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Around the World and Back: A Discovery in India

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Around the World and Back: A Discovery in India
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The impetus for my journey was the desire to learn more about another culture, and pursue the idea of the old cliché: be the change I wanted to see in the world. This journey fulfilled the requirements of the project in multiple ways. It was a major risk to travel to another country with a language barrier on my own. The amount of work it took to prepare for the trip and face the challenges of the experience itself was very labor intensive. I had to do this because I needed to see that I could make a difference. I also had preconceived notions that were thankfully extinguished. I have struggled with the need to feel in control of my life, my surroundings, and my world. My passion for women’s rights and cultural understanding have led me down many different paths, but the journey to India had the most to teach me about the world and myself. I did not do anything cliche like find myself in India, but I did discover what I was capable of on many different levels. In this paper, I hope to express who I was before my experience and the changes it made on my perspective and my life. My travels in Goa extinguished a part of me that felt powerless and hopeless, and much of that was through the unexpected door of the failure of my expectations. The title of the paper is *Around the World and Back: A Discovery in India* because of the web of changes the trip made well into my return. It is in narrative form, following the major events before, during, and after my trip. My attempt to present both the best and the worst of me as I took part in this trip will hopefully give an accurate portrayal of my growth and my work in India. In this two-year process (June 2006 to June 2008) forcing myself to go outside my comfort zone for three weeks made all the difference.
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My Expectations

As I sat fielding the long string of questions from my family, I felt my confidence begin to shake. With only one week left before leaving, my heavily prepared facade began to break down. Nothing in the final stages of planning seemed to be going smoothly. My volunteer program changed plans three weeks before I left. They informed me our group may be staying in a tent, and the initial plan of working with HIV/AIDS education was out the window. I read reviews about the hostel I was staying in that involved body lice and money rip-offs. I changed my hotel plans, for the first, but not last time. I logged hour upon hour on the computer and phone trying to get a train ticket to Goa. The time was counting down, and the overwhelming feeling I was in over my head kept me from sleeping for three days before my trip.

Looking around my gate at New York’s JFK airport, I could not help but notice that I stuck out like a sore thumb. Apparently, the people who go to India are Indians. Most of the women were wearing traditional saris. I sat in jeans and a t-shirt. I heard very little English being spoken. I was acutely aware of how alone I really was on this trip as I watched families, friends and couples talking and laughing together. As I started to think back, I considered all that had led to this point, and I talked myself into believing I was ready to follow through with my decision.

In January of the previous year, I sat with an old, rich man in Los Angeles. By all indication this man was involved with the mafia or at least some shady workings in California and Mexico. As we talked about our different lives, as with most of my conversations, the topic of books came up. I gave my standard favorite East of Eden and
waited with heightened curiosity as to what this gray-haired, Don Johnson-clone would say. He gave a couple of options but finally settled on *City of Joy*. He described it, and I tucked it away with about 400 others in my “Books to Read” file. When I finally picked up a copy of Dominique Lapierre’s book a month later, I did not know what it was going to start. It was just another story to add to my library.

It took me six months of sleepless nights and relaxing in the tub to finish the book. Each true page revealed a place I could not get out of my head. I was unable to pick it up for more than fifteen minutes at a time because what it contained was overwhelming. It was the best and the worst the world had to offer without the safety net of luxury or even basic necessity. As Stephan Kovalski travels to Calcutta as a holy man, not wanting to convert people to Christianity, but searching for meaning behind poverty and suffering, he learns about the very best and worst of human potential. Along the way he becomes inexorably linked to the rickshaw driver, Hasari Pal, and a doctor he brings in to help with a community of lepers, Max Loeb. Every person who would listen heard me talk about Stephan Kovalski, Hasari Pal, and Dr. Max Loeb. Even more so, they heard me talk about the subordinate characters, their lives and their struggles. I was mesmerized.

While reading the book, I started my first year of graduate school with *The Creative Pulse*. During the first week of class a second year student, Jeanine Gibby, presented her field project report on Nepal. My newfound friend, Mary Kate, and I concluded traveling abroad was what we needed to do for our second year project. We talked about it endlessly, and my India obsession led us to the “where” of our endeavor.
In my heart I knew after that first week of classes that within the next two years my feet would land on Indian soil no matter what the cost.

The next year of preparation flew past. I spent time when I should have been working searching the Internet. Every spare moment of my free and not so free time went into finding a program that would speak to me. I sent link after link to Mary Kate. We met once and discussed what we wanted out of our experience. I wanted to understand a world where I felt my insignificance grow each day. I wanted to make an impact in a place I did not understand to reassure myself if I could do it there, I could do it anywhere. I searched and I searched for something fitting my criteria: work either with women, AIDS, or leprosy.

Every program was exorbitant in price: thousands of dollars to volunteer. The plane ticket and immunizations were not even covered. As I searched, it became obvious that this trip was going to be more expensive than I had bargained for. Despite this, I picked through site after site looking for something I wanted and could afford without selling an organ or my car. The more I searched and found, the less I heard from my travel partner. Well before I admitted it, I knew I needed to plan for a solo trip, and all of my hubris would not let me admit defeat. I was tough. I was independent. I was the kind of girl who would not back down from adventure. I was going to India.

Really what it boiled down to was my life had fallen apart around me. A seven-year unstable relationship was on the outs at this point. I was unsure of my career, and I felt trapped in my hometown. I wanted to escape, even for just a short time. I wanted to fix a broken part I was not able to identify. This trip had a lot to repair in my life,
without me even knowing that was the motivation. What I really wanted was a vacation from myself. Fixing someone else’s life made me not have to work on my own.

Sometime around May I finally settled on my program, had priced tickets, and had confirmation that I was on my own for the trip. I found an organization online called Volunteers for Peace listing several options in my price range, volunteering in my areas of interest. I pulled out my credit card, and I started spending money I did not have.

I had originally had my heart set on Calcutta because that is where City of Joy took place. Subconsciously, when Mary Kate bailed, I realized that might be bigger than I could handle, so I settled on Panaji or Panjim, Goa. The Volunteers for Peace website described it as a “traveler’s paradise”, which in many ways had led to the inflated problem of sex trafficking. The idea that it was a high tourist area also implied a relatively safe place for travelers. The description of the program sounded perfect:

“Volunteers will be given a training on the topics HIV/AIDS, STDs, and counseling. Using the information that was given in the training, they will visit local schools and conduct lectures. Furthermore to reach out to the general public, the group of volunteers will create a Street Theatre Play that will be performed in public places” (Volunteers for Peace).

Not only was I going to be involved in HIV/AIDS awareness, but I was also going to get the opportunity to push my own boundaries creatively by doing some street theater. I assumed the type of people who would sign up for this kind of creative social project would be my kind of people, so even if I was going alone, I would end up working with kindred. This assumption ended up being the most fruitful of my guesses.
Once I had paid my $250 fee to Volunteers for Peace, I bought my ticket for a little under $1,700 dollars. Paying that kind of money seemed entirely logical and reasonable with the resolve I had made towards this venture. I didn’t even flinch as I watched my credit card balance skyrocket. It was surprisingly easy to justify how I would afford this with the giant pay raise I would be receiving, or at least that is what I convinced myself. Luckily, I let the spending spree stop here, and I only spent what I had in my bank account from this point forward.

