

Hello from Hyderabad...

Fourth Edition, January 2006

Happy New Year from India! Now in the midst of February, I am finally accustomed to writing 06 instead of 05. Surely that's not a big deal. But lately, I consider it an accomplishment whenever I write the date correctly. In India, as in much of the world outside the U.S., the date is typically written day/month/year. As in, "Yesterday was 31/12/05, today is 1/1/06, so Happy New Year." (Imagine if we were living in the post-11/9 world.) At work, occasionally I'll be processing subscriptions to HMI publications and notice one from, say, April 12, 2005. "Ahhh," I sigh, "How am I supposed to process a check that was sent 10 months ago? This office is so inefficient. Is it just HMI or is it India? Can't anything get done on time?" Eventually, I realize that the 4.12.05 on the check is actually December 4 – or 4 December and that there is no blame to point. Though I'm much more accustomed to this system than I was 5 months ago, reading the date each day is a reminder of where I am – and more significantly, of where I am not.

The calendar for January featured few but significant happenings. Mom, Dad, and Abby left in the first week, after our holiday travels in Delhi, Agra (Taj Mahal), Rajasthan, and Hyderabad. Six days later, Dustin (aka valentine) arrived for a two-week visit, importantly as courier for brownies and chocolate chip cookies sent by Mom and Abby. After my return to work on 2nd January, I was busy all month with preparations and coordination of the Semi-Annual Workshop on Conflict Resolution. HMI offers two such workshops each year, one in September which I attended last year, and one in January. This time around, I was the coordinator (logistics person), for a two-week workshop focusing on art as a medium for building peace and healing trauma. The workshop lasted from 16-28 January. It had been my primary focus each workday since early December, so I am thankful to now be moving on to other projects, most involving documentation and editing.

Of course, the month held more than the workshop, visitors from home, and brownies. But I suppose my short list of happenings goes to show that I am finding routine here, and with routine comes the tendency to not identify everything (brownies an obvious exception) as newsworthy. Perhaps this tendency will make for a shorter newsletter. There's only one way to find out . . . thanks for reading.

There's s'more where that came from

One of my favorite parts of eating s'mores is the ample opportunity to make lame puns like "see you in the s'morning" and "s'more or less". Such humor is a bit more difficult in multi-lingual India. Even so, despite the lack of puns, I am happy to inform you that the good news of s'mores has reached the campus of Henry Martyn Institute. Thanks to the squashable nature of mallows, Mom and Dad fulfilled my request and packed a bag of marshmallows on their journey to India. After our family travels in the north, we returned to Hyderabad on 30 January, just in time to get in on the New Year's festivities at the hostel.

Around 9pm on New Year's Eve I sent out the word, "It's time for the fire. Come, come." Naqi climbed the trees to collect twigs and branches to add to the night watchman's evening fire. As

the story goes, by 11:30, everyone (students and a few staff staying at the hostel for the holidays) had experienced the incomparable indulgence of flaming sugar. Adding to the sweetness of the evening was the sight of my parents and sister talking and laughing with friends here, a joining of two worlds that was far less awkward than I expected it to be.

I've never counted s'mores among my favorite treat. I've even been known to resist the offer just for the sake of avoiding sticky fingers. But there was something almost magical about sitting together around that fire with marshmallows, cookies, and chocolate. Perhaps it was the joy of finally finding something about America that my non-American friends didn't already know about. There's nothing particularly American about the s'more; a close examination of the marshmallow does not provide deep insight into the American psyche. But, for some reason, perhaps a fluke of food history, the marshmallow is relatively American. The s'more is something I, as an American, can offer to people here who daily show me so much about their cultures – of which I would otherwise be far more ignorant than they are about my culture. In sharing the s'more, for once I wasn't simply affirming or challenging what everyone *already knew* about America. The rarity of such occasions is a reminder that as an American in India, I've far s'more to learn than to teach.

