

Lucie Dubert

BAHINI

A three-year quest for a
meaningful life



BENEFITS

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For those still hesitating ...



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PREFACE

Action... Commitment... Impact... Challenging words to which it is sometimes hard to give real meaning. What makes a person choose one path instead of another? It is probably safe to say that people who choose to join an organization such as Life Project 4 Youth all have one thing in common: they have all, at some point in their lives, asked themselves the question “Why?”

Life Project 4 Youth (LP4Y) is an international movement whose goal is the social and professional inclusion of young adults from extreme poverty. For the past twelve years, the organization, its volunteers in the field and elsewhere, partners and the Youth have been working to create a connection between two separate “worlds” that we often believe cannot be linked: the world of exclusion (shantytowns, poverty); and the world of opportunity, of “decent” work, of employment.

When you join LP4Y as a full-time volunteer, you make a conscious decision to be curious and open-minded, and you make yourself vulnerable. Ahead of you lies a distant country, unforeseen events, the complexities of a new culture, a difficult

climate, spectacular light, new ways of working, different incentives, and, most importantly, encounters, a lot of different encounters... When, still in your twenties, and with a decent degree, you head off to the opposite side of the world to live in a slum, some might consider that brave, whereas some might consider it completely crazy. In fact, it's a decision that, to someone like Lucie, someone with a deep desire to live and to live happily, is both obvious and rational. This thirst for life is also what guides the Youth who join LP4Y programs; it is the fuel that gives them the strength to fight ten times harder than others to build the life they have chosen.

Lucie, who studied hotel management in Switzerland, was 25 when she decided to leave her job and join LP4Y. In the story that follows, she looks back on the three years she spent in Bangalore and Kathmandu, learning every day from the young women she coached. With humor and lucidity, Lucie tells us about her journey and how it changed her understanding of the world. She developed a powerful sense of wonder, not easily and not without hurdles, but through conscious hard work, a sense of wonder that deepened through contact with others and through the relationships she developed. We can all learn to watch, listen, and think, and doing so doesn't only bring joy, it also makes us smarter!

Rachel Cisinski
Volunteer in India and Lebanon, 2019 - 2021

*“Joy [...] is much bigger than happiness.
While happiness is often seen as being dependent on external circumstances,
joy is not.”*

Desmond Tutu

This book is based on real events. Some names have been changed to protect people's identities.



INTRODUCTION

I'm walking in a street that I know so well. The ambient din is a background to my thoughts. I walk past the bus stop. As always, the driver shouts out the destination of his journey to passers-by: "Ratna Park... Ratna Park... Ratna Park", but his voice is lost in the noise of the cars. In any case, my attention is elsewhere.

It's Tuesday, August 11, 2020. For the past three years I have been on mission in India and Nepal as a volunteer for the international movement Life Project 4 Youth (LP4Y). With one contract leading to the next, I can never quite bring myself to go home. As soon as I left home, and before even setting foot in India, I was already anticipating all the difficulties and differences that I would have to face when I went back home. And so, thirteen months of coaching in Bangalore turned into a year and a half; then, on a sort of roll, I accepted the offer of a post in Nepal. This life which, previously, seemed exotic and unknown, has become my day-to-day existence, my home, my new comfort zone. So how can I be sure that going home is not a mistake? But finally, after three years, still full of doubts, questions and, what's more, at a difficult time globally, I have decided to book a flight

