

Flipped Upside Down:

A Reflection Paper on My Field Studies Experience in Madurai, India

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Introduction

“The traveller can tell all she has seen on her journey, but she can’t explain it all.”
- Tshi (Ghana)¹

In the summer of 2011, I travelled to Madurai, India on a Peace and Conflict Studies field study through the Beyond Borders program with another student named Nicole. While there I lived with an upper class family and spent several weeks volunteering at various organizations. For two weeks in the month of June I sat in on a spoken English class at the Sudar Foundation; this class was taught to girls from disadvantaged backgrounds to help them apply to colleges and jobs. Following that placement, I taught English classes to students in grades three through seven at the YWCA Matriculation Higher Secondary school for a month. My evenings from June to August were spent with a group of girls from ages five to thirteen at Kirubai Illam, a hostel for girls whose parents suffer from leprosy.

Coming home in August, I struggled to articulate what my experience had been like and what it meant to me. Although my friends and family members expected an easy and succinct response to the seemingly simple question of “How was your summer?” I rarely had an answer for them. How could I explain the 99 days I had spent in a foreign country in less than a minute when I was still trying to make sense of it myself? A partial answer would come from an e-mail I sent to my cousin while still in India: “I feel as though India has taken me by the ankles and shaken me upside down until all the expectations and assumptions I had about it and about myself are lying on the ground, and I am so disoriented that I don't know which way is up anymore.”

This, in less than a minute is what those 99 days consisted of. This new tagline for explaining my experience in India also provided the inspiration for the structure of this paper. In the first section “The view from upside down,” I will discuss things that I noticed and experienced while in India. The second section which I have entitled “What fell out of my pockets” is an examination of how I was changed on a personal level and finally, the last section “Right-side up?” is a look at returning to

¹ Quoted by Patrick Ibekwe, *The Little Book of African Wisdom*, (New York: New Internationalist Publications, 2009).

Canada and how I see this experience shaping my future. Invariably on my journey, I did a lot of self-reflection which is why many of the following sections end with questions; they are ones I continue to grapple with. Despite the varied experiences I had while there, I do not claim to know or understand India from my limited exposure to it. Instead, the following are my observations and my interpretations of what I saw. I have no idea whether they present the truth, half-truths, or complete fabrications, but it is how I made sense of an incredibly complex country.

The View From Upside Down

“I feel as though India has taken me by the ankles and shaken me upside down...”

“One’s destination is never a place, but a new way of seeing things.”

–Henry Miller²

I arrived in Madurai, India on May 10, 2011, my twenty-first birthday. At that point, I didn't know that this experience would have a lasting impact on me and would drastically alter my view of myself and my role in an international context. I didn't know that I would return to Canada more confused than when I left, nor did I know that I was about to be challenged beyond my wildest imagining. I didn't know that I was about to be flipped upside down and I certainly didn't know that I would spend the next three months like that, farther from my comfort zone than I had ever been before. Yet the moment I stepped off the plane in Chennai, India at 1:00 am local time for a six hour layover, my concept of the world shifted and I saw it from a whole new perspective.

Here is my view from upside down.

India is... developing, developed, other?

To me, India is a land of paradoxes. The rich, the poor, the modern, the traditional, the

² Lola Akerstrom, “The 50 Most Inspiring Travel Quotes of All Time,” Matadornetwork.com, March 7, 2008, accessed August 2010, <http://matadornetwork.com/bnt/50-most-inspiring-travel-quotes-of-all-time/>

colourful, the plain, the liberal, the conservative, Muslims, Christians, Hindus, and multiple ethnic groups all literally live right beside one another. In my mind, India is constantly in a state of simultaneously moving forward and moving backward depending on where you look. It makes it difficult then to categorize India as an underdeveloped, developing, or developed country. On one hand, everyone carries a mobile (cellphone), yet many people also walk around without shoes. There are high quality hospitals on almost every corner, but garbage is still dumped and burned on the side of the roads or just thrown into rivers and streams. Although India is said to have a large middle class, the disparity between the various levels of society is incredible, and during my summer I encountered all sides.

