

Abundance. By Marilyn Tam, **co-founder, Us Foundation.**

In this first of two articles, Marilyn Tam chronicles her trek to India to provide anti-parasitic medicine and Vitamin A to impoverished children in India.

“Whatever you are doing, give thanks for your life because it is so abundant compared to so many people who will think that they are in heaven with 10% of your cast offs and garbage.”
Marilyn Tam

Hi Dear Friends,

A short write up on what's going on in my world for the moment....

This morning we were on our way to Happy Model School in the rural areas of Varanasi, India in fact our car was just negotiating around another cow when I thought about you. Not that cows are exclusive to the country side; the city has many more cows than the countryside it seems.... They lie down in the middle of the road, eat people's produce from their stalls and generally act like they own the place, which in ways they do. It is so weird to see the bony starving people and fat cows. The dogs are mangy and the goats are well fed, maybe because they eat everything and there is certainly lots of garbage for them to eat. Ah, I'm on an animal theme right now, so many domesticated animals but I haven't seen a cat or any rats, wonder if it is because people ate them all? Hah, I'm only half joking.

This place is the widest dichotomy of spiritual and almost incomprehensibly intensively



physical place. One has to stay fully present because the environment is so immediate and in your face. The noise level is deafening, with horns blaring, screeching of tires, chants and music coming from shops and temples, bicycle bells ringing, people hawking products all happening at once. Then there is the sheer crush of people, cars, pedicabs, bicycles, pedestrians, people sitting on the sides and middle of the streets, beggars, hawkers with push carts, men piles with various items to sell as they walk along, touts trying to get people to go into their commissioned stores, policemen

that stand around and do nothing, security guards with guns with bayonets on the end, and of course all the animals who seem to be oblivious to the cacophony of sound, traffic and general assault on the senses and very often one's life, since no one drives, rides, or walks in lanes or in any remotely organized fashion. And of course no one stops or gives much of a right of way, yet it all seems to work relatively smoothly, no one seems to get hurt badly

although our driver did pin a man on a bike between us and a pedicab and also glanced a school boy that was a bit too close to the car.... No one stops, says anything and they all keep going.

Then there are the smells. It is amazing that the place doesn't smell worse. There is cow dung, goat dung, dog doo and human urine everywhere since the men just stop when they feel the call and just turn towards the wall of the building and start urinating. All that is before the huge amount of garbage which seems to be generated by the minute; people just throw trash including one time used ceramic cups, banana leaves (aka plates) and all other manners of refuse into the side walk which is periodically swept up by the untouchable caste of people. All this is before the sheer emotional, philosophical and sociological aspects of seeing people live in abject poverty and in decrepit conditions that are hard to imagine. To see maimed beggars, hollow cheeked, desperate looking mothers with tiny babies come up to beg and people lying by the filthy sidewalks, which are their homes.... It's surreal.

For a Westerner who is used to having personal space it can be overwhelming, and in fact it can be frightening and very upsetting. Fortunately for me I've experienced this before so I'm managing, although I'm certainly going to be thrilled to leave this environment. But I wonder how you would do in such conditions. The intensity of the assault on all the senses is so high, I wonder if people just break down under the strain, if they have not been exposed before.

I elected not to go to explore the other side of the Ganga with the whole group to have the time in my room to write to you. There are only two computers for the whole hotel and only one of the two cables works with my computer. I'll explain later. Anyway you can imagine that it is literally almost impossible to get on line, so I'm writing this in my room and then I'll go down and see if I can get online.

Today we distributed the anti-parasitic medicine and vitamin A to two schools, about 2,000 kids. We were so late because of traffic that we missed one other school. We will make that up on Monday. We now have a good system and it is heartwarming to see how needed what we are doing is for the children. The doctors who came with us told me that every one of the children is anemic and obviously malnourished. Their big eyes fill up most of their little faces and I can see evidence of ring worms in at least 5% of the children. Since they are mostly in uniforms, their poverty is camouflaged, but the skinny little arms and small statures attest to their true economic status. Some have visible signs of worms, open sores, extended stomachs and that listless stare, but they are all wonderful little personalities in their own right. Since I have to give a speech in every place (a very Indian thing to do, give/listen to speeches for every occasion; maybe that is why they can be so patient.) I had them repeat, "Namaste" and "Om jai, jai Maa" back to me. They loved it; we clapped hands and they sang us their national anthem.