back to France. It leaves in three days. My nostalgia turns to melodrama: “My last meal... my last run... my last weekend...” In short, I’m not very good company for my roommates to whom I complain all day long. So, I decide to go get some fresh air and do a final bit of shopping. There’s no way I’m going to leave without some essential little treasures. For me, it’s going to be an Indian tea set complete with little tea glasses and a teapot with a metal stand. It is standard kit for any chaiwala¹. Chaiwalas operate in trains, on station platforms and in the streets, signaling their presence to passers-by with the instantly recognizable cry of, “Chaaaaaaaaaaai”. Ever optimistic about the capacity of my suitcases, I have decided that this is the souvenir that I want to bring home. I start with the glass merchant who sells me six glasses. So far so good. I then drift from one shop to another in search of a teapot and the metal stand. Not easy to find when you don’t know the precise term in Nepali; but I remain undaunted. With three years as an LP4Y volunteer under my belt, I have become the queen of mimes, grimaces and sundry gestures which, in addition to entertaining my audience, generally get me understood. After several unsuccessful attempts, I arrive at a small shed where I once again launch into my theatrical imitation of a chaiwala with two surprised Nepali as my audience. No luck this time. They call the owner who speaks a little English. Hurray! He understands! I place an order and save his number to my phone under the name Iron Man². Very kindly, and probably somewhat intrigued by this foreigner who thinks she’s a chaiwalette, he accompanies me to the teapot shop to make sure I’m making the right choice. But when I go to take out my purse, catastrophe! It’s not in my bag or with my things, anywhere. Panic seizes me, because my purse

1 Street vendor selling tea

2 Marvel comic hero

also contains... my passport. Three days before departure, in the midst of the COVID crisis, I am in Kathmandu... without a passport! I leave everything - Iron Man, the teapots - and I run. From one store to another, I ask the sellers, "Have you seen my purse? Please please check! Paisa³, passport, topi⁴ purse please check".

As my frustration mounts, my heart starts racing and I can no longer control my breathing - nor hold back my tears. In the space of a few minutes, I have gone from being a civilized human being to a sniffing maniac, seeking compassion in the eyes of everyone I pass. I tell myself out loud, over and over, that this is not happening, that I will find it, that this is not how I'm going to end my mission, stuck in Nepal. I finally arrive at the glass merchant's, where I last got my purse out. But when I enter, the hoped-for expression in his eyes, the Ah-there-you-are-look-what-I-found look is missing. No: no passport; no hope; no nothing.

So now what? What should I do? Ask the police to make an announcement over the neighborhood loudspeakers? Call the embassy? I can't think of any effective solution. I go back up the street, looking in every corner, every nook. I can't believe someone's stolen my purse. I've spent three years living cheek by jowl with young people in shanty towns, fighting prejudices and reviewing my own. I've spent so much time preaching the safety of Nepal and India, admiring people's honesty and now, like a slap in the face, I get robbed? I can't believe it! But I just have to accept it ...

I sit on the sidewalk, my head in my hands, hopeless. Tears rolling down my face, and I'm just starting to question my principles when my phone rings. I don't recognize the number, so I'm careful not to get too excited. It could be anyone - a

³ Money

⁴ Purse made from repurposed Nepali topi hat

partner, one of the Youth... Part of me is praying for a miracle - the other part is reasoning with myself. What is the probability that this call, coming just as I am beginning to lose all hope, is what will get me out of this terrible situation?

— Lucie Ma'am? I have your purse.

I'm shaking. I cannot believe it. It seems too perfect to be true. Cautiously, I ask:

— Are you sure ma'am? Can you check inside? Is there my passport inside?

— Yes, yes ma'am, passport is there. Where we meet?

I immediately suggest meeting her in front of the nearest supermarket. Yet mysteriously she replies

— Come to Boudhanath!

Now, I'm completely confused!

At this point my story takes a singular, almost mystical turn. The Green Village (GV) in Kathmandu, where I have been carrying out my mission since September 2019, is in the north of the city in a district called Budhanilkantha. Largely residential, and closer to the hills surrounding the valley, it's a place where people come to run, to recharge their batteries. It is a quiet area devoid of enchanting alleys and century-old temples. In Kathmandu, where the streets typically vibrate with the chanting of monks, Boudhanath is the district with a thousand perfumes. At the foot of the great Stupa, one of the most famous Buddhist sanctuaries, is a labyrinth of strange stalls selling charms, incense, fabrics and Tibetan flags. Despite the milling crowds, it is a quiet, peaceful place, as if, when they pass through the large gate at the entrance, everyone knows that here things are done quietly, that the magic of the place only works in silence and tranquility. Tourists and monks, circling tirelessly, come here to spin the prayer rolls... But to me, in my current situation, it is above all a district which lies 40 minutes from Budhanilkantha,

where I am at the moment! I'm already worried about my purse, but I become downright suspicious when the caller suggests we meet in Boudhanath. What's my purse doing there? Seeing my concern, Iron Man, whom I've met again on the road, takes the phone from my hands, chats in Nepali for five minutes, before saying, without batting an eyelid: "Come on my bike, I bring you to Boudhanath."

