



a new age birthday

As a child born in 1960, I was caught between the Baby-Boomer and Gen-X crossfire, and media-programmed since birth to think New Age: Oprah, gratitude journals, Venus and Mars.

BY CATHERINE GROLL (MONTGOMERY CLASS, 1992)

As my 40th birthday loomed, dark and foreboding, I felt compelled to take a spiritual journey out of my Gapped and cappuccinoed comfort zone, to a place where I could achieve Nirvana, renounce materialism, and possibly save the whales.

As luck would have it, a newsletter from Habitat for Humanity appeared in my mailbox encouraging me to check out its web site on “Global Builds.” The builds were an opportunity to travel to a Third World country, contribute funds toward the purchase of a house, and personally participate in building the home with the family that would live in it upon completion.

The trip closest to my birthday was to Nepal, a small country wedged between Tibet and India, the birthplace of Buddha, and former home to the Dalai Lama. I felt it best not to tempt fate, and signed right up.



CATHERINE GROLL AND FRIENDS

Habitat for Humanity is the dream child of Millard Fuller, a millionaire and lawyer who turned his back on his fortune, and followed his heart instead. In 1976, he and his wife created a non-profit Christian housing

ministry dedicated to eliminating poverty housing and homelessness worldwide. To date, Habitat has built over 60,000 houses solely through the use of volunteer labor, donations of money and materials, and the “sweat equity” of the potential home owner.

Jimmy and Rosalyn Carter have taken the charity under their collective wing, and often appear at the builds themselves.

Only 14 people from the United States were selected for the Nepal trip, and our “construction crew” consisted of an oral surgeon, a publisher, two youth ministers, a philanthropist, a real estate marketer, a stay-at-home mom, a GM executive, a few rich divorcées, and a furniture artist. With an arranged meeting spot at the JFK airport in New York, we came from our respective lives on different flights, than flew 27 hours to the other side of the world, to the International Airport and the capital of Nepal.

Kathmandu was a steamy, rancid city, with trash and human waste everywhere, and no government sanitation system in place. The dead were cremated on river’s edge, the smell foul and harsh. Animals were dragged through the streets, throats cut, bleeding all the way to market. People crawled and begged on the streets for rupees, the Nepalese currency. There were no traffic lights. Driving patterns were erratic and dangerous,

and sacred cows roamed at large, sway-backed from hunger, ribs sticking out. Men blew their noses in the street without Kleenex. It seemed a world gone mad, in comparison to the luxuries, such as sit-down toilets and garbage pick-up, that we enjoyed as privileged Americans.

After the assault of Kathmandu, we took a commuter flight on Buddha Air Lines to a city near the Indian border, in the northwest corner of Nepal, and from there, a three-hour bus ride to the village of Tikapur, our home for the next two weeks.

We were taken to a compound where four rooms served as our sleeping quarters. The beds were macramé webs stretched on wooden frames, with thin foam bedding. Two outhouses and one sit-down toilet were available and all our meals were eaten outside. There was no refrigerator, and cooking was done over an open fire in a smaller building separate from the sleeping quarters.

We ate rice, greens, and tomatoes every day, and puffed round bread made from potatoes, which could double as a pancake when honey was drizzled over it. Sometimes an alleged meat was served, but no one ate it, afraid of what it might really be.

When darkness fell, the wild dogs ran in loud, noisy packs, and after the first couple of nights, the men started sleeping with pails of stones by their beds to throw when dog fights began under our windows in the middle of the night. Each morning after breakfast, we trekked the two miles to our work site, carrying bottled water, and back packs with candy and treats for the children.

Most of the houses in the village were made of mud and thatched roofs, with no doors or windows. In the monsoon season, most huts blew down and had to be rebuilt each year. Animals roamed in and out of the rooms, and women and children collected dung from the fields and dirt floors to use later for heat and

cooking. The women were dressed in cheap and colorful cloth, wrapped tightly in saris, or worn as Punjabis (loose pants and a tunic).

The roads were not paved, and the villagers walked barefoot in the deep red clay that was everywhere, the women carrying large baskets of grain and produce upon their heads. The people were exceptionally beautiful, with smooth brown skin, dark eyes, and glossy black hair. Women wore colored spots on their foreheads to indicate their marital status.

The villagers stopped in their tracks to stare outright at the pale Americans, eager to meet us and study our strange ways and clothes. We were celebrities of sorts, and pied pipers, children streaming gaily behind us everywhere we walked, calling out hello and proud to show off their English. The national greeting “Namaste” means “I salute the divine within you” a sentiment I found very warm and touching each time it was said, especially from the little ones.

Not once did I ever see any children fight or cry in their interactions with each other. Laughter pealed through the fields as they ran and played, with no toys, no computer games, and no television.

For two long weeks we labored, in hot sun, air thickened with dust and acrid smoke from burning dung, used as fuel for cooking. We built four houses out of unfired brick and handmade mortar called “masala.” We carried big boulders from the river bed and carted the bricks by hand as there were no wheelbarrows. Large bags of gravel from loose rock piles and sand from the dry river bed were carried to a makeshift pit, and we pumped well water to mix concrete.

All day long, the village people would come by in shifts to sit at the edge of the work site, silently watching as a square foundation slowly became a room, then a house, and then a house with a tiled

roof, doors, and windows. The families worked side by side with us, and we grew to love their funny antics and gentle ways and gave them lots to laugh at as we attempted to learn their language.

True friendships formed, and all of us cried as we dedicated the homes in a ribbon-cutting ceremony on the last day and told them we would not be back.

Upon completion of our work, we were given presents that the villagers had handmade for us as a thank you.

We were told that most of the “mortgages” (interest free loans) on the homes took 10 years for the family to pay off, and amounted to approximately \$600 of American money. If that wasn’t mind-boggling enough, we were also told that the average income of the Nepalese family was \$130 annually.

The long plane ride back home gave me ample time to absorb and reflect on the two weeks we spent in Tikapur, and I can honestly say that it has given me a first-hand awareness of poverty that I never had.

My experience also gave me a deeper perspective on what we can do without if we have to. I continue to be amazed at the spirit and kindness of the people I encountered, who, from our perspective had nothing, yet were truly happy and peaceful in their lives.

Looking back, what remains most memorable about Nepal was what it did not have. No telemarketers, no malls, fast food, or road rage. No beepers, cellular phones, or guns in schools. No celebrity obsession, and no commercials.

Be that as it may, I was honestly ecstatic and deeply grateful to return to my nice clean home, my wonderful bed, and soft toilet paper. And as I enjoy these things each day, it is not without an awareness that many in the world do not even have the most basic necessities. I did not save any whales, but I found Nirvana in my own back yard. *Namaste!* ■