

ON THE ROCKS

Bryan Walker

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ON THE ROCKS

This actually happened: the names of people and places are real; the photographs were downloaded from Google Images. (I apologise if I have contravened any copyright: please inform me and I will rectify the situation). It was written at the beginning of my convalescence immediately following surgical repair required by my accident. I wanted to recall as far as possible my thoughts and actions during my time on the rocks. Such catharsis aided my recovery.

I had climbed on to a favourite rocky ledge at Unawatuna to watch the sunset almost every time I visited that beautiful Sri Lankan bay during the last two and a half years. The sunset was always a delight, always different, always glorious. Two nights ago it was the best that I had ever seen with a rich green area behind a golden yellow lattice. Elsewhere the sky was a riot of blues, pinks and aquamarine set on fast moving fluffy clouds with more solid clouds nearer to the sun. Once the sun touches the horizon it takes just over two and a half minutes to disappear. By the time you leave the rocks the bay is almost dark and ribbons of white breakers are flecked with the reflections of lights from the background of distant cars and houses. To the north the Galle lighthouse flashes across the sea that is so wild at this time of the year because of the south-west monsoon. The massive breakers smash against the rocks sending up great walls of spray. The wind snatches these in a random way; sunset watchers may be shocked out of their reflections by a surprise soaking.





Life can take curious twists sometimes so dramatic that the ‘living daylight’s can almost be snatched from the living. It was so on Monday 2 October at 18.00 hours. After a convivial afternoon on the beach with my older son Adi and his partner, Agnes, my other son Richard, Drew (from Australia) and Michelle (from France) I paddled my way along the water’s edge and up the steps beside the temple. The sea was rougher than usual and the clouds looked foreboding. Maybe the sunset will not match its usual standard today. To the right I could see Adi and Agnes with their arms around each other while watching the skyline. Not wanting to disturb them I turned left as usual. Only two other people were in the area. I had to pass one in my clamber over the rocky splash zone at the end of the bay and I apologised for disturbing his solitude as I scrambled past. The noise of the wind and waves was loud in my ears and my lips tasted salty.

The rocks here are black and unfriendly with rough surfaces. They were warm in temperature but they are not warm in colour like some. After nearly three years my feet had become hard and without footwear I could easily manage the climb along the familiar route. The last boulder is at shoulder height and needs careful negotiation as it protrudes beyond the foothold; you have to cling to it closely in order to keep your balance. Only two nights ago I came here with Vasuki, and her friends Allison and Thushan; she said it was dangerous and made me stay on the much larger shelf at the side. Now, without her restraining influence, I can reach my usual objective. Spreading my arms widely to maintain as much contact as possible with the protruding surface I got my first toe hold. Somehow my second foot failed to grip the ledge. And I slipped.

Some have said that drowning people have their whole life pass before them. This was not now my experience. My mind was intensely in the present and I was sharply aware of every single inch of the six metres through which I fell. My arms and legs were severely torn; I banged my head and bruised my ribs. Clutching in panic with my right hand, slued my body anti clockwise through 90 degrees as I continued my fall. Normally I wear my wristwatch on the inside of my wrist. My father taught me to do that when I was given my first watch as a 10th birthday present - this stops the winder catching on trouser pockets. For climbing I had twisted the watch to the other side of my wrist to protect its face. The relief of doing this flashed through my mind as my fall continued although the watch only cost me about £5.00 in India last year. But I was still glad of my forethought.



Three small rocks arrested my travel and I crash-landed on my left side. My thigh hit one stone, a little higher than the others. A million sensors in my body told me that my femur was smashed. I heard the sickening crunch, I felt the break, and receptors recorded the pain that washed over the whole of my body. Strangely my thoughts were only annoyance with myself for such carelessness. I could see that the metal strap on my watch was badly scratched but at least the face was saved. Then I saw the cuts and grazes on my hands and arms. I tried to see my legs but the slight movement caused by lifting my head sent the muscles of my thigh into spasm. The pain was far more severe than that caused by the break so I let my body stay where it was for a while.

