

Letter From Kathmandu

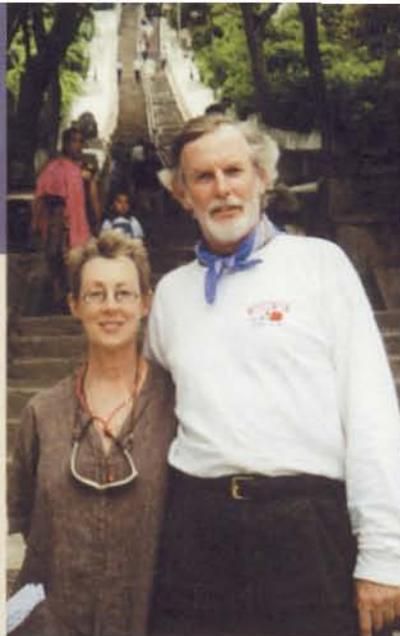
by Professor G. Michael Fenner

Early on the morning of Saturday, June 2, 2001, my wife and I were wakened by the ringing telephone. It is the kind of phone call that every parent knows—the one where you whisper “Please let the children be safe.” The difference this time was that my wife and I were asleep in the Hotel Norbu Sangpo, Boudha, Kathmandu, Nepal.

Nepal is about as far as one can get from Nebraska. To paraphrase Jamie Zeppa, if you go past Nepal, you are on the way home. We were on the other side of the world. We were submersed in a culture about which—as we are about to learn—we know very little.

I rolled over, grabbed the phone, and said hello. It was our son Ben. 

In my article in the last previous issue of the Creighton Lawyer I wrote about Bush v. Gore and my conclusion was this: “The good news is that [our] system works. The bad news is that many people feel that their guy got screwed. In the long run—for our next 200 years—which is more important?” As that article was being put into the mail, my family and I were experiencing a system of a different kind, one that does not work so well, and a transition of government that was anything but smooth. 



Anne & Mike Fenner at Swambanath

We were in Kathmandu because our son Ben is married to a Tibetan woman, Tashi Nublung, born in exile in Nepal. Tashi’s mother lives in Kathmandu. (By taxi, her address is “The Tibetan Camp in Jawalakhel. By the big tree.”) Anne and I, Ben and Tashi, and our daughter Hilary had come to meet the mother-in-law.

On Friday, June 1st, Hilary had flown from Kathmandu to her home in San Francisco. It was early the next morning that Ben phoned us at our hotel. I rolled over, grabbed the phone, and said “Hello.” He said: “They’ve just massacred the Royal Family. Stay in your hotel until we figure out what is going on.”

On Friday, June 5th I sent Hilary an e-mail from Kathmandu to tell her that we were okay and to try to explain to her what had happened. Here is that e-mail. 

Thursday, May 24, or there ‘bouts. We saw the King of Nepal.

Anne and I and Ben and Tashi attended a fair in Kathmandu. We had the pleasure of seeing his majesty the King. We stood 20 yards from him as he displayed a religious artifact, a relic, to the crowd. A beloved man, this King. Not only does everyone refer to him as beloved, but it was easy to tell from this crowd that they mean it.

He is not only King, but also the reincarnation of the God Vishnu. In the early 1990s the people of Nepal demonstrated for some measure of democracy. Some in the Royal Palace wanted to protect their royal prerogatives with a get-tough policy: They wanted the King to order the army to open fire on the crowd. Instead, he ordered democracy. He agreed with the people and he put into place a Constitutional democracy, along the lines of the English system.

In one of the poorest countries in the world, this King, this God, this man of the people gave his people what it seemed to me they most desperately needed. He gave them hope.

Friday, June 1. The King is dead.

The King has been shot to death. (Counted by our arrival in Nepal, this is King # 1.) Apparently all of the members of his family save two have been shot along with him and most of them are dead too. The King is dead; long live the King.

Pursuant to the line of succession set down in the Constitution, the King’s eldest son, the Crown Prince, has been named King. (King # 2.) He was among those shot and is in a coma: As he is in a coma, he cannot carry out the duties of King. (In addition, he is the immediate chief-suspect. More on that later.) The King is in a coma; long live the King.

