

HIS HOLINESS, PICO IYER & ME: ON THE ROAD WITH THE DALAI LAMA

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ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN THE CASCADIA WEEKLY APRIL 2008

Four years ago, the 14th Dalai Lama visited the Pacific Northwest, giving teachings and participating in roundtable discussions at venues across Vancouver, B.C. One of the highlights of his trip was an elaborate ceremony at Christ Church Cathedral where the Dalai Lama, along with fellow Nobel Peace Prize laureates Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Iranian human rights lawyer Shirin Ebadi, were awarded honorary doctorates by Simon Fraser University. With marching dignitaries, blaring bagpipes, a heavenly chorus of children and enormous leaded stained glass windows dripping colored gems, it was a breathtaking blend of pomp, posturing, spirituality and substance, and I was shocked to find myself with front row seats for the show.

I had been following His Holiness around town for several days as part of the media contingent, taking photos and notes, watching the pros from the **Vancouver Sun** and **Time** magazine at work. We were herded here and there, given background briefings, backstage access and an intimate press conference I'll never forget. I watched a lot of serious journalists lose all professional detachment when the Dalai Lama entered the room – it was near impossible not to be impacted, not to swoon, when in such close proximity to a "living Buddha."

I was mingling with the media in the basement of the cathedral, pre-bagpipes, when I saw a reporter that looked familiar from dust jackets of several books on my shelves back at home. "That looks a lot like Pico Iyer," I thought of the small, smiling Indian man with the beat-up rucksack slung over his shoulder, and a glance at his nametag confirmed my suspicion. I had read and relished *Video Nights in Katmandu: And Other Reports from the Not-So-Far East* and *Falling Off the Map: Some Lonely Places of the World*, two of his finest books collecting some of the most observant, piquant and intelligent travel essays I've ever come across.

Iyer was fresh on my mind because Whatcom Community College, where I was teaching composition at the time, had chosen another of his books -- *The Global Soul* -- as the Book of the Year, and it was being taught in a wide variety of courses. I was already looking forward to meeting him on campus in a few weeks, when he would visit with the classes studying his books, but here he was, in the flesh, in the basement of a cathedral in downtown Vancouver.

I introduced myself and quickly learned why he was such a successful world traveler: friendliness! With charm and genuine interest, he asked me for my story –

who I was, where I came from, what I do and what brought me to such an auspicious gathering. Together we talked about the Dalai Lama phenomenon, the frenzied adulation that accompanied him everywhere he spoke in Vancouver, indeed everywhere he popped up around the globe. We tried to be a little bit jaded about it, but couldn't quite pull it off since we too were extremely excited to be a part of his historic visit to Canada, especially the ceremony that was about to take place in the cathedral above our heads.

I mentioned to Iyer that I had read and appreciated an essay he wrote on the Dalai Lama from his then-new book **Sun After Dark: Flights into the Foreign** and he responded that if I like that one, just wait until his next one came out.

"I'm actually writing my next book entirely on the Dalai Lama, based on over thirty years of conversations I've had with him and many travels to hear him speak all over the world," Iyer told me.

Flash-forward four years, and the Dalai Lama is back in the Pacific Northwest, Pico Iyer is once again visiting Bellingham and his long-awaited biography is finally in print. *The Open Road: The Global Journey of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama* is an erudite, insightful and expansive book that is based, as advertised, on Iyer's three-decades relationship with the exiled ruler of Tibet. It isn't a chronological retelling of the Dalai Lama's life, but instead a series of interlocking chapters that examine the world's most famous monk from three different angles (which also serve as section titles): In Public, In Private, In Practice.

Iyer begins his biography by examining the aspects of the Dalai Lama's public life, dividing public perceptions of him into chapters entitled "The Conundrum," "The Fairy Tale" and "The Icon." In the first, Iyer points out the rich ironies embodied in the Dalai Lama: "A religious teacher who is telling people not to get confused or distracted by religion; a Tibetan who is suggesting that Tibet does not have all the answers; a Buddhist who, more and more, is urging foreigners not to take up Buddhism but to study within their own traditions, where their roots are deepest."

And this, the most painful of the Dalai Lama's ironies: despite being celebrated the world over as a leading peacemaker, the political situation in his own country is disastrous. The recent demonstrations by Tibetans against their Chinese masters have resulted in riots, curfews, imprisonments and over 100 Tibetans killed. The violence has unsettled much of the world, and threatens to derail China's coming-out party at this summer's Olympic games.

