

## Bhutan: Journey of a lifetime

RAANA HAIDER

"There are first world countries, third world and second world. But Bhutan is future world. Their way of viewing progress offers good guidance for the rest of us."

Deborah Llewellyn, Consultant with Save the Children, USA.

Conventional clichés abound on Bhutan. And like all clichés, much merit lies in the gist of the statement. Superlative adjectives also are aplenty on Bhutan. On this count, one would be hard-pressed to find many dissenters. Romantic epithets include: The Last Shangri-la, The Mythical Shangri-la, A Living Eden, The Last Place on the Roof of the World, Jewel of the Himalayas...Mythical epithets include: Magical Kingdom, Land of the Peaceful Thunder Dragon, Kingdom of the Dragon...Spiritual epithets include: Lotus Garden of the Gods, Hidden Holy Land, Heaven on Earth...Royal references include: Kingdom in the Sky, Kingdom in the Clouds, Kingdom beyond the Clouds, Last Buddhist Kingdom, Buddhist Kingdom in the Himalayas...Their nation steeped in myths and rituals, for the Bhutanese their country is Druk Yul or Land of the Thunder Dragon.

This off the beaten path mountainous country sandwiched between the geographical giants of China and India is a realm rich at both spiritual and material levels. With a population size of under 700,000 inhabitants, the Kingdom of Bhutan presents a canvas of images that are more fantastic than the one that just swept by. Mountains jam the terrain. They appear simply stacked against one another. This kingdom of some 38,394 sq. km. comparable to Switzerland in size still encompasses three distinct geographical features. On the lower reaches of southern Bhutan lies the tropical jungle terrain yet known as the 'Himalayan foothills.' Above this warm belt lies the temperate region of the 'Inner Himalaya' range. Further north, towering over the rest of the country looms the 'High Himalaya' heights at over 3000 metres. Bhutan within such a tight land mass actually covers an environment that ranges from tropical to alpine. In such a diverse visual backdrop of the bluest stretch of sky, endless span of snow-capped giants, salad-bowl valleys, rivers with serpentine courses, luminous lakes, verdant foliage, bountiful flora; where unscalable peaks and unexplored passes still exist; one may be forgiven for thinking that one has come across Mother Nature's true earthly paradise. And add to it air of pristine quality and purity.

Largely a factor of its isolated geographical parameters, Bhutan has engaged in a careful, conscious and calculated engagement with the rest of the world. This slow process of opening its frontiers began in the 1960s. Back then, in the memorable words of E.A. Vas in his book *The Dragon Kingdom: Journey through Bhutan* (1986), "In 1961 I was given an opportunity to visit Bhutan when the only wheel that existed in Bhutan was the prayer wheel." Prayer wheels are "a well-established religious tradition in Bhutan. Inside each cylinder are rolled long sheets of paper on which the same prayer is written thousands of times. Then passers-by turn the wheels, always in a clockwise direction, the prayer wheels 'recite' a single prayer thousand of times. This act wins merit, and helps to obtain a good reincarnation", notes Guy van Strydonck in *Bhutan: A Kingdom of the Eastern Himalayas* (1984).

Today, four-wheel drive vehicles swerve around hair-pin bends on mountainous roads as Maruti cars dodge one another and pedestrians in Thimpu city which has no traffic lights. In a true measure of the Theory of Relativity, residents complain of the volume of traffic and lack of parking space. Yet paved roads did not exist in the 1960s. Today, a single principal road runs west to east connecting all major towns. Keeping in mind the mountainous barriers that crop up close, it is a mark of considerable achievement. We saw trails snaking across hill and mountain slopes. These were the 'old roads.' Then we were told of the 'first road' and now this is the 'second road.' In the words of E.A. Vas: 'Roads may change but never the mountains.'