King # 1’s brother has been named Regent, and, as such, has the power to carry out most of the duties of King.

Among the dead: King # 1, his wife the Queen, their youngest son (who lived in London, but was home this Friday for dinner with the family). Among the wounded is the comatose King # 2.

We will not know any of this until the next morning.

Saturday, June 2. The phone rings and four theories emerge.

We were awakened by Ben’s news: “They’ve just massacred the Royal Family.” And his eminently sound advice: “Stay in your hotel until we find out what’s going on!” The frightening part of that sentence, of course, was “They’ve.” We had no idea who “They” were. Is this the first move in a bloody coup? Are the Chinese invading across the mountains? Will Americans be blamed?

Later that day—within 24 hours of their death—King # 1, his Queen, and their youngest son were cremated, and their ashes swept into a holy river, and the people of Nepal came to settle on three theories as to how this tragedy happened.

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Clockwise from bottom left: Hilary, Tashi, Mike, Anne, Ben Fenner at Pharping

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■ The first theory, spreading by rumors—"My brother has a friend whose cousin works in the palace and he said..."—and mentioned but not confirmed by the press is that the Crown Prince (King # 2; 30-some years old) took up an automatic weapon and shot everyone in the room, including turning the weapon on himself. The stated reason, if this can be called a "reason", is that he was upset with his father the King for not allowing him to marry the woman he loved, but rather insisting on a more politically advantageous marriage. Many people do not believe that the Crown Prince would do something like this and anyway, they say, that is not a reason to kill so many.

■ The second theory is one that, according to the paper, was put forth by the Regent: It was an accident. The automatic weapon went off accidentally and shot a minimum of 14 people, killing most of them. It is as though the Crown Prince was playing in the automatic-rifle cabinet when guns began accidentally firing, spraying bullets around the palace. (Guns don't kill people. Accidents do. It makes sense to me. I think I heard somewhere that the leading cause of death in America is accidents. Let's outlaw accidents. If it is true that if we outlaw guns, then only outlaws will have guns, then it is also true that if we outlaw accidents, only outlaws will have accidents, and isn't that a good thing?)

This theory was run up the flagpole. No one saluted. Duh! The Regent took it back. He has since explained his statement by saying that, at the time, as Regent, and (though this part went unspoken) with the chief suspect having just been crowned King, the Constitution limited what he was able to do and say. Nowhere, however, does their Constitution require that he claim it was an accident.

■ The third theory is that the Regent was behind it. Most all of the members of the Royal family were gathered for dinner but not the Regent. He was miles away in the far reaches of the country. The Regent's wife was there. She was wounded and is expected to survive. The Regent's son was there. He was uninjured but has not been seen or heard from since. Those who espouse this theory point to, ... well, to the facts.

Also, the people say that the Crown Prince would not do such a thing. They say that the fact that no information is being released to the press—or very little information—is evidence of a cover-up; the Regent is the one who has the most to gain by a cover-up; the Regent himself was conveniently far out of town; the Regent's family was not much harmed.

Coincidence? Maybe so and maybe not, but when there is no vigorous, free press—when the government, which has the information, can do no better than to claim it was an accidental massacre—what else are the people expected to think? In this regard the Nepalese are no different from the Americans: When those in control of the information won't let it out, we all think they have something to hide.

What was getting out was the normal kind of rumor stuff that spreads when President Kennedy or the King of Nepal is assassinated, but here it is all multiplied by a gagged press. (There is an "alternative paper." Tomorrow the editor and one other employee of that paper will be arrested for publishing a letter about the massacre.

■ Fourth theory: The Regent's son is responsible. People here call him the demon son. He sounds a bit like the son of Idi Amin, if you remember him. They say that when he wants a woman he has his guards bring her to him. They say he killed a rock star. They say he drives his Land Rover through the narrow, crowded streets of Nepal, way too fast, without regard for life or limb. "They" say all of these things. On the one hand, I try to remember that "they" said that John Kennedy was killed by the mob, by the Cubans, and by agents of LBJ. On the other hand, spoiled is far too weak a word for the children of this Royal Family.