I'm meeting with the head of the IMA (Indian Medical Association, like our AMA) on Monday to work out the fine logistics for the balance of the 100,000 distribution after I leave and to put in place the foundation for larger distributions after we get this program established. I also want to get a new program for newborns established because then with one dose we can cut infant mortality a minimum of 27%. It is a very effective program and we have already started this program successfully in four countries. India has the worst performance in improving infant mortality and in fact has slightly declined in this measure in the last few years. I remind myself to be in acceptance and acknowledge the good people who are volunteering to help,

instead of any judgment on the social/cultural system that allows for so much suffering when there is a growing middle class and cases of extreme wealth here.

The children are great and they make it all worthwhile. We will distribute to about 12,000 children before I leave and I will have a signed off distribution schedule for the rest by then also. The head of the IMA is a great guy. He is motivated and I believe that this program really opened his eyes on the people living in the underbelly of society here. He has committed to me that he will work with me to get the program to all of the state and eventually to the whole of India. Ambika is now signed on to help make sure things happen properly for the balance of the distribution and for future distributions. My goal is to be able to train her so that she can do this without my physical involvement in every distribution. These trips are hard on my body. The food is so unlike what we usually eat, and it is especially difficult since we've been served the same meal items three times a day everyday. Gee, I know I'm making this trip sound so appealing.

There are many great things, the kids, the internal quiet moments, the sacred sites, the inspiring people....and what an adventure in so many ways! Definitely something to be experienced Some people thrive on this; Howard my colleague from Vitamin Angels loves this, which is why he does what he does. I think India self selects who chooses to come. Funny that I am not attached to being here or not at all. After all that I said about people really having a visceral reaction to either being in India or not, I'm neutral. I love the work but the place does not really call to me. I know that things are incredibly inexpensive and you can get almost anything for cheap and at once but I cannot imagine wanting to shop even if we had time.



There is a sense of unreality to the place that makes me wish to stay away from other interactions other than with the anti-parasitic medicine and vitamin A and health and nutrition program I am on. Maybe it's the constant need to be aware that everyone seems to have a personal agenda and that it is to take some advantage of the situation for some personal gain, very exhausting to deal with that. You can't even ask for direction without knowing that the person (always a man because most "good" women aren't allowed to be out alone) is going to try to figure

out how to get some advantage out of the deal... Can he have you stop by a shop of someone he knows so that he can get some commission? Or what about a tour of some kind so that again he gets some cut? Or what if he can sell you something, hashish, change money or to direct you to another hotel so that he can make some \$ there too? It's exhausting.

I know many people love India and come for the incredible sights, the history, the spirituality and the inexpensive luxury of being pampered. You may be one of them and enjoy the place. I come for the work. There is so much that can easily be done to drastically improve the health and wellbeing of the children. I'll be here for a few more days and then I get to go to Hong Kong for a day and a half to see my brothers and then home. I will be so happy to enjoy quiet open spaces, to sleep in my own bed, shower in my own shower and yes, eat fresh leafy green vegetables that I feel safe eating raw!

Whatever you are doing, give thanks for your life because it is so abundant compared to so many people who will think that they are in heaven with 10% of your cast offs and garbage.

I am grateful for you in my life because you are part of my abundance.

Marilyn Tam went to India as the facilitator of a collaboration of three organizations, Us Foundation www.usfoundation.org, Humanity in Unity www.humanityinunity.org and Vitamin Angels Alliance www.vitaminangels.org to provide anti-parasitic medicine and vitamin A for 100,000 children. As the representative of Us Foundation, Marilyn took the lead in organizing this project and is responsible for implementing the program. Marilyn's group works with the local teams affiliated with Humanity in Unity, distributing the anti-parasitic medicine and vitamin A to prevent blindness, improve their immune systems and brain development and to educate and hand out hygiene and nutrition picture flyers translated into the local language so that the children, parents and teachers could take the information to their villages.

If you are interested in participating in a future mission, please log onto www.humanityinunity.org and www.usfoundation.org For tax deductible donations to this program, please send your donation to the India children's project at:

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