It was about this time I went to get all of my shots. According to Netdoctor, I needed: Typhoid, Hepatitis A and B, Diphtheria, Tuberculosis, Rabies, Meningococcal Meningitis, Yellow Fever, and Japanese B Encephalitis. Nightmares of turning into a pincushion or not being able to go because I would have to sell my firstborn child to pay for the trip started to make me nervous. When I actually called the health department I sat back waiting for the for the official death knell of my trip to sound. Instead, I found out based on my vaccination records I would only need Hepatitis A, my second round of Hepatitis B, Typhoid pills and Malaria pills. All of this freedom from disease for just short of $300.

As all of my major planning and paying was finished around the time I started the Pulse again in June, I was very confident I had considered everything. I had also been dealt the final blow of my relationship, and it was officially over. Of course, all of this meant an over-inflated need to put all of my chips down on the trip. Both financially and emotionally, this trip had a lot riding on it.
My Experience

I sat on the aisle of the plane so nervous and excited I did not even know how to sit still. I had the ring on my finger my mom gave me in case I got scared. She said I could run my thumb over it, and I would know she was there. As I opened my bag, I found one of the special rocks my brother collects and one of my sister’s stuffed animals. Despite the lack of sleep and the heightened nerves from my mom’s endless questioning, I was intensely excited and very comforted by all of the presents my family had shoved into my backpack.

I was excited to see who would sit down next to me. I was excited about my airline food. I was excited for a 15-hour plane ride. A pleasant surprise met me as I found out every seat had its own movie selection, and these movies hadn’t even been released yet. As I was sitting there checking out my choices, my seatmate arrived. At first I was disappointed to find he was an elderly Indian man, and then I noticed he was attached to an elderly Indian woman who was not sitting anywhere near him. As I looked down into the aisle with its miles of legroom and easy bathroom access, I decided to suffer through the next fifteen hours of flying in the center seat the elderly woman was occupying. Not even cramped legroom could put a damper on my enthusiasm.

As I cozied in between an American and Indian woman, I did my best to keep to myself. I picked up my copy of Eat, Pray, Love, and I buried myself in the book. Elizabeth Gilbert, the author of the memoir chose three countries to travel to after her marriage and her life spun out of control. She divided a year equally among Italy, India,
and Indonesia. At this point I, too, had a trip to Italy in the works, so the book felt very close to home for me.

Her trip to India was spent in an Ashram meditating with a Guru. While I was disappointed that she didn’t say more about the country itself, something about her experience with God spoke to me. I decided on the flight that each morning of the trip I would wake up early enough to spend 30 minutes in meditation. At the time I didn’t actually know if it would do anything more than give me time to myself to reflect on my experiences.

As the flight progressed and I watched the little plane on my personal TV screen get closer and closer to Mumbai. I watched movies and slept fitfully, and slowly the time clicked by. All the while I kept to myself until finally I couldn’t help but try to find out more about where I was going. I figured the two ladies next to me might have something interesting or enlightening to say about Mumbai.

The American woman was going to train telemarketers in Delhi. It was also her first trip. The Indian woman, on the other hand, was headed home to Mumbai to see her family. She told me about places to shop, places to eat, and let me know I was pretty safe in India anywhere I went. She was going to be home for a month, and she gave me her contact information in case I needed anything. Something about having a number I was never going to use from a person I didn’t know made me feel very reassured, and as the plane landed I felt confident.

Two days later, as I hid in my hotel room, overwhelmed, scared and homesick, I wondered why I couldn’t admit I was human. I was officially in over my head. India
was not a stepping-stone or a game. It was a country covered in the filth and slime of pollution, poverty, and in many cases desperation. The people, even at their worst were not like those of America. I did not have a fear of violence. I had a fear that I was a sucker. I had already had over $90 scammed from me in my first day, and with a limited budget, I wasn’t ready to have it wasted.

I went on a car tour of Mumbai, and despite having read everything I could about scams, I hopped in a random cab with a driver and a man named Babu. He showed me the Indian laundries, the Jain temple, the botanical gardens, and the beach, all in the midst of monsoon style weather. We were also supposed to see Gandhi’s house, but because it was Monday, it was closed. Ironically, it was the reason I agreed to the cab ride in the first place.

After driving around Mumbai in the more expensive air-conditioned taxi, despite my request for non-AC, we had to take a stop at a shop owned by a friend of Babu. I knew what this was all about. Indian tours were known for this kind of scam, so I begrudgingly walked in the front door of the shop. I was greeted by a very nice man with a zillion Persian rugs "I had to see". He showed me the smallest size, and he asked me what I would be willing to pay. I typed in the $25 I was able to afford, and he of course laughed. He thanked me for my honesty, and said even if I couldn’t buy a nice rug, he would love to share a cup of tea with me.

As I sat there drinking my tea I found out his family did not live in Mumbai, and that he was running the shop to make money for them. He was very kind and endearing, and I bought in hook, line and sinker. I knew I had to buy something from this kind person. My roommate wanted a Buddha statue, so I asked what he might have. After
finding one, and spending 750 rupees (19 American dollars), I hopped back into the cab with Babu and the driver.

Since the shop was our final stop, they took me back to The Gates of India where the trip had started. Upon arriving Babu told me I owed the 2500 rs we had discussed, plus 500 rs for his guide fee. I wasn’t prepared for this, and after spending $19 on a trinket I would later find everywhere in Goa for less then $5, I lied to Babu. I told him when I went to the bank I didn’t get out enough money for his guide fee, since he hadn’t told me about it upfront. I paid him 2700 rs, and quickly made my way back to my hostel. I felt sick. I had just spent $90 in one day, and the worst part was, I felt guilty I lied about what I had.

I walked back to my hellhole hotel, and knew I just wanted to hide. The worst part about having to sit in my room was how disgusting my room was. When I had walked in the previous night, a big cockroach scurried across my bed. The bed itself looked as if it had been used for a birthing center. I actually had opted to sleep on the floor in my sleeping bag the previous night. I was miserable. I didn’t want to be in my room, but I didn’t want to go out and risk being taken advantage of again. All I could think was how badly I wanted to get on the train and go to Goa. The best I could do was hope it would get better.

After spending over 24 hours in my room, it was finally time to go to the train station for my journey to Panjim. I was up and ready at 3AM, aching to get out of Mumbai, aching to be with a group of people instead of flying solo. The train didn’t leave until 7AM, but I just wanted to get out of my current situation.
I stepped over the rows of people sleeping on the street outside. I was flabbergasted as I looked down the sidewalk at the homeless people stretching as far as the eye could see. They slept shoulder to shoulder, with nothing more than the shirts on their backs. I felt guilty walking over them, like they weren’t there, but I really wasn’t sure what else to do.

When the cab driver tried to take my backpack, I held onto it tight, and declined the offer. It was the only thing I had, and it was filled with everything I needed. I couldn’t avoid the thought process that people who had so little would try to take what I have, so I refused to let it out of my sight.