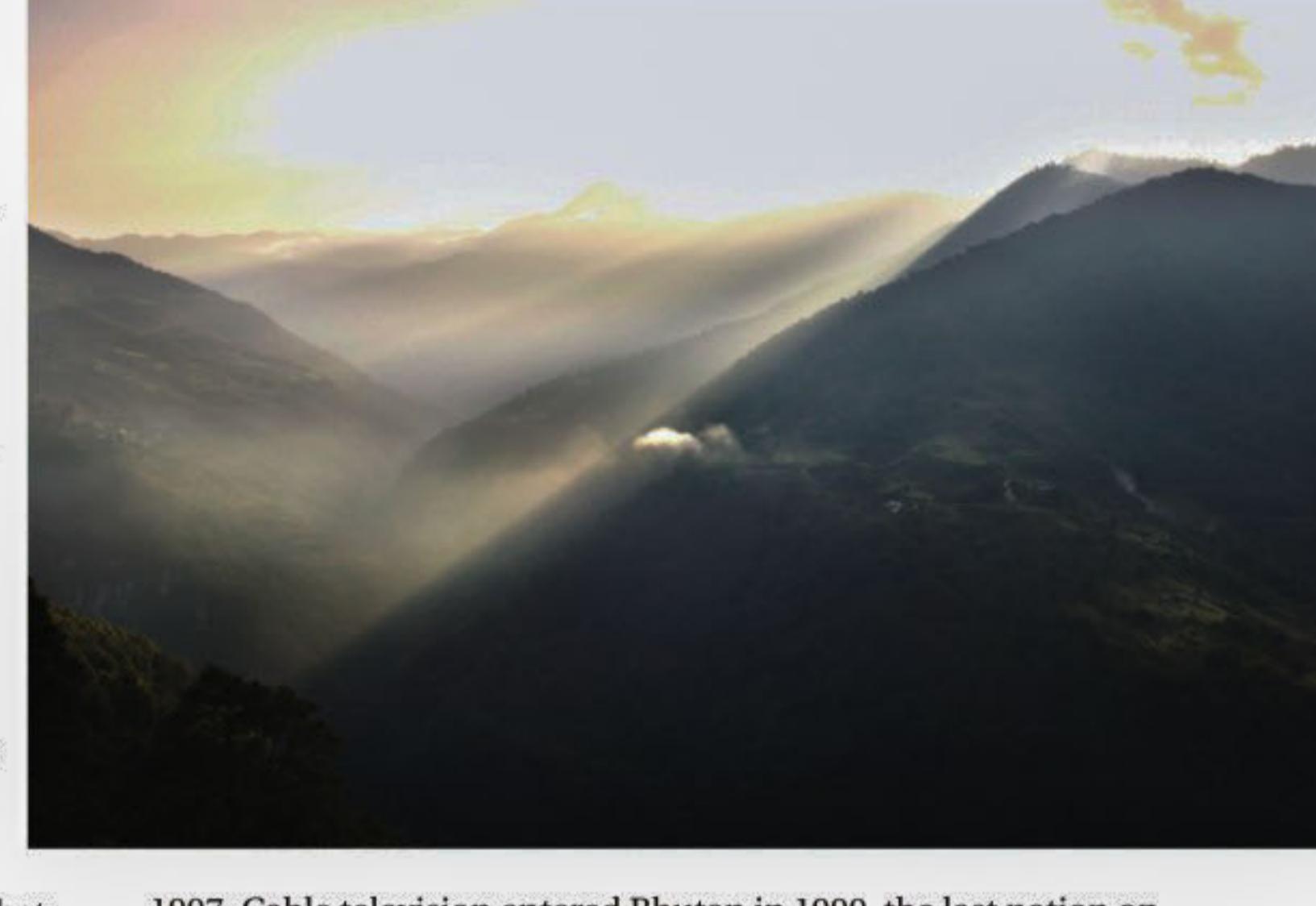
As Mankind endeavours to tame Nature and undertake development, the battle between Man and Mountain has been captured vividly by Joginder Singh in his writing on 'Conservation of Himalayan Ecology' in *Incredible Himalaya: Environment,*

*Culture, Tourism and Adventure*, by M.S. Kohli (2005). "They are superlatives the highest mountain, the highest pass, the deepest gorge, the highest living animals, these mountains confront us with phenomena that exist no where else on earth. Other mountains can be digested by landscape. They are penetrable, have harnessed by roads and railways. But no railways cross the Himalayas, and few roads. They are mountains so stupendous that they can be overflowed, but not tunneled, climbed but never tamed, mapped but seldom visited."

And we were blessed to catch a glimpse of the central conical snow-clad peak of the 'Great Lodging of the Divine Mountains', a spiritual appellation for the sacred Jhomolhari Mountain that sprawls across the Bhutan-Tibet border and whose eternally white crest reaches for the sky at 7314 metres. At this moment, I recall the lines composed by John Muir, a nineteenth century American naturalist.

"Let others orbit the inhospitable moon...  
I shall stay with my gigantic friends and let  
Them direct my thoughts to eternal truths."

