

## **One Death, One Life, One Awakening**

In 1984, at the age of 35, I took a solo trip to Nepal to hike around the Annapurna Circuit in the Himalayas. This particular tale relates to the last phase of that journey. It was an ending that I could never have imagined when I planned the trip: but life, death and world events happen when they do and we can never be fully prepared for the unexpected; we can only live in each moment.

After a day of hiking through lush forested valleys that wove between majestic peaks, our little party of three stopped for the night in a deep tropical gorge. My guide, Lakhpa, had found a small tea house that seemed serene and peaceful. Years ago, the location probably was a small farm as surrounding the tea house was a workable area of reasonably flat ground, which was a rarity in the steep gorge. However, at the time of my visit, this flat ground was also ideal for a camp site for a larger trekking party. Unfortunately, soon after we had settled, a much larger group arrived and they started to set up camp in the area in front of the tea house.

The setting for the tea house was quite beautiful, but the house was a simple squat structure made of wood and mud with a mud floor and a roof made of palm fronds and straw. In a small extension attached to the original farm house, there were a couple of beds for travelers who needed a place to sleep. It was quite crude and basic, but accommodation was not plentiful and choice was a luxury that did not exist.

During the evening, a heavy rainstorm hit the area and the trekking group's kitchen tent collapsed in the middle of their preparations for dinner. The group's guide bribed the tea house owner to allow his cook crew to join us in the trekkers' extension. So what had seemed small became incredibly cramped with an additional three plus all of their cooking pots and pans, food and supplies. Their gear was jammed into a corner, which barricaded the one door by which we could immediately walk outside. They then started a wood fire to cook on, in the extension. With little ventilation, we were soon trying to sleep in a cloud of wood smoke that did not clear, even after the embers were cold.

During the following two days' hikes, I started coughing increasingly intensely and began to feel really lousy. These days were very unpleasant despite hiking through some really beautiful terrain. The well-maintained trails wove down valleys filled with fields that were tended by the local villagers while magnificent peaks bore witness to our passing: all felt so wonderful, except for my inability to breathe. One other disturbing element caught my attention. Hikers who were coming up towards the peaks were talking about Indira Gandhi having been assassinated in New Dehli. By the time that I arrived in the main town, Pokhara, I felt extremely sick and retired to a small hotel to rest for a few days.

I soon heard all manner of stories from people who had left Kathmandu due to the sudden influx of travelers who were fleeing India. My condition seemed to be getting worse by the day and so I decided to head back to England where I felt certain that the

doctors would know how to deal with my condition. The next day, I took the six hour bus ride back to Kathmandu. I was afraid how other passengers would feel in the packed interior of the bus when I experienced an intense coughing session. I decided to spend most of the trip with a few others sitting on the luggage that was strapped down on the roof rack of the bus. This was totally normal as buses were often overbooked and then additional passengers boarded along the way. Several times, I found the bus conductor climbing onto the roof rack through an open window

Kathmandu's normally busy streets were packed with people - many appeared to be uncomfortable in the normally hippie type environment. All of my standard selection of hotels / guest houses were full. I felt totally exhausted and was having trouble breathing, but I was forced to search many smaller guest houses before I found a rather run-down place in a back street near one of the main market areas. It was filthy, but it was somewhere to be alone where my sickness was just mine, my pain was just mine and my fears were mine alone. It is strange looking back on that time now: I just wanted to roll up and hide. But it is impossible to hide with a constant cough that produced noise equivalent to a plane breaking the sound barrier. I am sure that other travelers were staying in rooms around me, but they all took great care to avoid me and whatever sickness I was carrying.

The next day, I walked to a nearby pharmacy in the market. They suggested a cough suppressant and I hopefully bought two bottles. I then had to gather all of my strength to negotiate my way through the entire market area to reach the travel agents with

whom I had previously had dealings. He listened to my pathetic story and could only explain the situation. Apparently, after Indira Gandhi's assassination, there had been significant civil unrest and much bloodshed. India had closed all its borders, closed its entire airspace and nobody could guess when the situation would improve. Many foreign travelers had come North to Nepal to escape the violence. So I was joining many trekkers who were scheduled to depart along with the majority of the fleeing Indian tourists in trying to get on a plane. Unfortunately, about 90% of flights leaving Nepal landed in India so they were canceled indefinitely. Most of the other flights headed to Bangkok, which at the time was not known for its hygienic health clinics and all flights were overbooked for the next month.

Dejected, I returned to my room and despite feeling like I needed sleep, I sat and hacked for hours. I will admit that I have always had a very intense cough, but some of those coughs really impressed me after I had managed to recapture my breath, which seemed at times to want to have nothing to do with me. Every few minutes, I would sense an utterly overwhelming tickle in my throat and then it felt like the Gods of War were gathering in my toes. They started to move up my feet and then my legs, picking up energy along the way. The energy would explode into my gut and feel like it was ripping my torso apart. I suspect nobody had much decent sleep if they were within a block or two of where I lay drenched in sweat and wondering how this miserable state would end.