The shelf on which I had landed was about two and a half metres wide by one metre to the edge. My surroundings were like a deep hole with only three sides: the fourth side was open to the sea view. Below, the waters were in a maelstrom boiling as a cauldron and reinforced by the massive swell. Had I fallen on my head or had I rolled over the edge certainly I would not be recording my experiences now. Behind me, just over the top of the channel I remembered that a man was also watching the sunset. Only 50 metres further off were Adi and Agnes. So I

called for help, but there was no response. As a child on a farm in Norfolk (UK) I had learned to give vent to a piercing whistle by using my fingers. This had often provided a useful signal to attract the attention of friends far away on the other side of the field. So loud was the sound that I could force others in close proximity to put their fingers in their ears. Now this should stand me in good stead. So I whistled the Morse code for SOS - dot, dot, dot, dash, dash, dash, dot, dot, dot. (Long after, I learned that this is not actually the international distress call. Even if I had known this it would have made no difference). Then I waited for my fellow sun worshippers to appear. Still there was no response. Evidently my signals for help were going straight up or becoming lost in the noise of the wind and waves. The sound of the sea rose and fell. All I had to do was wait for a lull then repeat my appeals for assistance. Even this failed to attract attention. Help was so near yet out of reach. My frustration mounted. Why didn't somebody come?



With abruptness darkness came. This is so consistent in the tropics that I did not need to look at my watch to know the time. Six thirty. A few minutes earlier a passing fishing boat had raised my hopes. This time I had whistled, shouted, then waved. One of the fishermen waved back in a friendly manner before redoubling his efforts at his oar to synchronise with the actions of his fellows. These took the small dugout to the limits of my field of vision. With rising despair I tried to sit up planning to remove my shirt and wave that. Once more a terrible cramp attacked my upper thigh muscles. Starting from a small region the pain felt like a dagger point that turned to a fire whose flames roared up my leg, rampaged throughout my body and head; and I blacked out.

The moon was six days short of a Poya full moon but the sky was bright when I came to my senses at ten minutes to 22.00 hours. The wind had risen and clouds as solid as rocks were looming up from the north. Far out to sea several fishing boats battled against the elements. There was no point in trying to signal to them. The waves and rocks meant that they would keep their distance. Although the moon was reflected by the sea and clouds I could not distinguish a single fisherman and, preoccupied as they were, it would be impossible for them to see me. I resigned myself to a night on my sloping shelf and thought how best I could make myself comfortable. Somehow, I found myself away from the spot where I had landed and to my shock I found that I was closer to the edge that fell away to the turbulent water. Gently, slowly, I tried to ease myself away from the dangerous position that I had unconsciously occupied.

I lay flat and began to explore the damage to my person. The abrasions were extensive but superficial and I did not seem to be bleeding significantly anywhere. Then I turned my attention to my leg and slowly explored rotating my thigh. To my pleasant surprise this was possible and it felt as if my whole leg was twisting. Perhaps my leg was not broken after all. Carefully lifting my head I repeated the exercise and watched. To my shock I found that my foot was lying parallel to the ground all the time; attempts to turn my leg left me only with the illusion that my whole leg was moving. Now I was aware of the sensation of bone grinding on bone. Once more muscular spasms hit me and again the pain was masked by fainting.

Tropical rain woke me up and I felt cold. My only clothing was a sleeveless cheese-cloth t-shirt and my sarong. I tried to engineer myself into a better posture as the slope was uncomfortable. By placing my hand under my right hip I could get myself into a more level and less painful position. Fortunately the rain was short lived and I began to feel warmer again. I found that I could use my good foot to push against my other heel in order to put some traction on my damaged thigh. This pulled the jagged edges of the bone apart. By experimenting I discovered that there was only a fraction of an inch between 'heaven' and 'hell'. Then I thought about the possibility of internal haemorrhage that might be caused by bone edges cutting into my muscle or other tissues. At least the bone was not protruding through the skin. Years ago I had taken a first-aid course and remembered that severe blood loss can give rise to a weak and rapid pulse. I tried to retrieve the arm supporting my hip and my thigh contracted in pain again. This time I kept conscious and, instead, cautiously moved my left hand to my neck to find my carotid pulse. Not surprisingly it was more rapid than usual (I regularly practice meditation and my resting pulse rate is about 56 beats a minute). The moon was certainly not bright enough to allow me to see the second hand on my watch and I did not want to risk trying to see it because this would have meant moving my other hand again. I just knew my pulse was faster than normal, but it

was strong and regular. To my relief there was no evidence of significant internal bleeding.