One of my major irrational fears about the trip centered on having a cab driver hijack me and sell me into white slavery. This was not very likely, but many sleepless nights had revolved around this idea. As I sat in the cab, and his phone rang, I couldn’t help but think of this stupid fear. I sat there tense as he carried on a conversation that very obviously had something to do with me. Finally he turned around and told me I hadn’t paid for my hotel room. I thought it had all been paid upfront online, but instead I needed to pay for the other half at check out. With great embarrassment, I stepped back over the sleeping masses, paid, and headed back to the train station. Here I was looking like the one trying to rip someone off.

When I got to the train station, out of sheer gratitude to the cab driver that I wasn’t sold into slavery, I paid him 100 extra rupees. He dropped me at the front steps of Dadar station. I looked at more people huddled on the steps and in the front entrance of the station. This place was full of people both asleep and awake, and I had no idea where I was supposed to be. Upon entering the platform, people started coming up to me in full
force, asking me if I needed help. The only problem was, when I asked I couldn’t
understand their answers. I just wanted to be left alone, but I had no idea where I was
going. I had no idea which train was mine. I finally let some people drag me to a
platform where the Shantabadi Express was expected to board in about two hours.

I sat on the platform, and I began reading *The Once and Future King*. I silently
laughed at the kind of nerd I am, but was grateful for my reading penchant to take my
mind off of what was around me. The funniest part about this reading compulsion was
the fact that in my only piece of luggage, a small green back pack, I had five different
books: *Eat Pray Love, The Once and Future King, There’s a (Slight) Chance I Might be
Going to Hell, Frommer’s Guide to India,* and a journal I had been writing in everyday
after meditation or before sleep. These books actually ended up being the wisest items I
could have picked because India is a place of a lot of waiting.

When the train finally boarded, I found my name on the car I would occupy for
the next twelve hours. This was my first train ride ever, and I couldn’t help but feel very
excited to be riding on an Indian train. The day before I left for my trip I had seen
*Gandhi,* and I had this image of the Indian railways with the people sitting on train tops
and taking in the sites with great enthusiasm. Not so surprisingly, my single seat
amongst a very large, multigenerational Indian family looked nothing like my
expectations.

The train ride was very quiet, and in my heightened state of paranoia, I kept to
myself, my purse strategically placed under my clothes, and my passport always tight
against my skin. I stared out the window at the rainy landscape. The countryside was
thick forest, and I couldn’t help but hope to see a tiger or an elephant that would never come. Instead I saw many small villages with cows and dogs everywhere.

In one moment, I caught a beautiful Indian woman standing beneath a waterfall in the rain. She stood spinning her umbrella on a rock ledge, as her bright saffron sari contrasted the deep emerald of the forest. I quickly pulled out my pens and tried to draw this amazing vision. My picture honestly looked like a little fat lady standing on a Georgia O’Keefe inspired lady part. Despite my disappointment in my attempt to capture this moment, I kept this picture as a testament to my first inspiration in India.

A simple thought ran through my head over and over in between reading, sleeping, and looking out the window. I felt like I was eavesdropping on something that wasn’t any of my business. As I looked out the window at people going about their day-to-day lives and I listened and watched the huge family around me, I felt like I was seeing the intimate details of people’s lives. It felt like anthropology class. I was analyzing people who weren’t all that different from me; they were just usually so far away. As I watched them I felt like I was using them.

As the train stopped in Margao, Goa, I realized this train wouldn’t take me all the way to Panjim. Furthermore, I had no idea how to get there. As I stepped onto the train platform, the same crushing feeling from the morning descended on me. Here I was in an unfamiliar place, surrounded by people I couldn’t understand. I went to the first window I could find. They pointed in a vague direction at the bus station. I asked for a taxi, and they pointed in an equally ambiguous way.
Suddenly, I felt a hand around my elbow, as a smiling man with an umbrella pulled me away from the window and towards the little taxi stand. He opened his umbrella and held it over me as we walked over to the booth. I quickly ordered a cab, and I confirmed the price was reasonable. When I was done, I discovered the man with the umbrella was still there waiting for me. He stood there and asked me questions about America as we waited for the car to pull around. I was struck dumb as I realized this person had nothing to do with the taxi company. He was just a nice person, who wanted to help me get to where I was going. He expected nothing in return. Suddenly, I realized this was really India. The people in the train station that morning, the cab driver who took me to the train station and this man all were just trying to be as friendly and helpful as they could. This was the moment my trip changed. I realized, while I still needed to exercise caution, I was safe in India.

Flying down the road in Goa was different than the streets of Mumbai. When I rode in the cab in Mumbai, I considered throwing myself into the fetal position and praying to my maker. The traffic was crazy, and from what I could tell there were no discernable traffic laws. In Goa I still thought I was going to die at every turn of the road. There were still motor rickshaws and other erratic taxis flying at our car head on, only this time, the road was narrower and there were mopeds added to the mix.

I was too preoccupied by the sights to pay much attention to the fact I might have a Vespa lodged permanently in my forehead at any given moment. As I looked at the jungle interspersed with villages, I was happy to finally be in Goa. Suddenly, a soccer game came into view. There was nothing extraordinary about it, but it was the most
familiar thing I had seen since I had arrived in Asia. I was stunned, and it made me miss my students a little. I had been to more soccer games in the past year than in my entire life combined.

As we got closer to Panjim, I started to dread my hotel. I hadn’t slept well in over a week now, and if my room was another roach motel, I thought I might lose my grip on sanity. As we turned a corner, I saw the sign and courtyard I had seen on the Internet, and that came as a small bit of relief. Unlike, Hotel Bombay, this place looked exactly like what it promised.

After being checked in they walked me through a courtyard with artwork and took me to my room. I was so happy to see my canopy bed with clean linens and a bathroom with toilet paper I almost started to cry. I watched Indian music videos on TV, read more, and finally fell into a coma like sleep. Relief at finally being in a place that didn’t make me want to take a bleach bath was overpowering. Plus, I went to sleep knowing that tomorrow would be the beginning of my adventure in volunteering.

I checked out early. Since arriving in India, I had mostly eaten the Luna bars I had packed. I was so nervous and worried up to this point that I hadn’t had much of an appetite. This morning however, I was famished. I took the best shower ever, dressed quickly in my baggy India clothes, checked out, and got directions to the bus station. I also tried to find a bakery my Frommer’s Guide had said was the best authentic Goan bakery. Unfortunately, it was nowhere to be found. I began walking to the bus station and saw another bakery. While I gorged myself on cake, I walked through the rainy, dirty streets of Panjim.
I decided since I had an hour before I was to meet my group, I should try some Chai. I stepped into a restaurant a block away from the bus station. It was filled with men, and I could tell they were men who were not happy to see me. More than anything I got stares and glares. As I tried to pretend I didn’t notice, I saw the most unfortunate dog I have ever seen.

The beautiful copper colored dog looked into the restaurant past a giant, oozing open wound on the right side of its snout. It began rubbing its face on the concrete outside the restaurant. As I watched the dog, the restaurant owner also took notice. He became visibly agitated as the dog moved nearer and nearer to the entrance. He ran to the door to try to stop the dog from entering, but it was very obvious he was afraid of the dog. As the dog came closer, the owner jumped behind the counter with a little yelp, and I did my best not to laugh as the dog ran back into the kitchen and disappeared. At this moment, I became exceedingly happy that my tea had already arrived.

