

PARTNER PLAN

Malcolm & Cati Ramsay - Nepal November 2014

c/o United Mission to Nepal
PO Box 126
Kathmandu
Nepal

Dear Friends,

Malcolm writes: Numerous workmen have recently been working flat-out to bring a sudden flurry of improvements to the main thoroughfares in Kathmandu. Potholes – which have existed since we arrived almost three years ago – have been filled in. Long stretches of road have been re-tarred. White lines have been painted in the middle of roads. Steel pedestrian barriers have been erected at the side of some pavements. There are some freshly painted zebra crossings, and there are now even traffic policeman stationed at them in the rush hour to signal the traffic (from time to time) to stop.



Evidence of a drastic clean-up needed on the streets of Kathmandu

On top of this, vehicular transport will shortly be halved at a stroke by the simplest method of all. Drivers whose number plates end with an even number can only drive on dates that are even numbered. The same rule will apply for odd numbers. And, as if this were not enough, the traffic will be still further reduced by the declaration of two days of public holiday, and the closure of all schools and colleges for four days.

Isn't this wonderful? The effect on the lung-choking pollution of Kathmandu will be dramatic! Our daily commute to the UMN office on our bicycles will become a pleasure! Everyone will have pristine breath-filling views of the Himalayas all day long, right from the pavements and orderly roads of Kathmandu!

Wonderful? Indeed! But alas it will only last for one week. All of this scrubbing up, and all of these special arrangements, are in place only because Nepal is about to host the next summit of SAARC, - which stands for South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation. All the heads of the eight member countries, (which include heavy-weight countries like India and Pakistan), will be in Kathmandu for this prestigious event. So none of these improvements are being made for the benefit of the long-suffering people of Nepal. Rather they are for the 48 hour meeting of the important visitors who will be here so soon.

At times like this it is hard not to lament the quality of a leadership that seems to do so much to impress foreign dignitaries on a fleeting visit, but then does so little to



A newly painted zebra crossing leading to a brick wall only

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improve the gruelling and interminable struggles of its own people. So when you pray for Nepal, please pray that more good leaders will emerge: in politics, in government, and in the churches. Just as in the UK, there is an urgent need here for leaders with integrity, altruism, and vision, who will take decisive steps to meet the most pressing needs of the people of the country. How Nepal could be transformed for the better if there were more men and women like that!

Cati writes: As I write, the UMN Board is holding its bi-annual meeting here in Kathmandu. Twelve board members have travelled from various parts of the world to discuss all the issues uppermost in the organisation's priorities at this time. In order to cater for all those involved, a team



Relentless succession of dishes being prepared outdoors

of Nepali folk have been contracted to cook a full-blown meal for them. Tables and chairs have been set up in the garden in readiness. Meanwhile directly outside our office several people are busily engaged in the multi-faceted activities of a professional kitchen. However this one is necessarily outdoors with everything spread out over an extensive area. Gas cylinders have been hooked up to numerous cooking stoves on top of which are gigantic pots bubbling and hissing with the contents of a typical Nepali meal. This is the monopoly of a few men whose faces have grown familiar over the course of our time here. Professional catering is clearly the work of men. In another corner is a group of women squatting down on the ground and chatting animatedly as they peel, chop and prepare large quantities of vegetables for the cooking pots. As the morning progresses they also find themselves presented with successive piles of dirty bowls and plastic buckets that have to be carried over to an outdoor tap and patiently washed in cold water. The smells of cooking waft up to our office window, and by the time the Board is ready to eat lunch, everything has been served up with

immaculate precision along trestle tables covered in blue tablecloths. The separate dishes are kept hot over small candles burning underneath and the entire spread has been made to look wonderfully appetising for those privileged to be eating it!

One of the characteristics of Nepali society that has consistently struck me since we began working here is the tremendous resourcefulness of the people. The challenge of producing an excellent meal under very basic conditions appears to cause no anxiety whatsoever. The end result is as appetising as any meal cooked in a professional kitchen and within a minimal period of time all signs of activity have been cleared away completely. Along the route we cycle to work, people set up roadside kitchens from as early as 5 am to cater for people wanting Nepali *chia* (a sweet milky, spiced tea), boiled eggs and whatever else happens to be available. By the time we pass a few hours later all signs of activity have long been removed...in readiness for a repeat of this daily business the following morning.



