

Turning Point - Resistance: When You Get More Than You Give

In the spring of 2008 I am in transition. I am retiring after 8 grueling years as principal of an Elementary School within a community filled with trauma. I feel an overwhelming responsibility to hand over our school smoothly. There are a million moving parts. By July I am physically and emotionally exhausted. I do not want any new responsibilities of any kind. Don't even talk to me. I resist everything.

BUT there is the matter of this little school in Far Western Nepal, where my newly married son, Mikey, and his bride, Ali, have decided to donate money – in lieu of wedding gifts. The school is proudly named Mikey Medium English School. There are 48 cute little kids dressed in their white uniforms, all eager to learn. Don't look at me. I am firmly resistant.

By the winter of 2009, my husband, John, my nephew Matt, and I are putting final touches on our "adventure before dementia" to an unknown town in rural Nepal to meet unknown faculty, parents and children - to stay for one month in an unknown home where we will eat unknown meals. What were we thinking? I am curious but resistant.

I will be teaching, but how to prepare? I beg for give-away suitcases, art supplies and good story books. I plan several flexible art projects and a play. We pack our sleeping bags, head lamps, Kindle books, layered clothing and good hiking shoes. Someone advises taking a towel and coffee.

In January 2010 we disembark from a rattle-y Indian train in the middle of a drizzly dark night somewhere near the Nepali border hoping to be found. After a rickshaw ride, several overcrowded bus rides, a meager plate of noodles and impossibly slow passage through Nepali Immigration, we arrive in Bauniya – a small crossroads village with no paved roads, intermittent electricity and no indoor plumbing. I take a deep breath. Am I crazy? Am I still resistant?

Soon we are in the classrooms. The children stare wide eyed at the colorful story books. Their curiosity is peaked by our crayons, scissors, glue and paint brushes. They cautiously handle the blow-up globes with fascination. They are remarkably well behaved and willingly try out their English. "Good Morning Mam and Sir" "How are you today?" echoes through the school yard. They enthusiastically join in the chorus of "Head Shoulders Knees and Toes" and more. Giggling and laughing at all our antics. My resistance is melting.

Within three weeks we are working on paintings of flowers, that I will take back to Maryland for fund-raising note cards. We are practicing the lines of our play, Roti Man – based on the Gingerbread Boy – but with an elephant, a rhino, a tiger and a gaggle of monkeys.

By four weeks, I have presented three teacher workshops on no-cost strategies for improving student engagement, sung myself silly, finished our art projects and produced our successful play for the parents and teachers. Our stage is in the middle of a farmer's field. The children glow with pride right beside me. I feel regal in my newly gifted bejeweled sari and have a shine in my eyes and heart to match. Resistance has disappeared and I am hooked.

I eagerly return to Bauniya seven more times in the next 10 years, sometimes cajoling resistant volunteers. But now we come to friends, familiar homes, delicious meals, warm hugs, and hundreds of enthusiastically impatient learners.

- Barbara Church, February 2021; Anne Arundel Community College (MD)
Autobiographical Writing Class for Seniors