

2002

# A Taste Shared: Reflecting John Hitchcock and the Good in Fieldwork

Tom Fricke  
*University of Michigan*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya>

## Recommended Citation

Fricke, Tom (2002) "A Taste Shared: Reflecting John Hitchcock and the Good in Fieldwork," *Himalaya, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies*: Vol. 22: No. 1, Article 4.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol22/iss1/4>

This Research Article is brought to you for free and open access by the DigitalCommons@Macalester College at DigitalCommons@Macalester College. It has been accepted for inclusion in Himalaya, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Macalester College. For more information, please contact [scholarpub@macalester.edu](mailto:scholarpub@macalester.edu).

# *A Taste Shared: Reflecting John Hitchcock and the Good in Fieldwork<sup>1</sup>*

Tom Fricke  
University of Michigan

*What is this I am doing? . . . What do I say I am doing? Many of my countrymen have heard of your country; many served with you in the war and admired you. But few know anything about you really. I have come to learn so that I can tell them. . . . Your children will know nothing [without a history] about their forefathers and how they lived. The answers: Why should your countrymen or our children want to know how we live? Our children should be glad to forget it. . . . They are very clear why I am here. To earn money. . . . though they may add, to cover any conceivable insufficiency, that it must also be for "name." How not admit this?*

John Hitchcock  
*Fieldwork in Gurkha Country<sup>2</sup>*

*Those questions do not, of course, go unnoticed by those of us to whom they are posed. Questions of fact are easy; we reply with the knowledge we have acquired. Questions that have moral implications are harder to hear, are not so easy to answer, and, for many of us, persist long after they have been asked—indeed, become our questions, posed to ourselves.*

Robert Coles  
*Doing Documentary Work<sup>3</sup>*

The best questions are those that are never completely answered. We hold them, like broken pieces of quartz, to the sun and twist them one way and another. The time of day, the season, and the angle of our holding all work together to reveal some new detail, some new possibility.

---

<sup>1</sup> Many thanks to Al Pach for comments and memories leading up to this version of the paper. Thanks also to members of my Fall 2001 University of Michigan seminar on ethnographic fieldwork.

<sup>2</sup> Originally, Hitchcock 1970. Reprinted without the crucial opening paragraphs in Hitchcock 1980: 111-137.

<sup>3</sup> Coles (1997: 51).

Compare those to the other questions. There are those that lay their answers down in front of you, only waiting for time to focus your eyes. These stay around a while. We often come on both the question and its answer days, months, or years after the first intuitive asking. And there are also the questions of fact. These easily answered ones are the most forgettable, the ones that barely recur because the act of answering seals them forever. All three sets animate our work as anthropologists and our lives as people. It's the paradox of our discipline, concerned with the human condition and all it implies, that we often use these last as the measure of how well we do with the others.

Social scientists are notoriously skittish about the best questions. We settle on fact, even when we count it as slippery. We settle on how to get it, even though the how is related to the why. We keep a ledger that separates science from art, even though art lends the emotive power that allows science. The authors of a book (King et al 1994) I sometimes use in my graduate seminars insist that qualitative and quantitative studies are underlain by a common logic. These authors think of themselves as mediators, calming the roiled waters of a long argument. But even as they make the claim, they exclude the questions that they call "philosophical." These are precisely those questions that every fieldworker must ask: those that turn on the researcher herself, those that follow from the "What is this I am doing?" that find their way into field journals.

We all have them. Whether in reflective scribbles that break our field accounts of everyday life or in the quiet moments of exhaustion when the talking around us fades into background, the primary questions come to us. These are the ones about selfhood and purpose and who we are. The ones that get elided in the methodological focus on how to do it. I look at my own twenty-year-old field journals and am surprised to find how my own mood and feelings tracked pathways cut before me, how my own words echoed John Hitchcock's from another twenty years earlier:

I am frustrated. I crouch on the porch, the pleasant steam of my coffee rising in the evening sun. I look north to the mountains, to the Ganesh Himal, to the

snowfields, the monsoon-fed green of the lower slopes. I listen to the constant sound of falling water—this valley of waterfalls—and unformed sentiments, thoughts, move inside of me, ready for articulation, waiting to be carved into some *mane* wall for others. They leave me with my coffee's breath—gone into the mountain air. And I'm left like a mute, with only feeling and the fleeing notion that I have something to say but lack the skill to say it. I want to say things about freedom and choice—these grand sentiments that come to me as I hunker on the terrace overlooking the village. I think often of why I'm here and what I can make of it. Too much self-absorption! (*Timling Journals*, 21 July 1981)<sup>4</sup>

And I see that my uncertainties then about the legitimacy of these thoughts and feelings resulted in a sudden cut to the apparent work at hand: Too much self-absorption!

It's easy to see why these questions are avoided in social science. Our disciplines seek the steadying answers that allow us to move on. Questions about what we are doing and why we are doing it too quickly slide into philosophy and, worse from the point of view of these skittish scientists, to questions of the moral and the good. Easier to keep to questions of method. And even our tenuous forays into the ethics of field research too quickly turn on a list of behaviors. We emphasize what we ought to do rather than reflect on what we should be.

There is pleasurable irony here. After all, every serious anthropological consideration of culture insists that no behavior can achieve coherence, and no analyst can understand that coherence, absent such pivotal understandings as what it means in a given setting to be a person, to act in terms of some notion of good, or to be a part of a narrative sequence of other meaningful behaviors. Appeals to these truths happily cross into philosophy.<sup>5</sup> More rarely do they turn their analysis to social scientists as people.