The reasons this theory is gaining currency are much the same as those propelling theory number 3.

Sunday, June 3. The military is put on alert.

The people are upset at the lack of information. There are fears of civil unrest. The police and military are on alert. A curfew is imposed.

Monday, June 4. We decide to take a trip.

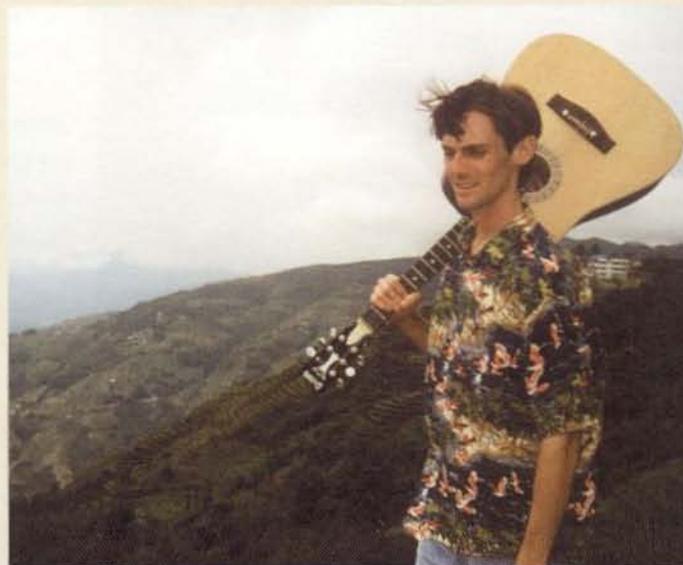
Monday, Anne and Ben and I took a cab to Nargakot [a Nepalese town in the foothills of the Himalayas]. We went there to get out of Kathmandu. There was a 4:00 p.m. curfew in Kathmandu this Monday. We decided we'd rather spend the day in Nargakot, where the air is fresh, the views of the Himalayas are spectacular, there are some lovely hikes, and there is no curfew.

We stayed in a very nice guesthouse. We paid close attention to the news, such as it was, and we learned that the government announced the death of King # 2, that King # 1's brother (the Regent) had been crowned King # 3, that rocks had been thrown at the police and fires had been set in the streets in Kathmandu, and that some curfew violators had been shot. We had a lovely time in Nargakot.

Tuesday, June 5. We decide to return to Kathmandu. God knows why, but we do.

We had planned to stay in Nargakot just one night, and to return to Kathmandu today. The manager of the guesthouse in Nargakot told us that he'd heard on the radio that a noon curfew had been imposed today in Kathmandu. The manager made some phone calls and found out the following: The main roads into Kathmandu were blocked to vehicular traffic. The tourist buses were not running from Nargakot to Kathmandu. (These are the nicer buses; no one rides on top, everyone has a seat, no animals). The regular buses were running, but only as far as Bhaktapur, a city a few miles outside of Kathmandu. There were no cabs.

We also learned that King # 3 established a three-person Commission of Inquiry to look into the deaths. He appointed the Chief Justice, the head of the opposition, and the Speaker of the Senate. The head of the opposition has already resigned, saying that under the Constitution the King does not have authority to establish such a commission. There are at least three survivors of this shooting, including King # 3's wife, now the Queen, and their demon son, now the Crown Prince. And there must have been servants at this Royal Family dinner. There is no word on what they say about what



Ben on the road to Nargakot

happened. This, of course, is more grist for the rumor mill. People say that the Commission—if there is one in the end—will only be as good as the information it is allowed to see. The Commission has been ordered to return a preliminary report within three days. Last I heard, however, it was a three-member Commission with one vacancy.

We asked the manager of the guesthouse what he thought of the new King. He said: "He's only been King for four hours and he's already used the Army twice." (Once as Regent, once as king, both times to enforce curfews.)