A Christmas Story

For sure, most of my thoughts on Christmas in India will be shared in years to come when the familiar traditions of home remind me of “that December in India.” There is, though, one story to share here – about invitation:

Ramlu works at HMI as an assistant to Kishan, HMI's head gardener. He lives on campus behind the hostel in a two-room house owned by HMI, with his wife Alivelu and two daughters. Alivelu cleans the office building and she and I are often among the first in the office each morning. It was just a few weeks ago that Alivelu, who does not speak English, began saying “Good morning, Emma”. I remember the shock of hearing her speak these words for the first time. Because she often seems timid even when speaking telugu, the morning greeting to me is never a casual phrase. Rather, I feel each morning like she is giving me those words as a gift.

I think that's one difference between India and the U.S.. At home, we expect language (i.e. I only notice another's language if I can't understand it). In India, there are many more opportunities in which speaking to another person means stepping outside of one's native language. To do so is a gift and, at some level, I think Indians are aware of the gift they can give by simply saying “good morning.” Perhaps I feel it more as an English-speaking foreigner because I know that every person who greets me could have spoken in at least two other languages but chooses instead to give me the words I will understand. From Alivelu, “good morning” acknowledges more than just my presence.

If it seems I've strayed from the story about Christmas, 'tis true. But such is life in a foreign culture, where even going for a candy bar can bring reflection about highway development and how my culture is affected by sidewalks. Ahhh . . . back to Christmas.

Several days before Christmas, Ramlu and Alivelu invited everyone in the hostel to come to their house at 7pm. The office had closed that day for the holiday and only a few of us remained on campus. We gathered outside the hostel before dinner and walked around the back to their home.

Ramlu and Alivelu have three girls – 7-yr old Sureisha and 5-yr old Monica live with their parents. The other daughter could not stand to part from her grandparents when the family moved to HMI, so she stays with grandma in the village nearby.

When we arrived that evening, outside the house sat a small table complete with cake, cups, plates, snacks and candles. Alivelu carried a mat from inside the house and spread it for us to sit upon. With all of us in a circle, Ramlu asked Thelma (hostel manager) to translate as he spoke (Telugu to English). He welcomed us to their home and shared his deep thankfulness to God for the blessings in his life. Included in these blessings was his path of coming to faith in Christ after hitting a low point in his own behavior and entering a church to ask for God's help. Ramlu cannot hide his enthusiasm for life and his thankfulness to God. He converted to Christianity from Hinduism several years ago and is passionate about his faith. When no one has signed up to lead morning devotion at the office, Ramlu will always share a story.

On this night, he told of how, a few weeks prior to this evening, God had shown him in a dream that he should celebrate God's goodness. In the vision, Ramlu saw that he was to paint the walls around his house and to hold a small party at Christmas. Ramlu and Alivelu's house is situated near a corner of the property wall surrounding HMI's campus. Upon hearing Ramlu tell of God's call to paint the walls and hold a party, I looked up and noticed that, indeed, Ramlu had painted the entire section of wall around his house. Bright white. Though I had not noticed the white when we arrived, I could see what a difference it would make for his family's environment to see this bright white rather than the grey of the rock wall. And I imagined Ramlu painting with care, while singing or praying, as he spent his evenings and early morning hours fulfilling this vision. The other part of Ramlu's dream was this: "I felt God calling me to host a small party for you all at HMI, to give thanks for God's goodness." Wow. I looked at the table with cake and snacks, at the walls, at Alivelu and the children.

Ramlu's circumstances, aside from a healthy family, are what most of us contrast ourselves against when thanking God . . . "God, I know that some people in the world have so little. Thank you for the many gifts you've given me." The "so little" is what Ramlu praises God for everyday. But what impressed me this night was not that Ramlu has so little and yet still gives thanks. (I've grown up on Christmas movies and stories based on the idea of people in poverty being thankful for what they have; the difference in India is that I can't just change the channel.) No, what impressed me that night at Ramlu's house was the invitation to be part of another person responding faithfully to God's call.

In the last 5 months, I have struggled with how to pray. With new perspectives on life, faith, the world, creation, God, my questions are abundant: What do I ask for? How do I envision God? Do I need an image for God in order to pray? How can I love people here when every moment contains my desire to not be here? What is my role when I feel so out-of-place? When I feel like I'm rendered helpless because of language and culture? When I see hardship in abundance

and feel more annoyed by its presence than compassionate? Approaching prayer with all these questions, I've often found myself using the same old words I once said with conviction but now sound fake unless followed by a question mark.

