

ICWA LETTERS

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Thamel Times:

Tales of Drinking and Climbing in Nepal

By Richard D. Connerney

JUNE 2006

KATHMANDU, Nepal—Some people say at the end of their lives that they have no regrets. I am amazed by this claim because—at the age of 35—I am haunted by a wild legion of them. The trip I never took, the call I never made, the friend I was false to, the girl I never kissed; they all come back to me in the gentle hours before dawn. Some regrets are sad, some are sweet, some are bitter, still others are hilariously funny. In my opinion, regrets are not to be avoided; they contain a type of wisdom. Regrets are the paths not taken, schemes never hatched, lives not lived. Their contemplation allows us to confront future choices with hard-won insight.

One small but insistent regret has plagued me since college—I never went on Spring Break. While all my undergraduate classmates were heading for Bermuda or the beaches of North Carolina, I spent the spring holiday at home in chilly New England. Today, when I see images on TV of rowdy college students frolicking on the beaches of Florida, I feel like a piece of life has passed me by. This spring, I decided to remedy this sad lacuna in my biography by spending the month of May in sybaritic repose in Kathmandu, Nepal. This has, unfortunately, created a whole new batch of regrets. Nevertheless, the experience was interesting and bears re-telling.

Living in Thamel, Kathmandu, was my first and only experience of ghetto life. By ghetto, I mean an ethnic enclave with a distinct culture. Thamel is where anybody who is not Nepali can live with their own kind. After so long in Lucknow, where as a white man I cannot walk down the street without eliciting intense curiosity, Thamel felt good. Although a recent spasm of civil unrest had scared off most travelers, more Westerners walked the streets of Kathmandu on any given day than Lucknow sees in a year. Most were on their way to the mountains, but some long-term residents lived there too. During my time in Thamel, I learned about a small group of determined people—a penurious bar owner, a beautiful half-breed, a belligerent but brilliant chef, a stripper-saint—who had not given up on Nepal.

Nikki Gesundheit

Soon after landing in Kathmandu, I fell in with Nikki (Niek) Gesundheit. Gesundheit isn't her real last name, which I can neither pronounce nor remember. She is a Dutch woman from Amsterdam and her name sounds like a sneeze to me. The first time I heard it, I had to suppress the desire to say "gesundheit." I like the sound of Nikki Gesundheit and it has another meaning as well. "To your health Nikki." And, in the end, despite her quirks, I would drink to her continued well-being. Nikki, wherever you are, Gesundheit.

It happened like this. One night, after a three-week curfew finally lifted, I walked through Thamel listening for the loudest bar. I had just attended a number of demonstrations, riots and street battles. I have a weak stomach for violence and I needed to forget momentarily about the last tear-gas filled week with some like-minded individuals. The loudest bar on that night was a small, second-floor club

called Niek's Place. I walked inside and noticed a can of Guinness sitting behind the bar next to a tall, brown-haired woman.

Guinness is almost unheard of in India, and I hadn't had one since I left America. "You have Guinness?" I asked.

"No, we don't. This one is a gift from a friend," the woman said. "It is not for sale."

I thought for a moment. "I'll give you 100 rupees (about \$1.40) for whatever is left in that can." I said.

She shook her head, "No."

"200...300..."

She smiled but still refused.

"Listen, I will give you 500 rupees for whatever is left in that can of Guinness, final offer."

"Sold," she said with a smile. I placed the bills in her hand and she passed the can to me.

"It is flat." She said with a cackle.

Another customer witnessed the exchange, "You sold this man a flat Guinness for 500 Rupees?" He exclaimed, "You drive a hard bargain Nikki."

"Yeah," another man joined in, "What is it with you Dutch people? Are you forced to fight for your food as children?"