Gingerly, did a nation in medieval time warp till the 1960s emerge into a modern setting. The only education available till then was theological teachings received at Buddhist monasteries. Today, English is widely taught and, importantly, spoken. Some 60% of persons aged 15 plus can read and write. Some students go abroad for higher education, many on government scholarships. Tourism only started in 1974. Pepsi Cola built a bottling plant in



1997. Cable television entered Bhutan in 1999 the last nation on earth to access it. Fast forwarding to 2008, some 47 satellite channels were accessible to Bhutan's remotest villages. According to the 2005 national census, 80 percent of Bhutanese have access to clean drinking water, child immunization is close to universal, iodine deficiency has almost been eliminated and both maternal and infant mortality rates have decreased.

The government-owned *Kuensel* daily newspaper for long has been the sole newspaper. Since 2006, some five other newspapers have emerged from the private sector. Its nascent film industry still was able to secure a nomination for the best foreign-language film for 'The Cup' directed by Khyentse Norbu at the Academy Awards in 2000. The plot centres on a young Buddhist monk's passion for football and his efforts to watch the 1998 World Cup matches. Bhutan's single airport in the Paro valley is the country's point of entry and exit for all Druk Air flights. The single runway has been described as 'the longest stretch of straight road' in all Bhutan. The airline commenced operations in 1983 with an 18-seater aircraft between Paro and Kolkata. Today, flights connect Bhutan to Bangkok, Delhi, Dhaka, Kathmandu and Kolkata via Airbus aircraft.

Just when you think that the availability of modern conveniences is what development is all about, Bhutan reminds us that visionary leadership is a core feature of the process. The Wangchuk dynasty established in 1907 has successively and by all

evidence successfully and slowly guided Bhutan through the past century. The fourth king (1972-2006) is the author of the unique development philosophy Gross National Happiness (GNH) as opposed to GDP. This all-encompassing political philosophy seeks to balance material progress with spiritual wellbeing. In the words of Eric Weiner, author of *The Geography of Bliss*: "With three simple words, Gross National Happiness taps into deep and ancient truth, even if it is one we sometimes forget; that there is more to life than money." The prime minister of Bhutan at the 5th GNH International Conference in Brazil in November 2009 in his keynote address noted that "the balance between economy and ecology is a key consideration in GNH."

Since Buddhism reveres Nature, 'Spiritual Ecology' is a relevant notion. We travellers to Bhutan in the twenty-first century are still privileged to witness Nature's realm. Bhutan was an early proponent of the Climate Change factor. Deliberate environmental precautions over decades have ensured green coverage and biodiversity. Unrestricted felling of trees is prohibited. Some 30 percent of the country is protected as wild reserves. Forest cover is at around 70 percent. The National Environment Commission was set up in 1992. Importantly, the central theme of the forthcoming 16th SAARC Summit to be held in Thimpu at the end of April 2010 is 'Conservation of Environment and Climate Change.'

As developing nations seek to attract global tourism; Bhutan has once again demonstrated a unique path. Limited high-value and low-impact tourism is the Royal Government of Bhutan's national policy and has been so since the country opened its borders to regulated tourism in 1974. In brief, Bhutan's pursuit of happiness underlines quality and not just quantity.

In an unexpected move, the Fourth Druk Gyalpo, the Fourth King abdicated the Golden Throne of the Kingdom of Bhutan in 2006. Into the twenty-first century, Bhutan has evolved into the world's newest democracy with its first parliamentary elections held in March 2008. The Fifth Druk Gyalpo crowned with the Raven Crown in November 2008 is today the youngest reigning monarch in the world's newest democracy.

We flew into Paro on the 'Wings of the Dragon' from Dhaka in the month of mid-March. Transported in two hours from the din of Dhaka to the palpable peaceful Paro valley was akin to landing on another planet. With Nature as its master choreographer and its jaw-dropping scenery as its constant backdrop, the focal point at every site of human habitation is Bhutan's iconographic image the *dzong*. The Paro *dzong* is visible from the aircraft window as we approach Paro airport. The fortress cum monastery is at the very heart of Buddhist Bhutan's religious and social fabric. Mahayana Buddhism is Bhutan's state religion and Bhutan is the world's sole

Buddhist kingdom. Once defensive structures built on high strategic ridges by the ruling Buddhist theocracy of the time; they also served as administrative offices, monasteries and residences for the head abbot, senior monks and the rank and file monk community. Extravagant details and gilded decorative features adorn doors, windows and roofing supports. In a blaze of red, yellow, orange, green, blue and black palette of colours Bhutan's unique and magnificent architecture comes alive. The same vibrant colours mark all *dzong* interiors; men's clothing, the knee-length robe named *gho*; women's dress, the floor-length dress called a *kira*.