Each day, I returned to the travel agent for an update. It was the same depressing news for the first couple of days. By the third day there were rumors that India was thinking of re-opening its borders but flights were overbooked for weeks ahead. My condition was holding but showing no signs of improving. During my daily visit to the pharmacy, they told me of one hospital that Westerners sometimes used. I checked it in my guidebooks and found that it was a couple of miles from me.

I took just what I needed for the walk through the neighborhoods and hoped to be back before the heat was too high. The hospital was very quiet and set in some pleasant gardens. I walked in the main entrance where I found a few people sitting in groups around the lobby. There was no sign of any staff and I waited. After about ten minutes, I decided to try to find someone. I explored a few nearby corridors. Not only could I not find any staff, but some of the odors were rather scary for a supposed sterile / clean facility. I decided to leave before I could be infected with any additional bugs - what I already had was quite enough.

When I returned to my room, I was in serious trouble. I seemed to float in a semi-conscious state for periods between coughing fits. I honestly did wonder if I would die. But it was not those types of thoughts that plagued my mind - it was being so scared and so alone - both at the same time. Potentially, my life ending so young and so unfulfilled. My passing unnoticed by anyone. It was incredibly painful to acknowledge and even harder to accept.

It was late in the afternoon when I did recover from the morning's trip and felt confident that I could make it to the travel agents. He seemed to be assuring that flights would be resumed in a day or two. This buoyed my spirits with the minor caveat that I still needed a seat on one of the flights.

I was at the travel agents door before he opened on the following day. I sat and waited while he checked his mail and phone messages. Eventually, he looked over at me, smiled, and said that I was on the second flight out that evening. I do not recall if I cried when I heard that news, but it sure makes me cry, now, writing about it.

That evening I stood with the line of passengers waiting to board the plane and the sense of relief was quite palpable. I tried to not hack too much on the flight and I hope none of my neighbors were too disturbed by my outbursts.

We landed in the old International airport in New Delhi just after dark. We disembarked the plane for the short walk across the tarmac and into Immigration. The Immigration officer confirmed that we were just the second flight to land since the Indian airspace had been re-opened. I found my bag at baggage claim and walked out into the main concourse that was normally a massive 24 hour-a-day cacophony of people, noise and activity. Instead it was empty except for a single soldier in steel-toed boots with a rifle and bayonet clip-clopping his way precisely across the vast marble floor. That sight really awoke me to what possibly had been happening in India for those last eight or ten days.

Luckily, I had the telephone number of a small hotel where I had reservations, but for a later date. When I rang, they could not believe that I was at the airport because they thought all flights were still canceled. They had plenty of room as they had absolutely no guests. At my suggestion of taking a taxi to their hotel, they were emphatic that they would send a car to pick me up.

A little over half an hour later, a lone car drove up to the terminal and three very nervous looking characters approached me. One of them greeted me in English and offered me a business card from the hotel as an introduction. He said they would take me to the hotel but suggested that I not look around too much. They put my luggage in the trunk of the car, they got in the front and I had the back seat. I soon realized why there were three of them. The one who had spoken to me was in charge as he could talk with me in English, the driver simply drove the car, and the third one was trying his best to appear as our body guard. He had tried to hide a three foot long machete while he had stood in front of me. I would not say that Muscles, the body guard, commanded any real respect because if he had tried to raise the machete above his head, it would have probably dropped on his head as he did not appear to have the required strength.

My intrepid trio set off and the drive quickly became rather sobering and surreal. At times they argued vehemently about the best way to navigate around certain areas, the sight of groups of people caused them fear, and they were constantly looking all around the car. For me, it was weird observing them, interesting to note how few cars were on

the roads, but the disturbing sights were people with plastic bags picking up things while others used hose pipes and buckets of water to clean, I presumed blood, off the streets. It was beyond my comprehension, but at the same time it was very real and very terrifyingly ugly.

I checked in at the hotel and retired to my room. I felt really rough as the journey had been physically demanding and emotionally charged. But something had shifted deep inside. I actually ordered a chicken curry dinner - it was the first meal I managed to eat in about a week and it tasted so absolutely wonderful. I was thoroughly spent and had no more strength to expend that day. I laid down on the fresh comfortable bed and slept for periods of an hour or two between coughing bouts. It felt so divinely decadent and necessary.