Since I lived in the home of an upper class family, I had access to certain amenities all summer such as clean water (from large water jugs), safe food (cooked by the family's cook named Parvathi), phone connections and wireless internet to connect with my family, air conditioning which I used at night, and an almost uninterrupted power supply (courtesy of the house's generator that mediated the occasional brownouts). However, I also taught in classrooms that could sit about 20 children comfortably but were crammed with up to 40 students and were equipped with little else but a rusted teacher's desk and chair, a blackboard, chalk, and a rag to wipe the board. I spent evenings with girls who kept their few belongings in duffel bags placed in cubbies and who slept on the floor because the hostel they lived in couldn't provide beds. I talked to a religious man who wandered all over India and who slept on the banks of the Ganges River at night, and I had dinner with businesswomen who lived and worked in Dubai. I encountered beggars without fingers who asked for money outside of churches, and I rubbed shoulders with wealthy Indian and foreign tourists.

The varied experiences I had with people of all classes, castes, and colours have made it difficult for me to classify India, even in my own mind. One of the most important lessons I learned from these encounters was that my social location has a large influence on how I see and make sense of

the world, and I've started to evaluate my own biases in how I measure development as a white female from Canada. I've also begun to question how we decide where a country falls on the developed and not developed continuum and what that classification means for the people who live in that country.

Corruption

Less than a month into my placement in India, the issue of corruption was brought to my attention by the well-broadcast hunger strikes of yoga guru Baba Ramdev in protest to the government's apathy towards fraudulent activity.³ While researching the issue myself, I found the Corruption Perceptions Index put forward by the global coalition, Transparency International.⁴ The index measures the perceived trustworthiness and reliability of officials in the public sector through a compilation of data from 3 to 10 surveys (depending on the country) which are administered by independent organizations. Countries are given a score from 10 (highly clean) to 0 (highly corrupt). Along this scale, India ranks 87th out of 178 countries with a score of 3.3 tied with Albania, Jamaica and Liberia, while Canada ranks 6th with a score of 8.9.

Corruption is clearly a problem in India, but beyond the issue of financial dishonesty which may exist at a government level, my host mother also commented that fraudulent conduct exists throughout society and is, in fact, the norm in India. This norm is clearly visible in terms of development programs and projects. Although structures are in place and numerous programs exist that should be providing support to the most vulnerable, there is little follow-up or assessment done to ensure that goals are being met. For example, although all students at government schools are supposed to be fed a cooked mid-day meal that includes vegetables and protein, this rarely happens and instead children are fed differently based on the school and the extra money is pocketed along the way. According to my host mother, dishonesty exists even at the most basic level of Indian society,

3 I first read about Baba Ramdev in The Hindu, one of the articles can be found here:
<http://www.thehindubusinessline.com/industry-and-economy/economy/article2073793.ece>
Or an article from the New York Times which can be accessed here:
<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/05/world/asia/05yoga.html>

4 See http://www.transparency.org/policy_research/surveys_indices/cpi/2010

weakening social systems and undermining much of the country's progress. "Why would anyone be honest or work hard, when you can pay to get a government job?" she asked me.

It was certainly easy for me to see the manifestations of corruption in India, but it also forced me to acknowledge the injustice and the dishonesty that exists in Canada too. Did I see corruption in India because I didn't trust the people who lived and worked there? If I looked hard enough, would I find corruption in Canada? Would it be just as overt, or is it better hidden? In my opinion, corruption and distrust of others is a great impediment to the creation of a just and peaceful society, so then how can corruption at all levels of society be dealt with? Should it start in the family and the schools where basic values are first taught as my host mother suggested? Or should better structures be established to dissuade dishonest conduct, such as changes in hiring processes? Is there anything I can do as a foreigner to discourage corruption in other countries? What about corruption in Canada?

