

Family and Friends,

I'll start off by acknowledging that this letter was made possible by the folks at the Neotechnic Service Center, who managed to fix my computer. For the past couple weeks my laptop had been giving me a screen that was about two inches by three inches of barely legible static. I'm ecstatic to have it fixed, but also embarrassed by how attached to my laptop this forced separation has made me I realize I am. It's not hard at all to find internet access here, but finding the time to sit down at an internet café and devote a couple hours to writing and introspection is more difficult. In any case, thank you to everyone who has taken the time to write to me and I'm sorry if one of my abbreviated emails left you thirsting for more detail; if you make it through this one I think you'll be sated.

A bit about the setting: we moved into our permanent homestay families the first week of October. We're all still in the Kathmandu Valley; while the Fulbright program likes to refer to our placements as "villages", I'm not sure the connotations that word brings to mind are helpful in this case. It's clear that twenty years ago or so, my village was in fact a humble collection of brick buildings surrounded by rice paddies and fields. I've been told that the population of the Kathmandu valley has doubled over the last ten years, and the fields in my village are fighting a losing battle with five and six story concrete boxes. It's not a particularly scenic, but that being said I do appreciate having an internet café a short walk away and an easy bus ride into the southern end of Kathmandu.

As several of the local villagers have taken the time to point out to me, my new homestay family is quite [relatively] prosperous. We live in a new, three story concrete house with luxuries like a propane water heater and two bathrooms. I live on the second floor, and right next door are my older brother and his wife, 25 and 20 years old, respectively. Next door to them live the parents, and on the third floor lives my 21 year old brother. Both of my brothers and my sister in law speak decent English; bad for my language immersion, but it does make certain things much easier. My parents don't speak any English at all, although my butchered Nepali has generally been enough to get the important things across. From what I've gathered, the father does administration in a government office and my older brother works at an NGO that deals with women's empowerment issues (his words), though on the basis of the meetings he's brought me to it appears to be run entirely by men. My younger brother, always helpful and constantly curious, has applied for a US student visa three times now with no success, so he's currently studying to become a licensed accountant.

My family has slowly been giving me the independence to do things myself: walking down the main road through town, for instance, or visiting the internet cafe. After a couple of trips into the city during which they called me twice a day to ask "Kent, where are you?" I think I've convinced them of my ability to navigate the public bus system on my own. As I've settled in, I've been feeling quite content and comfortable around the house, but the constant attention does get exhausting. One morning, as I was eating the giant plate of rice served for breakfast at 9AM, my brother abruptly yelled from across the table, "Kent, stop!" As I sat there, bewildered, he ran around the table and delicately picked off a hair that was stuck to my finger. For the first couple weeks or so, my younger brother would walk into my room, sit on the carpet, and just watch me. If I tried to talk to him, he would say "Don't be bothered; just do whatever you're doing!" My older brother would take me along to his meetings so I could "see what he does," but all the talking was in Nepali the only thing I took away were bitten fingernails. Fortunately, the novelty of my presence seems to have worn off a bit (though even as I write this in my room my 'nephew' is trying to read it over my shoulder. It doesn't seem like he's getting past the first sentence, or else I might have to make him stop).

It's been about a month and a half since I first stepped into my school, but only about four weeks of actual teaching thanks to the festivals Dhesai and Tihaar, which took up most of October. The school has a nice new three story concrete building that was built with funds donated by the rotary club of Japan. A Hindu shrine frames the entrance to the old brick building, which houses kindergarten through second, the library, and the lunch room where the teachers are served the daily portion of rice and potato curry

(it's quite good). My principal doesn't speak any English at all, but he is, from what I can tell, a very kind man. My 8th grade counterpart, who speaks wonderful English, was very friendly and helpful in getting me oriented. About two thirds of the teaching staff are women, and building a relationship with them has been more difficult; for I while I chalked it up to cultural shyness, but I've also begun to realize that they seem to feel about as comfortable speaking English as I do Nepali (if I'm bolder with my Nepali, it's born of necessity). After a rather uncomfortable first couple weeks sitting in the corner of the staff room, I've had some good conversation with many of the teachers and am starting to feel like an accepted, albeit bemusing, member of teaching staff.