The rain poured with greater determination and with the rain came the colder temperature. The hand supporting my hip started to ache and my fingers were sore against the rough rock. Somehow I managed to get a fold of my sarong in between my hand and the rock surface. Then I started to shiver which set off another cramp. I tried to stop shivering without success. Heat loss was inevitable and somehow I must either control it or generate more heat if my body temperature was to be maintained. There is a 'rule of nines' which gives a rough guide to the percentage of the body surface area which covers our trunk and appendages. The front of the torso is 18% and so is the back. Each arm is another 9% and each leg is 18%. The head is a further 9%. (There are no prizes for guessing what is covered by the last one per cent!) The surface area is roughly proportional to the rate at which heat is lost from the body although the amount of blood circulating through the skin is a major influencing factor and rather more heat is lost from the head. I reckoned that if my legs were kept together and my arms held as close as possible to the sides of my body, this should reduce heat loss although what I really needed was a blanket of some sort; there was little chance of this being delivered! But I had not allowed for being awash with water above and below. Water is a good conductor of heat - however I held my arms and legs, heat was being washed away from my body. With this realisation I started to shiver again and that set off my leg pain once more. A different strategy was needed.

Perhaps strangely I was not in any panic. If I could hang on until the morning somebody would have to discover me. The rocks were a popular place for exploration. My two sons, who were with friends, would be bound to miss me at some stage before the next evening or even during the day. Somehow my pain was bearable providing I could keep still, and the muscular cramps were only provoked by movement. So despite the cold and discomfort I focused on a pragmatic approach to occupying my time until daylight. It was about one o'clock; that meant five more hours or so.

With resignation I knew that I had to shiver. Yet somehow I needed to stop my left leg shivering and from progressing to cramp. To keep warm I must shiver, but not in my left leg: the solution was obvious. The means to that end required concentration, so I applied my mind. At one stage in my several careers I had helped clients with stress management. I had taught them how to take their minds to the arms and legs, stomach and back, neck and shoulders, even head and face. "Tense the muscles there - hold it - and relax". I had used the device many times to help myself sleep (when counting sheep had failed!), and I had helped others to do the same thing. I had taught them biofeedback - how to talk their bodies into relaxation and check from their pulse rates that relaxation had been achieved. (The pulse is a most sensitive barometer of bodily activities). But I had not thought about separating the left from the right side of the body! When I tried to let my right side shiver while keeping my left leg relaxed, it simply would not work. I could stop shivering for a short while, or reduce it to a limited extent, but I could not leave part of my body to shiver while another part did not. This was 'no-go' as a strategy for survival until the morning.

I had attended a Vipassana meditation course in India and regularly (although not daily) practiced meditation for about three years. However, I felt ashamed that, in a moment of crisis, my mind was still so undisciplined that I had not thought to use the present experienced as a meditation exercises. The initial course had been taught by Goenka at his ashram in Igatpuri north of Poonah. Many considered Goenka one of the greatest exponents in the whole of Asia of this pure form of meditation. He had recently visited Sri Lanka although I had not managed to attend his discourses at that time. The course in India was a silent meditation course lasting 11 days. Much of it was spent in individual cells in total darkness. I remembered how my sons had laughed at me in disbelief when they heard about it saying that I could not keep quiet for eleven minutes, let alone eleven days! As if destiny responded to my need, the rain had stopped again. A warm wind blew up and dried me out; my shivering subsided and I could now begin to focus my mind. Initially I did not address the pain but started with my breathing - in and out, in and out, in and out, in and out, repeatedly. My mind was directed to the triangular portion of skin formed in the region from the corners of my mouth and my nose and I examine the sensations there in detail. Then I began the process of

surfing over my body inch by inch examining the feelings there. Cold, stinging, tingling, hurt, pressure, numbness: almost every sensation except heat. My hand felt sore and I thought about getting it into a more comfortable position. With a gentle self reprimand at my digression I forced my mind back to the task in hand. “Examine the sensation with detachment, objectivity and equanimity. Experience it fully. Where is it? How mild or severe is it?” I could hear my tutor saying. Repeatedly I forced my brain to continue with its survey. At last I completed a review of my skin. Then I started the journey ‘inside’. This is harder because the mind has to focus within a three-dimensional framework. I usually start with the ‘easier’ spaces in my mouth and ears before working through my head and taking the journey down my neck, through my body to my legs and feet.