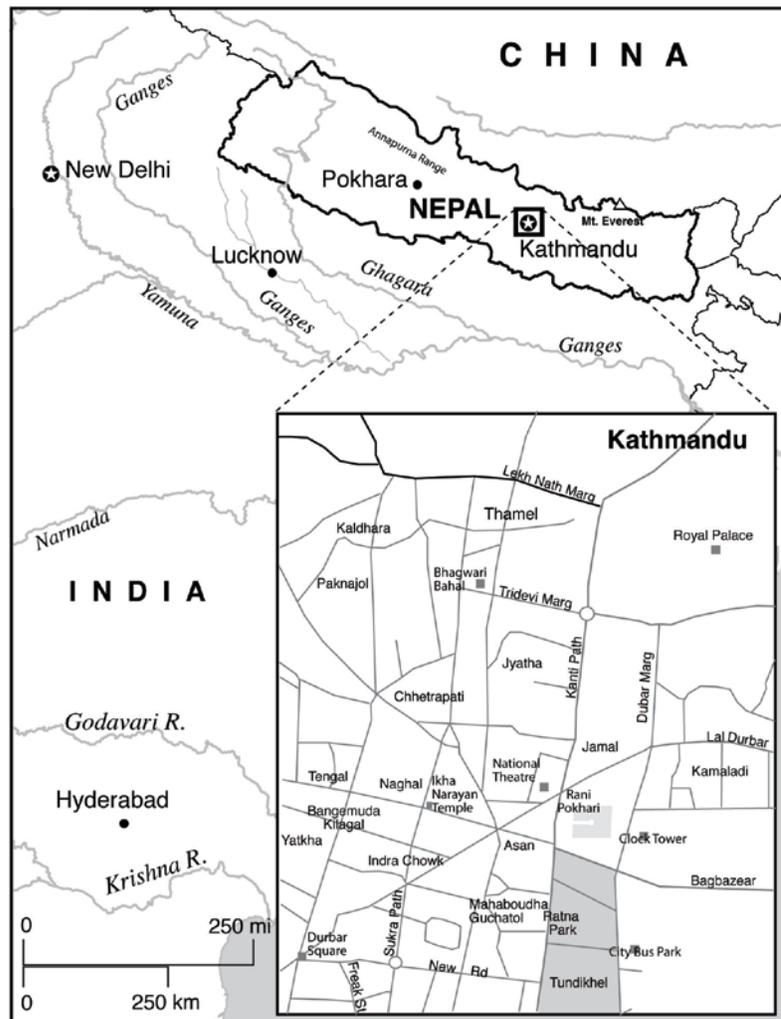
Nikki (Niek in Dutch) might have been tight-fisted, but she was friendly enough. She introduced me to her friends and her friends introduced me to more friends and soon the night turned riotous. We closed down Niek's Place and wandered from bar to bar, only going home when the sun came up. The next night we did it all again. Soon, my evenings all started out at Nikki's Place. During these nightly excursions, Nikki told me something about running a business in Kathmandu. She had opened Niek's Place about four months previously because she liked nightlife and wanted to make a living while enjoying herself. As with all the bar owners I spoke to in Thamel, however, she had not yet turned a profit. Moreover, she finds working seven nights a week exhausting and limiting. She hopes to sell her business soon. "Then I can be free."

As I explored the after-midnight world of Kathmandu, I was dismayed to learn that it was such a violent place. The mix of people

in Kathmandu is extremely eclectic, consisting of every variety of European and Asian. With enough drinking, even slight cultural differences can cause friction. Nepali men, in particular, seemed often to drink themselves into a numinous state. Fist fights were common, and not a week went by without some sort of hurly-burly erupting between groups of besotted young men.

One night I arrived at Niek's Place, to find a brawling group of young Nepali men spilling out onto the street. Inside Nikki was trying to convince a very drunk young Nepali girl to get in a taxi and go home. To escape the histrionics, I walked out onto the balcony. There I found a group of British soldiers from the British Embassy and a group of American and Nepali barflies. At least there will be no fight out here, I thought to myself. A few minutes later, however, an American party animal made the mistake of offering a British soldier a hashish pipe. The British soldier, proudly proclaiming that he was "anti-drug," grabbed the pipe and—without looking—threw it over his shoulder into the street below.

A confrontation erupted with the British soldier taking the moral high ground by claiming that it was his "duty" as a soldier to confront drug use wherever he saw it. The American hemp head, on the other hand, wondered whether carelessly hurling burning objects



into the street in the middle of the night was really part of British military training or whether this man was simply looking for an excuse to act like a self-righteous buffoon. "Will they give you a Victoria Cross for *that*?" he said. Before things got ugly, Nikki appeared. She declared the conflict over, and separated Brit from Yank. It was the second time that night that she had acted as nanny for over-excited, intoxicated patrons.

