Disheartening setbacks and senseless delays create space for a family to form in the foothills of Nepal.

CHAD ERIC BERGMAN

TRANSFORMED IN KATHMANDU

In Shakespeare's tragedy *King Lear,* one character finds his outlook on his own terrible circumstances altered near the end of the play. Edgar has been driven from his home and falsely accused of wanting to kill his father, the nobleman Gloucester. In the course of events set into motion by King Lear's ill-advised decision to force his daughters to prove their love for him, Gloucester is blinded and left to die wandering on the heath. When father and son meet, Edgar turns away from the action and, in a side comment meant for the audience, says:

> And worse I may be yet: the worst is not
> So long as we can say "This is the worst."

These lines have resonated with my wife, Celia, and me as we have traveled the circuitous route of international adoption for the past few years. Our journey has been far from easy, and at times we would say, "Oh, this is the worst," only to experience a deeper level of despair and frustration at the next stage.

Chad Eric, Karina, and Celia Bergman

More than fifteen years ago we decided to create a family through adoption, and about five years ago we put it all in motion. Adoption made theological sense to us. If it is true that we are adopted into the family of God, then we wanted to reflect God's kingdom here on earth. And if that kingdom is multinational and multiracial, we wanted to reflect that reality in our family as well. In this way, we are trying to live our faith in an honest and genuine way.

We began with our even now pending application to adopt a child from China and followed that with our recently successful adoption of our daughter from Nepal. Edgar's words resonated with each new setback. Surely this couldn't be the worst? And then we would experience a new level of absurdity.

We thought it was the worst when we had reached the four-year mark of waiting for our Chinese child (and still we continue to wait). Indeed, one of the surest ways to make God laugh is to announce your plans. After both Celia and I had finished our graduate work and had found jobs in our respective fields, we thought we were now prepared to start a family. We both independently thought that China would be a good place to begin, and when we began to talk about adoption together we believed that was where God wanted us to be.

The Chinese adoption program was well-respected and dependable overall. At the time, it was taking about fifteen months from the point

of submitting a dossier (the prospective parents' paper application) to the three-week visit to China to make the adoption happen.

Then the Beijing Olympics happened and China focused significant energy and personnel to make the games the pride of China. It seems that there were other reasons for the massive delay as well, especially as the government continues to process paperwork for adoptions at a glacial pace. Some think China no longer wants to be seen as an exporter of children. Some say that the one child policy has produced an army of men with no ability to marry; as a result, female babies are no longer being abandoned at the same rate. Some have pointed to the new middle-class that has developed in China as a result of easing economic policies. That middle class may look to the West for examples of how to "look the part."

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Celia and Karina in their Kathmandu apartment

Perhaps the prevalence of foreign couples entering China to adopt girls has caused a dramatic increase in Chinese domestic adoptions. All of these reasons are conjecture, of course, as China has not made any official statement.

At any rate, the program is moving forward now at approximately three log-in dates each month. The log-in date is the day a family's dossier is received by the Chinese government. Currently the Chinese government is processing dossiers that were registered on June 15, 2006. Our dossier was received March 20, 2007, and if you do the math, it means we anticipate our file being approved in about seven and a half years. This kind of math is very discouraging.

So in late 2008 we looked at a promising new program from Nepal. Nepal had done international adoptions in the past but now wanted to eliminate any possibility of fraud and work toward being compliant with international laws and standards. In order for a country to be Hague Compliant, the adoption process needs a clear and transparent protocol that eliminates any potential for child trafficking. Based on our research, the Nepal program looked good, so we started the application process for this second country, officially submitting our dossier to the government of Nepal on June 8, 2009. We were now dual-tracking, with our China application still pending.

We thought it was the worst when we feared that the referral for our Nepalese daughter was going to drag on. We started to hear some grumblings about Nepalese/U.S. adoption relations in January 2010. By February the State Department was urging prospective parents to transfer to a different program due to lack of transparency and potential fraud in the Nepalese system. We made some inquires and could find no substantial evidence to validate these concerns. By April of 2010, our adoption agency as well was encouraging us to transfer out of Nepal. After much prayer, we decided we would wait it out for one year. As we inched toward our June 8 personal deadline, Celia and I each felt the loss increasing.

Then on June 7, 2010, one day shy of one year, we got the call that Nepal's Ministry of Women and Child Welfare had matched us with a thirty-month-old little girl named Karina Kanya. We could hardly believe it, but it was true. We were going to have a Nepali daughter.