In typical *dzong* design we find the sloping high-walled white-brick exterior, steep entrance stairway, massive central tower and courtyards that lead off to inner sanctums of prayers and offerings. Outside, Buddhist prayer mantras in the form of prayer flags blow in the wind while reaching across to all living sentient beings. Sharing blessings 'May my prayer reach those far and away; for their well-being is my well-being as well' is the heart-felt prayer wish.

\*Raana Haider, a literary travel writer traveled to Bhutan in March 2010. The Kingdom of Bhutan will host for the first time the 16th regional SAARC Summit in Thimpu on 28 & 29 April 2010. Marking 25 years of SAARC, Bhutan will hold the Chairmanship of the SAARC regional body till April 2011.

...from Susan Afzal

### Immortal

I, The immortal, wander through the night  
In some sad and lonely flight.  
I thirst for blood and  
crave to feel pain.  
My lights have fled and  
my spirit is dead.

I, The immortal, fear no heart  
but am afraid of the light.  
Though with desire to see just one sunrise,  
even if it burns me to ashes on sight.

I, The immortal, have such power  
but my immortality came with a price.  
As I have witnessed  
the death of those I loved  
for they were helpless and  
fell in the hands of time.

I, The immortal, now wander through the  
mist of time and space.  
In some dark and forsaken place.  
Cursed forever and  
my sins too deep.  
I grieve for mortal hearts  
as if I feel pain!

I, The immortal, shall be what I am.  
Till the end of time.....

### Fate

Life together seems like a struggle.  
Nothing but trouble.  
Thought we brought happy ending  
but it was just the beginning  
of a story never ending.  
Sacrifice is like a lame word,  
Misunderstanding keeps us apart  
from the precious things in life.  
Cannot break this bond  
for the sake of fate.  
So, we wait, as our love slowly fades.  
Until we part and find peace  
in our graves.

### Dark Hours

Every night, I am engulfed  
By a never-ending sea of darkness.  
All things in my room seem  
Motionless  
And the atmosphere adds much to my  
Restlessness.

Surrounded by a veil of what seems like  
Eternal darkness  
I venture into a deep mysterious world  
Where evil wins,  
Darkness prevails  
And shadow my sins.  
Devils torment my soul  
Till to Nothingness I sink.

Susan Afzal writes poetry and is a teacher.

