

More Musings on Calcutta, India
Interesting Souls Along the Way

At this moment I am with two men that I see fairly frequently on this busy, noisy street. They mostly just sit here and talk with each other or others who come by. Victor Das is about 20 and is quite articulate. He finished high school and has had one year of college when he needed to drop out and support his family of origin. Not at all unusual in this country and many others. As we talk, Victor tells me his grandparents are from Bangladesh. His grandfather is no longer living and I ask him about the circumstances around his death. Twelve years ago his grandfather was dying of cancer of the neck and was receiving treatment at the hospital. It was terminal, apparently, and the expense of the treatment was quickly depleting what little savings he and his wife had. If the treatments continued this way, when he died there would be nothing left for his wife. As an act of compassion and love, he threw himself in front of a train! Cremation is cheap! Clearly, he must have felt that there were no better alternatives. What money was left after his death must not have been much, or did not last very long, however, because Victor and his parents care for and support the grandmother. Victor's support for his parents and grandmother is needed because that supplied by his parents is not sufficient. As I listen to him, I feel a sadness for a kind of trap he finds himself in, a bright capable young man who it seems is not able to pursue his dreams. And sadness, yet admiration, for the grandfather who felt he had to take such drastic measures, loving measures in his mind, for his wife.

Then there is the other man - Norman Benjamin. Not a very Indian name. To look at him one notices that he has somewhat dark skin with facial features that are more Western. He is 58 and speaks with a sense of humor yet with an edge indicating to me an unsettledness, a frustration, perhaps anger. As we talk he soon begins to tell me some of his story and I learn that his father is English and his mother Burmese. Both live in Burma. His maternal grandparents are Burmese and paternal grandparents are English. Norman's English is excellent and he tells me that is the language he grew up speaking in the home.

Norman has an 8th grade education, and as his story unravels I hear more of his poverty and frustration. He is hurting and has suffered many injustices in this country - which continue apparently. It becomes clear that Norman is not a stupid man. He is quite articulate and speaks 7 languages. I see where that puts me! I wonder why this man doesn't put his intelligence to work and apply it to some kind of gainful employment. Of course, I don't yet know his game. Maybe he makes quite a good living off folks like me who wander along and engage him in conversation. So I ask him in a sensitive way, like: "Hey, Dude, why don't you get off your ass and get a job? You're intelligent, you're articulate." Well, not quite like that! He comes back quickly like he has heard this question before and might like to pound the next person who asks it! "I'm a Christian and that makes me odd man out, a minority in this culture. The Hindus and Muslim are given first consideration and nothing is left for me."

As he relates his story, he is cussing like a trooper and very animated, intense, with a face that is taunt. He's quite out front with me and says he befriends me because what he wants is money. Plain and simple! Well, I do have to admire that while at the same time making sure my money belt is still around my waist! What is that adage about trusting God but tying up your camel in

the meantime! My 'camel' is still here! Ah, yes, and it feels quite good under my shirt as my hand rests upon it!

“I have a wife and son to feed. I did have 2 sons but one died at 6 months because of multiple medical complications. I couldn't afford the private doctor's fees and the government doctors couldn't get to him before he died.”

He says he would do most anything to earn some money and tells me that 10 years ago a politician who was running for a particular office offered him some land to put a house on if he would throw two bombs in the office of the politician of an opposing party running against him for the same office. Again, Norman is not totally daft, is clever and resourceful, so he took the 2 bombs given to him by this political figure and threw them into the jungle close enough so the first politician would hear the explosion and yet so no one would be hurt. Despite all his frustration and grievances, he was not angry enough or desperate enough to actually kill another human being. He went back to the politician and made up the story that he was being chased by the police and had to somehow discard the bombs. He did get his land, such as it is! A very small plot along the railroad tracks with enough room to put up 4 bamboo poles and arrange a tarp for a roof. Not exactly a mega-mansion! This is now where he, his wife and son live. Both he and Victor say the land can be taken away from him at any time. No title, no deed, and probably never owned by the politician in the first place.