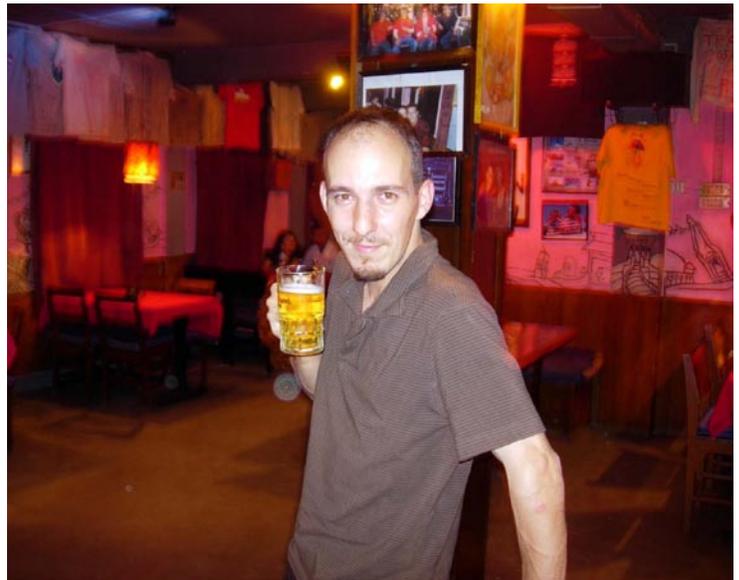
Even I was unable to avoid occasional fisticuffs. Late at night at the Fire Club, a small difference of opinion between several patrons I did not know escalated into a donnybrook. Unfortunately, I was standing in the wrong place at the wrong time and found myself unwillingly caught in the middle of the confrontation, squared off with a Nepali man who had gone berserk with drink. An errant left hook of mine landed flush on a structural beam, breaking off a chunk of poorly mixed concrete. My hand was cut and bruised so badly that I could not type for a week.

Nikki witnessed the entire event and decided that, while I was not much danger to my opponent, I was definitely a danger to her furniture. It did not matter to her that I had been an accidental and unwilling participant in the row; brawlers were bad for business and she decided to give me the silent treatment. The next day I was walking down the alley and looked up to see her walking toward me not five feet in front of me. Our eyes met. Then, she crossed the alley, entered a store, picked up a box of Cornflakes and held it in front of her face. I stood looking at her for a moment as she peered over the edge of the box at me. Part of me wanted to confront her, "I can see you Nikki," I wanted to say. "Come out from behind that Kellogg's product. I know you're in there." In the end, I just shook my head and walked away.

Vinnie's Dream

Nikki had a friend named Vinnie Gniachhi from Brooklyn. He had a bad habit of thinking of the most offensive remark possible and spewing it forth on whoever was nearby. For example, he might come up to you and say, apropos to nothing, "You see that dog in the alley, the one with mange and three legs? You're uglier than that dog, no lie!" When he wasn't insulting people, Vinnie kept up a constant monologue that included his rants about the New York Yankees, his sexual organs and a torrent of miscellaneous trivia that became increasingly less cogent as the evening wore on.

Despite his nightly imitation of Tourette Syndrome, everybody seemed to like Vinnie. For one thing, he never let things get dull. For, another, he was a top-notch chef. He had studied culinary arts in Vermont and apprenticed at a five-star restaurant in Nevada City, California. He came to Kathmandu on a two-month vacation, which had stretched into a year-and-a-half long culinary odyssey. He



Vinnie Gniacchi, head chef at 1905. His dream is to open Nepal's first microbrewery.

was soon offered the position of chief chef at 1905, Kathmandu's oldest and most well-respected restaurant.

With his culinary talent Vinnie could easily make his way in New York City, San Francisco or any other gastronomic center in America or Europe. He chose to stay in Kathmandu because of the novelty. 1905 is the only restaurant outside of a few five-star hotels where a traveler can find true fine dining (in our sense of the term) in Kathmandu. Many of the dishes he creates have never appeared in Nepal before.

"There is so much that you can do first," he told me. "And there's nothing like being the first."