Heavy stinging drops of rain on my face snatched my concentration away and brought me back to my immediate circumstances with a jerk. Tropical monsoon rains are matchless. In the West we speak of ‘raining cats and dogs’. In the tropics it often rains ‘buffaloes and elephants’. This was dinosaurs and whales! In moments I was chilled to the bone again. The drops hurt my face but if I tried to protect my face with my hands my arms became more exposed and I could feel a more rapid heat loss from my body. Slowly, I levered myself closer to the rock above my head. Under it was a small gap. If only I could get my head partly under it. By now the water was streaming off the surface battered by the rain. To force my head into the gap I had to tilt my head back a little. The water pouring down filled up my nose to produce a most unpleasant feeling. I immediately cleared my nostrils in the manner of a sub-aqua diver and turned my head to one side. Just as rapidly the uppermost ear filled with rain and this could not be cleared by any of

the techniques I had learned when snorkelling years earlier! With resignation I inched my way from the boulder curling above my head and tried, with unsuccessful detachment, to put up with the new stinging pain on my body. Another leg spasm sharply took my mind from my face to the other end of my body. How much longer can I hang on here like this? Perhaps surprisingly the idea of simply rolling over the edge and finishing everything just did not enter my mind. The biological drive for survival is strong in all of us although, interestingly, the suicide rate in Sri Lanka at that time was outstandingly the highest in the world. My thoughts went down this alley and for a time I pondered the paradoxes that form the apparent paradise island which is Sri Lanka. The predicaments of others, however, were less significant than my own here and now. What time is it? Unaware the moon had waned and I could not see the hands on my watch. Now there was complete darkness. I had long since stopped trying to call for help. Disregarding heat loss I cleared the water from my eyes with my fingers and tried to tell the time from the luminosity. But I need glasses for reading and they were far away. There was a time, I forget just when, that I discovered that an object could be brought into focus by squinting at it through a tiny hole. Indeed, it is possible to buy glasses with lenses composed of a meshwork of pin-prick holes. So I created a small hole in the fold of skin formed from crooking my first finger. Painstakingly I worked out that the time was five o'clock. Only 1 hour before sunrise. I can cope with that. Anybody can cope with anything for just 1 hour!

To lie in severe pain, in total darkness, for 1 hour needs some resolve but mine was running short. Of course, on our meditation course we were set tasks to do. It was essential that I organise my mind if the time was to pass at all. So I set my head the job of coming up with something compelling for it to do for one hour. The rest of the time could be coped with after dawn: nothing seems quite so bad in the light of day. But no ideas came to mind. In fact my subconscious told my conscious brain that it was thoroughly tired. "Sorry, there are no suggestions for occupational therapy". Then I felt the need to urinate. Over half a century of habit associated with standing up in a selected and usually private place provoked the instinct to stand up. This was out of the question. "What to do?" is the question that any English speaking Sri Lankan might ask. It was self evident that I had to micturate just where I was. Thoughts of unhygienic taboo were virtually swept aside by the constant deluge of water which washed over me and the relaxation of my sphincter muscles resulted in a surprisingly hot feeling at the top of my legs. It was too short lived and regionally restricted. How I longed to feel like that all over. I have heard that storks and other long thin-legged birds contribute to their temperature regulation by urinating down their legs. This efficient counter current system could help to conserve heat in animals that needed to function with a higher metabolic rate and at a higher temperature than do human beings. For a few minutes I tried to calculate roughly how much heat could be saved in this way. The computation became too complicated for my

ability and 'guesstimates' of temperature gradients must have been two wild for a scientific conclusion to be reached. From fatigue I lost track. Out of boredom I checked the time again. To my total despondency I found it was about four o'clock, not five o'clock - there were two hours to sunrise not one!



