



Traveling in Sydney, Australia, 1974

Two years ago my husband and I decided to celebrate our fiftieth birthdays and thirtieth anniversary by spending four months in Nepal learning to paraglide.

It was an amazing, and yes, frightening experience. Some days we would be circling in the sky with huge eagles and buzzards close enough to touch, beautiful Lake Thewa sparkling thousands of feet below us, and massive 25,000 foot peaks dominating the horizon. Truly, a life-changing adventure. Little did we know.

On the morning of Christmas Eve, I launched off the hill for my 52nd flight, leaving my husband and a friend standing on the cliff as I flew down the ridge and out of sight. I didn't know it would be fifteen minutes before wind conditions would allow them to take off. And they didn't know I had crashed near the landing site and broken my back.



From the Take-off

I lay in a crumpled heap in a rice paddy at the bottom of a cliff. I couldn't stand. The slightest move brought agonizing spasms. Local children and women huddled around me but didn't know what to do. A dog licked my face. I saw a vision in the clouds - my Mother-In-Law's face showing shock and concern, and filling me with love.

Twenty minutes later my husband landed nearby, ripped himself out of his harness and raced over. Our friend arrived shortly after. There was no ambulance, no helicopter, no emergency service to call, so they got me up the hill and to a taxi.

I refused to go to the hospital, insisting they take me back to our hotel instead. Which is why I was sitting on the fourth-floor terrace of our hotel two hours later, fighting off spasms and fear, when gunfire erupted in the street below as Maoist guerrillas attacked a police checkpoint in front of our hotel.



On the road to Tang-Ting

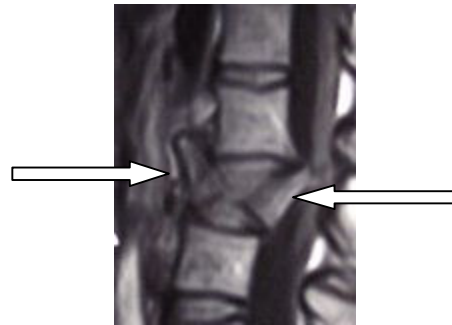
At first it sounded like fireworks. But then women started screaming and someone yelled, "They're killing each other! They're killing each other!" I started sobbing and tried to get out of my chair. My husband dragged the chair with me in it off the terrace and back into the safety of our room.

It was Christmas Eve, 2004.

Two weeks later, doctors at the hospital took x-rays of my spine and found evidence of massive trauma, but insisted it was from a very old injury - "Otherwise you wouldn't be walking." They said no paragliding for two weeks, but other than that, expressed little concern.

So ten days later we were still in Nepal, and I was well on my way to recovery (I thought), when we got word that my Mother-In-Law had just passed away. The next day, the King declared martial law, closed the airports, and cut off all phone and internet service indefinitely. We were stranded with no way out of the country.

We tried to be as philosophical as possible about our circumstances, but were once again pushed up against the wall a few days later when a visiting Swiss Radiologist happened to have a look at my x-rays. The instant he saw them, his eyes opened in dismay and he said, "I don't think this is an old injury! See these? These are bone fragments in your spinal canal. If one of them shifts you could be instantly paralysed. You shouldn't be walking. You shouldn't even be standing!"



Roxanne's spine

Our journey instantly took another twist: it became a tour of medical facilities in Nepal. A CAT-scan in Pokhara reaffirmed the Radiologist's concern. An MRI in Kathmandu confirmed his diagnosis - it was a very recent burst fracture of the third lumbar vertebrae. I must not carry anything bigger than an apple. I must avoid any trauma or jarring action. (Have you ever taken a taxi ride in Asia??) And there was nothing they could do: I would have to see a Neurosurgeon as soon as I returned to Canada.

Suddenly, every pothole in the road became a mortal enemy. Every twinge from my back came with a vision of life in a wheelchair. Every moment of not knowing what was in store sucked emotional energy from my husband and me like a giant black hole.

And then we met Dr. Banskota, an American-trained orthopaedic surgeon who runs a hospital in Kathmandu where they do free surgery on underprivileged children with terrible deformities whose parents could never afford the operations. And as we sat with him in his office, he exuded such love, such optimism, and such wonderful stories of the body's remarkable ability to heal itself, that by the time we left him, we had been transformed: for the first time in many days, we had hope.



A child in recovery

The next day, we flew to Europe. And several days after that, we were back in Vancouver.

Every one of the x-ray technicians, emergency-room doctors and neurosurgeons who saw my collection of x-rays, CAT scans and MRI's over the next several weeks was astounded that I was walking. In the end, it was decided that surgery was too risky, and that my spine had stabilized enough to minimize immediate risk of paralysis. Recovery was now up to me.

My husband and I had gone through the most intense five months of our thirty years together. We had floated in the air thousands of feet above the earth. We had witnessed death, been touched deeply by death, and come closer to losing each other than ever before. And we had come out of it closer than ever before.

To look at me today, almost two years later, you would never imagine how close I came to death, or life in a wheelchair. But I do my best to never forget.

And one of the ways I accomplish that is by organizing home jewelry parties that channel twenty percent of the profits back to wonderful charities in Nepal. Charities like an organization that rescues girls from the sex trade. Another that gives training and a fair wage to single women of the lower castes. And another, a certain hospital, where underprivileged children with horrific deformities are given a new life.

My husband and I have spent many of our thirty-some years together traveling the world. But this journey, celebrating our fiftieth year on the planet, changed everything.

With every good wish to all this holiday season!

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Pokhara, Nepal, 2004 (before Christmas Eve!)