He would like to take me to where he lives, to have me see the conditions. Again he is up front and says he would expect some payment for this. I ask Norman why it is that in almost every case I have experienced, the people here befriend me because they want something from me, not just for the joy of the friendship, and the frustration that is for me, how it often causes me to be on the defensive immediately before even giving the other person a chance. He says it is impossible not to want something from Westerners like me because we have everything and they have nothing.

“Tourists come here, take lots of photos, spend time talking to us, then go home and sell the photos or write a piece for a paper or magazine, and we are left with nothing. One man recently promised to help us set up a school after I took him around and showed him the conditions, the needs. He took many photos with him in them and local children. He said he'd go home, show them and talk of the need here. In two months he'd come back with money to help set up a school. Guess what. We never heard from him again.” Norman's face, his voice and his gestures are full of anger, bitterness and frustration.

I'd like to go with Norman to where he lives, to walk into this 'shack', to know what the energy of that place offers, how it enters my body and psyche as well as his, to have Norman show me the slums, but the truth is I really do not trust him. He seems to have a good heart but one that is quite conflicted. No matter how much I'd give him for this, it would likely not be enough. It feels like a no win situation rather than a win win situation. The only reason he sits and talks with me is that in the end he hopes to get something from me in the form of money. This feels sad but yet he is honest about this and I can not help but respect that much. I feel the impulse to tell him that maybe he would get more of what he wants if he had no expectations of anything in

return. I don't follow my impulse.

At one point he makes a remark about trusting Jesus, while cussing like a sailor this time, for a blocked blood vessel that goes to the heart. Momentarily I think of the symbolism of this condition! He goes on and says that he trusts Jesus for healing his medial condition because he has no money for medical treatment. Again I feel the impulse to suggest to him that he might trust Jesus for his monetary needs as well. That perhaps if his attitude were one of thankfulness and embracing what life brings him, and what he unknowingly draws to himself, he might in fact draw to himself that which he desires. Of course if this is an ulterior motive, that sort of knocks the hell out of the whole thing! I thought better of this tirade also! How do you say this to a desperate hungry man with a family to support. Change your attitude, Son, and then watch manna from heaven descend, or watch the trickle down theory go into effect! Norman has suffered injustice and hurt too many times at 58 years. Can anything shake this loose? I suspect what might have a chance of shaking this loose is to put food in his and his family's stomachs, somehow provide shelter for them that the government can't come and bulldoze at their discretion, and create a job with dignity for him. As previously pointed out, this is not a stupid illiterate man but one who speaks 7 languages and reads and writes at least 3 of them.

In my quieter moments away from all the noise and bustle, I am reading 'The Hungry Tide' by Amteo Ghosh and have come across a statement that reminds me so much of Norman, and many others like him.

“Each slow turn of the world carries such disinherited ones
to whom neither the past nor the future belong.”

My room is on Sudder Street which is a busy street for backpackers and assorted vagabonds from all over the world. It draws Indian people with various motives. One man I meet, around 40, tells me he is a drug dealer and has six children to support. He acknowledges that when he was in his prime he was on drugs and should have been working instead to support his family. Now he insists that he is not capable or competent to hold down a regular job. He never developed the job skills needed to support a family so he sells hash, grass, and opium, and does quite well with Westerners. If you want something he doesn't have on hand, he will soon find it for you. A resourceful fella, I'd say. He is a friendly man, low key and when I see him from time to time, his eyes betray his continued use of drugs. At times like these, when we talk, his words are slurred. During the high season, when there are plenty of Westerners about, he can earn from \$30 to \$65 a week.

When I am on this street, sometimes there is a young man about 15 who runs, hops and skips up and down the road or on the sidewalks. He is completely naked and doesn't seem to care a wit what anyone thinks. He is doing what he wants to do. Yes, he is mentally challenged. Where he comes from I don't know, but someone usually takes him by the arm or hand and leads him off somewhere away from the public eye. This is done in a matter of fact way and never with anger, frustration or any kind of judgment.