I rather like the 6th, 7th, and 8th grade textbooks supplied by the government. During orientation we were told that an Australian spent several years in Nepal co-writing them; Ayer's rock, kangaroos, and sheep ranches do seem to get a disproportionate amount of attention, but they contain a good mix of grammar, passages, and activities for the students. With the fifth grade text however; it's pretty clear that something was lost (or gained, I suppose) in translation. I'm including a personal favorite here:

Unit 2.2: Chant

On Sunday I had a dream.

On Monday I went to a stream.

On Tuesday there was a great flood.

On Wednesday I saw a pond of blood.

On Thursday I cleaned all of them.

On Friday home I came.

On Saturday I woke up and had a big scream.

- (i) Find any three pairs of rhyming words.
- (ii) Write the past verbs from the chant.

Yes, it does indeed say a "pond" of blood, although the illustration shows a young boy wiping up a puddle of some dark liquid. I've been trying to mix up the textbook with other activities as much as possible. While there are about five months left in the Nepali school year, the fifth grade class is 4/5 of the way through the textbook; I asked my counterpart what she does when they finish the book early, and she suggested "Oh, start from the beginning again." So I'm not exactly in a rush to get through it all.

Part of the cross cultural challenge of integrating yourself into a Nepali government school is the rather different understanding of how one should go about education. Few, if any, of the teachers at my school have a copy of the textbook they teach from, so they grab a book from one of the students in the front row when they walk into class. This of course precludes any sort of lesson planning or preparation, and makes any sort of lesson planning with my counterparts difficult; it's just not something teachers do here. While the government schools claim to be English medium from the fifth grade up, most of my counterparts teach in Nepali in English class (with the exception of Ramess) unless they're reading directly from the textbook. It's not that the teachers aren't dedicated, it's just a very different context that they come from and teach in. And of course, classroom creativity often requires resources that aren't here; as another ETA pointed out, "We have chalk and talk." I've taken to buying my own sheets of loose-leaf paper to hand out to the students for assignments I want to look over.

This isn't to say that I'm on a crusade to bring Western style education to the Padma Prakash Secondary School, in fact, feeling like I'm getting across any sort of education in my classes has been taking just about everything I've got. In theory, the Fulbright program sets us up with a counterpart teacher (hence the title English Teaching Assistants) to plan and teach some or all of our classes with. Unfortunately, when I arrived my counterpart teacher was still in India, so the Deputy Head Sir (i.e. the Vice Principal) signed me up for four random English classes first thing in the morning and sent me off to

fifth grade, where the regular teacher never showed up (and neither did the 7th, 6th, or 8th grade teachers that day). Since that rather abrupt initiation, my eighth grade classes have been going well: my counterpart does his best to integrate me into the teaching process. On the other hand, my counterpart for seventh grade has only shown up to class twice in the past four weeks, but it's a small, relaxed afternoon class and I have a lot of fun with the students. Most of my stress comes from fifth and sixth grade; my fifth grade counterpart told me it was unnecessary for both of us to be in class at the same time, and since she's left the class it always feels on the brink of total pandemonium. In some ways it's been much easier to teach myself, there's a lot more room for games and speaking activities when I can plan and teach independently. On the other hand, discipline becomes much more of an issue when the language overlap is so small. Another challenge without a counterpart is of course my inability to explain things like grammar in Nepali; my school uses supplementary textbooks that often make me feel like I'm trying to teach algebra from a calculus textbook. Still, the students themselves have been wonderful; always friendly, inquisitive, and generally good natured. The school is always loud, the concrete stairwells amplify voices up and down the building, but generally it's the buzz of students who seem happy and excited to be there, and their enthusiasm can be infectious.

Looking back over this, I realize that there are some gaps in the narrative. I spent most of the festivals with my family, and that was quite a cultural experience: kite fighting, sacred grass growing in the shrine upstairs, endless visits to and from the relatives. We (the ETA's) also found time for a short visit to a very touristy town at the foot on the Annapurna mountain range, and it was nice to feel like anonymous in the crowds of Europeans tourists for a while. Mostly though, the teaching has been what's on my mind of late. It's been getting cold here, so it really does feel like November, although I don't have any of the markers that usually remind me Thanksgiving is near. It will be a good opportunity to try to focus less on my frustrations (screaming children, lesson planning) and more on the many things I have to be grateful for here (hot water, a functioning laptop). Not sure what my specific plans will be, but even if there's no turkey or cranberry salad I like to hope it won't be rice.

Have a wonderful Thanksgiving!

Much love,
-kent