Faculty Development Grant report—Joyce Lightbody

I received a faculty development grant in 2006 in support of travel to Kathmandu and Nepal. The purpose of the journey was to record music created by the local people, as part of my study and professional practice.

From Kathmandu I departed on an 18 to 20 day trek with my guide, Dawa Sherpa and a porter, Rinzin Gale to the Langtang Valley, Nepal. The experiences that unfolded while interacting with the people as an artist/researcher as well as the recordings themselves have been invaluable to my creative practice and my teaching life. Excerpts from the audio files will be available online in the future (with the generous assistance of Kathleen Forrest).

I traveled with a Micro-Track Professional 2-channel mobile digital recorder, a Nikon Coolpix 3500 digital camera, and a small Sony battery-operated cassette recorder. The battery of the Nikon would not hold a charge, so I have very few photographs. The digital recorder is a delightfully easy device to use, however, without reliable access to electricity (on the trail) I used it judiciously. So my “old school” Sony did the trick, thanks to the inner voice that counseled bringing plenty of batteries and blank cassettes.

I kept a journal while traveling. There is not a lot else to do when the majority of the people I was surrounded by spoke no English (I became astutely aware of how I used language—no subtle, ironic remarks for humorous effect, etc.).

The Faculty Development grant allowed me to experience first-hand the rich and moving details of a distant culture, and to synthesize that experience into my practice.

I include here some excerpts from my journal to add some local flavor to this report:

23 December—Langtang View Hotel, Dunch’
Road trip from Kathmandu along precariously rough roads. Thankfulness for the jeep, gas, and Rajendra—the driver and the contemporary Nepalese pop music he sang along with as we careened along.

25 December—Evening View Hotel, Thullo Syabru
Discovered local people are celebrating the birth of a baby tomorrow. Much dancing and singing! Decision made to stay over an extra day and night.

26 December
We arrive at the tail end of some sort of relative formal ceremony. We are invited upstairs and into the house. Wads of rupees, piles of blankets and baby clothes, baskets of rice, eggs and local produce lay about one side of the room. As the crowd clears out, Dawa and I are left sitting pretty much by ourselves. I inquire as to whether we have “cooties.” Dawa informs of
how important it is to honor a stranger by inviting them inside. We proceed out to the courtyard area. The festivities are under way. Tea is being offered and the local raski, grain alcohol. The singing and dancing begin. A large circle forms; segregated by gender. Young and old participate. The songs have a distinct call and response structure. I am briefly informed that they have to do with men and women, family dynamics, and geographic and spiritual history. A cluster of 4 to 7 year-olds gather around me and play with my earrings while singing along with the adults, (directly into the microphone), while becoming uproarious every time one of the somewhat inebriated locals stumbles or sings too loud. The digital recorder works well!

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