His real ambition, he confided in me, was to open Kathmandu's first microbrewery and brew pub. In South Asia, beer is almost inevitably lager. Porters, ambers, lambics and the rest of the beer universe are almost wholly unknown. A microbrewery at 1905 with a range of custom-made draft beers would be a first not only in Kathmandu, but perhaps in South Asia itself. The obstacles to his ambition are steep, however. Getting government permission to brew beer would be a Herculean task, involving numerous bribes and tangles of red tape. Still, Vinnie sees a potentially strong market for his business. Embassy personal and various development specialists are always looking for some gastronomic escape and rich Nepalis are keen to experience authentic Western victuals. Moreover, tourists returning from weeks on the hiking trails are desperate for luxurious meals and have enough cash to pay for it. If Vinnie achieves his dream, people like me will not longer have to pay 500 rupees for the remains of a Guinness.

I asked Vinnie about all of the fighting I had seen in Thamel. According to Vinnie, not all of the violence is the result of alcohol or drugs. One night, as we sat in the

*Nikki
Gesundheit
refused to allow
me to take a
picture of her
face unless I
paid her a large
amount of
money. She did,
however, give
me permission to
photograph her
hind quarters.*



courtyard of 1905 waiting for the Saturday night crowd to gather, a group of rough-looking Nepali youths came in. They looked around and, seeing only a small crowd, they soon left again. Vinnie had seen them before. "If your place becomes too popular then the Nepali club owners will hire guys like that," he explained. "They come and start fights deliberately to scare off the tourists."

Nikki Part Two

After I found Nikki Gesundheit hiding behind a box of Cornflakes, I decided I would not talk to her again. I even refused to attend her party in honor of the Queen of Holland's birthday. Thamel, however, is too small a place to make lasting enemies. A few nights later I was enjoying myself in Tom and Jerry's Pub with some Norwegian tourists—Viking stock, big healthy people. About midnight I looked up to see Nikki sitting at the bar alone. She had been drinking heavily and her tear-filled eyes sat atop heavy bags. Her lover, a mountaineer from Britain who had just returned from the summit of some unpronounceable Tibetan peak had elected to spend his last night in Nepal without her.

I was angry about the Cornflakes, and, truthfully, Nikki wasn't the most open-hearted person I had ever met. But I couldn't let her sit there by herself; the devil knows his own. Some day it might be me at the bar alone with a bruised heart. So I left my Scandinavian companions and tried to make her laugh. I was unsuccessful; all she could say was, "It is sad to say good-bye...it is sad to say good-bye..." But at the end of the night she invited me to return to her club. "You come back," she said. "Just don't punch anything." The next night she even gave me

a free round—a rare occurrence at Niek's Place.

As a barfly at Nikki's club, I met some interesting people. One night an expedition to Mt. Everest returned to Kathmandu and hit the bars in Thamel for some much needed relaxation. Tim Wayne, a six-foot-six-inch climber from California, told me that they had run into extraordinarily cold weather near the summit. One of the climbers, (David Sharp aged 34) ran out of bottled oxygen at the summit, developed a severe altitude-induced condition and died during his descent. Tim was low on oxygen himself and had to turn back a mere 100 meters from the top. He held out his hand where one of his fingers had turned a sickening shade of black. "Frostbite," he told me. "I have two toes that look the same. The doctor tells me I'll probably lose all of them."

The death of David Sharp created an uproar in the mountaineering community. Everest pioneer Sir Edmund Hillary, on hearing about the event, faulted Mr. Sharp's fellow climbers, claiming that they did little to revive the ailing climber. "The people just want to get to the top. They don't give a damn for anybody else who may be in distress," he remarked in an interview with a New Zealand newspaper.

In conversation with me, however, Tim Wayne countered Hillary's comments, claiming that by the time Sharp had been located in the cave where he had lain



Mountaineers Tim Wayne (right) and "Cowboy" Alexander after their return from Mt. Everest.

for the night, he was near death. Moreover, he continued, the climbers were on the tough north face of Everest where evacuation is virtually impossible. Even Sharp's family agreed that the other climbers on the mountain that day were inculpable.

After all the controversy and weeks at high altitude, Tim was ready to blow off some steam. He bought a full bottle of Jack Daniels and emptied it with remarkable speed. While drinking, he made the acquaintance of a svelte Russian beauty. When he had drained the last of his whiskey, he loaded his Muscovite marvel into a rickshaw and disappeared down the dark alley. The next night I saw Tim again at the same bar with another bottle of Jack Daniels in his fist. "How did things go with your Russian friend last night?" I asked.

