

Nepal Trip by Esther Taunton

HOW THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE FAILED ME

numb *adj* without feeling

Perhaps the editors at Harper Collins (publishers of my dictionary) addressed being numb as a purely physical condition, but their definition falls a long way short of explaining the emotional state many of us experienced in Nepal.

To be emotionally numb is not to be without feeling. It is in fact, the opposite. To be emotionally numb is to be so bombarded with feelings that you are not able to distinguish one from another or pinpoint which is strongest.

To be emotionally numb is to be parted from everything you know to be real and to be confronted by the difficult truth that there exists another reality. There exists a reality deprived of technology, without reasonable social order and without the basic requirements to sustain life. There exists a reality where children play in streets littered with garbage and the kind of waste matter I don't even want to document. There exists a reality where people rummage through this same rubbish in search of food for their families.

To be emotionally numb is to come face to face with overwhelming need and to be unable to help. It is to know that you are horribly unequipped, unprepared and unable to "give to all those who beg of you." It is to have your resources depleted by your efforts to help a few, leaving you unable to help the rest.

To be emotionally numb is to see pure, unbridled joy in the midst of unbelievable suffering. It is to see happiness in the faces of children who have experienced more difficulty than opportunity; more failure than success; more rejection than acceptance. It is to see smiles through tears - often your own.

To be numb is not to be without feeling. To be numb is to feel too much.

HOW THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE REDEEMED ITSELF

see v perceive with the eyes or mind; understand; consider or decide

The good people at Harper Collins got themselves sorted with this one.

A wise man once said, "Sometimes when you try and see something you stare at it so hard that your eyes water and your vision blurs. You have to look away in order to refocus..." Of all the things I learned in Nepal, the most important was how to look away, how to see the massive flaws in my "correct" western perception of the world and how it should be.

There is an old story used to illustrate the limitations of human perception, which tells of a group of blind men and an elephant. Each of the men perceived the elephant in a different way according to the part of the body they felt. It would be easy to believe the animal was terrifying if you only got your hands on a tusk... Much like it would be easy to believe Nepal was a hopeless case if you only saw the derelict buildings, only felt the sting of the questionable water hitting your eyes in the shower, only smelled the pollution and waste.

Jonny, who left us in Nepal, wrote on the team website: "The poverty of the people is hard for me to cope with but when I see them interact with each other so affectionately, when I see their genuine smile and hear 'Namaste', I can't help but feel that perhaps it's us who are missing out on something...not them." And I have to agree with him; we are missing out. Sometimes you find things in the most unexpected places. Shrouded in the undeniable materialistic poverty of Nepal is an undeniable wealth of spirit.

Too often we take things at face value, neglecting the finer, less obvious details and failing to reap the rewards of really seeing. The spirit of the Nepali people - particularly the children - was, by and large, incredible. As volunteers we were given an insight into the true culture of Nepal, much more than the shallow overview the average tourist in Kathmandu would stand to gain. We experienced life as part of a family unit, as members of a rural teaching staff and as members of a community. We saw incredible resourcefulness, unbelievable optimism, and amazing resilience. It is this list of psychological qualities I am truly grateful to have seen. More than the images of the mountains, the incredible displays of lightning, the cows standing in the middle of the main street in Kathmandu (madness!), I hope that the memories I have of their optimism, resourcefulness and resilience stay with me.