In this struggle to be authentic in prayer, the place at which I've found meaning and sincerity is in praying these words: "God, may I respond faithfully to the calls on my life today." At that small Christmas party, seated against the white-washed walls, Ramlu looked at his circle of friends and smiled because he was in the moment of responding faithfully to what he perceived as God's call on his life. He and Alivelu had completed all the preparations for that moment - saved the money, ordered the cake, set up the table, painted the walls, invited friends, and prayed. It was obvious that he saw us as the fulfillment of his purpose - a faithful response to the call on his life that day.

Encounters with the meaning of home

Tea time in India has been compared to the cigarette or coffee break in American offices. But one key element makes it an entirely different exercise - namely, that everybody does it at the same time. And in this way, breaks have a different effect on the office community. The coffee does not sit in the pot ready to be consumed at any moment. Rather, Anita prepares the and sets out the cups each day at 11 and 3. In the U.S., you can pass time with a coffee break, but here you can keep time by the tea breaks. It is a fact that, within the HMI workday, ne'er do two hours pass without an institutionally-sanctioned break for consuming food or hot beverage. You might even call it sacred.

One day at tea, Qadeer and I happened to fill our cups at the same time. "How are you doing in Hyderabad, Emma?" Qadeer is on faculty here, teaching Islamic studies. In January he returned to full-time office hours after several months of leave during which he worked on his PhD research. Because our interactions to this point had been fairly infrequent, Qadeer usually asked me about my progress in adjusting to Hyderabad. My response, which probably hasn't changed since our first such conversation 5 months ago (though apparently my less tense appearance betrays that I am now more adjusted) goes something like, "Doing pretty well." Though I always expect to explain further as the conversation progresses, I find it difficult to initially answer the "How are you doing" question. On this day, Qadeer asked also about what I'd done in the city and which sites I had seen. After my response, he took on a cautionary tone and gave advice about avoiding foods from street vendors and small hotels ("hotel" often means restaurant, not lodging). "And you should avoid eating fresh vegetables outside." He also mentioned crime in Hyderabad and how this city and all of India are getting less safe. All of this he said with a tone of disappointment. "This is my country," he said, "but still I'm saying this."

Earlier in January, a group of German pastors stayed at HMI for a workshop on interfaith relations. Among them was Susannah, who also stayed several days before and after her colleagues. From the day she arrived, we watched this tall German pastor fall in love with India, returning to the hostel each evening with stories of being moved by the people she met that day. One morning at office devotion time, she offered up the following prayer request (paraphrased). "I'd like us to pray for a woman in Shivrampally whom I met yesterday. She is a teacher there. She's struggling because of difficult situations in her life, especially regarding her young son.

She told me that she wants her son to go to America because she feels ‘there’s no future for kids in India’.”

For both the woman in Shivrampally and for Qadeer, home – India - is a place that disappoints. When Susannah shared her story, I thought about small towns dwindling away in rural America, the brain drain to the big cities, high school students looking for a way out because “there’s no future in my hometown”. Yes, many Americans feel their children must move away in order to find opportunity. And when Qadeer spoke, I thought of the many disappointments felt by Americans about their country: too much materialism; what happened to family values; our foreign policy is messed up; kids don’t respect teachers anymore; rent hikes leave poorer families with nowhere to live; lead in the water; gangs are growing. The difference, perhaps, is that for Qadeer and the woman in Shivrampally, “here” is not about dwindling small town population or a gang problem in the inner cities; rather, it is a statement about their entire country. I’ve never heard the words “there’s just no future for kids in America”. And this seems to be a significant difference.

Many Indians do look forward to a bright future for their children in India. Almost every person I meet here was born and raised in the same city where they currently live. Their ambitions are in the context of being here. Indians are far more in love with America than Americans have ever been in love with another culture. Yet, most Indians I’ve met are content to frame their ambitions in terms of living in their home – which often means living in the same house with their parents. Though they might like to travel, they look forward to raising their kids here, getting a good job, starting an organization to help their communities. This contentment with being home and commitment to “my people” also has fewer parallels in the America I know.