### Storied lives

*Man is in his actions and practices, as well as in his fictions, essentially a story-telling animal. He is not essentially, but becomes through his history, a teller of stories that aspire to truth. But the key question for men is not about their own authorship; I can only answer the question "What am I to do?" if I can answer the prior question, "of what stories do I find myself a part?"* (MacIntyre 1981:216)<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> In the remainder of this paper I will cite my own journals as either *Timling* or *Maikot Journals*. Quotes from letters will be indicated by the initials of the sender, JTH for John Hitchcock and TEF for my own letters. Quotes from John's "Fieldwork in Gurkha Country" will be identified by "Fieldwork" followed by a page number from the 1970 publication.

<sup>5</sup> Frequently cited works here include Charles Taylor (1985, 1989)

More than many, John Hitchcock's life and work forces us back to the best questions. Soon after he retired from active teaching at the University of Wisconsin in 1982, Al Pach and I wrote a short retrospective of John's contributions to Himalayan anthropology (1984). I followed up with a discussion of his place in cultural ecological studies in another publication (1989). These necessary accounts have the quality of fact. They detail the fit of John's research within the community and nail down how we build on it in our contemporary work. But by themselves they focus on the man's doing rather than his being. In doing so, they cheat us of the lessons we can learn.

Moral philosophers have a way of talking about the person that opens us to these lessons. Their phrase is the narrative unity of a life. Anthropologists have picked up the notion, too. We organize our lives through story. Our meanings lie there waiting to be heard. Of course, there are different kinds of stories. Some are barely stories at all, mere summaries or vignettes that imply something more. These are the ones that tell a community how to appreciate their honored ones. They are often fragments used to capture the smaller lessons that, strung together, approach a whole. Poorly done, they run dangerously toward sentimentality. Well and more complexly done, they gather like trickster tales or the story cycles of desert saints.

Similar to these are the personal tales, still told by others, that begin the binding of lives one to another. No longer communal, they are the work of singular memory and the beginning of lessons for the memorist. Lying at the intersections of lives, these stories take their flight from intimacy and personal knowledge. They hold mysteries known best to the teller.

More beautiful still are those stories we tell ourselves about ourselves. These are our answers, always moving and growing, to our questions of who we are, of being rather than doing. We judge them by how well they cant toward truth, an angled approach that is always changing to account for growth. These stories tell us about character, "the necessary condition for us to be able to 'step back' from our engagements," as Stanley Hauerwas describes it (1981: 271), to step back, reflect, and move on. These are stories of hopefulness, making sense of disappointment, giving meaning to and renewing the struggle.<sup>7</sup>

All of these are required if we are to learn from John and to share his meanings by weaving them into the fabric of our own. I tell some of them here with no misapprehension

<sup>6</sup> For more on the narrative unity of lives, also see Johnson (1993) and Hauerwas (2001).

<sup>7</sup> "[T]he question 'What should I be?' demands we live hopeful lives, as it holds out the possibility that we are never 'captured' by our history, because a truer account of our self, that is, a truer narrative, can provide the means to grow so that we are not determined by past descriptions of 'situations.' Our freedom comes not in choice but through interpretation" (Hauerwas 1981: 271).

that I have a privileged view. I knew John less well than some and better than others. That I knew him at all is warrant enough to join with others, even John himself through his writing, in the construction and partaking of his life.

### **Communal stories: John as we knew him**

*Every village's portrait of itself is constructed, however, not out of stone, but out of words, spoken and remembered: out of opinions, stories, eye-witness reports, legends, comments and hearsay. And it is a communal portrait; work on it never stops* (Berger 1979: 9).

Understanding the meaning of a life involves a kind of fieldwork. With the communal stories we move into the setting. Prior reports, ethnographies already digested and analyzed, and those first general contours we encounter ground our subsequent field experience. In that spirit, I begin with these shared tales about John.

Sue Estroff, one of John's students who works outside of Nepal, asked Al Pach to include two sentences in his *Anthropology Newsletter* obituary (2001): "John loved life with ferocity. He was an avid sailor and athlete whose stamina and competitiveness were legend even in his later years." John had a way of transferring that ferocity to his expectations of others.

We know that John changed lives with small nudges. Father Casper Miller, S.J. told me that it was John who convinced him back in 1960 that if he was going to live meaningfully in Nepal he was going to have to understand Nepali culture. Cap went on to study anthropology at Tribhuvan University and at Oxford University and received his Ph.D. in Nepal. Al Pach told me that he met John in 1973 after his guest lecture at Ripon College. Al joined him for wine and cheese and again for lunch. Soon enough he signed up for the Wisconsin program in Nepal. Later, he began his graduate studies in anthropology.

And John did it to me, too. When I came to Wisconsin for graduate work in cultural ecology, my plans were to do fieldwork with Cree speakers around Hudson's Bay. Two weeks into my first semester, John asked me, "Why Hudson's Bay?" I didn't think I could tell him the real reasons, which had to do with loving cold weather, craving the North Country sky, and owning a vague desire to hunt and trap. So I jumped up a theoretical reason right out of Julian Steward, something about marginal environments and cultural cores, not knowing that I had tripped into some of the very motivations for John's own early fieldwork in Nepal. By that afternoon, and almost without realizing it, I found my schedule rearranged to include classes in spoken Nepali and Sanskrit.

It's only in the looking back that I realize how John didn't stop there, one on one. He also saw himself as the center of a community and he kept that community alive. Wisconsin Anthropology in the late 1970s was not especially friendly.