To lie in agony and general discomfort when you are beginning to feel exhausted, in total darkness, for two hours needs more than determination. Two hours in total darkness! Despondency turned to despair. Since a child I have been frightened of the dark and I have never managed to overcome these feelings. It seems to play havoc with my imagination. Suppose somebody found me now and just rolled me over the edge after stealing my watch and wedding ring? I removed the items from their place and tied them inside my shirt. I knew this was beyond rationality yet I immediately felt comforted. Nobody could find them in the dark, and if they did my watch and rings could not be seen. If my brain would not work properly I must set myself a more physical task; ideally something that generated heat. I started singing as loudly as I could. Singing generates heat because so many muscles are brought into play. Dear reader, try to sing while lying on your back as Destiny pours bucket after bucket of water over you! About a year ago I had the pleasure of singing in a choir, with the Colombo Philharmonic Orchestra at a Christmas concert. Unaccompanied, the base line of Christmas carols or the marvellous choruses from Handel's Messiah, sound curious without accompaniment or coercion from fellow choristers. I struggled on through an incongruous mix of hymns, pop songs, music from the shows and just anything I could think of in the circumstances. My voice was quivering and wobbling out of tune. Eventually I had

to laugh at such pathetic efforts. I was still trying to sing and chuckle as the rain stopped and dawn broke.

Light intensity increased as rapidly as it decreased at night fall but the heavy clouds hid the direct and warming rays of the sun. Nevertheless I felt cheered and more optimistic. Rescue time must be near. I would give myself three hours to be found. Only in the unlikely event of this not happening by nine o'clock would I explore ways of getting myself out of the hole in which I was placed. I fantasised about the relief of rescue: warm baths, soft sheets, the clean comfort of a hygienic hospital, the tender touch of beautiful nurses in crisp uniforms, freedom from fear and pain, hot food and drink. Drink? A mug of tea! In my mind everything was suddenly OK. The whole business was just a horrid dream. A nightmare of unreality. The clouds thinned and the sun's circle became outlined. The clouds broke and the sun was there. However, searching the sky, such as could be seen from my vantage point, did not significantly reinforce my euphoria. There was little for encouragement. Rain clouds were everywhere and moving fast. The sea was far more turbulent than it had been yesternight. Already blacker clouds were moving overhead. A stronger wind blew up and then it rained. It really rained!



This time the rain did not merely sting - it hurt. With the rain came the frustrating realisation that chance discovery would now be impossible. Nobody would be scrambling over the rocks if the weather continued like this. Anyway there were hardly any tourists about as the real season for tourists was still about two months away. The immediate rocks were free of shellfish so no gatherers would be coming to this area. Should the weather persist into the next night nobody would come to watch the sunset either. They would not be any sunset! The extreme rain eased

enough to lift my spirits. The lull was short lived. A squall blew up and the sea was lashed with rain that bounced at the surface. Now my frustration became tinged with anger for the first time. Why should I be treated like this? Why was the weather heaping its anger on me in this protracted way? After all I had come to this place to admire the beauty of the sky. My anger intensified until it became the dominant emotion in my being. Rationality moved out. In spite of my experience with meditation I was totally in the grip of 'reaction' not 'action'. Objectivity and equanimity were submerged in a flood of circulating adrenalin. Goenka would have delighted in this living example which his simple yet profound teaching was designed to correct. Reaction and lack of detachment can lead to misery. Definitely I was miserable.

The very form of the questions which began to shout inside my head took me back in a flash to a conversation which Julie, my late wife, initiated about twelve years ago after she had been diagnosed with breast cancer. The conversation was repeated and extended many times in the period that followed until her death six years later. Within her theological framework she insisted that the question "Why has this happened to me?" was it not the appropriate one to ask. There was no satisfactory answer to that (as there never will be to 'why' questions). The only question that had meaning, value and a possible answer was "What must I learn from what is happening to me?" Somehow I managed to rehearse some of her arguments. This was a vivid experience. Now was real. The past cannot be changed. The future could be hoped for and was under some control, but the present is here. Most of us spend too much time living in the past instead of leaving it **with** the past. Most of us spend so much time planning the future that we do not allow ourselves the value of living and experiencing the present. Only the present is under our immediate direction. Every second has its own intrinsic value that must be savoured. It must act as our mentor. The present situation is not to be resented. How we act on it will influence the path that we take into the future. Reflection on this matter naturally led me to think more of Julie. She knew of physical and mental suffering. She had helped to nurse her mother in terminal illness knowing that she herself was suffering from exactly the same disease. (What cruel fate that was!) How would she have responded to the present situation? I longed for her wisdom. Somehow her warmth and encouragement seemed to be present with me. I could hear her voice. If only.....

