water is carried in pottery jars from the rare aquifers

for miles on the heads of women, their bright saris billowing in the hot, desert wind. Here, oxen are pulled around millstones, marketplaces teem with turbaned and jewelry bedecked hawkers and buyers, threshers work the fields, shepherds and goatherds, their flocks, and camel drivers outnumber the cars and trucks moving down the highway. Here, amidst wild peacocks, marauding capuchins, and flocks of golden eagles, life goes on as it has for eons. Here everything changes with the shifting sand, and yet paradoxically the more it changes, the more it remains the same.

Say what you will about India, that it is a mess, a broken, apocalyptic, overpopulated society teetering on collapse; or that is the next great superpower, which, in a century's time, along with China will eclipse America's dominance and influence. But before and above all else, India is this planet's oldest living testimony to the human condition and the precarious dance we are in with the rest of the natural world. Here, you see, and touch, and taste and smell and hear life as it is, as it always has been, and always will be. Here, like the denizens of barefoot, wide-eyed pilgrims, seen marching in every nook and cranny of this vast land, you learn the way of pilgrimage. In this place of all places where nothing seems to change, you are changed forever. In this God-obsessed, God-saturated culture, you step at last before the Almighty, and come to know and believe that our restless, homeless hearts will never truly be at home, will never truly be at rest unless and until we accept that all things flow, that nothing abides, and plunge into that river that flows beyond the discernable horizon.

Blessings and Peace,

Steve



"I have been to a world where history and tradition is everything to return a place whose citizenry has difficulty recalling what happened yesterday, much less last year, or last century."

# Saint Mary's



Saint Mary's Episcopal Church in the Village of Barnstable, MA 02630



[www.stmarys-church.org](http://www.stmarys-church.org)

## Welcome Back—Palm Sunday March 28

The Rev. Stephen Smith will return from his sabbatical to India in time for Palm Sunday and Holy Week. Please join us for Palm Sunday services beginning with a procession from the Sturgis Library at 9:45am, weather permitting.

Contact us: 508-362-3977 [stmary@cape.com](mailto:stmary@cape.com)



Saint Mary's Episcopal Church

3055 Main Street  
PO Box 395  
Barnstable MA

[www.stmarys-church.org](http://www.stmarys-church.org)

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