I was also very happy that the men in the restaurant had stopped paying much attention to me in lieu of the dog. I opened my book, sat back, and enjoyed my tea as the dog ran past the front door again. The owner tensed up, and then relaxed as the diseased animal moved on to torment someone else.

I hurried to the bus station. The rain had let up for the first time since I had reached India, and the air was hot and muggy. I still had time before I was supposed to meet my people, so I grabbed a Pepsi from a small shop. As I drank down this drink that was so America, after having a drink that was so not, I felt a little kick in my step. This was the first time since my plane ride that my optimism was brimming.
Sitting outside of a giant shrine of Jesus and the sacred heart, sat a Korean girl. She had a mountain of luggage under her, and she was also reading a book to pass the time. I saw her pull out paperwork very similar to mine, and I thought I must be in the right place. I quickly went up to introduce myself. It became very obvious despite the requirement of the program that participants speak English; this girl had taken this idea very loosely. She told me her name was Solyi, but I could call her Sol. We talked as much as her limited English would allow and then quickly pulled out our books and began waiting together.

After we waited, waited, and waited some more, we realized no one else looked like they were with us. We ran to a stand and called every available number given to us by FSL. Finally, after some serious concern that we both had come to India for nothing, we found our people. There was a small girl from France named Chloe, a guy from Japan named Taiga, and two girls from Holland, Rozmarjin and Lucienne. We also met Vinod and Joe, who were our Indian group leaders. We went around and exchanged background information, and I joked about forming a band because of our mutual love for music.

Joe told us it was time to take us to “Our paradise” and then start our first meeting. As we hopped in our van and drove to the guesthouse, it felt like the trip was finally getting started. The people seemed great, and the next two weeks were guaranteed to change my life.

After our first meeting, the only feeling I could rightly verbalize was pissed. I had just forked the second half of my payment to FSL, which was $250 worth of rupees.
to teach a bunch of kindergartners English. There was nothing about AIDS/HIV education or street theater. I knew this before I got there, but even after the other ladies and I pleaded to do what we had originally signed up for, they compromised by saying we could spend the last two days with some prostitutes discussing HIV with them. We were going to spend the next two weeks teaching little kids in a slum their ABCs. We were also staying in a guesthouse I would not wish on my worst enemy. While it was still nicer than Hotel New Bengal, I wasn’t about to touch anything without the distinct fear of body lice. Paradise was definitely not the word I would use describe it.

The best news of the trip was the amazing ladies I was staying with. We bonded instantly. We were all outraged as our group leader, Vinod, told us we had to be in by 10:30 every night, and we needed to check in with him every time we left the hostel. None of us were up for this considering we were all the type of girls to take on India on our own. This little difference in opinion with Vinod, the man we eventually called Sunshine, was not our last.

Now, to be fair, this was the first time we had a culture clash in India, and retrospectively, we probably seemed like spoiled brats. However, it is hard to spend a load of money and energy on something, only to be told you won’t be getting what you want, and you will have to check in with the man running the show. Throughout the next two weeks, this all made more sense to me. From the lady who was not allowed to run a copier on her own, to the brilliant women I met, who instantly let the voices of the men reign over her, the need to protect was something Vinod was trying uphold. What he did not realize: he was dealing with a whole pack of women with something to prove.
On the first night Rozemarjin became angry and confrontational with him, and most of us feared this would be what the rest of our trip would look like. Luckily, there was only a slight tension, but nonetheless, this was a continual roadblock between Vinod and the rest of the group for the entirety of the trip. I walked away from it with several friends, of which I don’t count him as one.

On the morning of the August 7, 2007 we started out for our first day of work in the slums of Chimbel. Despite not getting the program I wanted, I couldn’t help but be really excited to see the school and meet the children. This morning had also been the first morning I got my brain to slow down enough to feel like meditation actually had some merit. I felt a calm centeredness that seemed to start in my brain and hang on partially through the rest of my day. The combination of everything had me overwhelmed with hope.

What would later become part of our routine, we bickered harmlessly about what to eat. Most of us had gotten a tad sick the night before and wanted something familiar. I ended up having nothing more than unsweetened yogurt and chapatti. The yogurt, throughout the trip really grew on me, and I ended up liking chapatti very much. By the time the trip was over, my other group mates would entirely ramrod Sunshine into getting American and European style breakfast almost everyday. The saddest part of this is when I had a chance to eat on my own, I would eat as much spicy Indian food as I could, and I ended up leaving the country wishing I had more of it.

After breakfast, Sunshine tried to convince us we should go back to our room and wait until after lunch to go to the school, but we refused. We were all excited to get
started as soon as possible. As we walked the same path I had taken the day before to the bus station I started to recognize landmarks, and Panjim’s layout started to make sense. We arrived at the station to meet our contact from Lifeline, and she crowded us onto a bus.

The bus was dirty with standing room only. It had been baptized and had paintings of Jesus and Mary everywhere along the dashboard, which eventually I came to notice about almost every car I entered in India. We all stood close together and watched out the window as the city, the river, a rich neighborhood, and finally the slum passed by the windows.

As we entered the slum, we were told we were the first outsiders to ever come into Chimbel. People stared out of their windows in fascination, and as we walked down the street, shoeless children poured out of their houses asking, “What is your name?” Among the children wandered all types of animals. Goats, chickens, dogs, cats, and even cows and buffalo went in and out of the doors of the peoples’ houses just as much a part of the community as the people.

The children ran giggling and screaming as they led us to the school, and as we walked the garbage-strewn street, we shielded ourselves from the endless late monsoon drizzle with our umbrellas. The wet smell of animals and waste of all kinds hung in the air with the moisture, but there was something strangely okay about the whole scene. Whether people were happy or reluctant to see us there, their children, our most important customers were bursting to see us.
The school, which was one room with partitions separating it into four, looked more like a garage (1). Outside sat an outhouse, which we were instructed by Sunshine to avoid at all costs. The tin roof was sagging off the building and the moisture was seeping through the walls. The children sat on mats on the floor with their soaking shoes and sandals outside. The second we walked in the room, the lesson their teacher was working on was over.

Roze and I were the only ones with teaching experience, so we led the way by introducing ourselves through games. We had been told they knew way less than they actually did. As we moved into ABCs, we were astonished by what a group of kids with so few resources had been taught. For about an hour we played spelling games and sang songs (2). At the end of the morning session, we all felt like we were getting through to them, and we were all having fun doing it.

When the children left, we sat at lunch to discuss what their teachers would like to see in the next couple of weeks. We explained to them we were going to paint the school and teach the children some basic English. Our group sincerely wanted to know what they wanted out of the next couple of weeks. With a significant language barrier in front of us, the best we could ascertain was the next day we would be talking about our individual countries. We also found out we would be teaching two different groups of students. The ones we had in the morning were not involved in any type of school, while the ones in the afternoon used this as a supplement to the schooling they were already getting. The teachers had some training in English, but were not educated in the practice of teaching it.
We asked about painting and put our ideas forward. Culturally, our ideas were so different. We wanted the teachers and kids involved with the decision, but every time we tried to include this, either Sunshine or the teachers themselves pushed us to do our own thing. Originally we wanted to get the kids to do handprints, but the teachers cautioned that children would stop coming to school or avoid coming if their handprint was not included.

