

“Another Passage to India”

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Not six months ago I returned from South India, 30 days in South India, days and nights packed with people, receptions, programs, visits to temples and mosques, to schools, to universities, to factories, to hospitals. Never in my life have I been so relentlessly in social interaction with people, expected to be interested, to be responsive, to be gracious...and also relentlessly, to eat the spread of dishes put in front of me.

I had been interviewed to be chosen as the Rotarian who would serve as Group Study Exchange Leader for a team of four young professionals from the greater Lehigh Valley. It seemed an interesting trip to make, a way of being useful, and now retired, I had the time and the energy. This was settled last October; we were to embark at the end of January.. Then I started to worry...have second and third thoughts...I read news of India and Pakistan, more than I should have...I worried about the weather and my health, and the possibility of random terrorism. I told my old Peace Corps friend Gruberg. We had survived quite well two years in Nigeria many years ago. He teased me: “what are you worrying about Cohen? You’re just going along for the ride.”

I liked the sound of Gruberg’s wisdom: Just going along for the ride. I repeated it like a mantra many times before we took off from Philadelphia airport in late January.

The truth is: I sought neither enlightenment nor spices in taking this passage to India. I had no expectations that I would bring back anything.. Indeed, I was going along for the ride.

Thirty days and nights later, I had had my fill of exotic spices for awhile, but even at my age I had found some scraps of what I would identify with the dramatic word:
ENLIGHTENMENT...LEARNING THINGS OF IMPORTANCE I THOUGHT I HAD ALREADY KNOWN.

In the following THREE SCENES, culled from my India experience, I present three of these enlightening – or if you prefer – clarifying events.

SCENE ONE: Eating With the Hand, the Right Hand...

Our Rotary Team attended a lavish wedding held on the stage of a large public auditorium; We were honored guests, sitting in the front rows, and taken up on stage to greet the heavily-gold laden bride and the groom and principal family members. En route to the site of the wedding feast, we had washed our hands under spigots above a long trough, shaking them dry in the air. Then we joined the wedding guests in a high-ceilinged warehouselike structure, and were seated for the banquet, all on one side of a continuous narrow table, upon which were our table settings...in front of each of us, : a large banana leaf, no utensils, several small paper cups at the margins of the banana leaf. We faced a passageway along which came food servers carrying buckets of various dishes; one placed a large scoop of rice in the center of my banana leaf, the next carrier ladled some samba, a vegetable stew, in a puddle to the northeast of my rice hillock; the next brought some pickled lime chutney, deposited onto another corner... Soon, small

mounds of moist mixtures almost obliterated the underneath dark green of the banana leaf.

Fortunately and by design, I was flanked on either side by allies:

On my right, a Rotarian named Mohammed Ali Harris, on my left, our GSE Team Member Matthew from Boyertown. Matt plunged his large right hand into his food with the delight and energy of a two year old, intuitively pushing the puddles toward the central mound of rice, then using his hand as a kind of steam-shovel moving toward his awaiting mouth. I hesitated, looked to my right at Harris for guidance and support. "Go ahead, Mister Bob," he said. "Just be sure you have enough rice in the mixture to give some bulk to the mound, not too soupy." I complied.

At first, my concern was for the wetness of my hand, a sense that I was somehow getting it dirty with the food on it, grains of soaked rice stuck between my fingers. But the aromas and textures and tastes were so pleasurable and so various – minty, smoky cardamom, tart/sour, creamy, peppery – these satisfactions soon replaced my concern about my wet and now spicy hand! And before long, the pleasure also transferred TO what I was doing with my hand, and my satisfaction, my sense of achievement, in delivering the food into my mouth without much spillage. I looked over to Matthew, who was observing me with amazement and amusement. Then I looked on my other side, toward my coach Mohammed Ali Harris; he, too, was watching my progress, and nodded vigorously in approval.

THIS, the Experience of encountering DIFFERENCE.

SCENE TWO: The Moon in Pollachi.

At the end of a long day with my team, taken to factories, a crematorium, an Ayurvedic College, where at each place we were duly greeted, briefed, and I gave the customary speech of thankyou as spokesperson...at the end of such a day, with still a two-hour car-ride ahead of us back to our host families, we were pulled to the side of an open-air café/restaurant in the town of Pollachi, where a local Rotary Club had been expecting us for a late dinner and schmoozing with them and a Rotary-affiliated group of college students. We sat in a rough circle of seats with foodplates on our laps (this time there were forks). I was asked to speak to the assemblage. I was utterly exhausted, but somehow this exhaustion gave rise to a special exhilaration I was not, when I first stood up, aware of.

I said at first how honored we were to be here in India, in the state of Tamil Nadu, and to be this night in Pollachi (a name whose sound I particularly liked, somehow Italian). I felt like a politician making his stump speech for the umpteenth time that day, lucky to get the name of the town right. Then I looked up at the dark sky which, even with the lights of the café, was sending us a bright luminescent glow. The moon above was full and round. "See that full moon above us?" I said. "That moon casting its glow on us here in Pollachi...in America, when they see that moon, when it casts its glow...that is the SAME MOON" I breathed deeply, as if the moon itself could be inhaled. And then spoke again: "...just as we are warmed by the same sun...the very same moon, the very same sun. Are we not a common humanity?"

With that, I sat down, feeling quite like a truth teller, a prophet, a person who thought of this for the very first time, and who KNEW with COMPLETE CERTAINTY that it was the truth.

Not just that I had heard it to be true, that I wished it to be true, that it should be true...but that in this moment, for me, it WAS TRUE.

THIS, the Experience of encountering UNIVERSALITY.

SCENE THREE: On An Ordinary Task As A Rotary Group Study Exchange Leader

On one of the many very hot and steamy days, I was told I'd be giving out awards at a multi-school ceremony, along with one of my team members, Alicia. We were led and accompanied by

Madame Geetha, a wonderful wise dowager of a Rotarian, who had been for several nights my host mother. The awards were to be given for various environmental-related projects, posters, logos: Save Mother Nature was the Theme. All I knew was that kids were being bussed in from miles around to attend these ceremonies. Alicia, Geetha, and I climbed scores of cement stairs leading up to the public school auditorium; Geetha and I had to pause to catch our breaths. At the side entrance to the school, I could hear the buzz and chatter inside, and was ushered inside, into the auditorium lit, it seemed, only by the natural sunlight coming through the windowless openings of the building. I was led up an aisle, and onto a shallow stage. There were ceremonial chairs designated for each of us. I took my seat, shook the hands of dignitaries in adjoining seats. Only THEN did I lift my head and look out in front of me, toward the packed auditorium, kids sitting on long benches. Row upon row of dark faces and long limbs, children in school uniforms of various colors, their bright eyes staring up toward me, lots of smiles, lots of bright teeth, all staring up toward me. I gasped in astonishment. I felt a swelling under my ribs. All of this life, all of this energy, and implied, all of this hope. I bit on my lower lip to keep my tears from flowing. Alicia next to me Asked, "are you all right?" I'm not sure I said this, but I know I thought it: "Yes, I am VERY all right."

This, the EXPERIENCE of feeling HOPE.

Did I come home enlightened? If gaining clarity, viscerally, deep inside my head and my heart and my hands...if that amounts to some enlightenment...then my answer is yes. Can one prepare for it? I don't know. But taking Gruberg's advice helped, and I repeat it now: go along for the ride...be open to experience...in short, LET LIFE IN... whatever passages you are taking, and wherever you take them to...India, China, or right in your own backyard.