Tim shook his head and smiled slyly. "It was like my expedition," he said. "I failed to summit."

From Via Via to Go Go

Just outside Thamel is an old building, painted red, with the words Via Via emblazoned on the wall. Inside, the top floors have been converted into a comfortable lounge and restaurant. Behind the bar is Maya Sherpa, the exotic looking co-owner of Via Via. Her father was Nepali, her mother was German, and she ended up with the best of both worlds. With large, dark eyes, high cheek bones and cascading hair, she looks like a cross between Botticelli's Venus and a Thai princess.

Maya and her husband Eve have operated Via Via for about three years. Like all bar owners in Thamel, they are confronted with a unique set of problems. For one, most Westerners moving through Kathmandu are trekkers and mountaineers, backpackers and wanderers. They rarely stay in Kathmandu for very long. This means that every week there is a new crowd with a new set of likes and dislikes. The crowd is very fickle. For a week or two a particular club seems like *the* spot to see and be seen, and then, in only a few days it seems to lose its status almost over night. Civil unrest is also an ongoing problem. Maya told me that Via Via was on the brink of turning a profit when the recent three week curfew sent tourists packing.

Thus, the Friday open-mike night at Via Via was sometimes well-attended and sometimes not. The one set of faces you could always count on at Via Via were women



East meets West. Maya Sherpa, and her husband Eve at the Via Via Cafe.

who lived across the street. From the balcony of an adjacent house, two Nepali women watched the patrons carefully through the open window. If they saw a young man who they found attractive, they would let their long hair down and brush it in full view of Via Via's patrons. When I sat near the window one night, they watched me but did not brush their hair. Instead one of them picked up an elongated green gourd (*loki*) and began waving it at me.

"Maya," I said, "What are they doing?"

Maya looked out the window for a moment. "Wow," she said, "They've never waved a *loki* at anyone before. I'm not sure what that means."

"That's a really a big vegetable." I said. "It's a bit intimidating."

Maya decried the current state of Thamel. She told me that prostitution and drugs were on the rise in the neighborhood. Dance bars, where Nepali girls gyrated on stage in miniskirts, were attracting large groups of rowdy men to Thamel. For a glimpse of what Thamel had become, Maya suggested I take a look at Go Go Bar, across the street from the royal palace. When I arrived at 11:30 PM, the scene outside Go Go Bar was chaotic. Female and male prostitutes plied their trade on the sidewalk with impunity. On the street corner I saw a group of about 10 boys ages 8 to 12. They were all holding small plastic bags. An older boy approached with a tube of glue and they all held out their bags to receive some. Then they began huffing the glue fumes, in and out, in and out.

Inside Go Go Bar, tired-looking Nepali women

danced on a dimly lit stage. The show was rated PG; the women did not take their clothes off but just danced in short skirts to Bombay film music. When they were done dancing, they joined patrons for drinks. While some of the dancers reportedly make extra money after hours as prostitutes, most seemed content to drink and eat their fill at the expense of the customer. I never saw any of the women at Go Go Bar offer patrons anything more than an occasional peck on the cheek.

In fact, my visit to Go Go Bar would have been very dull if not for the midget. The bar employed a three-foot tall dwarf who entertained the crowd between girls by mimicking traditional Nepali folk dancing. When not waving his deformed torso in front of the crowd, he was a menace. He wandered through the crowd waiting until patrons were engaged in conversation with one of the Go Go Bar's ladies, and then stole their drinks, cigarettes and anything else he could get his hands on. When I reached my apartment, I felt lucky to find my wallet still in my pocket.

Cast the First Stone

Not all the adult entertainers in Thamel are Nepali. One night, I found myself in conversation with Robbie (not her real name), a 24-year-old strawberry blonde from the West Coast. She had just returned from a prolonged visit to a Tamang village outside of Kathmandu, where she was trying to set up an NGO to promote public health. She had returned to Kathmandu to register her fledgling organization with the Nepali government, no easy task. It had been a long, trying week, and she was relaxing with a few rum and cokes.