"You very very beautiful." White is beautiful

Before living in India, I never paid much attention to skin colour. Over the summer, however, I quickly learned from advertisements, material culture, TV shows and movies, that white skin in India is not only identified with wealthy tourists but is synonymous with the pinnacle of beauty. Lighter skin is often associated with wealth and power and the higher castes (remnants of British colonialism), while someone with darker skin is assumed to be poor and of a lower caste. Although skin colour is rarely a reliable indicator of someone's exact socioeconomic status, it was interesting for me to note that the students I taught in the relatively poor YWCA school were generally much darker than those I met while visiting a private school down the street from my homestay.

Aside from the power and wealth that is assumed of a lighter skinned individual, paler skin is also considered beautiful for its own sake. It was rare for a day to go by when someone did not comment on how beautiful I was, even if I was sweaty and dirty or had forgotten to wash my hair that

day. This concept of white as beautiful was especially apparent in grocery stores where beauty products to lighten your skin (such as “Fair and Lovely” face cream) lined the shelves and were used by many of the young girls I met. Even the girls at Kirubai Illam (who did not have access to such cosmetics) would make fun of one another for being black and would constantly praise my own beauty as a white woman. What kind of effects does this have on Indian girls as they grow up?

There is no doubt that my skin colour was foundational for my experience in India, shaping how I was perceived and how others interacted with me. This leaves me with some leftover questions about how I approach race: how do I judge others based on skin colour in Canada? How do I treat them? Do I value a certain race over another? What prejudices do I hold? How does my skin colour affect how I am perceived in Canada? Can we ever truly be “colour-blind”? As a white woman what does this mean for any future international work that I choose to do?

“No shawl?” Gender

Gender relations were something that always mystified me in India. Although expectations for women are slowly changing as girls remain in school for longer, are unable to be married before they are 18 years old, and are increasingly taking jobs in traditionally male-dominated sectors, obstacles still exist for women of all ages. Many upper class women I spoke to emphasized how difficult it was for them to get into and remain in the workforce and how their families disapproved. Lower class women didn't seem to experience the same difficulties (perhaps because they maintain jobs out of necessity). However, across classes there are still very specific ideas about how a woman should behave and especially how she should dress which remain particularly evident in the conservative, Hindu city of Madurai.

Before leaving Canada, I was advised to always dress modestly since jeans and t-shirts are rarely seen on women in India (shorts and tank tops were completely out of the question). So for the

summer I wore long skirts, capris that covered my knees, and the long salwar pants and shirts worn by unmarried Indian women. The only article of clothing I struggled with (and rarely wore) was the shawl. All women who wear salwars (an outfit that consists of baggy pants and long dress-like shirts) also wear shawls with both ends draped over their shoulders to cover their chests. I found the shawl to be too much of a hassle and would often forgo wearing it. On one memorable occasion I was reprimanded by one of the girls at Kirubai Illam when a serviceman came by while we were playing outside. Eleven year old Keerthana scolded me for not wearing a shawl as she tried to pull up my v-neck shirt. “No shawl, boys look,” she said, pointing down my shirt. Apparently, without a shawl I was in danger of unwanted attention from men and boys (attention that I got anyways as a white woman), a fact that even an eleven year old knew.

Equally shocking for me was how gender roles were enacted during play for the girls I encountered at Kirubai Illam. In one particular game, a girl named Saranya had me play her husband who was mainly responsible for protecting her from jealous suitors (played by other girls) who attempted to steal her away. In all instances of pretend abduction, Saranya needed me (as her husband) to rescue her; this notion of female passivity was perfectly replicated from the Tamil movies, music videos, and TV shows I had seen. While it was heart-wrenching for me to watch these little girls enact gender roles that I considered constrictive and limiting, I was inspired by their ambitions to be doctors, teachers, evangelists and engineers. I was also encouraged by the young women I spent time with at the Sudar Foundation who insisted they would keep their jobs following marriage. “It is my job, my life,” a girl named Usha told me, “it gives me self-confidence.” Although in my mind, women in India are still not afforded the respect or the opportunities they deserve, I was inspired by the tug-of-war being fought by Indian women and their hopes for the future.