Apart from the anxieties shared by all graduate students, we found our faculty particularly aloof. Arnie Strickon terrified us in the first core theory seminar in the Fall 1977 by declaring in his introduction to the class that half of us wouldn't be there in two more years. We looked right and left and wondered who would be the first to go.<sup>8</sup> After I joined the Nepal Studies Program, there were four of us working with John: Maureen Durkin, Linda Iltes, Al Pach, and me. We forged our own kind of group but John widened that community by bringing students returning from Nepal into classes as guest lecturers. Andy Manzardo and Gus Molnar, working on their dissertations, met us at the campus bars. John extended our community even further by including his other students: Sue Estroff working on her post-doctoral fellowship in psychiatry and Harry Sanabria working toward his fieldwork in Columbia. We felt a continuity and a hopefulness that the others seemed to lack and they confessed their envy to us.

It's in John's letters that I see how far this went. Throughout our correspondence every letter from John included news of the others:

I'm sure you've been in touch with Al. . . . He's done a magnificent job as program monitor, a task I hope he will soon be able to give up so that he can begin his own research. The decision on a replacement is difficult. . . . Maureen and Jack were here recently for a couple of weeks. Maureen will be writing in New York. . . . Harry Sanabria passed his prelim recently and is working on... (JTH, 29 November 1981).

Maureen has successfully defended and except for the formalities at the end of the summer semester has her doctorate and will begin with a Columbia program for three years . . . I think her thesis is publishable without much amendment. . . . Al has found a very sympathetic Nepali psychiatrist to work with him, though from his perspective, in a village in the near vicinity of Kathmandu. The interplay between the two will provide a very interesting complement to what Al is doing . . . (JTH, 5 July 1982).

The community for some of us grew to include Nepal where being John's student always opened doors. Ted Wooster, long gone from anthropology and living as a carpet merchant at the edge of Boudhdha, invited us to his bohemian parties. Bob Cardinalli, working for various development interests, offered his spare room in a

---

<sup>8</sup> Herb Lewis, a fellow professor and close friend of Arnie's, was horrified to hear this during my conference presentation. He was afraid people would get the wrong impression of Arnie. For the record, Arnie's gruff exterior masked a warmth and concern that all of us appreciated. He became my official dissertation chair when John's retirement prevented him from completing that role.



crumbling Rana mansion in Patan when we were back from village fieldwork.

The stories included the whispered ones, too, the rumors and hard facts that connoted a sadness to our general frolic. We all knew of his son's death in Nepal and the later tragedy of a daughter's. And we shared and tried without success to solve the puzzling stories of manuscripts completed, pulled from publication, and shelved. Such puzzles left gaps in the communal portrait. There was an air of mystery, incompleteness, and something more to be known.

### **Personal Tales: John As I Knew Him**

I entered into John's story with my own questions and uncertainties. Looking back now at how he worked through his own disappointments, I begin to find answers. They were always there in front of me. It has taken a long curing in the smoke of experience to bring me to them. So, here, three vignettes to prepare the way for John.

I never knew what John saw in me, at the time. Raised on the Northern Plains, the product of a normal school become a college, I thought of Madison as more East Coast than Midwestern. Maybe it was my ponytail and my backpack. Or it might have been my size and my occasionally ducking away to the North Woods for hiking and winter camping. Or it could have been my prized Italian hiking boots that created his image of me. We shared a love of poetry, although his ran to Robert Frost and mine to Gary Snyder. He was sixty-one and I was twenty-two. When I looked at him, I saw everything I thought an anthropologist should be in his trim white beard, compact build, and crisp intellect. I remember his brisk walk in the humid days of early fall, his white shirt wet from an athlete's easy sweat, the worn leather of his briefcase bulging with handouts for the graduate seminar on Himalayan Anthropology. Of our first meeting not long after my parents forwarded the letter of acceptance to the graduate program to me (I had moved to Madison after applying, not certain why), I remember only that we seemed to have laughed constantly. I thought he was Han Shan at Cold Mountain. I was hooked.

For whatever reason, John assumed that I should love sailing as much as he did. Though North Dakotans are rarely socialized to the open water, I could at least swim. He and Kitty McClellan lived on the northeast side of Lake Mendota back then and he invited me out one Saturday for a pre-fieldwork lunch. John picked me up early so that we could sail before our meal. We walked out to the dock that ran into the inlet right off their back yard. The wind was up. More than up, really, since the warning flags were raised around the lake to keep people off the water.

"I don't know, Tom, it's a little windy but don't you think we can handle it? Why don't we give it a try?"

And so we were on the lake together for a quick round, John directing me to sit where my dead weight gave him best advantage. The wind had become a gale. It scooped and piled water all around us as we made our way, notice-

ably the only boat out there, into Lake Mendota. John seemed fired by special grace and I was caught up in his enthusiasm. In the full force of the wind and with my inexperience, the boat flipped over more than John was used to. He showed me how to help right it and we kept on. John's pure joy at all this infused me with the same happiness until the last capsizing when I leaned my weight too hard to right the boat and snapped the mast off at the base. I remember the two of us sitting in the boat together while the wind drove us toward Maple Bluff.

It looked to me like we would surely die. The waves surged and boiled into the bluffs and the wind drove us closer and closer. John was a little disappointed and ruminated on what may have caused the mast to snap so we wouldn't make the same mistake next time. I watched the bluffs. We drew closer. After a while, John and I sat quietly together, rising on white-topped breakers and sinking into deep troughs, watching our progress toward the bluffs. Finally, when it was obvious what was about to happen, John turned to me and said evenly into the spray:

"Well, Tom, when we get to the cliff don't worry about the boat. Just save yourself."

