

Lifelines: The Personal and Professional Significance of Vocational Communities within Anthropology

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Opinion

As anthropologists, much of our professional and personal life is configured around our field site, whose contours shape our experiences, memories and relationships, in addition to language skills and cultural knowledge. In my case, it was the country of Nepal that captivated my attention across twenty-five years, seven of them in residence, most of them spent in the crowded environs of squatter settlements. For nearly a decade, however, I found myself isolated from the region through an admixture of loss, grief and trauma, much of it intertwined with the country and people that I had come to love.

To be disconnected from one's field site is to be separated from that which animates our lives as anthropologists. I eventually found my way back, mostly by grabbing onto the lifelines tossed my way by caring colleagues whose support I had previously eschewed, first in mourning, and over time through inertia and the avoidance wrought by self-consciousness. It probably did not help my cause that like many field anthropologists, I also have the paradoxical capacity to thrive both in community and in solitude, and I had chosen the latter for too long.

The essay that follows reflects on the pivotal role played by vocational community in the personal and professional rejuvenation of my own journey as an anthropologist through shared scholarship, collegiality and the ephemerality of deeper connections that define a region and those of us who dwell in it for some time.

After my long sojourn away from all things Himalayan, including friends and colleagues, the first steps taken gingerly towards community were through invitations to participate in regional conferences devoted to the Himalayas and South Asia. Participation in roundtables, panels, workshops and speaking engagements lifted me out of isolation and resuscitated my knowledge of

local conditions and trending theoretical frameworks. These opportunities also placed me in the company of scholars, teachers, advocates and artists who understood the conceptual challenge of harnessing the fluidity of Nepal in our work, such as trying to convey changing notions of citizenship, or attempting to capture the volatility of ethno-nationalist politics. These were not just conferences but the mutual and collaborative rendering of place, albeit a restless and shifting one.

The sense of place, in turn, cultivated connection beyond the scholarly. Friendship within this vocational community is easy if not presumptive. Even when meeting someone for the first time, we are inclined to recognize in one another the same qualities of awe, reverence and curiosity by which we were drawn to our field sites in the first place, be it a deep and abiding love for the mountains and river valleys, a concern for sustainable socioeconomic development or a desire to further explore the tenets of Buddhism and non-Western ways of engaging the world. While my calling may have been the Himalayas, I have also seen the depth of connection cultivated by place in the lives of colleagues and friends whose anthropological journey beckoned elsewhere.

When this familiarity is amplified by the shared experience of civil war or natural disaster, as it is for many of us, and punctuated by the concomitant loss of life and property in places and with people that we have come to love, the relationships we build through vocational community can be particularly affecting. It is no wonder that I felt a sense of homecoming when I returned to the fellowship of regional scholars. Who better to accept and understand my own struggles than others who had borne witness to or experienced their own challenges, directly or indirectly, by virtue of their relationship to Nepal? I have also seen this sensibility at work in the vocational relationships between colleagues at similarly affected

field sites like Serbia or Haiti, where friendship can be hastened and solidified by political unrest, economic instability and earthquakes.

As an anthropologist, I both lament and celebrate a place and people whose national landscape sometimes reflects or becomes

my own, and I do so in the company of a vocational community that best understands this dialectic and approaches its complications with compassion and insight. It is a lifeline both personal as well as professional and one for which I am deeply grateful.



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