“Come to my aunty's wedding.” Hospitality in India

Looking back, one of the most endearing parts of my India experience was the hospitality I encountered. “Hello, where are you coming from?” (which means- “What country do you come from?”) was the typical greeting I encountered from Indians, often followed by an invitation to their home, usually for a meal. These invitations were completely unlike the ones given in Canada (the casual and noncommittal suggestions of “we should get coffee sometime”), but were instead an immediate and specific insistence that I should come to this person's house (today and often at that very moment) for a meal and/or tea. Whether I was walking down the street, working at one of my placements, wandering through a market, or even on a train headed to another city, I was always being asked to come over to someone's house and was offered food at every turn. I was even given snacks from a couple while waiting at a post office, and another time was handed a sweet from a man out his car window while we were both stuck in a traffic jam.

These experiences never ceased to amaze me. Although I found it frustrating to be constantly given attention because I was a foreigner, it also made me question how I treat others. There is a selflessness associated with Indian hospitality that is largely unknown to me and that I admire; after all, you certainly wouldn't find a Canadian cooking a meal for an almost perfect stranger and not eating any of it themselves (as a girl named Priya did once following a class at Sudar). And when was the last time I invited a mere acquaintance over for dinner?

What Fell Out of My Pockets

“... until all the expectations and assumptions I had about it and about myself are lying on the ground...”

“I soon realized that no journey carries one far unless, as it extends into the world around us, it goes an equal distance into the world within.”

- Lillian Smith⁵

“Adventure is a path. Real adventure – self-determined, self-motivated, often risky – forces you to have firsthand encounters with the world. The world the way it is, not the way you imagine it. Your body will collide with the earth and you will bear witness. In this way you will be compelled to grapple with the limitless kindness and bottomless cruelty of humankind – and perhaps realize that you yourself are capable of both. This will change you. Nothing will ever again be black-and-white.”

- Mark Jenkins⁶

As Lillian Smith's quote suggests, my journey to India was simultaneously a geographical one and a personal one. When I arrived in Madurai on that Tuesday in May, I thought my only struggles would deal with the outside world of India: the poverty, the confusion, and the cultural differences. I didn't yet realize that just as many, if not more of my challenges would come from within, from a constant grappling with my personal ethics, my motivations, my expectations, and my identity. Many things fell out of my pockets while I was in India; some of them I picked up when I left, happy to have discovered qualities that I didn't know I possessed, while others I left where they fell.

Never knowing what's going on: Control and Courage

“If there is one thing I've learned about living here it is not to get too comfortable because the world will shake you around whenever you start to feel you have a handle on things.”

-Journal entry, August 3rd 2011.

One of the first tough lessons India taught me was that I can rarely control situations, only my attitude towards them. On my second day in India, my host mother took my fellow Beyond Borders participant, Nicole and I to the YWCA Matriculation Higher Secondary School. There, she proceeded to explain to the principal (and indirectly, explain to us) what we would be doing at the school over the next several months. This was the first that Nicole and I (along with the principal) had heard about us

⁵ Matadornetwork.com

⁶ Ibid.

teaching spoken English classes, and it became the first of many “change of plans” situations we dealt with. From learning that we would only start working at the YWCA school and Kirubai Illam on June 15th (a month after we arrived), to finding out on our first day of teaching that we would be instructing five grade levels each day not two, to daily adjustments and surprises, all of these situations made my entire summer in India a crash course in flexibility.

For those three months, I rarely knew what was going on. This was partially due to the immense language barrier I encountered as an English speaker in a Tamil speaking city, but also had much to do with the more relaxed attitude Indians hold towards making plans or following schedules. (I quickly discovered that the many jokes made about IST, “Indian Standard Time” or “Indian Stretchable Time” held true). This attitude was in direct conflict with my own need to always understand and regulate my days and movements with maps, plans, schedules, lists, and other organizational tools. The unpredictability and ever-shifting nature of my experience in India daily challenged me to address my anxiety and to face the unknown with a smile. Throughout the summer, I struggled with this immense vulnerability which in Canada I was able to manage by taking control of situations but which in India often overwhelmed me with my utter inability to do anything but roll with the punches as they came.