The story rightly ends there. We ended up being towed to shore by a rescue boat. (Even there, I remember John's reluctance to accept the offer of help.) Years later, John ended a letter to me with an echo from that day:

Later in the summer [Kitty and I] will be going for some sailing with Madison friends in the Puget Sound—with a dryer outcome I devoutly hope than happened to you and me! (JTH, 10 April 1986)

Based on my ecological interests and his image of me, John had decided that I was well-suited to continue his work with the Kham Magar. Gus Molnar had returned to Madison from one of the southern Kham-speaking villages and the two of them agreed that the northernmost Kham Magar village of Maikot, at the gateway to Dolpo, would be perfect for my interests. I spent that summer before leaving Madison learning some basic Kham grammar and vocabulary from Gus. After several visa delays because the region was politically sensitive I finally arrived in Kathmandu with a Fulbright grant at the end of January 1981.

My Maikot journals are painful to read. After 6 weeks there, often sick and nearly always depressed, I prepared my return to Kathmandu to resupply and pick up mail. My original plan was to return to the village, after this single break, and stay for at least nine months before getting back to Kathmandu. I left a tin box of clothing and books as earnest of my intended return, but when I walked out of Maikot after those first weeks I realized that my spirits were rising for the first time since I got there. I knew, a half hour onto the trail and standing on the ridge across from Maikot's own ridge, that I would never go back.<sup>9</sup>

I was sure that this meant I had failed, both because of

John's expectations and because of my own hopes. Well before leaving the village and recurrently in those brief journals, I turn to the topic:

Tomorrow I begin . . . The trick is to keep busy. One takes the first step in fieldwork with an absolute lack of certainty about how it will all turn out—you take the step anyway. Everything comes down to hope. I hope this works. . . . We never hear about the failures. And failure is my biggest fear, my way of letting everybody down . . . But I'm disoriented out here. The strangeness of life. Even people's smiles are somehow unnerving. *What* do they expect from me? Medicine. Cigarettes. Money. Whatever an American may have that they lack. How can I convince them that I have no key to salvation and still be their friend? (*Maikot Journals*, 3 April 1981)

I arrived in Kathmandu thinking that I was on my way back to Madison. Bob Cardinalli and Krishna Rimal—who was then working with Bob, had worked for John before, and who was to later work with Al Pach—convinced me to walk up another valley where the ecological conditions were similar to those in Maikot and where I might find another research site. More to humor them and to do something enjoyable after my experience with the Kham Magar, I trekked up the Ankhlu Khola, staying in Tamang villages along the way with no expectations. This was how I came to Timling, on the slopes of the Ganesh Himal and the last village complex at the head of the valley. And this is how I, unknown to me, started my education in the same lessons that John had learned years before.

Quickly returning to Kathmandu to resupply and set up for a first few months of research in Timling, I decided that I needed to get established in this new fieldsite before letting John know of my change in plans. I wanted to write to him with good news of a solid start rather than in the outwash of failure. I began work in Timling in an entirely different voice reflected in my journals. The hangover of Maikot was there, a quiet background bringing everything into relief:

Still, the Tamang impress me. . . . I appreciated our first night on the trail, reaching Deorali just as a sudden cloudburst broke over the mountainside. In the darkness, breached only by the dying embers of our fire, the rain rattling against the tin roof of a hotel and pouring off the eaves, the lamas sat in the corner and chanted sutras in a low, rhythmic murmur—a lonely sound reminding me of how far I am from home and the things most familiar to me. It was as though some

---

<sup>9</sup> I had to send two porters to retrieve my gear but some things never made it out. Years later, I heard that Charles Ramble, who I have never met, said to another anthropologist, "I saw Tom Fricke's shoes. He must have been in a hurry."

wall broke in my consciousness and I suddenly *felt* as well as knew that I am in Nepal. I felt a strange mix of melancholy and commitment, a purpose for being here. That night I dreamed of being home and finished with my work . . . Timling. Tamang. I'm in love with the prayerflags and the Buddhists. . . . Grey houses shrouded in monsoon fog and cloud, parting once or twice during the day to allow a quick glimpse of the whole village with its green fields of corn. (*Timling Journals*, 29 June 1981)

But John still didn't know from me that I had left Maikot. He found out from others and was deeply disappointed. I think he was embarrassed, too. I'll never know exactly how it went, but I figure he must have continued to give assurances that I was doing fine in my fieldwork whenever people in the department came up to ask. Eventually, somebody must have looked at him in confusion and said, "But Tom isn't in Maikot. He's gone elsewhere." The advisor is always the last to know. However he discovered the news, it upset John enough that he gave me an "unsatisfactory" on my fieldwork grade that summer.<sup>10</sup>

I didn't know that, of course. In Timling my days were full, fueled by a sense that time was short. With the accumulating flood of material I knew I would make my dissertation. My journal entries became buoyant as I realized I would not fail:

Actually—the truth—questions upon questions are hurtling themselves at me every new day in Timling. I am reaching (or have the feeling of reaching) some threshold where the research is suddenly productive. Has something to do with being here long enough to see how the land lays, I guess; I have visions of returning from Kathmandu as "the compleat researcher" armed with my typewriter, 1000 index cards and a filing system to record every scrap of info in the right place (all this paper is getting unwieldy). (*Timling Journals*, 2 August 1981)

My optimism gave even my questions a new kind of precision, a willingness to look head on at my wondering itself. I see in my journals how I had grown as a fieldworker, how those questions about self and being began to pivot on a relationship with the people I lived among. My Maikot journals are clotted by fear and isolation. In Timling, the same questions appear, but are now couched in fresh honesty:

---

<sup>10</sup> At Wisconsin in those days, we had to be continuously registered for credits, even when in the field. I have for years remembered the grade as an "F" and only discovered that it was a "U" when I looked back at correspondence from that year. An "F" makes the story better, but even if it was really a "U" my memory is a good indicator of how a student regarded letting John down as a kind of failure.

