

“Back to the future in the Himalayas”

Since I returned to Denmark I have been trying to understand the tremendous impact this journey has had on me. After the first “welcome home” parties and joyful reunions are over I start realizing the changes in me. Changes I did not feel that strongly while I was there, but now confronted with my life and reality in Denmark became clearer to me. I stumbled over an old book called “The art of navigating in chaos” in which there is a chapter about the inevitable culture shock you face while living so close and intense within such different culture. Reading it was an eye-opener and helped me translate my ocean of thoughts, feelings and reflections. I will use ones to describe my journey.

- 1) “Excitement before a journey”: Before you leave for the new country you vary between “love for the adventure” and cheerfulness to anxiety for leaving your loved ones and your safe/secure life behind. You prepare yourself both practically and emotionally.

I really was not that familiar with Jhamtse Gatsal at all before I came. I came as a stranger. But I was driven by a sincere curiosity and an undoubtedly feeling of something valuable to gain there

- 2) “The tourist”: Everything is new, exotic and exiting. You have a feeling of living with all your senses open – you are fully awake, but passively observing.
- 3) “From passive to active”: This shift of role is often followed by a growing feeling of frustration over not being able to do elementary everyday things (“Nothing is as it usually is”). Slowly you adjust, try to understand and accept your new reality. You get an ambivalent feeling of wanting to adjust to the new world and an anxiety of losing your old world.

Coming out of “the tourist” stage and awakening into “reality”. One of the major lessons I needed to learn was “patience”. Patience with the whole system and patience with a new mentality and culture, and learn to adjust – or how to navigate so I would not lose myself and still incorporate the new lifestyle. With an incident with a workshop on communication I realized that in order to get integrated I needed to take a step back, and just observe and learn from them for a while before contribute with anything. It filled me with humility towards them, that combined with my desire for “getting things started” and professional agenda resulted in various creative school projects and, more important, deeper and more trusted relations and friendships. This was my gate-way into the community and where my adventure really started!

- 4) “The anti-climax/the real cultural shock”: An emerging feeling that everything is artificial and surreal – you start questioning the purpose of the trip and wonder how on earth you are able make any sense out it again. You question and are being directly skeptical towards your “host culture”, because you simply do not understand it and it clashes with your own culture in a way that shakes your very own foundation.

This stage came as a shock to me. I began to feel lonely. What I thought I knew about it all suddenly seemed “wrong”. In retro perspective this was a crucial point; because it was here I really

started to open up and let my family in. At this stage we got to know each other's both good and bad sides too. Teaching English was a challenge and at this point it sometimes felt as if everything I tried never paid off. Every day I needed to change my strategy, and yet again the students' response was "we really want to learn Madam, but we do not understand it!" Without the help, understanding and support of Minoti, GombuLhamu and Lobsang I would have had exploded in frustration a couple of times. What came out of it was more than beautiful and heartfelt.

- 5) "The third culture and the multicultural personality": Somehow you get out of the resent stages and into this – there is a growing feeling of belonging to the new culture. You start to identify yourself with it, develop strong relationships and it starts feeling like "home" to you. Everything happens with the knowledge that you still are a "stranger" although you mostly feel "like one of them". This might sound negative, but it is a most vital one. You realize that a "third culture" is developing in which you and your "host-culture" can live and learn from each other. You develop "a multicultural personality" which makes you able to contain both yourself and your own culture along with other fellow human beings – the distances between us decrease and become useless to think about.

What happened at this stage of my adventure? Suddenly Jhamtse Gatsal became my home and my family. Everything around me looked familiar and safe. Visitors were my guests too. I could wake up in the morning with something on my heart to tell one of my friends. Some days in school were easy and playful others were tough – yet again some did not do their homework! I could hang around with the kids trying to learn "five stone" (unsuccessfully and to great fun for them). The days shortened; filled with school, activities, and drama plays, endless tea/snack down "the secret room", coffee at Lobsang's, hanging out in the family houses, watching movies in the prayer hall, Saturdays dance parties – joking and teasing the kids (The stonequeen and class 7 - "There is no need to fear – underwear is here"). I was living and loving in the little community!

- 6) "The cultural shock in reverse": You are back in your native country and after the first happy reunions you are faced with trying to adjust back to your previous life. It is here you really realize which impact your journey had on you. Despite the fact of being "home" again and everything is familiar and instantly easier to navigate in, you might have changed yourself in ways that will take you a long time to process.

Back home again with happy reunions, summer and parties – with Jhamtse Gatsal in my heart. What was it I learned? I lived so intense there that the experiences need time to settle in. Did I change profoundly I do not think so, but indeed it strengthened me both personally and professionally. I became the kind of social worker I want to be. Personally... I daily reflect on the terms "being useful" and "whatever you do, do it with dedication" and how "to be content, is not the same as letting things slide". It is impossible for me to put down into exact words what I learned, because I realized that the principles of Jhamtse Gatsal are so simple and yet so challenging to follow: they call for constant self-reflections, call for dedication, to be sincere and to be honest in

everything you do. Life is a process – a constant flow of living, giving and learning and these values serve as guidelines and simply make life a lot easier to enjoy and live to the fullest.

Danish people are known to be a little reserved – it takes a little while before we open up and let others in and we suddenly do not use a lot of big fancy words. But Jhamtse Gatsal, my dear family and loved friends – you live and blossom in my heart every second of the day!

Yours Sincerely

KirstineMadam

To the Kids – you are the true inspiration and source of wisdom “You’re the light, shining through the night – ohh let it shine, shine so bright!”