By August, although I was by no means immune to the chaos of India, I had learned to laugh at the constantly changing situations which often brought me joy in their ridiculousness. For example, while teaching my seventh grade class one day, a teacher and two men came into the room to fix the ceiling fan and replace the tube lighting. Never mind that class would end in a few minutes for the lunch break, or that I had 50 students crammed into the tiny room, the light and fan proceeded to be changed with many of my students huddled together on the floor while workmen climbed onto their desks. Another time, Nicole and I had to run several blocks through pouring rain (and ankle high water on the streets) to catch a train because our auto was caught in a traffic jam. These unplanned moments often brought me confusion, fear, and doubts about my ability to cope; however, as the summer wore on the time I spent dwelling on these feelings before taking action lessened until I barely noticed my

inhibitions. Although I still remember India as a constantly shifting environment that never let me grasp my footing, I learned that I have the ability to bypass my need for control in favour of a shrug, a laugh, and the courage to tackle any situation thrown at me.

Making a difference... whatever that means: Purpose and Expectations

Before leaving Canada, I never questioned my purpose- I was going to India to work at an organization to learn and grow along with people who could benefit in some way from my help. While I knew my impact on the structural problems that India faced would be minimal at best, I was excited to lend my hands in whatever small way I could. This was not only what I thought my purpose was, but what I expected to accomplish while I was there. Early on in my summer, however, problems arose with my work placements which delayed my starting date until June 15th, over a month after my arrival in India. Suddenly my purpose was thrown into question- if I wasn't working then what was I doing there?

“How much is enough?” is a question I asked myself a lot over those three months. When I first learned that I would be working for four hours a day at the YWCA school and Kirubai Illam, I wondered whether this was enough time. Should I be doing more? I felt guilty that not only was I living in a house with the comforts I was used to in Canada, but I wasn't even putting in a good portion of my day into the very organizations that I had travelled to India to work with. In addition, I was seemingly going to spend a full month without once doing any work with one of said organizations. Was I helping enough? Was I giving enough? Did I have it too easy? Was I needed in India? Was I even wanted there?

One of the conclusions I came to during the summer was that maybe my purpose couldn't be contained in a 9 to 5 work placement. Instead, maybe it was enough to brighten the days of those I lived with: talking with my host parents Roopa and Ravi after dinner, singing with grandmother Aachi in the evenings, helping Segunthe and Priaya, the home nurses who looked after Aachi, and going to the market with our cook Parvathi. Maybe all of the unofficial and seemingly unimportant acts were

enough, like always waving to the women who sold mangoes from a little stall I passed every day, or smiling at the man who ironed clothes outside his home, or spending time with a young woman we met who wanted to practise her English.

Coming home from India, I can't say that I made much of a difference; my being there for a few months didn't change anything. The girls who take courses at the Sudar Foundation are still far from being fluent in spoken English, corporal punishment is still used at the YWCA school, and the girls at Kirubai Illam remain limited in the time they have to play and just be children. While all of these are true, I am able to appreciate that my impact was probably smaller than I expected but no less significant. Instead of a wide swath of colour on a canvas, my impact more closely resembled a dot on a Jackson Pollock painting. I can't cross off my accomplishments from India on a list, but I also can't ignore the fact that no word or action exists in a vacuum but somehow affects the words, actions, thoughts, beliefs and experiences of others. No, I can't point to the completion of a project as proof that I was in India and that I changed something, but I was there and I did have an impact even if I will probably never know what it was.