I am humbled by the sight of these people living their lives. Most questions I ask about why something is done are answered with "Tyesai,"—"like that, without thinking." Something like: I do this because it is done. Even with the big ritual events of *Barma* I got the same answer from the Gompo Lama. "Does this ritual mean anything?" "What meaning? We do this because of the grandfathers." So, I am humbled—not by any particular "wisdom". There's nothing self-consciously wise here. It's just humbling to be confronted with people acting out their lives firm in the faith that they have always been done this way and will continue to be. . . . How are we different? What is it that books and history and writing add to confuse this scene? Is that why I find it so difficult to enter into these minds, because I'm locked into a worldview dependent on explanation and causality? (*Timling Journals*, 19 August 1981)

My return to Kathmandu in September was a different kind of trek than the despondent retreat from Maikot just a few months before. I was ready to write to John to tell him of the change and my re-righting of the boat. I was ready to collect my mail of the past months and send the letters I had written. And in that collected mail was a letter from my wife telling me of the grade from John. So I sat to write the letter I had planned to send anyway. I mailed off the letters after a night drinking at Al Pach's place near Swayambhu and headed back to Timling, planning to return in December. And it wasn't until then that I was able to read John's reply:

Thank you for explaining so fully your difficulties in Maikot. It was sensible to recognize the psychological impasse you were encountering and to take the steps you did. You can appreciate why it was embarrassing for me not to know what had happened to you and where you planned to go next. I can understand very well your reaction to the Kham-speaking Magars. Your letter brought back vividly my initial month with them. Brought up anthropologically on Mead's recommendation—that our professional initiation should be by parachute drop onto an unknown island—I was determined to try for an entrée without official standing or support. I'll spare you the details but beginning with the first nights in a leaky shed under a cold January rain (no one would offer a porch) our initial two months were dismal, physically and psychologically; and with a couple of exceptions, I never did find I could warm up to them as I could to most of the Magarspeakers further south. The Kham-speakers reminded me in some ways of the Utes, and you probably have heard that a couple of weeks of them was all Lowie wanted.

I'm sure your experience among the Tamang will be happier, and that you can get the required data more easily and quickly. Given the time constraints, that's important. I hope you won't let worry over being unable to get absolutely everything you had planned on stop you from going ahead with the thesis. I can't help but be confident that what you do obtain will be adequate. (JTH, 29 November 1981)

This was the first time that I discovered anything about John from his own telling, but I was still too inexperienced, too much in the quick of my work, and too much the relieved Prodigal Son to understand the gift in this letter. I intuited that there was something else here, a revelation of sorts, fogged by my own incomprehension. It would take a while before I could place this into John's own story.

### A Narrative Unity: The Good in Fieldwork

*I am suggesting that descriptively the self is best understood as a narrative, and normatively we require a narrative that will provide the skills appropriate to the conflicting loyalties and roles we necessarily confront in our existence. The unity of the self is therefore more like the unity that is exhibited in a good novel—namely with many subplots and characters that we at times do not closely relate to the dramatic action of the novel. But ironically without such subplots we cannot achieve the kind of unity necessary to claim our actions as our own* (Hauerwas 1981: 144).

*In writing this book, I also have tried to convey a sense of the essence of fieldwork—that tension between sensuous reality, especially as expressed in the uniqueness of individuals and events, and those abstractions with which we try to capture it and give it order* (Hitchcock 1966: 2).

It's when John tells his own stories that the connections and the lessons begin to come clear, when all these other narratives and fragments get their context. In telling our own stories that connect us to John, we frame for ourselves a partial answer to the question posed by Alasdair MacIntyre, "Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?" Our own actions become more meaningful by claiming a place, at whatever remove, in that narrative.

But what of John's own story? Raised long before the confessional impulse became second nature, John rarely spoke about himself. When he opened one of his articles with a disclaimer against historical speculation, a person senses that he meant more than just speculation on the topic at hand. His own brief biographical account, written in response to a request, amounts to a bare scaffold for constructing a self, although it contains tantalizing hints as when he



mentions he was “attracted to Nepal because of the physical and intellectual challenges of fieldwork in that portion of the Himalayas” or when he writes that “four students have obtained doctorates in Nepal studies under my direction and by spring semester of next year the number will have increased to seven.”<sup>11</sup> But these are merely clues, small indicators of an athlete-scholar’s love of challenge and a sense of obligation for forming the next generation.

More clues. In writing our ethnographies, we write ourselves. Regardless of the presence or absence of a defining “I” our choices of place, of topic, and the occasional phrase conspire toward revelation. John’s own choices—his concern with powerful personalities, his feel for landscape, his insistent quest for an underlying order in the face of the one damned thing after another of life<sup>12</sup>—offer us a man both fascinated by and resistant to the powerful, yet on an often melancholy quest for his own meaning.

I pull my old copy of *The Magars of Banyan Hill* down from the shelf. It still smells of burning juniper and monsoonal must. I see my markings, the first careful underlinings with a ruler, the later checks and notes. And the phrase I always return to, John’s opening remark about the essence of fieldwork, its sensuality and the later order of abstraction. Clues to be sure, but not the narrative. Are these John’s conflicting loyalties? How to put them in motion?