But then, just two months later, on August 6, the U.S. government closed down adoptions in Nepal for suspected fraud. The accusation was later found to be unsubstantiated, but we were among about sixty families with matched children but without opportunity to secure a U.S. entry visa to bring the children home. What complicated the issue was that the Nepalese government was only allowing a sixty-day window to officially adopt the matched children. We received our official travel approval in late September, so if we were going to adopt Karina, we needed to do it by the end of November. We didn't know what to do.

Having seen Karina's picture and becoming increasingly attached to her, Celia and I took a midweek retreat in October together to think and pray about our choices. We made two statements to each other that seemed straightforward at the time, but later seemed filled with holy irony. First, we decided that families make sacrifices for each other and we felt that Karina was now a part of our family so we were willing to sacrifice it all to bring her into our fold. The second statement came from Celia after half an hour of silence, which she broke with laughter, saying, "You know, I've always wanted to live in the mountains."

That retreat helped us to understand that this was where God wanted us. So we made the leap of faith to "move" indefinitely to Nepal. What that leap really meant was a lot of coordination to make it happen—and happen fast. With the permission of the administration at North Park University where I teach, I pulled in favors from Chicago theater professionals to cover my responsibilities. Celia took twelve weeks allowed by the Family and Medical Leave Act, as well as an additional four weeks of unpaid personal leave of absence from the University of Chicago. Through Celia's connection with a student from Nepal we were able to rent an apartment month-to-month in Kathmandu. We purchased plane tickets.

We came out of the airport in Kathmandu on November 16 exhausted, nervous, anxious, excited, and barraged by taxi drivers in a whirlwind of exotic sights and smells. We met Karina the next day, which was her third birthday, at a small orphanage in the hills of Bhaktapur in the Kathmandu valley where fifteen children were cared for by a loving staff. We

spent three days visiting Karina at the orphanage, and at the end of the third day we brought her back to our apartment in Kathmandu.

The care the orphanage had given Karina was outstanding. She was medically sound, she had been fed a balanced diet, and she had had the same loving caretaker for all three years of her life. What we witnessed was a group of caring people who were trying to take care of the "least of these" in a poor, post-war-torn country. It was hardly an operation in the business of selling babies as the U.S. Embassy and State Department feared.

On November 23, 2010, in accordance with Nepali law, we adopted Karina. We still didn't know if we would ever be granted a visa to bring her back to the United States.

We thought it was the worst when the U.S. government issued a Request for Further Evidence in response to our application for Karina's orphan visa. After two months of living in this liminal space together in Kathmandu, we began assembling evidence to demonstrate the veracity Karina's orphan status. Our attorney wrote a rebuttal, close to 300 pages, which thoroughly addressed the questions that the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services had raised in our daughter's case.

Karina had been found when she was approximately ten days old, and there was no possible way to find her birth parents to get a signed statement of release. Lacking that document, we tried to establish a clear and clean (free of fraud) timeline from the point where she was found, to the policeman who received her at the police station, to the handoff at the orphanage.

On January 16, I had to leave Celia and Karina in Nepal to resume my spring semester teaching responsibilities. Celia continued her stay with an unpaid leave of absence. At this point, there was no guarantee that she would have a job upon returning to the States.

Kathmandu is a complicated, frenetic city. When you mention Nepal, most Americans conjure up images of Mount Everest and idyllic "getting back to nature" treks. This is profoundly misleading. For one thing, you can't see any mountains from the center of the city (holy irony number one). Also, Nepal is one of the poorest countries in the world, and Kathmandu has an urban density that constantly challenged our western thinking. We lived by the 10/2 rule—what takes ten minutes to do in the States takes two hours to do in Kathmandu. An additional challenge was the load-shedding (power outages) and water shortages. In mid-February, most of Kathmandu has about five hours of electricity a day, which usually occur at night when nobody is awake. Hot water often isn't available, and drinking water always needed to be boiled. In addition to adjusting to parenthood for the first time, Celia was now facing these challenges without me.

By this time, other families who arrived in Kathmandu after we had were receiving their visas to bring their children home. Celia and Karina were living in Kathmandu with no end in sight. Our case had still not been reviewed by U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services and we couldn't get a direct answer as to why not.

And we were out of money. Going through the adoption process, we joked about the notion that we had no secrets anymore. Once a family decides on the option of adoption, you go through a home study. A caseworker examines all corners of your life (and cupboards), assessing your potential as parents, and then writes an evaluation. This evaluation allows you to proceed to the next step of preparing to bring a child into your home.

But you still have secrets. Ours was financial. When we made the choice to go to Nepal, "willing to sacrifice it all" to build our family, we didn't think God would take us at our word (holy irony number two). Maintaining two households, one in Chicago and one in Kathmandu, drained our savings. We had been preparing for this (I was a Swede from Minnesota after all), but we hadn't prepared for the exorbitant costs of the investigator and lawyer that we needed to prove to the U.S. government that Karina was truly an orphan.