Perhaps I’m blind to the parallels in my home. I hope the perspective gained from time in India will make me more aware of how home is experienced differently and similarly in America. In a conversation last night, an American friend said that coming to HMI was her first big trip. “After this,” she said, “I feel like I’ll never be content to go for a long period without travel. I’m inspired by the travel stories of so many people who come to HMI.” I agreed to some extent, but added that I feel like time in India has also given me permission to say “it’s okay to prefer being home.” My time in India is very much about this theme - about confronting my relationship to home. The comment from the mother in Shivrampally reminds me of another element in this confrontation. When I long for home, am I longing for home because it is home, just as Qadeer - despite his disappointments with Hyderabad, would miss this place because it is home? Or do I long for home because home is America – the promised land of comforts and infrastructure?

Funny Story: Do I get to answer?

Dustin and I had gone for an afternoon at Lumbini Park, on the lake that separates Hyderabad from its “twin city” - Secunderabad. Lumbini is a popular park with playground equipment, a driving track for kiddie cars, boat rides, and a laser light show. We’d gone on a boat ride to the Buddha statue in the middle of the lake. Upon returning, we sat on a bench to rest a while and take in the busy-ness of a Hyderabad Friday afternoon. A few minutes into our sitting, I heard a high-pitched voice from behind: “Hello. How are you? I am fine. Thank you.” I turned around to see a girl of 8 or 9 years walking by, surrounded by family, and looking back at us with a huge

smile. I laughed out loud. “Did you hear that girl?” It wasn’t the first time I’ve been greeted with “How are you? I am fine.” She is surely on her way to fine English conversation skills – just so long as someone tells her the importance of letting the other person respond. Then again, maybe she has actually perfected American English. Two coworkers at HMI like to act like Americans. I suggested they incorporate one key expression of American-ness by saying “how are you” without waiting for a response. For instance, when walking along the street, you see a friend, wave, and say “What’s up?” with no intention of stopping to hear the answer. Perhaps the girl at the park is very familiar with American English and assumed that in such instances we must be answering our own question.

Thanks

Before coming here, I sent a letter explaining my plans for a year at HMI and requesting support. In that letter I wrote, “I hope that your support, be it prayers, money, advice, or questions, will hold me accountable to be intentional about this adventure – to seek a return on your investment in me.” At the time of writing, I did not realize the implication of those words. I had no idea how much this accountability would impact and enable my experience.

For many reasons that I don’t quite understand, being in India is difficult for me. I don’t understand because, in many ways, my life is the stuff dreams are made of – 3 meals a day cooked by professionals, living close to work, all the appreciation that comes with being labeled “volunteer”, being constantly surrounded by people from diverse cultures, every week full of new faces, an impressive library at my fingertips, a good exchange rate, cheap everything, no obligations outside my daily job, lasting friendships with people from multiple continents, good restaurants, and the list goes on. It is, in a way, so much of what I want in life. Yet, for reasons I cannot articulate, I’ve found it more difficult than I ever expected to be away from homeland for a year, to deal with culture and job frustrations, to deal with seeing the world as I see it here. In the first month of this new year, I thought often about why I am still here. And I realized that it is largely because of the accountability extended by you. If I had come here at my own expense with no one expecting to receive my newsletters, I probably would have given up long before the January edition. With all sincerity . . . thank you for your support.

I have much work to do to come to terms with India and to come to terms with myself in this context. Let me clarify again that my life here is not difficult or burdensome. What I wake up to each day is in many ways a life of leisure – fascinating, peaceful, well-fed leisure. Even at this very moment, I am torn between finishing the newsletter or joining friends who are laughing in the next room. It is a mystery to me that I can feel this way and also feel like I could leave tomorrow without regret. And each day I am more convinced that I will solve this mystery and come to terms with this experience only after it is over – when I return home to get perspective on India – the place to which I came to get perspective on home. In that letter 6 months ago, I said I was coming to India to “look, feel, and worship as a minority, to encounter God through discomfort, and comfort through hospitality.” Thank you for helping me get exactly what I bargained for. In other words - How are you? I am fine. Thank you.