## THE ALBERTA JOURNAL

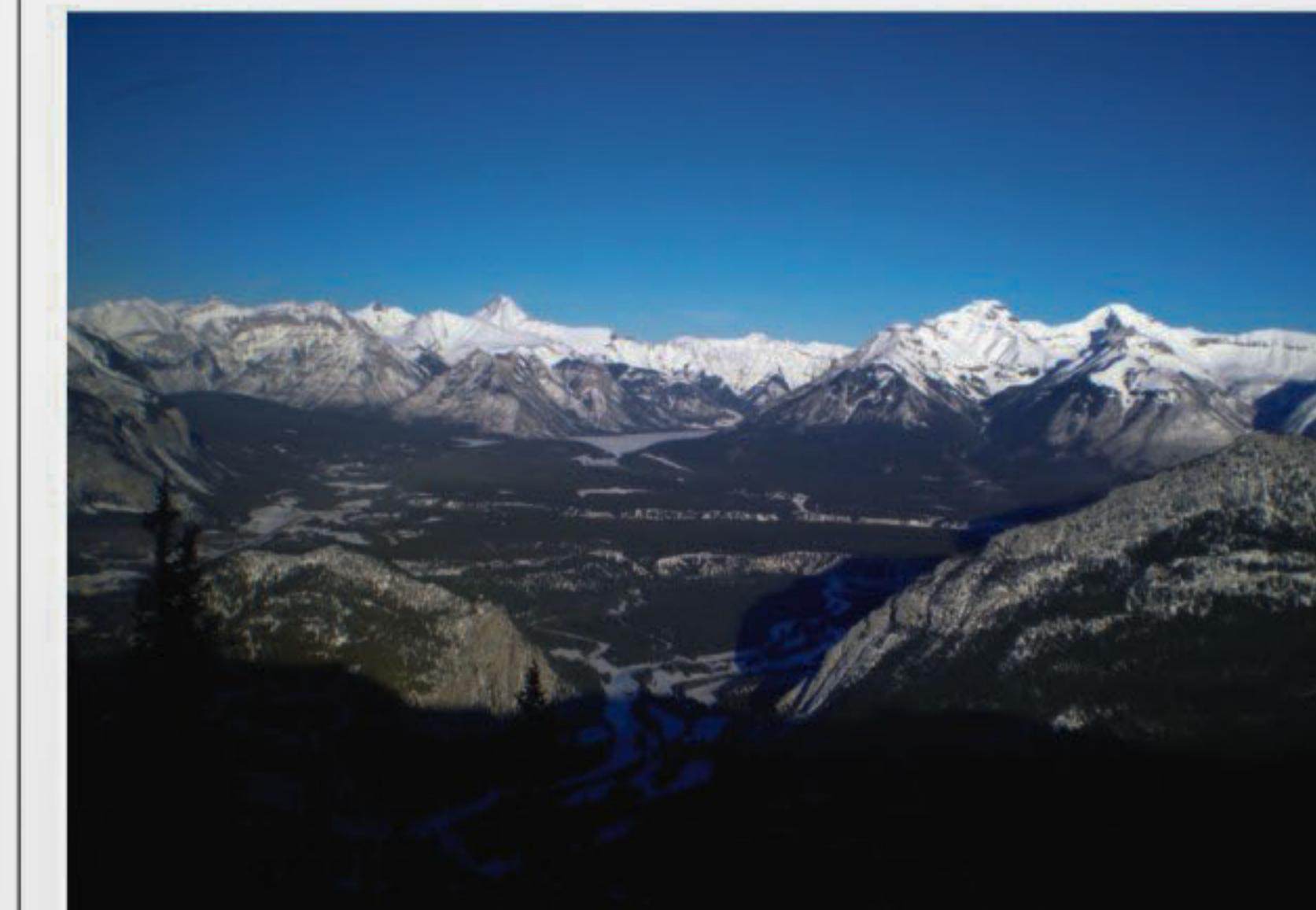
### Life in its patterns

SAYEEDA JAIGIRDAR

It was an arduous Albertan winter. The temperatures fell to -45 degree centigrade. Edmonton was the coldest place on the planet for a week or two. The winds moaned incessantly and snow drifts piled up high in front lawn. Nature appeared insensate. I ventured out for grocery essentials on one of those sub-zero days and thought I was in the midst of an Alistair Maclean's novel, namely "Ice Station Zebra". In times such as this, a human being asks one self... "Where am I? Where have I been? and... Where am I going?". Then one evening there were sparks in the dark night sky. I saw flashes of the aurora borealis that only manifests itself in the arctic zone. It was eerie-the skies lit up like a fireball and then the spirit of the great North appeared to speak: "Patience, my child...life unfolds in its own patterns, of which you are only a small part...Embrace the North and it will embrace you."

Alberta is one of Canada's western provinces. It is home to the famous Angus Beef and the Calgary stampede. This is the wild, Wild West at its very unsurpassed. Alberta is also rich in oil and coal and has an abundance of natural resources unknown to the other Canadian provinces. Edmonton is the capital city of this province and it is here and in my forays into its surrounding cities and towns that I am learning the ways of the great North.

Acceptance is one of the ways. In myriad ways, I have learned that resistance is basically futile when you hurl yourself against the harsh elements. "Give in" whispers the great North "...and you will be taken care of". The Native Indian aboriginal people who live here are generous with the stories of the true North. A junior colleague at work (of native origin) relates to me tales of moose hunting and deep winter fishing. A dark mist hides her face when she talks of death on frozen ponds and lakes that give away and engulf the intruder on the icy surface. "But that is nature...it takes away life and gives it back to the earth in some other form".



The Native people are wise...they retain their perspective of life through folklore and tales.

This wisdom is a far cry from the cosmopolitan, frivolous Toronto that I have left behind. This astuteness is deep rooted in this fertile earth reminiscent of the indigenous tribes that settled here centuries ago from Asia and brought with them the worship of the earth and the desire to preserve it. Here I am also learning minimalism and affection for the wilderness around me.