A feast laid out for the UMN board in the garden

I wonder sometimes if our resourcefulness in the West has dwindled with access to technology and higher expectations of what is considered necessary in our daily lives?

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Malcolm writes: One of our main tasks in our role of 'Pastoral Care and Support' in UMN is to carry out annual 'Personal Reviews' for our expatriate staff. These Reviews have nothing to do with the person's performance at work: there is an annual Performance Review with line-managers for that. Rather they are to do solely and simply with the expatriate's welfare over the year in question.



Quietly absorbed in her morning smoke

To help prepare for the conversation the expatriate is asked to answer a questionnaire before meeting us asking how life has been for him or her over the last year. The questions are fairly searching. For example, they include these: 'Your joys: what have been the most fulfilling and rewarding things? What keeps you here?' 'Your burdens: what are the things that have driven you to your knees?' The questions then go on to cover most other aspects of life: the expatriate's sense of being spiritually nurtured; health; relaxations; level of ease with Nepali culture and language; degree of concern over matters of personal safety, or the likelihood of an earthquake; and so on.

We have found conducting these interviews to be a very privileged task. They give us insights into thoughts that sometimes people have never shared with anyone else, anywhere. We feel humbled when we realise the hard emotional struggles that some of our colleagues are going through. We give renewed thanks when others' stories remind us again of how our own lives are so laden down with blessings. But above all, and most often, we are inspired when we see the steady commitment, and the quiet faith, hope, and love, that brought our co-workers here, and keeps them here.

Currently nearly all of the reviews we are doing consist of our second such annual meeting with each expatriate. This enables us to build on the previous year's review, and to take a longer perspective. Exactly as is the case at home, good pastoral work here almost always benefits from a big investment of time. In February we will have been in Nepal for three years. This means that we have been here longer than a good number of our fellow UMNers from abroad. It feels good to be working with people that we now know well, and many of whom we count as friends, not just as colleagues.



The happiness following surgery that is possible!

Cati writes: Meanwhile in the far west of Nepal in a remote village a young girl's happiness hangs in the balance. When Malcolm and I had the privilege of visiting some disabled children in Doti and Bhajang earlier this year, we met a beautiful teenage girl whom I will call Laxmi. Her face was alarmingly disfigured by the slow, relentless growth of a painful tumour. During the three years since it first appeared, poverty has discouraged her family from seeking the advice of a doctor. It required little imagination to appreciate the excruciating pain and embarrassment experienced by this girl and on our return from furlough we made every effort to find some way of enabling Laxmi to receive treatment. With the help of an account that we had set up in Tansen by means of church fund-raising in Scotland, we consulted the surgical team and were delighted to discover that a plastic surgeon was expected very soon afterwards to work voluntarily at the hospital for just two weeks. Intensive efforts were made to contact Laxmi and her family, offering them

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this chance of treatment at no cost whatsoever to themselves. Transport, accommodation, surgery and a return to her village several days' journey from Tansen would all be paid for out of the account. I found myself positively overflowing with excitement at this small window of opportunity with the potential to transform Laxmi's life.



The paediatric orthopaedic ward in Tansen

Tragically we were told that Laxmi's family had decided at the last minute to rely instead on the herbal remedies offered to them by a witch doctor or faith-healer in the vicinity. (Note: some people find the term 'witch-doctor' pejorative. It is however the term in English most Nepalis use, so we adopt it here). I felt profoundly disappointed that somehow this so-called healer who, until now, has had no effect with his remedies, is being relied upon for the future happiness of this girl. Meanwhile the possibility of advanced surgical treatment is being discounted. Perhaps the family have been made to fear the potential consequences of giving up on the witch doctor. Yet the reality might be that this girl will spend the rest of her life hiding from society because of the embarrassment of being disfigured.

How difficult it is to withhold judgement in a situation like this. A life blighted by poverty, minimal education, and now potentially treatable disease, is ultimately at the mercy of what might best be described as deep-seated tradition which stands as a powerful obstacle to change and new hope.

All we can do now is pray that somehow the family's fear, or prejudice, or simple ignorance, might be overcome by the offer of skilled surgical treatment which could almost certainly bring an end to this girl's future suffering.

With love and prayers,

Malcolm and Cati

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Twilight over the Himalayas beyond Kathmandu

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