My anger subsided but the weather conditions did not. Spray from a huge wave washed over my shelf and added to the cold. Was there a danger of being washed into the sea if the waves increased? Now I was functioning in a practical mode and in control of myself again. How weak and inadequate I had been in coping with the present adversity. Just in time I stopped myself going down the road that was likely to lead to depression. Back to pragmatism. The time was eight o'clock.

There was little point in waiting for the end of an arbitrary three hours. “Start now. Plan the escape. Take action”, I told myself.



For the first time in ten hours I carefully eased myself into a sitting position. This was possible because I had learned how to reduce the pain by keeping my damaged leg stretched. Gently I nudged my damaged leg to the left so that I could view the only possible route to the ridge. Clearly the way I came into my present predicament was not the way out. The sea offered no salvation. The rocks immediately above my head were unclimbable. There was only one pathway that offered any hope at all. Inch by inch I moved myself round to the left in order to see a slab of rock about a metre wide and seven metres long which sloped upwards at an angle of about 45 degrees. That will have to be the exit with or without rescuers.

By bending my good leg as far as I could and then straightening it, I could shuffle on my bottom in the manner of a baby. This still did not allow an adequate view of the potential exit. I had to get upright. With my back pressed to the rock face I slowly extended my sound leg while supporting the broken one with both hands. Wriggling my shoulders allowed me to ‘climb’ to a standing position. Frequent rests were needed as muscle spasms could not be prevented altogether. The concentration and effort of achieving the standing position stopped me from thinking about the cold and I felt safer as I moved a few feet further from the edge. Now I had to invent a means of progression as hopping was not a possibility. The physical challenge was a refreshing change from lying in one place and just thinking. Moving as a tripod was the only way. Constant soaking with the

relentless rain and sea water had left the skin of my hands and fingers pappy. In fact, skin was missing from some areas on the palms of my hands and the tips of some of my fingers. This might have been lost during my fall or subsequently. Now I was aware of the soreness that reduced the ability to manoeuvre myself towards the exit. In spite of the continuous rain I removed my sarong and used this to pad my hands against the roughness of the rocks. Each step and stop had to be planned. At last I came to face the sloping slab and I stared at it for a long time studying each deformity in its surface trying to work out possible toe and finger holds.

Keeping still let the cold seep into my bones once more. On one side of the slope was a narrow crevice so small that only one leg and shoulder could be accommodated. Even this gave some protection and I draped my sarong over my exposed side. The rain and spray combined felt more like standing under a mountain waterfall. I tried to envisage how I might work my way up the slope on my bottom. At least this would allow my damaged leg to trail so that the weight of the leg itself would maintain some traction on the thigh. Movement upwards would be achieved by using my three good members. The only indentations, however, were on the side of the slope where my bad leg would be. If they had been on the other side, somehow I felt that I might possibly manage, but the middle path up the slope was perfectly smooth. I was forced to the realisation that I could not make it alone. Fatigue and cold combined were too much. And suppose I did manage to make some progress before a further cramp and fainting - a tumble down the slope would leave me in a worse situation. I could not stand any longer; to sit where I was positioned was out of the question and I needed to lie down. The only alternative was to return to my shelf to lie flat and to wait for help.

The journey back seemed to take for ever. There was no optimistic objective this time. To regain the sitting position and then to lie seemed more painful than the reverse but at last it was achieved. I had not noticed that the rain had eased and the sky was brighter. I looked at my watch for the first time since the morning. The time was 12.30. From lying down, travelling to the slope and back again had taken four and a half hours. Four and a half hours of hard work and I was back where I started!

The sun came out as the rain stopped but I was almost too tired to appreciate the slight rise in temperature. I draped my sarong over the top of me as far as it could be spread and put up with the rough surface of my couch against my back. The warmth was wonderful. Then I realized how different the whole experience might have been had the sun been hot. The black rocks might have been intolerable in the absence of water. In that small trap I could have been roasted. I glanced round my prison and saw there was no shade at all. There would be no means of

sheltering from a blistering sun. Now there was a chance of the sunset, the sunset watchers, all visitors to the area, of rescue. The chance of another night alone was reduced. I felt like sleeping but I did not want to lose concentration at this stage. Perhaps another fishing boat would pass which could be signalled.