John wrote “Fieldwork in Gurkha Country” in response to an invitation from George Spindler. Spindler asked his contributors to write personally and to convey something of the emotions of fieldwork. I had read John’s small masterpiece before going to the field, trying to find the little tricks that fieldworkers need to get their work done. Lacking a methods course at Wisconsin, our only hope for this kind of preparation was in the accounts of others. But “Fieldwork” was entirely puzzling to me then, hardly the kind of methodological discussion I thought I wanted. Long after this, I was both amused and, because of my own earlier incomprehension, embarrassed when I read another anthropologist’s comments on that essay. That she, too, could so miss its truth and power is a breathtaking example of our more general failures in the quest for a nuts and bolts methodology:

In order to get a feeling of the emotional impact and practical consequences of particular problems, frustrations, sources of elation, boredom, ethical conflicts and misunderstandings, prospective fieldworkers are perhaps better off reading more detailed accounts by a single author. Many of the summary accounts in ed-

<sup>11</sup> The disclaimer is in Hitchcock (1978: 111). The quotes are from an undated two-page typescript by John.

<sup>12</sup> Much to choose from here! See the wonderful “Surat Singh: Head Judge” (1960), an ecological essay (1977), or his essays in Hitchcock and Jones (1976).

ited volumes or in periodicals are too far from the immediacy of emotion, too predigested and analysed to convey a real sense of what it was like. The sections of a field journal which Hitchcock . . . includes in his piece are one notable exception and are far more informative than the dry and somewhat turgid prose he uses in his text (Goward 1984: 92).

Still, in spite of her narrow concern (paralleling my own) to strip-mine the “practical consequences” from John’s piece, this writer is struck by the journal excerpts. What she misses, and what I missed too, was the truth about “Fieldwork in Gurkha Country.”

We all know the story. Indeed, we share pieces of it through the bond of fieldwork, that common enterprise that weaves John’s meaning into ours. John went to Nepal with Pat and their family, hoping to explore an abstract problem of cultural ecology by way of an experiment. At one level, the narrative is a long chant of disappointment and loss. The knifecut loss of their young son. The unraveling of the tight package of theory pricked by field realities. A sense of time running out. He was dissuaded from research among the Gurung who he thought the better case for testing his ideas. His account of the search for an alternative among the Magar is a litany of rising hope and crushing disappointment. The “uneasy sense of being pushed by unfathomed forces” (Fieldwork, p 165), the very uneasiness that drew him to anthropology to begin with, could only have seemed further from resolution than ever.

John quested for reason and order, the “capturing” of reality in Banyan Hill and “the realm of reason” in “Fieldwork” (p. 167). Yet, his references are often to heroic figures of myth, not reason: to Beowulf, who he hopes not to be, to Theseus who he admires, to Don Quixote, when he is rueful in his own frustrations (“Fieldwork,” p. 167, p. 177). Here is a man who hoped to tame his own “flailing in a bloody sea,” his own description of Beowulf but how not to apply it to the onetime pacifist who flew anti-submarine bombers in the war?

In the end, and thankfully, reason is bested. Reason, for John, was always from outside. It was the “determinist, Durkheimian worldview” that “struck a responsive chord” (“Fieldwork,” p. 165) transformed into the later determinist elegance of Stewardian cultural ecology. Like any external guide, it runs the risk of becoming “a demon rider, driving me up and down and across the ‘mountain enclosure’ in fruitless search” (“Fieldwork,” p. 120). John’s story is one of interiorization and the reluctant, halting pilgrimage to a truer account of himself. Reason, the ball of twine that Theseus uses to best both Minotaur and maze, is not adequate to the task of answering these questions.

Those of us fixed on the easy questions, of fact and how to get it, will always risk misunderstanding. We’ll mistake the power of his words for the “dry and somewhat turgid



prose” that Nicola Goward sees in “Fieldwork.” It takes a willingness to hear in those words the echoes of our own experience, a recognition that John’s questions “have become *our* questions, posed to ourselves,” to see the meaning of this story. It takes work. It takes imagination.

[I]t was a matter of coming to terms with emotion, not the least of which was disenchantment with the enterprise, including discovery, reasoned discourse, plausible method, the whole ball of twine. What was left? Why go on? This was the question and in answering, I found myself finally in a realm beyond or prior to reason, a realm best expressed in story or symbol. (“Fieldwork,” p. 167)

Whether intended or not, the invitation is clear. We are to read this essay as story, the elements as symbol. There is no other way to its meaning.

Our self-told stories are a lifetime’s work, of course, and we have no way of knowing how John revised his in the thirty years after “Fieldwork” was published.<sup>13</sup> It’s up to us now to make our own revisions and to carry off our own lessons. It’s up to us to see this essay as a grey cairn heading the pass. “Fieldwork” is, at its heart, the tale of a quest for self-understanding, a wisdom tale no different in form from those powerful myths told by people everywhere. John recognized as much in his allusions to Theseus and Beowulf. As with all stories we tell ourselves, the author is the hero. He goes to a foreign place, strangely alluring, thinking that he knows what he needs to find and suffers the rending of every certainty. We see John sinking, from the swift, slicing loss of his son Ben to the tattering fabric of his research design, and flailing. Every encounter bears a testing edge: two headmen aloof to his need for data, the glancing blows of other deaths that remind him of his own son’s. It seems that finally, everything is ruin: “the river all day and every night was telling of the rush of everything to waste” (“Fieldwork,” p. 184). John’s downward movement ends in an angle of repose compounded of blame and self-loathing.