Who am I to say what is right? Social Location and Neocolonialism

In addition to questions I had about my impact in India, the situations I encountered challenged me to re-examine how I defined “making a difference” and what that meant in terms of my time in India. I soon discovered that my understanding of India was inevitably informed by my experience of life as a white woman from Canada, and this difference in social location often led to many misunderstandings. I would often interpret the actions and words of others in relation to my limited understanding of the context (without understanding the language or the body language). From there I would draw conclusions, potential faulty ones. This realization of my inability to fully understand India, along with a recommendation from my Beyond Borders adviser, led me to be more critical about how I was interpreting the situations I encountered and how this affected my understanding of what

development meant in India.

For my Beyond Border partner and I, neocolonialism became our buzzword. We did not want to oppress those we met by forcing our ideas, opinions and values onto them, so we became extremely critical of how we approached the situations we encountered. For me, this was a very difficult task, especially when I came across instances of injustice (as I interpreted them) and automatically wondered how to change them. Whether I saw teachers hitting children, or saw Aachi being treated roughly by the home nurses, or learned that the girls at Kirubai Illam were not given time to play, or heard my host father Ravi yell at the young home nurses or at the cook, my immediate reaction was how to change what I saw. But what if Indians themselves did not see these issues as problems and did not think any changes were necessary? I soon recognized that I was approaching India and its people in terms of what I could do for them, how I could solve the problems they faced as I saw and interpreted them, and what “desirable” methods and outcomes I could propose.

I had to admit that I couldn't possibly understand everything about India from being there for only three months. Although there were certain things that I thought were essential for the “development” of a country, who was I- as a foreigner- to say what those things were? Who was I to say what was needed in India? Who was I to how these changes should be achieved? I couldn't- and certainly not in the span of three months. Although this constant questioning of myself and my thinking in a quest to recognize and bypass my biases became exhausting, by the end of the summer I was much more aware of my worldview and how it shaped my understanding of India.

Right-Side Up?

“...and I am so disoriented that I don't know which way is up anymore.”

Travel is more than the seeing of sights; it is a change that goes on, deep and permanent, in the ideas of living.” – Miriam Beard⁷

⁷ Matardomnetwork.com

There is no denying that India changed me. When I first returned home I doubted that this was the case, especially since coming back to Canada was easier than I thought. “I felt confident just being in the Toronto Airport and knowing where I was, knowing that everyone would speak English and that all the rules I used to assume governed the world applied again,” I wrote on August 23rd reflecting on my re-entry into my home country. I was finally back on solid ground, right-side up. Or was I? What I am slowly discovering is that there is no “right-side up,” there is only a multitude of perspectives amidst an ever-changing and ever-shifting world.

Failure

“All journeys have secret destinations of which the traveller is unaware.”

– Martin Buber⁸

Coming home from India, I found it difficult to see the entire experience as anything other than a failure. I didn't accomplish anything. I hadn't been useful, considering that I had worked in positions created for me rather than fulfilling unmet needs at my placements. I couldn't point to any definitive lessons I had learned, and I had returned more bitter and cynical than when I left. What had it all been for? What was the point? Although it may take me years to fully answer these questions, months of reflection on my experience have taught me that it was anything but a failure.

Before embarking on this experience, I had certain expectations of who I would be when I returned, how I would feel, and what the experience would have meant to me. (One thing that India taught me is that expectations can be dangerous if clung to too tightly). Although I may not have achieved what I set out to do, this does not mean that I failed, or that my summer in India lacked meaning. I certainly learned important lessons, just not the ones I thought I would. As Martin Buber

comments, there were hidden destinations to my own journey that I am only just beginning to discover.

The Future of “Helping”

For many years now my educational path and my desired career options have been directed by the desire to help others. This is why I chose Peace and Conflict Studies as my major, and why I decided to spend a summer in a foreign country. I wanted to learn about development and how I could help those I met in a tangible way. Finally, I wanted to be able to see how development works on the ground and would be able to lend my skills in moving projects forward. India, however, had other plans for me.

What I learned from May to August was that although I may want to help people, this desire is only the beginning of a complex process involving give and take between numerous actors and concepts. I learned that development is not straightforward; it is inherently value-laden and may or may not match my values or the values of the local population. I learned that who I help, how I help, and why I help has a lot to do with my biases, blind spots, expectations, and assumptions which I don't always acknowledge or recognize. Most importantly, I discovered that within both international and local contexts I am rarely able to help someone in the traditional sense of the word.