Robbie was articulate, persuasive and had a comprehensive grasp of many of the political and cultural complexities of life in Nepal. I assumed I was talking to somebody with a background in development or public policy. I asked Robbie where she had gone to school and what type of work she did in America.

"I'm a dancer," she responded.

"What kind of dancer?" I asked. "Ballet, modern?"

"Exotic," she answered, looking me straight in the eye, "I'm an exotic dancer."

"A stripper?"

She nodded. She told me that she began dancing in college to pay tuition. It was easy money and she did not usually mind the work. But the usual perks of the job—fast cars, expensive clothes, condos near the beach—did not interest her much. On a trip to Nepal as a volunteer she realized that she could put her extra cash to better use. Now, she dances during the summer at clubs in Las



Young boys sniff bags of glue across the street from the royal palace.

Vegas and Seattle to raise money for her Tamang village. Her goal this year is to raise enough money to hire her first full-time nurse when she returns.

I was awed by Robbie. I always imagined that adult entertainers were motivated by greed, drug addiction, abusive relationships or some sort of emotional dysfunction—and many of them are—but to discover that some, like Robbie, are motivated by more noble impulses was an epiphany to me. Just when you think you understand right and wrong, think again; things aren't always what they seem.

Robbie told me that near her village, some well-intentioned but ill-informed NGO recently attempted to open a public lavatory for the villager's use. "But, of course the pipes were soon blocked with stones, because Tamangs use stones to clean themselves."

"They use stones?" I asked incredulously.

"Yes," she said. "Not such a bad idea in a village without much water and no toilet paper."

"I have never heard of that," I said. "That is so strange."

"Sticking rocks up your ass? That's not so strange," she said with a knowing smile. "You should hear some

of the requests I get in Vegas.”

Into Thin Air with French People

One morning a few days later, I entered a near-catastrophic state while waiting in line for a visa at the Indian embassy. I had been out late the night before with Nikki, Vinnie, Tim Wayne and a group of others and was experiencing numbness brought on by lack of sleep and too many Everest beers. The world—the immovable queue, the airless embassy lobby, the incorrigible Indian official sitting like a wax statue behind the glass of the visa counter—seemed a million miles away. My mental life consisted of a series of dim scenes, conversations slurred in the unsteady light of a neon sign, a chortling and snorting lump of drunken humanity, and a sea of deranged faces akin to a painting by Hieronymus Bosch.

Suddenly, I heard a voice, like a communication from a different sphere. It wasn't God, however, unless God was a woman with a Parisian accent. I turned to see an old acquaintance of mine, a French journalist named Dominique Humbert, standing next to me.

“Dominique...,” I said, startled. “...what did you just say?”

“*Ami*,” she repeated, looking into my eyes, “You look like *total sheet!!!*”

“Nice to see you too, Dominique,” I answered.

“No joking Reechard,” she said. “You look like you have not slept in a week, you have not shaved, and you smell like a wet pile of stale cigarettes.”

She was right of course, and, like a good journalist, she had refused to sugar-coat the truth. “Listen my friend, a group of us are going to hike the Annapurnas,” She said. “You come with us; you look like you need some fresh air.”

“But,” I protested, “I am writing a story about life in Thamel.”

“Forget it,” she said. “You are much safer in the Annapurnas. We leave tomorrow morning. You stay in tonight and pack, no *bullsheet*.”

And so my excursion into the dark underbelly of

Kathmandu ended as unexpectedly as it began. The next day I took a bus to the much quieter city of Pokhara, the starting place for a trek through the Annapurna range. I never did see any of my Thamel friends again. By the time I returned to Kathmandu many days later, Nikki had left for Amsterdam to work as a pastry chef for the summer, Tim Wayne had gone back to California to plan his next expedition and work on his Harley-Davidson, and Vinnie fell in love with a British girl and was never heard from again. The nighttime world of Kathmandu will continue next year with different faces but this rogues gallery would never be seen again.

About a week later I was suffering from altitude-sickness, dysentery and total exhaustion at 4000 meters, a few kilometers below the Annapurna base camp. A month of inactivity in Kathmandu had not had a good effect on my athletic ability. I had been fighting for my breath and unable to keep my balance for hours. Dominique saw me sitting on my haunches and clutching my midsection. “I am sure you will be okay *Ami*,” she said. “There is not so much daylight left and I must have some photos of the peaks. We will see you at the top, yes?”