We ended up deciding on a few murals done in bright colors and some charts to place on the wall. I also asked the teachers to think about what else they might like. A parent of one of my previous students had given me some money to put towards ladies in prostitution, but I was sure she would not mind seeing the money go to children who really needed it.

We left early to work on paint supplies and our lesson for the next day. As we walked down the street the kids yelled our names, and we began to see a cult following start with the boys surrounding Taiga. Each day as we walked to and from the school Taiga would have his entourage of teeming little boys, who would growl at him, under the impression his name was actually tiger.

Sunshine pulled me aside on our way down the hill to discuss the fact that midnight would bring in Roze’s 26th birthday. He informed me he had already ordered her a cake and was hoping I could join him to pick it up later for her midnight surprise party. This moment was what sealed Vinod as being a nice guy in my eyes. Our differences never did make us friends, but I started to understand he had pure intentions and big insecurities. It became more obvious with time, that this leadership he had been placed with was a matter of honor. For the rest of the group it was a trip, for me it was
the about many things, including my master’s degree, but for him it was making his family name proud.

When we got back to Panjim we were exhausted. Most of our group went to take a short nap, and Sunshine and I went to get the cake at the bakery just down the street. We stood at the street corner I would come to curse every day, several times a day because of its crazy traffic. We stepped across the street and discovered a grocery store with Red Bull, peanut butter, white bread, and toilet paper. We picked up plates, candles, and small gifts. Around the corner was THE bakery I had looked for on my first day. I wolfishly ate a tasty beef filled samosa and thanked my lucky stars that beef really was served in India. We grabbed a delicious looking chocolate cake and returned back to the guesthouse very pleased with ourselves.

After a long night of shopping and eating I fell deep asleep. Suddenly, I was awoken to the sound of Happy Birthday. Our entire group convened in our room. We ate cake and laughed, and suddenly Roze, Sunshine’s biggest critic started to see it too. This was not a bad guy. He was a kind person with good intentions. She told us far away from home she felt already that she was with family.

Reflecting on my day the next evening as I lay in bed, I could not help but be overwhelmed with what an amazing day it had been. I danced on the back of the bus to Nelly Furtado and Will Smith, as all of the girls in my group and I lip synched with our umbrella microphones. I had a homemade Indian lunch of dal, rice, vegetables, and chapatti. I had smoked an Indian cigarette and tried an Indian beer.
We spent the morning with the students teaching them about our countries. We each showed our flag and explained its significance. We talked about the food we eat, how we say hello in our language, and the sports we play. I actually learned quite a bit about all of the countries. When we finished we built off of what we had started the first day.

In the afternoon we divided the two groups into a young group and an older group. As I worked with the older kids, I fell in love with them. They were eager to learn, and they loved to laugh. I worked with my students on vocabulary and sentences using the vocabulary. I tried to use some acting to get the kids to remember it. In the other room Roze led the kids in a different kind of activity. When the guy from Lifeline came to check in on us, we were too caught up to really pay much attention to him. It was soon time for the kids to go, and Roze and I congratulated each other on a job well done.

We sat down with Sunshine to discuss how the day had gone and make a game plan for the next day. He informed us the teachers and the man from Lifeline were unhappy with what we had done because the students had been too wild. I took this very personally. I had seen the kids the previous day as I observed a lesson. They had been poking, hitting, and kicking each other during the teacher’s entire hour-long lecture. While they may have been noisy and running around while we taught, every one of them was paying attention. Furthermore, they understood what we had taught them. While the kids were wild, they were learning.

I could not believe what I was hearing. Why were we even here? If they knew what they were doing, why did we need to teach? I informed Sunshine, that if this was
the case, maybe we were just better off painting and getting out of here. We had worked really hard and done an alarmingly good job despite the language barrier. Rozmarjin and the others agreed. She and I had been the only two comfortable teaching in the first place, and now we were not quite sure what to do. Most of us felt a bit disillusioned with the whole program at this point. None of it was turning out as planned. I had officially lost my temper, and I hoped I had not pushed my group too hard to see it my way.

As I lay mulling it all over, I still felt angry, but I came to realize this was just another time when my ideas of normalcy were affecting my perception of what this place should be like. While, I became aware of this, I also knew I could not go back and teach for more than a few minutes a day for the rest of the trip. I have never been and I never will be the kind of teacher they wanted me to be, and I was tremendously happy about this fact. I had stood up for what I believed to be right.

When I woke up the next morning to go to breakfast, I became acutely aware that I had some bad Indian water along the way. The unfortunate part about the previous day was that I wasn’t all that sad to be staying home. I ended up sleeping until everyone returned in the evening.

I learned more about women’s ability to bond on this day than on any other. Lucienne, Roze, and Chloe and I had discussed some really intense ideas prior to this point, but on this night we really bonded. We discussed everything from politics to sex to body image. It was reassuring to feel at home with these women far away from the US. I might as well of been talking to my own friends.
Our first weekend of freedom approached, and we decided to take the bus to Old Goa to see all of the Portuguese architecture on Saturday and go to the beach on Sunday. I was awed by all of the beautiful old buildings. Of course Roze, Luce, and Chloe were used to old churches, but all of it was new to me. The oldest buildings in Montana were still at least 200 years junior to what I saw. They were disappointed because there wasn’t more shopping. I left feeling quite happy with all I had seen. From the cow hanging out right in the middle of the road to walking through St. Peter’s Basilica, I was really impressed (3, 4). The only idea that gave me pause was how celebrated the European influence was on a place with a culture that had been there for centuries before the Portuguese came. Where was Really Old Goa?

The beach was a hilarious adventure. Despite the fact the rain had finally decided to let up, the wind was intense. We wandered up and down the street leading to Calungute Beach looking at all of the junk peddled to tourists, and we bought our fare share. I have a hard time deciding in situations like this whether it is better to avoid the whole mess or support the tourism economy, but I spent money like there was no tomorrow. Between the stone ring that would eventually turn my finger green and the wrap skirt that matched Chloe’s; I walked away with a good mix of garbage and treasures.

We eventually worked our way to the Arabian Sea, and we watched as hundreds of people swam in the freezing cold surf full of trash. I dipped my toes in the water, and the plastic bag that stuck to my shin as the tide came in higher than expected saddened me. Even as I brushed it off, I could not help laughing out loud. To my right there was a
group of men leaping around and playing in the water in their underwear. They looked like they couldn’t care less if a barrel full of toxic waste floated by. They were having a good time. As the sun began to set, I saw how beautiful this place must be during the warmer months as the sun poked out from behind a cloud (5). It illuminated a happy little family picking up shells at the tide line. I picked up a few for myself.

Chloe had made friends with a mute man by giving him a cigarette. He continued to follow us all the way back to the bus and he became quite agitated with us on several occasions. We were unsure of what the problem was, so we just kept up with our window browsing as we worked our way towards the bus. We actually started to become a little scared of him as we got closer, and he kept getting angry and making gestures we didn’t understand.