In the morning, I knew what I had to do as soon as I pulled myself out of bed. In the bathroom, there was a shower with a large shower head that came out of the ceiling. I turned it on, stepped under the warm torrent of water. Tears and more tears joined the shower water cascading down my face and on to my withered torso. With each bout of tears a sense of relief seemed to untangle a little of the web of tension that seemed to hold me in its tentacles. As my fears and the unbridled weariness slightly lightened, I knew, in my heart, that I was not going to die from whatever malady I had. There would be a tomorrow for me. The word relief scratches the surface of how I felt in that shower, but it lacks the power and the rejuvenation found in the depths of that feeling.



I found some reasonably clean clothes and dressed before walking down to the lobby to ask for a newspaper. Back in my room, I read the newspaper over a light breakfast. I quickly realized that this time was a very significant moment in Indian history and even world history. I felt a little stronger after some sleep and the food. I firstly headed to a travel agents to arrange a flight into Heathrow: it would be on the following day. Later I wandered around some of the standard tourist areas of central New Delhi. I talked with many store owners about the aftermath following the assassination and they expressed shock, shame and horror about the atrocities that had occurred in so many parts of the city and in other areas of the country. Many hoped that these troubled times would lead to a time of reconciliation between the sects and a less divisive society. But they acknowledged that many aspects of Indian society needed to change, which was going to take time and much hard negotiations.

As I walked around, it was hard to not notice how on-edge many people seemed to be. Subsequently, I have read reports that indicated that over 8,000 people were mutilated and killed and many more were injured in the unrest. International agencies have since said that number is probably short of the real total. It felt sobering to witness that the markets were quieter and not their usual frenetic masses of people going about their daily activities.

When I felt my energies drop and my cough start to become problematic again, I took long breaks in parks under the shade of the dusty trees. I returned to my hotel in the early evening and enjoyed another tasty dinner in my room. Later, I called my mother

in London to tell her of my plans to fly into Heathrow on the following day. The connection was not good, which made my trying to tell her how I felt difficult. Instead of hearing what I said, she heard what she thought I would say. I said that I was very sick and that I was exhausted - she heard that I was sick and tired of being in India and she missed the fact that I was actually seriously ill.

On the flight into Heathrow, the stewardesses were very understanding and moved several other passengers to not be too close to me and my not un-subtle coughing bouts. After we landed and cleared customs, I was greeted by my mother and step-father, Fred. They told me that they decided to not drive but took the underground instead, which was not what I had wanted to hear. I wanted to relax and rest - the thought of negotiating luggage up and down escalators and changing trains was almost too much for me. By the time our train had traveled through three stations, my mother was anxiously asking why I had not told her that I was so seriously sick. I also noticed that all other passengers in our end of the train car had moved to other cars to be further away from me and the spasms of coughing.

When we arrived at home, I simply collapsed into bed and mother pulled out some of her standard cough remedies. I slept fitfully and tried not to keep my mother and step-father awake for too long.

In the morning, Fred dropped me off at the local hospital's ER. They took several x-rays of my chest and lungs, and gave me a thorough checking over. At the end of the exam,

the nurse told me their initial assessment was that I had had a classical bout of ten-day bi-lateral viral pneumonia. I asked what was classical about it and she said that by the end of the ten days, you are either dead or alive, and she thought that I had just managed to squeeze into the second category. Several days later, they rang me to tell me to return to the ER immediately as further checking of my x-rays had shown that I probably had a collapsed lung. Thankfully, the second round of x-rays indicated that some of the infection was clearing and that I seemed to be recuperating as they hoped.

I stayed with both my mother and my sister for about four weeks, which gave me time to recover, gain my strength, and to regain some of the weight that had dropped off me. After this time of recovery, I flew back to San Francisco to return to work, from which I had taken a couple of months break. I was met at the airport by my good friend, Pete. He had been very helpful in the planning of my trip, as he had done a similar journey a year or two before me. His opening greeting was "What the hell happened to you? You look gray!!" It did leave me wondering how I must have looked when mother met me at Heathrow as I was by then a month into recovery.

I did eventually fully recover from that bout of pneumonia. I have had several other bouts in later years (being hospitalized for four days with one bout seemed such a strangely different experience). The Nepali / Indian bout was a terrible period of my life while it was happening, but it is a part of my experiences that have created who I am today. If I could have changed my life and not taken that trip, I probably would have avoided the pneumonia, but I would never have seen and felt the confusion, the

disbelief, the shame and the fear in the eyes of those store owners as they talked about the blood shed and civil unrest, following Indira Gandhi's assassination. To witness such immediate stark reflections of human suffering and pain, a bout of pneumonia was a very cheap price. Nowadays, the most consistent way this period touches my life is the profound blessing that I feel each and every time I walk under a shower. The flow of water reminds me there is life and here is another day to be of benefit to mankind. It reconnects me to the time when my fear and uncertainty were washed away, but it also reminds me of the tenuous nature of all lives. It engages me with ideas and people who think universally and peacefully so that we can live in a world where assassinations are not seen as solutions to problems and where the slaughter of innocent people is not sought out of vengeance.