My head swam as I watched Dominique and her friends disappear into the distance. I tried to follow them, but I could not. I struggled forward for a few minutes, and then collapsed on a rocky hillock. As a thick mist rolled over Annapurna III and covered the treeless slope, I tried to think. I wondered if I would ever reach the camp, or if they would find me in the morning, frozen stiff. In the thin air I began to have some very strange thoughts. I imagined my Uncle Eddie turning summersaults over the alpine grass, my seventh-grade love Cathy Carter picking wild flowers, the Prophet Elijah leaning against a lichen-covered boulder taking a leak.

Between my delusions, I thought about Sir Edmund Hillary; maybe he was onto something. Some people climb lofty Himalayan mountain tops; for other people, the only thing they ever summit is a barstool. Lost in the pursuit of our own glory or self-destruction, even the pain of our nearest companion can escape our notice. In either situation, whether we are rising to our greatest height or sinking to our lowest depth, we should remember to be human. After all, to know that you allowed someone to suffer alone is a terrible anguish. That kind of regret no amount of drinking can cure. □

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A lecturer in Philosophy, Asian Religions and Philosophy at Rutgers, Iona College and the University of Hawaii at Manoa, Rick Connerney is spending two years as a Phillips Talbot Fellow studying and writing about the intertwining of religion, culture and politics in India, once described by former U.S. Ambassador John Kenneth Galbraith as "a functioning anarchy." Rick has a B.A. and an M.A. in religion from Wheaton College and the University of Hawaii, respectively.

Kay Dilday (October 2005-2007) • FRANCE/MOROCCO

An editor for the *New York Times*' Op-Ed page for the past five years, Kay holds an M.A. in Comparative International Politics and Theory from the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, a Bachelor's degree in English Literature from Tufts University, and has done graduate work at the *Universiteit van Amsterdam* in the Netherlands and the *Cours de Civilisation de la Sorbonne*. She has traveled in and written from Haiti and began her journalistic life as city-council reporter for Somerville This Week, in Somerville, MA.

Cristina Merrill (June 2004-2006) • ROMANIA

Born in Bucharest, Cristina moved from Romania to the United States with her mother and father when she was 14. Learning English (but retaining her Romanian), she majored in American History at Harvard College and there became captain of the women's tennis team. She received a Master's degree in Journalism from New York University in 1994, worked for several U.S. publications from *Adweek* to the *New York Times*, and is spending two years in Romania watching it emerge from the darkness of the Ceausescu regime into the presumed light of membership in the European Union and NATO.

Nicholas Schmidle (October 2005-2007) • PAKISTAN

Nicholas is a freelance writer interested in the intersection of culture, religion and politics in Asia. He is spending two years in Pakistan writing on issues of ethnic, sectarian, and national identity. Previously, he has reported from Central Asia and Iran, and his work has been published in the *Washington Post*, the *Weekly Standard*, *Foreign Policy*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, and others. Nick received an M.A. in International Affairs - Regional Studies from American University in December 2005. He lives with his wife, Rikki.

Andrew J. Tabler (February 2005 - 2007) • SYRIA/LEBANON

Andrew has lived, studied and worked in the Middle East since a Rotary Foundation Ambassadorial Fellowship enabled him to begin Arabic-language studies and work toward a Master's degree at the American University in Cairo in 1994. Following the Master's, he held editorships with the *Middle East Times* and *Cairo Times* before moving to Turkey, Lebanon and Syria and working as a Senior Editor with the Oxford Business Group and a correspondent for the Economist Intelligence Unit. His two-year ICWA fellowship bases him in Beirut and Damascus, where he will report on Lebanese affairs and Syrian reform.

Jill Winder (July 2004 - 2006) • GERMANY

With a B.A. in politics from Whitman College in Walla Walla, WA and a Master's degree in Art Curating from Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, NY, Jill is an ICWA Donors' Fellow looking at Germany through the work, ideas and viewpoints of its contemporary artists. Before six months of intensive study of the German language in Berlin, she was a Thomas J. Watson Fellow looking at post-communist art practice and the cultural politics of transition in the former Soviet bloc (Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Croatia, Hungary, Latvia, Romania, Slovenia and Ukraine).

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