Anyway, what are we to do? We decided on the 40-minute hike to the local bus stop. We will take the local to Bhaktapur and spend the night there, and hope we can get to Kathmandu early the next day. As we were walking up the dirt road carved out of the foothill, from our guesthouse to Nargakot, we came upon a taxi pulled over to the side. We asked if there was time to get us to Kathmandu before the noon curfew, and the driver said that there was.

We really did not know what to do. (Though looking at it now, in the safety of the office of our hotel, with a San Miguel and the hotel's computer, it seems pretty simple: Stay in Nargakot, out of harms way and in view of the Himalayas.) But we wanted to be back in Kathmandu, so we decided we would hire the driver to take us there, if he could do so. If we could not get into Kathmandu then we would stop in Bhaktapur and go on into Kathmandu the next day.

The cabbie took us careening down mountain roads at top speed, in a car at least two sizes too small. Lots of wheels sliding around curves. Lots of bouncing into and out of potholes and over rocks. Lots of banging my head onto the ceiling of the car.

At Bhaktapur, we arrived at the intersection of the main road into Kathmandu. The police stopped us and told the driver that the main road was blocked. We could not get through. He pointed him back the direction we had come, to a back road into town. We got on that road, largely unpaved (and I don't mean unpaved like the road to Ed Morse's house in Iowa; I mean unpaved, unimproved, and nearly unrecognizable as a road). We immediately fell in behind three large trucks, costing us precious time. At various points down this road, the driver stopped to ask people about the road ahead. Two or three times, he changed our route based on what he heard.

Eventually we came to a just-installed roadblock. Large concrete sewer pipe had been rolled across the road by a bunch of men, angry men with shaved heads. The shaved heads are a sign of respect for the dead King. Anne and Ben



and I do not know enough about the cultural traditions of Nepal to be reassured.

At the sewer-pipe roadblock, our driver got out and words were exchanged. (At this point—all along this drive, really, but particularly at this point—we really experienced most fully the relationship between travel and fear.) Our driver was allowed to remove the blocks behind one section of pipe, roll that section back, and drive through.

More speeding down a different kind of terrible road. When they cleared the rice paddies on either side, the road must have been where they put the rocks. (Not gravel, mind you. Rocks. It felt like driving through a batting cage.)

We reached Kathmandu. There were paved streets, normally packed with pedestrians, buses, trucks, cabs, and cows. Today there was no traffic but for three Americans and a Nepalese driver in a speeding cab. The metal doors were pulled down over all of the shops. There were people out, along the sides of the streets; they were not going anywhere; just standing around waiting on the noon curfew. (This was when the cab driver said, if I understood him, "You cannot mob a speeding car.") The streets were strewn with mostly-busted bricks. There were a few fires in the streets, and of course there were still a few cows. ("Escape from New York" came to mind, except it was daylight and I didn't feel much like Kurt Russell.)

The cab dropped us at the Bouddhanath Stupa at 11:45. Our hotel is a 7 to 10 minute walk down back streets. 

We really did not know what to do, standing on that road outside of Nargakot next to that cab. Perhaps we did not make the best decision, but, at the time, the taxi on the mostly deserted road seemed to be some sort of gift, and we accepted it. Anyway, we are here, at our Kathmandu hotel. The border between Nepal and India is closed, we are told. We fly from here to New Delhi in two days. I guess the border will be open by then; either that or we'll be home late.

I am going to close now and go out to the garden and read.

I am reading "About a Boy" by Nick Hornby. I seem to recall Bob Mundy recommending that to me once. It is a terrific book, and quite funny, and I can use a good laugh. You recommended it also, Hilary, and more recently. Usually it takes three mentions of something before it sticks with me, but these are odd times and uncommon places.

Here is how unfamiliar these times and this place are: As I type this, I hear a sound through the window. It is either a Civil Defense siren, like our tornado warning, or someone is vacuuming in the next room. I can't tell which. I don't know whether to take cover or to search my pockets for tip-change.

We love you, we're glad you were with us, and we're glad you've made it home safely.

Dad 

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