By mid-January, we didn't know how we were going to pay for February's Chicago mortgage and Kathmandu rent on one source of income. So we decided to give up our secret and open ourselves up to those who had been lifting us up in thoughts and prayers along our journey. Their generous response was humbling and an amazing example of how community truly works.

And worse I may be yet: the worst is not/So long as we can say "This is the worst." Such downward spiral thinking unfolds with each

Chad Eric and Karina exploring the sites in Nepal

potential layer bringing a new level of despair. Embracing this view of the world results, as demonstrated in *King Lear*, in tragedy.

Fortunately that is not the model we chose to embrace. Thankfully God provides us with a different paradigm, one that invites us to trust in him and embrace the circumstances that surround our path. We finally received the approval for Karina's U.S. entry visa, and I returned to Kathmandu to bring Celia and Karina back to Chicago on March 20, 2011. Our community, worldwide, has embraced us and loved us. And Celia returned to her work a few weeks later.

During our four months in Kathmandu, two folk tales helped us reframe our experience. The first is a Chinese story, the second is Nepalese. In the Chinese story, a farmer's wife gives birth to a son, and the people of the village respond by telling the farmer how fortunate he is to have a son. The farmer responds simply, "Maybe." Several years later the son breaks his leg just before the harvest, and everyone in the village says, "How unfortunate." The farmer responds simply, "Maybe." As the son is healing, the military comes through town to conscript all the able-bodied men. The son is left behind, to which everyone cheers, "How fortunate!" The farmer's response is still, "Maybe."

We were drawn to this story as our friends and relatives rode the emotional roller coaster with us. After a while we began to realize that even events that presented themselves as challenges sometimes turned out to be exceedingly helpful. The comments people left on our blog constantly reminded us of the transforming nature of experience if we chose to view it through the lens of God's grace.

When we were telling the Chinese tale to some Nepali friends, they told us that the story echoed one they

Karina dressed for a chilly spring day in Chicago

remembered from childhood. A king is about to go on a hunt, but he cuts his hand badly. His primary adviser tells him this is a good thing, but in a rage the king sends the adviser to prison. "How can it be a good thing that the king is injured?" he rails. Then the king and his entourage head into the jungle. During the hunt a tiger stalks and kills all of the king's party—except the king, because tigers only like fresh meat. It leaves the "wounded" king for the vultures. When the king returns to Kathmandu he pulls his adviser out of prison, intending to apologize, but before he can say anything, the adviser runs to the king with open arms. The king is confused, but the adviser explains that the king's action saved his life as well. Surely the healthy servant would have been killed by the tiger had he joined the hunt.

Both stories unlocked for Celia and me important lessons as our adoption process unfolded. The first story helped us realize how limited our vision was and how quickly we were caught up in a shortsighted view of events as they unfolded. Only now that we have been in Chicago with our daughter for several weeks are we seeing that the time we spent in Kathmandu was a gift. It was not "unfortunate." We were able to get to know Karina on her terms in her country, with her sights and smells. Celia and I were the strangers doing the adjusting. This experience opened us up to a place of vulnerability as we grew to trust our surroundings, just as Karina's trust in us was growing.

That trust has transferred as we made the move back to Chicago. I recently made a traditional Nepali dish of rice and lentils for dinner. When we came to the table Karina's eyes lit up and she smiled that smile that makes my interior flutter. She then turned to me and excitedly said, "Daal bhat! Thanks, God. Thanks, Daddy."

The second story reminds me of a key lesson I discovered during my undergraduate education about twenty-four years ago. In a way, it is about how we embrace our experience and perspective. British writer Charles Williams (friend of C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, and Dorothy Sayers) wrote about how "preferring the given" was a step toward understanding that the plan that is unfolding, if we embrace it, may be the plan that God has given. This concept of preferring the given is one that has stuck with me throughout the years. We may think we have an idea of how our lives should go. We execute that plan, often in contrast to how our lives are actually unfolding, causing tension and strife. Yet Williams was advocating that we prefer what God has given us and be present in that experience. Then and only then can we hear the whisper of God's plan as we make the choice to be present in its unfolding.

So we continue to take steps to prefer the given. This "given" happens to be a three-and-a-half-year-old powerhouse named Karina who has forever changed the way we see the world. *King Lear* ends in tragedy because both the king and Gloucester recognize too late that the very blessings they had been seeking had been with them all along. Thank God we have stories that help us prefer and embrace the events as they unfold.

As I write this in my office at North Park, "Blessed Assurance" is playing out of Old Main's tower.

Blessed assurance, indeed. ■