"The country that he was born to rule is slipping ever closer to extinction," laments Iyer, "...on his watch, his own people have lost most of their contact with their leaders, their loved ones, and their culture, and one of the great centers of Buddhism...has been all but wiped off the map."

Iyer likewise brings his sharp insight to the Dalai Lama's cult of personality, examining how a man who describes himself as "a simple monk" came to acquire the same global recognition as Michael Jackson, Coca-Cola or *Pirates of the Caribbean*.

He believes the Western world's fascination begins with our cultural perception of Tibet as a "Shangri-La," a place of peace, unity and perfect wisdom hidden away from the imperfect, divisive, crass world that we inhabit. The well-known narrative of the Dalai Lama's unusual life story – from the mystical origins of his being recognized as the 14th Dalai Lama as a 2-year old to the dramatic flight from Tibet as the Red Army invaded to his tireless work as a leader-in-exile – also fuels the adoration that follows him wherever he travels. Tibet and the Dalai Lama both "wear the contours of fairy tale" and this turns out to have both benefits and drawbacks.

But fairy tales aside, Iyer also sees something genuine in the way people of many nations and cultures flock to the Dalai Lama.

"The world seemed to have moved from having too little information about itself to having too much," he observes, "and what the soul cried out for...was something that could put the clutter into a larger perspective." The Dalai Lama wins audiences over with "transparent sincerity and lack of shadow: just one man obviously speaking from the heart, with no apparent wish to sell any position or philosophy, let alone himself."

These natural talents for providing people with that larger perspective were evident in the Dalai Lama's recent visit to Seattle. On Saturday, April 12, when temperatures rose above 75 degrees for the first time this year, over 50,000 people filled Qwest Stadium for the capstone event of the five-day Seeds of Compassion conference. The gala featured a colorful parade highlighting over 200 different cultures that live in Washington state, a 1500-member intergenerational choir, drumming and dancing ceremonies and a beaming Gov. Chris Gregoire. The Dalai Lama spoke to the capacity crowd about compassion, nonviolence and dialogue, with a special emphasis on the importance of passing these qualities on to children.

It was the Dalai Lama's first international trip since riots have broken out in both Tibet and along the global path of the Olympic torch as it winds towards China, though he chose to make little reference to the controversies. Instead, he appeared to be engaged with the diverse groups of people he was interacting with on-and-offstage throughout the conference, including the governor, researchers from the University of Washington, musician Dave Matthews, local school children, author Ishmael Beah, Costco co-founder Jeffrey Brotman and Archbishop Tutu.

He also made time to meet with a few people from the Whatcom area, including members of the Lummi Nation, who presented the Dalai Lama with traditional gifts including a cedar bark hat and a beaded necklace, and Chris Moench, a

Bellingham artist who was commissioned to create two of his unique prayer wheels to commemorate the Seeds of Compassion conference.

The ultimate outcome of his trip to Seattle was rather like the ultimate outcome of his visit to Vancouver four years earlier: to discuss what he considers to be the "universal values" of love, dialogue, respect, equanimity, reason, happiness and especially compassion. Rather than proselyte about his own Tibetan Buddhist faith, or speechify about the fate of Tibet, the Dalai Lama barnstorms city after city, country after country, reminding us of what we already know.

Iyer describes this particular gift of the Dalai Lama's as helping people "return to the clutter and commotion (of their lives) a little differently, in part by seeing how they could change the world by changing the way they looked at the world."

"The Dalai Lama liked to talk of 'human beings,' nearly always preceded by the pronoun 'we,'" furthers Iyer, "but what he was really talking about was 'human becomings,' and the ways each one of us could travel along the open road to becoming more compassionate and responsible."

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My original story about the Dalai Lama's 2004 visit to Vancouver B.C. is available for download at www.podcastcafe.org/blog/Dalai_Lama/Dalai_Lama_2004.pdf.

Podcasts of the Dalai Lama's talks in the Pacific Northwest are available for streaming or download at www.podcastcafe.org/radiofreefundi/MP3/HH_Vancouver04.mp3 and www.podcastcafe.org/radiofreefundi/MP3/HH_Seattle08.mp3