Finally, we heard the shouts that the last bus of the night was headed back to Panjim. As we started to run so did the man. We jumped on the bus, and we all hoped he wasn’t going to follow us. Suddenly he popped his head in the door, waved to us, and hopped back out. As the bus drove off, we saw him waving to us the whole way. We all felt stupid as we realized he had been trying to tell us we had to get to the last bus, and if we weren’t quick we were going to miss it. It was just another case of a language barrier masking the truly good intentions of the people of India.

When we went back to work on Monday it became apparent we were all starting to get tired of each other. Everyone was grumpy, and there were several minor arguments about this or that. Luce and I fought about everything possible. Everyone blew up at Sunshine, and other little arguments arose here and there. None of us were
really happy with the work we had done so far, and such close proximity with people who were becoming less and less strangers made it hard to keep it together.

We did nail down our mural ideas, finished painting most of the white, and we started working on our red border. While we painted, the girls from the school practiced their dance for their Independence Day performances (6). One of them was exceptional. The other girls watched her constantly for direction. I asked her teacher if she had the option of going to a school for dance. She informed me this girl would be married within the next three years after she turned fifteen. Cultural lens or not, this made me very sad. I couldn’t imagine not even having the option to pursue a talent. It was one of the moments in India when I felt blessed to be from culture that, while sometimes a little self-indulgent, still valued the self, even in women.

Something about the entire situation made me realize how lucky I was to be traveling in India as a free, single woman. While I lied to strangers about a fictional husband, I couldn’t help but be very happy I had the option to come and volunteer without the constraints of a relationship. Even better I had the option of pursuing my own creative endeavors. As we left that day, I became very excited to work on my mural. I had sketched it out, and I had a great idea. It was the first time I felt genuinely useful since we had arrived.

Until this point I had gone to the school to work with mixed emotions. I felt a begrudging sense of being forced to pay to do a job I did not really want for people who weren’t all that appreciative. On the other hand, I had woken up every morning excited to have new experiences and meet more people in a place culturally alien to me. On the morning of the 14th, however, I was more than excited to get started on my work.
I had discovered through the process of working in India that nothing is quick and easy. Paint stores do not just mix colors for people like Home Depot. When a person wants to paint in India, they have to buy the base color and then purchase the tint to mix. As we drove through the city streets, it became very apparent to me just how much work went into painting the bright yellows, reds, and blues. I also observed multi-story buildings being erected with nothing more than handsaws, hammers, and nails. Every place in Goa was built from scratch with the bare minimum of resources. Something about working like this spoke to me. As I got used to the hoops that needed to be jumped through, I appreciated the work it took to do jobs that very simply are done in the United States.

As I stood behind the school putting the paint base into the bucket and mixing it with my hands, I asked Sol to add color or water alternately as I tried to get just what I wanted. I made a palette out of the paint bucket lid, and began to mix the colors. I had settled on rain clouds holding up a bright sun and rainbow. I had sketched out the drawing on the freshly painted red and white wall. At first Luce helped me with raindrops, but eventually I made her mad with my cloud color choice. I was finally left alone to work.

The moments passed by seamlessly as we blasted western radio. I laughed with Taiga here and there as I sang “Hey There Delilah” to him. The girls got in a paint fight, and Sol took pictures of what we accomplished. Roze worked in the other room on a mural of animals native to India. It was a perfect moment.

As we cleaned up that day, and we had finished what we had come to the school to work on, I watched as the different colors of paint ran together into the mud. As a
pretty environmentally conscious person, I was a tad chagrined at dumping paint and chemicals directly onto the ground. This was India though. There was no luxury of being able to care about the environment. Where in the middle of a slum surrounded by a literal dump, would a person ever find a place to dispose of chemicals that would only seep back into the earth?

Our tired group fell into our seats on the bus, and I was left solo in a seat. I did not think much of it as a very attractive young man sat down practically on my lap. I sat staring out the window until I became aware of an arm grazing my chest. I shifted in my seat a little, but then I felt a light brushing of fingers where they did not belong. I realized the guy next to me had his arm crossed in front of him, and he was trying to cop a feel by hiding his right hand under his left arm. I pushed myself closer to the window, and I thought about The Frommer’s Guide instructions to strike a man if they got too friendly. I glared at him, and he just sat staring straight ahead as I watched his fingers moving towards me again. I could only think, “This guy must really want to die today”. Instead of making a scene or smacking him across his creepy little face, I leaned forward and talked to Luce and Chloe.

I cannot say what I would have done in the same situation in the United States, but I could not help but think about what Chloe had told me as I tried to decide how to deal with the situation in the right way. White women in India are considered promiscuous because of the way they are portrayed by Hollywood movies and pornography. It is not enough in my own country to feel out of reach of the constantly unattainable beauty portrayed by the media, but to be sitting in another country where
most men looked at me like a villain or a whore was an entirely different feeling. I had noticed the disconcerting looks, but this was an entirely different situation. Luckily, putting my body out of reach of unwelcome hands was enough. I rode out the rest of the ride fuming at what had just happened. Whether my white skin was the reason or not, I was happy not to be a woman living in India.

Indian Independence was something I had looked forward to from the moment I had found out it would be happening while I was there. City of Joy had talked about huge festivals of bright colors and various religions getting together to celebrate all types of different holidays. My expectation of the day definitely was way out of proportion. While the kids put on a show at the school, the rest of India was pretty subdued.

We got up early to be sure to get to the school on time to see the presentation the kids had prepared for us. We had not spent a lot of formal time with them since the failed teaching early in the trip, but we had enjoyed showing them our painting progress each day. We also got a daily laugh as they followed Taiga from the slum calling his name like adoring fans.

When we got to the school, the girls were dressed up in their best saris, which are the typical brightly colored wrap dresses worn by most Indian women. In a neighborhood with little, the girls always looked bright and crisp in every imaginable color and print, but today they were covered with the most beautiful flowing fabrics and jewelry. While I became acutely aware of some of the major problems of being a woman anywhere in the world during this trip, I also felt sorry for the boys who wore the same shirts and shoes they had worn every other day we had been there. There is something
about putting on special clothes that really is not about anyone else. It is a gift to the self, and it made me sad that men rarely get the pleasure of this in their lives.

We also had dressed up for this day. Chloe, Luce, and Roze and I had gone to a tailor to have clothes made for the occasion. Decked out with Indian style tunics and scarves, we paled in comparison to what the girls wore, but we felt festive. Amongst the children, we took pictures with them and of them as they danced to the CD player crooning the local pop music of their generation. They banged their bangle bracelets and shook their scarves. Their practice had taken place in the middle of all of our painting, and we were all excited to see what they had ready (8). Their practice had paid off, and while they all did an amazing the job, the girl in the rainbow tie-dye still outshone all of the others around her.

When they finished, all of the students lined up to sing the Indian national anthem. A cliché part of me thought of Gandhi, and I wondered if he would be proud of his country. I knew I was impressed by a place that was rumored to be on an upswing of nationalism. The kids stood in straight rows, and they sang earnestly, even if they did not quite know all of the words. Of course Sunshine couldn’t help standing over them with a ruler and correcting their every misstep. He wanted to show his national pride, but instead he came across as overbearing.