The Canadian Rockies are wild, untamed and startlingly exquisite in their simplicity. On a trip to the mountain town of Banff in December, I discovered the sheer majesty and the enigma of the Rocky Mountains. The Rockies are a magical geological juggernaut. They were the bottom of the sea when upvalleys in the earth's core over hundreds of years twisted and shaped them into mountains. Now the reverse is happening: wind and water erosion is eroding them away. From a geologist's perspective they are diminishing, even though the vanishing act will take millions of years.

One silvery dawn in Banff, I ventured outdoors when it was still dark. I wanted to see the sun rise over the Rockies. Many moons ago, my father and I had gone to Darjeeling and were awakened early by a group of other tourists who were scrambling outdoors before sunrise to see the Kanchenjunga at dawn. At that time, I was a teenager and thought that they were gibbering lunatics to rise at dawn. Now as an adult, I was obdurate to see the sun ascend over the Rockies.

It was glacial that morning. A tinkle of laughter came from me, partly in cold and partly in anticipation. There was a faint rustle in the bushes as we waited. A bear or an antler, perhaps I thought. I had seen the footprints of the coyotes around. Could they have belonged to some hungry Grizzly bear? I shivered slightly inside the car and bundled up tighter. The mountains were pristine, poised for glory and there appeared a faint glow in the horizon. I emerged from the car and sat on the hood to get a better view. We waited.

The sun crept slowly over the tops of the mountains, embracing its curves and emerging with the force of its mirthful strength. Awe swept through me. Now I understood how life can stand still for one second and yet rip through centuries. These mountains in all their might and glory were at one time at the bottom of sea and were now towering over me. "Could these mountains become the seabed once again?" I wondered to myself. The mountain air blew around and softly whispered into my ear... "Nothing remains the same...only change is constant, my child". I went back to the hotel that morning after a hot pancake breakfast at MacDonald's, a little more tranquil and filled with the pure knowledge of the mountains. This was beginning to feel like home.

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### MUSINGS

## We are all Will, all Shakespeare

MD. SHAFIQUL ISLAM

William Shakespeare is everywhere and our debt to him is unlimited. If we type his name in on any search engine, we will find him on thousands of Websites. His image, his characters, and quotes from his works can be found in countless movies, on television shows, in literary works, and in advertisements. Even on an auction site, we will find thousands of Shakespeare-related items: books, films, T-shirts, bottle openers, coffee mugs, ties, caps, coat pins, buttons, chocolates, toffees and much more. But Shakespeare has given us much more than these trinkets. It has been commonly said that a new book about Shakespeare is published somewhere in the world everyday, and millions of people go to theatres around the world to see his plays performed. He has given us wonderful tales peopled with remarkable characters who are windows into our own souls. There are characters, such as Othello, who force us to realize that within each one of us the better angel of our nature is always struggling for dominance with a subtle dark angel. Shakespeare has given us language of unsurpassed beauty as well. After all, his language is a window through which others may peer into our souls. As we listen to the moving speeches of Juliet, Hamlet and Falstaff, we can also see into their hearts' core. Shakespeare's mastery of the language is demonstrated by the many expressions which have crept into our modern speech. His language has become our language, and in his book *The Story of English*, Bernard Levin illustrates this quite adeptly: "If you cannot understand my argument, and declare 'It's Greek to me', you are quoting Shakespeare; if you claim to be more sinned against than sinning, you are quoting Shakespeare; if you recall your salad days, you are quoting Shakespeare; if you act more in sorrow than in anger, if your wish is father to the thought, if your lost property has vanished into thin air, you are quoting Shakespeare; if you have refused to budge an inch or suffered from green-eyed jealousy, if you have played fast and loose, if you have been tongue-tied, a tower of strength, hoodwinked or in a pickle, if you have knitted your brows, made a virtue of necessity, insisted on fair play, slept not one wink, you are quoting Shakespeare." Bernard Levin continues, "If you stood on ceremony, danced attendance (on your lord and master), laughed yourself into stitches, had short shrift, cold comfort too much of a good thing, if you have seen better days or lived in a fool's paradise...why, be that as it may, the more fool you, for it is a



Roddenbury and the other series creators, and actors of the many Star Trek series have displayed a love for Shakespeare by using quotes from his works as titles and in the various episodes.

As a fan of Shakespeare I continually see the profound impact that Shakespeare has on his students and modern audiences. Shakespeare offers us the chance to see ourselves in him. As Anthony Burgess said, "To see his face we need only look in the mirror. He is ourselves, ordinary suffering humanity, fired by moderate ambitions, concerned with money, the victim of desire, all too mortal...We are all Will."

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