Then there is Mike, a 52 year old Westerner from Detroit. I'm sitting in a Sudder street side café having a bite to eat. He has just arrived from Bangkok, unloads his pack, sits down at my table and says he is having a difficult time finding a place to stay. It is high season and spots in this area are limited so I eventually walk with him to my guest house and they have one room left. Mike is relieved. Before we head for the guesthouse, however, we have some food and talk awhile. Mike's story soon begins to unfold. All one has to do is ask a few questions, wait patiently and it isn't long before the blank spaces are filled in - sometimes slowly, sometimes quickly. Mike has lived in Asia for around 8 years and has mostly taught English as a second language. Not a difficult thing to find.

As with many travelers who have been doing so for a good while, Mike is resourceful. He left home at a young age, joined the merchant marines and never completed his bachelor's degree. Growing up on the streets of Detroit and spending time in the merchant marines, he soon became clever and a survivor. He faked a B.A degree which he presented to get a job teaching, and later 'talked' his way into two master's degree programs which he completed. Now he is writing his dissertation for a Ph.D. on Buddhism and psychotherapy.

Mike struggles with loneliness. He has a strong need to talk and says he is burned out with academics. At times in mid sentence he loses his train of thought and wanders off. Eventually it usually circles around and gets completed. Mike goes on about his life, himself, his views of everything. A pleasant enough person who doesn't seem to have interest in dialogue or conversation. Tomorrow he leaves for Bodhgaya where he wants to spend a lot of time in meditation. Perhaps this will be useful. Perhaps he will just get lost and become further self absorbed which of course is not meditation at all but serves only to enhance our ego, our narcissism. Perhaps a strong dose of reality therapy would be more useful. Who is to say? It is, after all, his journey and must be done in his way. In the end, of which there is not one, it all comes together and we move on to the next challenge.

A couple days later and I am at Reliance Webworld, an upscale web café with a room full of the latest computers and a speciality coffee shop which also carries delicious pastries and other goodies. One can purchase cell phones and get connected to the airways. Thus there are various wireless services available. I am told that this chain of Reliance cafes is the brainchild of a very wealthy Indian oil man. You can buy as much time as you want and use it at any of the Reliance cafés in India which generally are located in the larger cities.

So I am sitting here checking email when a tall (about 6'5") American woman comes in very upset. Apparently she bought a cell phone here and claims it is defective. She isn't getting the response she wants from the clerk nor as quickly as she wants it and becomes more and more heated. The Indian man remains quite calm since anger is not a commodity much appreciated here and actually works against one wanting to get anything done constructively. This piece of cultural wisdom seems to be out of the awareness of my American sister so with great American sensitivity she vocally explodes and hurls her cell phone across the room smashing it against the far wall where it crumbles to the floor in many pieces. She then proceeds to lecture the clerk about how things are done in America and how the Indians are cheating her and 'how do you feel about that?'

As one might guess, the clerk is a bit befuddled and not quite sure how to react but remains calm. I sit here and watch with some horror at the diplomacy of my fellow American ambassador! Thoughts race through my mind of Graham Green and the “Ugly American.” She glances my direction and our eyes lock. For pregnant moments we connect. She wears a long dress. Her face looks old and in much pain. Maybe it is my imagination, but following this she calms down considerably. She begins to walk out then turns and asks the clerk for his name so when she comes back she can deal with the same person.

Later I get up to leave and say to the clerk that I feel I want to apologize for my American sister’s behavior. Yes, there are American’s like this but hopefully not all. I encourage him not to take it personally because it isn’t about him. He thanks me for my kindness and seems relieved. I do not address the fact that she is a transsexual, perhaps still in the process, and there is much to confront in such a transition. Not an excuse but a fact. Nor do I speak to the probable pain related to the many perceived injustices this person must have experienced in her life, some of the brunt of which he has just tasted.

Reflections of myself? Of course! It is impossible to get away from the Pest one might call the Buddha. Around every corner, with every breath, in every mirrored circumstance, event or movement, there she is providing us with another awakening possibility. As many of the great masters teach, life is done with mirrors. It is all mirrors. There is nothing else! Will I accept the invitation and look into the mirror?