



Nepali Lessons

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IT WAS DUSK as the plane dipped down, nearly skimming the precariously stacked houses below. I sat at the edge of my seat, holding my breath. After over 24 hours of weary travel, I was almost there. During the flight to the Kathmandu airport, the same airport where my family and I started our journey so many years ago, my stomach was in knots. I thought back to the faded photographs in our family albums: all of us—my mother, father, grandparents, gathered outside the red brick entryway. I was returning to Nepal after more than a decade since my last visit. Would it feel like I had come home, or would I be the worst kind of stranger: the kind who used to belong? This was my homeland, but as the years away added up, my connection with the language and customs had frayed. As we moved closer and closer to the runway, I took a deep breath and thought of my mother.

The moment I was able to read and write, my mother decided that it was time for me to take Nepali lessons. She was insistent that the Nepali language, my birthright, would be a part of my identity. My parents and I immigrated to the United States when I was 3. Like many immigrant families, the “coming to America” stories are mythologized in our household. My parents love to tell me, “We came to the United States with nothing more than a suitcase full of clothes and a giant pressure cooker.” (Presumably to cook endless bowls of lentils.)

My mother knew that I would go to American schools and watch American television and make American friends. She feared that the Nepali language, the thread that tied me to my country and my family, would gradually fade until it disappeared entirely. So every day, rain or shine, despite my yowling protestations, she would sit me down for Nepali lessons. Again and again I would recite the alphabet, read from Nepali textbooks, scribble out essays. I remember my 6-year-old self, sprawled on the living room floor, squinting furiously at the tiny Nepali letters. Ink on my face and hands, I would try to bend the precise, inky characters to my will. “Why do I need to do this?” I would moan. “We only speak in Nepali at home.” We lived in a small, mostly white town in the Midwest. The language outside our home was always

English. My mother’s brow would furrow, and her lips would purse. She’d remind me that some day, I’d feel the tug of my homeland and make the journey back. How lonely and lost would I feel if I couldn’t speak my own language? I’d roll my eyes. But she was formidable and unrelenting, and the language stayed, preserved and bright, in my brain.

As I grew older, I became interested in biology and life sciences. I started volunteering at a local children’s hospital. Quickly, I fell in love. Connecting with young patients also felt a little like learning a new language—establishing trust and building rapport. The world of medicine had opened its door to me, and I was all in. Eventually, I left home for college and then medical school. My mother was no longer waiting for me at the end of the day, forcing me to practice Nepali. I didn’t have many Nepali friends, and days would pass when I spoke and thought only in English. Bit by bit, the fruits of my mother’s meticulous labor began to wither. The Nepali letters, once vibrant and clear in my head, became blurry and gathered dust.

I soon moved even farther away from home to start my pediatrics residency. There, my passion for global health flourished. I learned about sustainable partnerships and important skills for working in resource-limited settings. I was lucky enough to be given the opportunity to travel for a global health elective experience. I immediately remembered my mother’s prescient words—I felt the tug of our birth country, and thought of my relatives in rural Nepal who struggled to find access to health services and receive treatment. I knew I wanted to return home.

And that is how I found myself on a plane, stomach tied in knots, as we landed at the Kathmandu airport. The thing that often remains unsaid when discussing global health work is that it can be deeply lonely. As I began working in the community hospital, I tried to find the Nepali that was buried in my brain but the language felt strange. I fumbled, desperately seeking to dust off the letters to form words and sentences. At first, my patients from the rural villages would stare at me aghast. Once, I used the word for “neck” in place of “kidney.” The children would giggle at my American accent.

The role of the ex-pat is a strange one. We look the same as our countrymen. Our names are the same. But often, when we open our mouths, we're marked. Not quite American, not quite Nepali. There is the surge of guilt, for leaving our homeland while other families have stayed and are fighting to build better systems. At the heart of it, though, we've come home, many of us working to rebuild connections to a place that has formed our identities, even from oceans and long plane rides away.

So, I told myself that I belonged. And bit-by-bit, my confidence grew. I spoke Nepali at every opportunity: with the residents, attendings, and nurses. I squinted at signs on the streets, stringing the words together, letter-by-letter. As the weeks flew by, the little sprouts of Nepali grew thicker and brighter. I began to laugh and joke with other people in the hospital; the cafeteria workers began calling me "black coffee girl" because of the endless cups I drank.

During my last week, one of the women I worked with greeted me with the word "bayni," which means "little sister." I immediately felt a lump in my throat. I thought of my mother and felt flooded with gratitude. On this journey to Nepal by myself, I had certainly felt lonely. But, though it had needed some nurturing, our language had remained—the roots that led me back to my country and my people.

The next year, I began my pediatric hospital medicine fellowship. During one of my first months, I was on service and working in the newborn nursery. I headed to my patient's room to greet a mom and her new baby. As I entered the room, I realized that the patient's last name seemed familiar. I saw the mother study the name on my badge before taking another moment to glance at my face. She spoke hesitantly, hopefully, in Nepali: "Are you the doctor?" I broke into a smile and answered: "Yes."

She and her husband had recently immigrated to the United States, and this was their first baby. Her expression was one that I understood on a fundamental level. I thought of my plane ride to Nepal, all the uncertainty and fear that I carried with me through my journey. I thought of the woman who had called me her sister, who let me know, through a simple word in our shared language, that we were connected, and that I belonged. In a place that seems unfamiliar and strange, a common language can be what makes you feel seen, dispels loneliness, and gives you a sense of safety.

Soon after, I told my mother the story of how I was able to connect with my patients, both in Nepal and the United States, through our shared language. She listened to me, with a knowing smile on her face. "*Aatmiyata*," she said, simply. In Nepali, this means a sense of connection between people. I carry that one with me.