Helping someone, implies that they don't have the ability to do it themselves and that they somehow need me to do part of a task for them. This perception ultimately disempowers those I am trying to help by denying their ability to help themselves. This is especially dangerous in an international setting where it is far too easy to push my own values onto people who may not necessarily agree with me. I have learned that any development work I do, whether in Canada or abroad, must always be in an “assisting” capacity rather than a “helping” one. I may never fully understand the situations or struggles of other people, but I can always support and encourage them, and walk with them on their life journey; I believe that this is ultimately what development and peace work should be about.

Extreme Vulnerability: Accepting My Weaknesses

In March of 2011 I wrote a blog post about vulnerability in preparation for my departure two months later. I wrote about how vulnerability has always challenged me. This especially holds true in unfamiliar settings where I believe I cannot afford to show any weakness for fear I'll be dominated by my anxieties and be unable to cope with the given task or situation. What I encountered in India was my inescapable vulnerability and a recognition of all my weaknesses, limitations, and other aspects of my personality that I previously ignored.

My fellow Beyond Borders participant, Nicole, once commented to me that she felt as though India had completely stripped her of who she thought she was, leaving her raw and bare. What she eloquently articulated was an all too clear reality for both of us. Being in India took away my protective barriers and revealed my vulnerability along with those aspects of myself that I liked to forget about: my need for gratitude to affirm my actions, my fears of anything or anyone new or different, my desire for praise and affirmation, my guilt over my want-less life, and my selfish motivations. As Mark Jenkins described⁹, India forced me to recognize both my capacity for courage, strength, and compassion and my capacity for pessimism, suspicion, narrow-mindedness, and a lack of belief in my own abilities.

Once back in Canada, it was tempting to forget about my moments of vulnerability and to once again hide my weaknesses. Being aware of the ugly aspects of my personality and my own vulnerability is an uncomfortable experience, but it is one that I believe is necessary for my journey towards mature self-awareness. If I want to be a peace builder (in a broad sense), I need to acknowledge not only how my biases influence my work but also understand what my motivations are, what prejudices I harbour, how I behave when under extreme stress, and what my weaknesses are. In his book *The Moral Imagination*, John Paul Lederach argues that in order to understand one's vocation, and her place in the world, she must understand herself.¹⁰ If I don't understand myself, my full self, how

⁹ See p 9, Matardornetwork.com

¹⁰ John Paul Lederach, *The Moral Imagination*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p 165-166.

can I ever know what I am meant to do with my life? My experience in India, helped reveal part of myself that I hadn't acknowledged before and I know that this will undoubtedly help my own life journey.

Into the Future: A Conclusion

When people ask me about my summer in India, I say that it was an incredible learning experience. I say that after having lived in India, I am more aware of my social location and how that informs my interpretation of the world which may be radically different from the perspectives of others. I tell them that I am now better able to understand and anticipate cultural differences in worldview and communication. Although I've overcome the initial bitterness and cynicism I came home with, I have become more critical about information I read, hear, or see, understanding now that everyone has a bias whether they acknowledge it or not. I've also gained a better awareness of what extreme stress is like, how it affects me, and how to recognize and address compassion fatigue in myself and others. These are lessons that I continue to use in my daily life as a student and hope to use as a peace practitioner in the future.

Although it wasn't always positive, it was rarely easy, and it didn't come without its share of surprises and challenges, living in India was an incredible learning experience. I learned about issues surrounding peace and development such as gender relations, corruption, cultural practices, and the importance of race in India. I discovered my strengths and my limitations, and I encountered new ideas that continue to challenge how I choose to live my life. Perhaps most of all, India challenged me to face reality, to understand the complexities in the world and myself, and to live amidst an ever shifting world. India may have flipped me upside down initially, but it also showed me that my view of the world is relative and that it and I are always growing and evolving. I can think of no better lessons than these.

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