[I]t is exploitation compounded. Compounded by pressure. I work too fast to move innocuously in and out of a community, letting friendships grow as they will. Persons become means . . . It is compounded by an attitude I would not quail at if it were not made respectable by being called ‘getting rapport’ . . . I may make my bit, the publisher his, the university its, but in the end, and on and on. (“Fieldwork,” p. 184)

<sup>13</sup> We know that he cut the opening paragraphs and journal excerpts in its 1980 reprinting. Interested readers should also see Pat Hitchcock’s own account of Ben’s death and its aftermath (1987).

But then something happens. And this is a part of the story, too. John’s understanding requires resolution.

In concluding now, should I move beyond this nadir winter? . . . This was a time of waste once again and to spare; and if it was for me to find something other than self-pity and total indictment, I had not cared to take the responsibility. That there were a few things unsought that found me out gives them meaning beyond anything they otherwise could have (“Fieldwork,” p. 185).

The three things that bring John back are these. One, the sight of “Narpati, happily tipsy” dancing alone in the muddy rain and snow to a wedding band. Another, a man sleeping with his sick grandson next to his warming skin “and throughout the many nights getting up to hold the boy, retching and squirting with diarrhea over the manure pile.” And last, the long, exquisitely detailed story of another death and burial—a woman’s diamond courage when necessity overshadows desire. A wedding, a sick child, and a burial.

We’ve already been told that no applicable reason can explain it. And we all need to make our own meanings of this story. Reading John’s story again, and looking at my own fieldnotes alongside it, I begin to see that he found his answer to those best questions, the ones that come before the others.

Fieldwork, the concrete being in this place with these people, is a kind of redemption. John asked, “What is this that I am doing?” It could be that he was there to tell a story to others, as he thought was the case. It could be that he was there for “name,” as the Magar thought. But the truer story ended up being about who he was and, by extension, how fieldwork done well brings us all to who we are.

### Living John’s lessons

I am struck by how long it can take us to really get it. Arriving at the always changing truth of a life appears to me now as something like the walk from Trisuli to Harkapur Danda in the monsoon. I have made that walk often and know the feeling of losing careful purchase in the red grease of rain-soaked clay. It’s the worst part of the walk to Timling when I choose to go by way of Deorali to the Ankhu Khola. My letters reveal how often I slipped on the trail to understanding John. I still wanted to contain his meaning in his products.

Over the years, John and I kept up an irregular correspondence. I returned from the field and let him know how my dissertation was going and, after getting my doctorate, about my quest for jobs, getting hired at Michigan, new research interests, and getting tenure. John replied, sometimes with longer typed or hand-written letters and often with postcards from his travels with Kitty to the Yukon, Turkey, Scotland and beyond. I was seldom shy about telling John what

I thought or felt about things. Sometimes, his letters to me would open new understandings about his own thinking. Shortly after I arrived in Honolulu, where I wrote my dissertation at the East-West Population Institute, I sent John a long letter and mentioned my disgust at ex-pat life in Kathmandu. John wrote back:

It's enjoyable to find a taste or distaste that's shared, and after fairly intimate exposure from time to time, I do share yours for government and foundation enclave life abroad. Of course it fosters distance from village realities, but more objectionable to me, and a nigh inevitable outcome, is the corruption of spirit. The classic symbol is the missionary and many who take to the life in this generation are children of missionaries, 'mish-kids,' only now with Mammon and other Powers apt to be substituted for the God of their fathers. In this respect, South Asia may be especially insidious. The Sahib status and associated treatment is so easily raised to levels we associate with remarkable talent, or even divinity itself. Even when known for the ploy it almost inevitably is, it nonetheless can be flattering. It's hard to keep a swollen ego from filling out the image of what one so often seems to be seen as. (JTH, 24 February 1982)

These revelations flattered a student who had not so long before disappointed his mentor. I skittered across the surface rather than dive into the deeper pools contained in phrases like "corruption of the spirit" and their connection to missed realities.

Dissertation written, my field journals made their way to a space on the shelf and I barely returned to them, losing through that oversight the key to my real connection with John. Ever the student trying to prove himself, I continued to miss the truer meanings behind his words and settled instead for the surface praise. After Al and I wrote the appreciation for John, he sent me a letter that only increased my hubris. After a long note of thanks, John ended with, "When I read it I thought of Robert Frost and his awareness of a kindred spirit when coming across a tuft of flowers" (JTH, 21 February 1985). That would have been the time to go back to "Fieldwork" and to my journals as a first step in understanding the deeper possibilities of "kindred spirit." But I didn't. Still, the letters between us continued as my own career took off.

John's ecological work in Banyan Hill and Monal was to result in a book comparing the two settings. In his introductory remarks to the first 1966 edition of *The Magars of Banyan Hill*, he calls it "a preliminary report on a portion of my research in Nepal." By the second 1980 edition, when it appeared as *A Mountain Village in Nepal*, the introduction had lost that crucial modifier. All of John's students knew the story, although not whether it was fact or fiction, of his

completion of that promised manuscript and how it was pulled from publication. Whatever the truth of that last detail, I knew the book existed. I had held it in my hands.

Before going to the field, I had stopped by John's office for a conversation about Maikot. A question came up over some detail and John turned to a shelf and pulled a bound manuscript off to find the answer. He flipped through, found his page, and passed the heavy volume over to me. It was the book! I remember my excitement and my inability to keep from paging through it after I read the offered passage. And I remember John gently taking it from my hands and returning it to the shelf.