Clinging on the back of his motorcycle, I cross this city which holds so many extraordinary moments for me. Just five minutes ago, I was convinced that I was not going to be able to go home and see my family as planned. When I thought I was stuck in Kathmandu, my only thoughts were about leaving. And now that a solution is in sight, now that I can see an end to this ordeal, my perspective changes and I watch the city pass by with sadness and regret. As we approach Boudhanath, I wonder about the meaning of this latest incident. What is the message, what lesson should I take away?

We finally arrive. Two smiling old ladies wave at us, but there is no sign of my purse. Several scenarios then run through my head. Do they actually have my purse? Why didn't they bring it to the rendezvous point? Will they ask me for money in exchange? Is this a scam?

We get off the bike and the old ladies, still smiling, ask us to follow them. Chatting as we go, they tell me that they are originally Indian, and have been living in Kathmandu since childhood. We soon leave the maze of small streets, taking shortcuts that lead us to... a slum. There, on a vacant lot, we see a few corrugated iron houses stuck to one another, and an entire family, awaiting me with smiles, inviting me into their house. The women generously immediately set about preparing the chai. And finally, laughing, they bring me my purse, saying: "Check that everything is there,

ok?” in a way typical of Indian women that manages to be kind and authoritarian at the same time. I open it up, and everything is there, my passport, my credit card, my cash, everything.

Then Sweetie tells me that her 12-year-old son, Hashish, was at Budhanilkantha selling masks in the street, when he saw my purse on the ground. Seeing that it contained 3,000 rupees (€25, or the value of 300 of his masks), he called his mother to ask what he should do. Should he keep the money? His mother told him to come home immediately to try to find a phone number. She then hands me my LP4Y business card: “This is where I found your number”.

She then tells me that the lockdown has been extremely difficult for her and her community, that there is no more work, no more money and that the local NGOs do not help them because no one in her community has a Nepali identity card. They therefore do not have access to food aid. I listen to her carefully, all the while trying to think of LP4Y partners in Nepal who could help them. Then I tell her that young women aged 17 and 24 are eligible to join the Green Village, or the Life Project Center (LP4Y training centers), that we will come back to the neighborhood to recruit, and that we will do our best to put her in touch with people and associations that can help.

As I sit there on the family’s only bed, surrounded by children and the two women, I understand the meaning of this crazy adventure - this miracle. I needed to experience one final such encounter. Highlights of my mission flash before my eyes: the moments spent with the Youth and their families; the recruitment and information sessions in the communities, the misunderstandings and the burst of laughter. I now have the supreme privilege of being invited to enter this home, sitting and sharing this final perfect moment of simplicity.

After three years as a volunteer, here I am, sharing tea with

a humble Indian family in Nepal, talking about LP4Y. My fears of returning home fade, and I simply feel an immense gratitude. How lucky I have been to experience such things! These encounters, these moments and images will remain forever etched in my memory. This final adventure is the most beautiful parting gift; the best possible souvenir to bring home.

The Book of Joy details the exchanges between the Dalai Lama and the Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu over five days in 2015. With American journalist, Douglas Abrams, they consider all the obstacles to Joy before revealing the Eight Pillars of Joy; eight keys to living fully and in serenity: Perspective, Acceptance, Humility, Humor, Forgiveness, Compassion, Generosity, Gratitude. My experience as a volunteer offered me the opportunity to get closer to these pillars and explore their nuances. My book brings together anecdotes and reflections on the powerful role of volunteering and cross-cultural experience in understanding the Pillars of Joy.