When they had finished, it was time for us to go. We took several pictures. The kids surrounded the camera. They surged and pulsed and fought to be brought home in a picture with us (9). I watched them in their improved surroundings. Their eyes and then hands reached out to touch all we had done. They listed off the colors of the rainbow and the names of Roze’s animals in English. Their fingers played over all of the colors we
had added, and I am pretty sure they were pleased with what we had left them. From the blue door and shutters to the new posters to the wall that faded like a sunset, we had not done all we wanted, but we had done a great job. Whether the work we left or the lessons we taught to the kids would remain in their hearts forever, we knew that inside of us it would (10-12).

The man from Lifeline gave each of us a rose, and then he took us off to discuss the last few days of our trip (13). Our fight to work with prostitutes and women suffering from HIV/AIDS appeared to be paying off. We went to a house in the slum with a surprising interior. The hard floors and thick tapestry on the wall were unexpected as I walked in the door. We sat down to discuss our options, and we settled on going around Panjim that afternoon to meet some of the ladies in the area we were living in and get an idea of what we were dealing with. It sounded promising as we discussed it. What it turned out to be felt a lot like voyeurism.

That afternoon we stood outside the post office waiting to meet one of the local prostitutes. I had watched Born into Brothels before leaving America. I had learned from the documentary about the desperate prospects of women and children living in the culture of sex trafficking. The movie focused on the children, and while it did a great job showing their situation, it did not go as far into the lives of their mothers. Looking into the face of a woman who was actually part of the trade was entirely different.

She did it because she was putting the daughter of her husband’s second wife through university. She did not paint herself up like the peacocks of women in America. She stood in a simple sari. She was in her late forties, wore only a bindi on her face, and
spoke very matter of fact about her job. It was something she did for her family, which I soon learned to be the major reason most women did it. Their sister’s son had a heart condition. Their husband was an alcoholic who did nothing to support the children. It was just something they had to do. Each woman talked to us in exchange for condoms the lady from Lifeline bought for them.

While we stood on the street corner being eyed by each passerby, I began to feel uncomfortable. I was not doing anything to change these women’s lives. I was simply learning to be grateful for my own circumstance. The final blow came as I was told about a prostitute in a brothel who was beaten by a group of about eight men while her friends sat inside and watched. They could do nothing, for their careers made them targets of the law, even when it was someone else doing the breaking. This story made me realize two days of talking to prostitutes only made me feel helpless. I got no inclination that they really wanted to talk. It seemed like a trip to the zoo.

I opted on the final day of work to paint the cupboard my sponsoring family had bought. I decided, even if it wasn’t my first choice, doing something for the slum children of Chimbel was the right choice. The green and yellow of Charles M. Russell’s colors grew into vines and swirls. I began to paint the cow skull logo, and I laughed at my cultural faux pas as I changed it simply to a head. As people drove by they stopped to watch me work, and as it came together, I was relieved to be watching something tangible form in front of me.

I walked away from the cabinet, not entirely happy with the end product, but not entirely disappointed either. It felt in a lot of ways like my trip. My life and its problems were still there, but I had learned so much in the process.
In our final meeting that afternoon Sunshine admitted to us that this was not what he had signed up for either. He had expected to work with men and had no idea what to do with us the entire trip. He began to tear up as he apologized. He said he had failed as our group leader, but he tried to be a good friend. Part of me felt for him, and part of me couldn’t help being tired of watching this man feel sorry for himself. He had admitted previously to a broken heart, with a refusal to ever love again. He had also signed up for this project to fix his life, and part of me identified with him so much I was repulsed. I waited with patient anxiety for our last meeting to end.

I spent my last few days in India playing with my new/old friends. We danced in the only nightclub in Panjim, shopped at what were now familiar shops, and ate at the places that had become our favorites. Chloe was the first one to leave, and as my other Westernized girls and I said goodbye to her, we made unkeepable promises about never losing touch. Since Roze, Lucienne, and I were all the second ones to leave early Sunday morning, we packed up our not so terrible guest room and said goodbye to our two Korean roommates. Areum and I would be seeing each other again in Mumbai. Sol, the first person I met on my travels, squeezed me tight to her and lavished me with Korean gifts.

As we woke up before five the next morning, packed all of our belongings onto our backs, and prepared to say good bye to Orav’s for the last time, we knew we had had the time of our lives. We made our way to the boy’s room to wish them well. Taiga and I would also be meeting in Mumbai, so I gave him a quick hug and ran over our plan. I
felt great hesitation as to how to say goodbye to Sunshine. He was a nice man, but unlike the others, he was not my friend. I chose a respectful handshake and walked out the door.

We made our final trek to the Panjim bus station, and I couldn’t help thinking about how scared I had been walking this same route two weeks before. We passed our restaurant and coffee shop where we had inhaled brownies and swam in cups of coffee. We passed the spot we had bought the bracelets symbolizing our strength. We stepped over the same dead cat and pointed disgustedly at the same diseased dog. We stood in the same spot where we first met. Finally when we were waiting on the bus to Margao we talked about every memorable moment in India.

We were excited to get to the next destination and sad to leave. Luckily for us our bus was running late, so when we finally made it to the train, the only choice we had was to dash away from each other before we could cry. This time as I sat waiting for my bus, I read *Into Thin Air* because I wanted to, not because I was scared not to.

I pulled down my seat in the sleeper car of the train, and I passed out from emotional and physical exhaustion. I was not scared of the people around me, and I was pleasantly surprised about how great my experience on the way back was in comparison with on the way there.

Part way through the ride, I suddenly began to cry. It wasn’t about leaving my new friends. It was still about my ex boyfriend. This time, I let myself go. I was hidden behind the curtain of my train seat, and I knew it was okay to let loose a little. Although Sunshine hadn’t become my friend, I knew I had learned many important lessons from him. The most important, I thought, revolved around knowing that while my heart was
still broken, it wasn’t forever. Unlike Sunshine, who promised his last love was really his
last, I was unwilling to let my ex have that much power.

That evening when I got to the nicest bed I had seen since Hotel Panjim I fell
asleep easily. The taxi ride to the hotel had elicited no thoughts of white slave trade. I
was actually happy to see Mumbai again. It felt like a second chance to be as brave as I
knew I was.

When Areum and Taiga got there the next morning, we walked the whole city
wasting time until my flight. We ate at the restaurant I had been too scared to find the
last time. It was the best meal I had. The grilled taste of the tandoori shrimp coupled
with the familiarity of a Red Bull made a perfect meal. We walked in search of a Hookah
bar. Instead we found a fish market. We saw more shopping than could be imagined,
and I laughed a little as I saw the familiar Buddha statue for a load cheaper than the one
resting in my bag.

As I hugged my two last friends goodbye I got into a taxi where I would meet the
only truly unfriendly Indian person of the whole trip. He was disappointed in how much
sex Americans had. He was mad at how much I was paying him. He hated the people
we passed on the streets. He pretty much was disappointed by everything. If this was a
normal attitude in India, I had been spared for the almost the entirety of my trip. I liked
to think he was just an exception.