The existence of that manuscript stayed with me through the years. Although I now interpret my own experience in the field and John's accounts in light of more important questions, it took me years to understand how self-understanding can trump other things. This isn't to argue that John's book should remain unpublished. But it explains the comical refrain in my letters to John over the years—insistent questions that miss the deeper truths:

Another question: Is there any chance that your book would be going to press or coming out in the next year? I wouldn't mind previews of parts that you feel like showing to anybody. (TEF, 15 March 1982)

How are your own projects going? (TEF, 3 December 1984)

I went on like that in letter after letter like a terrier. And John, whether writing at length or sending just a card, was as insistently mysterious. He never once wrote of the book and I eventually quit asking.

Then in 1989, he sent his first letter written on a computer, filled with news of the projects he hoped to begin and complete: collaborations with Greg Maskarinec, the life history of a young Taraali, and the book itself. This was also the first time he mentioned his Parkinson's Disease:

I'm loath to mention another project because I'm finding that Parkinson Disease so slows me down. But I do hope to finish a revision of the comparison between Banyan Hill and Monal. As far as writing is concerned a most frustrating aspect of P.D. is the inability to write longhand. If I can finally wind this project up, I'm thinking an appropriate sub-title would be a line from Frost's poem "The Ovenbird": "what to make of a diminished thing." (JTH, 18 September 1989)

And there's the final lesson. Focused on the easy questions, we might see this "diminished thing" as an acknowledgment of failure. Read more truly, it seems to me, we can recognize that it's not that at all. John's life was lived well

because he grew into his own story. We all start off smaller than we end. What motivates us in the earlier years seems unbearably large, not possible to contain. It's not that John's ecological project has lost any of its importance. It's just that his story outgrew it.

#### **Envoi: all manner of thing will be well**

John's story isn't finished. As with those persistent questions originally posed by others and becoming our own, its narrative meaning infuses our continuing stories. John remains here with us.

In my first field year, John came to Nepal for a couple of weeks of meetings and checking up on his students. Like he always did, John tried to connect us with people that might be helpful. Bob Cardinalli arranged for John to host a dinner for an old research assistant who had become well-positioned in the government and Maureen and I were invited. I remember being hopelessly ill and spending most of the dinner in a back room of Bob's mansion. And I remember John being disappointed that I wasn't connecting with his friend. For me the dinner was wasted.

A few days later, when John was getting ready to leave Nepal, I happened to run into him in Thamel. He was renting a bicycle to get to a meeting, but the boy at the stall was having trouble raising the seat to fit John's height. John was late and I still hear his Yankee-inflected "Eeh, bhai, bhayo. Tik chha, tik chha. Hoina, bhai, tik chha." Like all of us, the boy seemed to want it to be perfect for John and he kept working away.

Finally, John took the bike and mounted it. He turned to me and said, "Okay, Tom," nodded, and was off. I watched him, his leather briefcase in a basket at the front of the bike, white shirt, tie, and tweed coat wobbling off into a crowded street. People parted to let him by and folded back into his path like a wave.

#### **References**

Berger, John. 1979. *Pig Earth*. New York: Pantheon.  
Coles, Robert. 1997. *Doing Documentary Research*. New York: Oxford University Press.  
Fricke, Tom. 1989. Human Ecology in the Himalaya. *Human Ecology* 17(2): 131-145.

Goward, Nicola. 1984. The fieldwork experience. In *Ethnographic Research: A Guide to General Conduct*, ed. R.F. Ellen. London: Academic Press.  
Hauerwas, Stanley. 1981. *A Community of Character*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.  
Hauerwas, Stanley. 2001. *The Hauerwas Reader*. Durham: Duke University Press.  
Hitchcock, John T. 1960. Surat Singh: Head Judge. In *In the Company of Man*, ed. John Casagrande. New York: Harper Brothers.  
Hitchcock, John T. 1966. *The Magars of Banyan Hill*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.  
Hitchcock, John T. 1970. Fieldwork in Gurkha Country. In *Being an Anthropologist: Fieldwork in Eleven Cultures*, ed. George D. Spindler. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.  
Hitchcock, John T. 1977. Buying Time: Population, Trees, Liebig's 'Law,' and Two Himalayan Adaptive Strategies. In *Himalaya: Ecologie-Ethnologie*. Paris: CNRS.  
Hitchcock, John T. 1978. An Additional Perspective on the Nepali Caste System. In *Himalayan Anthropology*, ed. James F. Fisher. Paris: Mouton.  
Hitchcock, John T. 1980. *A Mountain Village in Nepal*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.  
Hitchcock, John T. and Rex Jones (eds.). 1976. *Spirit Possession in the Nepal Himalaya*.  
Hitchcock, Patricia. 1987. Our Ulleri Child. In *Children in the Field: Anthropological Experiences*, ed. Joan Cassell. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.  
Johnson, Mark. 1993. *Moral Imagination: Implications of Cognitive Science for Ethics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.  
King, Gary, Robert O. Keohane, and Sidney Verba. 1994. *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.  
MacIntyre, Alasdair. 1981. *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.  
Pach, Alfred. 2001. Obituary for John T. Hitchcock. *Anthropology Newsletter* May 2001, 42(5).  
Pach, Alfred and Tom Fricke. 1984. John T. Hitchcock: Appreciation and Retrospective. *Himalayan Research Bulletin* 4(2): 3-15.  
Taylor, Charles. 1985. Interpretation and the Sciences of Man. In *Philosophy and the Human Sciences*. New York: Cambridge University Press.  
Taylor, Charles. 1989. *Sources of the Self*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.