As I scanned the sea a movement in a crack in the rocks near the slope caught my eye. I was not left wondering for long. The movement turned to a flickering which was caused by a tongue which came out of a head which was attached to the jet black body of a snake. There are more than 90 different snakes in Sri Lanka and about one third of them are poisonous. Several of the latter are deadly poisonous and these account for about 1000 deaths and 50,000 bites a year in Sri Lanka: the highest rates in the world. The only black snake that I knew was the Banded Krait, one of the most deadly. Only the Krait seems to be aggressive; most snakes try to avoid contact with humans. One of my closest colleagues, in the Department of Community Medicine, is Sri Lanka's snake expert. I have watched him handle the poisonous fellows, and even assisted with his non poisonous specimens at his public education presentations. I have actually kept several snakes as pets and enjoy handling them - but not this one! Unlike the bite of the other poisonous snakes the bite of the Krait causes little pain and many people have died without rousing from their sleep after being bitten. Unlike most snakes the Krait is nocturnal. I strained to see if I could identify the characteristic white bands (not always present in older forms), but the body of the animal was out of sight in the crack. Definitely I did not relish the thought of another night on the shelf. A wave of my hand caused a snake to retreat into its hide. Imagination can riot so easily and I started to imagine movements in every space between the boulders.

Turning my head brought sounds into focus. Voices. I shouted and whistled. Two heads appeared and within seconds two people were at my side. They were the fishermen who had seen me from the sea. They wondered about the curious behaviour of the person on the rocks in the rain and had come to investigate. My

Sinhala is poor but I managed to explain my predicament. They were all for dragging me up the slope but I would have none of that and explained how my two sons could be located. In another moment they had gone. How I wished one of them had stayed. Had they understood? Would they bother to come back? Suppose they could not find Adi and Richard? Had they really understood? Not long previously I had tried to buy a cup of tea and a cake in a small café. In Sinhala I carefully asked for “a cup of tea with milk but no sugar and two small elephants”. The owner looked confused and I repeated my request but still without clarification. Then I remembered that the word for ‘elephants’ was ‘aliya’ but that for a tea cake was ‘aluwa’. It seemed funny at the time and we have laughed about it since. Now I was frightened that I had not made my message clear.

My fears were unfounded. In no time a ring of heads surrounded my pit. Friendly, sympathetic people came with ropes and planks. Two helped me to stand up again and I arranged my leg straight. Then my sons arrived. The feeling that came over me was such a mix of emotions that it is beyond description. Adi draped a sleeping bag over me and for the first time I felt thoroughly warm. He is an experienced mountain climber and understands mountain rescue techniques well. Richard came with three pieces of stick to serve as splints and these were fixed tightly into place with an assortment of cloths including Drew’s headband. A rope banister was held alongside the slope. I was placed in the sleeping bag and willing hands carried me to the top. In less than an hour I was back in the teaching hospital where I was employed as a volunteer pharmacology professor.



AN EXTRAORDINARY POST SCRIPT

The Voluntary Service Overseas, my employer at the time, insisted that I return to the UK for surgery. They booked nine seats on the earliest plane and, with an accompanying nurse, had my stretcher balanced on top held in place by a tangle of seat belts. For the next eleven hours, my nose was inches from the luggage rack. Evacuating my stretcher from the plane to the ambulance was excruciating but I arrived in Hemel Hempstead hospital met by my sister. I was warded and waited.

The curtains were pulled open and a huge African figure said, “Are you Bryan Walker?” I agreed and asked him from which part of Ghana he came (!). He had attended my pharmacology discourses in the Accra University Medical Faculty twenty-five years earlier when I was teaching at the Korle Bu Teaching Hospital. His medical qualifications had grown to his present consultant position.

My leg was broken in four places requiring a metal rod to be inserted the length of my femur and located with two pins just above the knee. A further rod was threaded through the main pole to keep the dislocated hip joint in place. I can still feel the outer end of this pole under the skin of my thigh. Later x-rays astonished curious surgeons at the perfect quality of the repair. They promised a 90% recovery of movement.

The physiotherapist who supervised my daily exercises had evidently been a prison warden in her earlier career. “Why are you screaming, Mr Walker?” “Because I am in such pain.” “Be quiet. You are disturbing the other patients. Just do as I say and you will get 100% recovery.” And I did. I cannot praise her enough. Three months later the Voluntary Service Overseas flew me back to Sri Lanka to continue my pharmacology teaching.