I watched out the window as the miles and miles of cardboard and tin houses
lining the streets passed by. People swarmed our car at traffic stops. I gave away my
favorite hat and the last few rupees in my pocket. I wasn’t scared of them. I only felt badly about their situations.

When the cab pulled away from the airport, and I had come full circle on my trip, I began reading *The Witch of Portobello*. I had read four books on the trip, and had to purchase this one in Mumbai from a street vendor. It had been about a month since I had been home, and I couldn’t wait to see my dogs, sleep in my bed, and eat Mexican food. It had been amazing trip, but I was ready to finally go home.

**Final Reflection**

After returning home on August 20, 2008, I was exhausted. Coming home was not as overwhelming as I expected at first. All I did was eat and sleep. When I finally got my bearings about a week later, it all came crashing down. In a journal entry on the 24th, I found myself overwhelmed with sadness. I didn’t want to leave the house or talk to anyone, and more than anything, I didn’t want to talk about my trip.

I had fallen in love with India, and I missed it. I also felt very selfish in regards to what had occurred. What I presumed to be a trip I would get home from and then explicate quickly in a paper, actually turned into something quite different. It was my experience, and I did not want to have to share it or try to explain it. It took months before I could make myself really talk about it, let alone write about it. All I could get out was a simple poem:
Sitting on a runway
Dabolim, waiting over water
a shadow still here.
Thought I could leave you
in dirt, poverty, and chaos.
With the descent into loneliness
you are still here.
Eleven thousand miles
Broken parts can’t fall away.
Trains, busses, and airplanes
Never leave you behind.

I became very worried that my melancholy would be a permanent state of affairs.
I could not get a sleeping pattern down, and as the first days of professional development
for the new school year began I was up by 5 AM running. I had spent a lifetime trying to
convince myself to get out of bed early in the morning to run, but something about jet lag
made it very easy. While jogging in the morning I would think about my trip and my
friends I had met, and it was the one time during my suddenly busy day where I could
concentrate.

It was not until I finally got back into the normal routine of my day-to-day life
that I could start to talk about it or start writing. The final impetus to begin working
came when I taught my students about the school I had worked at in Chimbel. Sharing
with them the poverty in comparison with our own tendency at wastefulness got me
thinking about what I had really accomplished and learned.

I had taken on this venture in order to prove something to myself. Initially I told
myself I had no expectations, which was entirely a lie. I wanted to be inspired and I
wanted to fix what I perceived as broken. I had expected an artistic epiphany, which
never came. Instead I came home eternally grateful to live in country where I was
valued, while learning of the paradox that my same country set me up as a villain in other
places around the world. The complexity of being a female abroad was even more than I expected. As a white female I was perceived as promiscuous, but if I were an Indian female, I would not be trusted to use a copier, let alone plan my own future. I would be indebted to my family at all costs, and if I did the very worst for their betterment, society would come down on me without remorse.

While I respectfully disagree with the perceptions of women in India, the culture itself is one to be admired. People do what they have to in order to survive. Chloe told me unemployment is low in India. Sunshine told me it is a nation on the rise. Since I returned in August, the Indian rupee has gained in value, as the American dollar has declined. I love my country, which became more and more apparent each day I spent abroad, but something about our slow decline and their slow success makes me proud of them.

Every time I think about the potential for India as a super power, I think back to shopping for a purse in Goa. As Chloe and I searched through the bright colors, a man in swim shorts and a t-shirt with the sleeves cut off came in. He started to yell at the salesmen in a very loud voice about “being sodomized” on the prices. As I listened, his Chicago accent became very clear. He was not much older than me. His brashness and need to be the center of attention made me ashamed and uncomfortable. The Indian workers, in their simple button up shirts and khaki slacks did their best to placate him, but as they grew more helpful, he grew more boisterous. I had to leave.

This encounter perpetuated every stereotype about Americans I could imagine. The entitlement and arrogance emanating from this man, in contrast to the humble and helpful demeanor of the Indian workers really laid it open in the simplest terms. I would
love to see their country become great because they do not expect it or feel it is owed to them. They work hard and are kind to those in need.

Beyond my understanding about their country, I learned a great deal about myself. I step up to lead, even when I probably should not. There is something about taking the reins of a project that makes me feel in control of my own destiny. Until taking this trip, I was not aware how much being in control matters to me. The best aspect about India is that you really are not in control. Everything will happen late. Nothing will work out exactly like you want it to. People will make mistakes. Letting that be okay is the best course of action. Breathing and going with the flow is the only way to survive in a place that is so much the opposite of the United States. Knowing this has made me function as a much happier person at home.

I value the fact in America that I am entirely okay as a single entity with my own aspirations and dreams. I had spent so much time lamenting being single, and as I watched people who had no choice in the matter, I became intensely aware about how important my personal freedom is. I cannot say I was instantly over my ex boyfriend, but it became more about losing a person I cared about and less about not living up to my own unrealistic expectations. While I feel the pangs of loneliness, I also feel the reassurance of choice.

One of the results of this reclamation of choice is my resolute desire to support and shape my country. I have become very involved in politics on the local and national front. In the classroom, I have focused my curriculum on government as well as the common courtesy that lacks in the stereotype of America. I have also been working on
political campaigns and voter registration. It has become important to me that people take advantage of the freedoms given by the United States Constitution, especially as a woman, who was not always allowed to be a part of the decisions. I want to shape this nation into a place the world can respect for the right reasons. I want it to have the strength and individuality it already possesses coupled with the humanity and humility I saw in the people I met abroad.

Recently, re-inspired by my trip, I wrote a poem very much a contrast of my last.

The Aftermath

Regarding the Year of Charlie

The claptrap of my existence
Still putters to starts and stops
shade behind me
Quavers at pounding fists
wielded with civility
Slung with practice.

Airborne, flying towards fate
The International Convention on Womanhood
Caulking the vertical cracks
Duct taping the damage
Full circle to the salutation
Of my front door.

Snipping the leash strap
With each running step
No shock or fall
To reconcile with a part
Decidedly left behind
For good. For good.

Losing what was not worth winning
It all came back to me
In strides and dashes
In friction and force
Ball busting itself
Through the wall of my dissent.
Proportioned for a welcomed disaster
a reconciliation
With the villianness
The damsel in distress
Perhaps ready to do it exactly
Different.

Ready to be banded
Or disbanded
Together or solo
The act of taking myself back
Romancing my own true love
While licking the kindest cut of all.

After miles of travel, hours or volunteering, weeks of learning, my trip really did
make a difference. I fell in love with my life. I hope someday to return to India to
volunteer for an organization that is truly committed to women. The program
disappointed me, but it gave me a chance to see what India is like. The value in living
and working with another culture is invaluable. Credit card debt and all, this trip was
worth every penny of the original cost and the interest.
1. Chimbel School

2. Teaching the First Day

3. Water Buffalo on the Side of the Road in Old Goa

4. St. Peter’s Basilica in Old Goa

5. Calangute Beach
6. Chimbel Students Practice for Independence Day

7. Painting the Mural

8. Independence Day Dancers Dressed in Their Best Saris

9. Students at the School

10. Roze’s Animal Mural

11. My Mural Finished
12. The School Before We Painted with the Younger Students

13. Our Last Day at the School with our Painting in the Background

Works Cited


