

Letter from Rebecca Young in Indonesia

August 26, 2009

Dear Friends,

A new semester has begun at Jakarta Theological Seminary. There's a flurry of activity on campus after a quiet summer. As I write, I hear cheers from a pickup game of badminton in the courtyard two floors below me.

Also in the distance I hear the local mosque's call to prayer. Ramadan, the holy month of fasting, began last Saturday, so the calls to prayer start earlier and last longer than usual. As twilight descends, there's a palpable sense of anticipation for the breaking of the fast at sunset. I'm happy to report I've adjusted to the calls of "Saur, saur," that begin around 3:00 a.m. to remind people to rise and have their morning meal (*saur*, from the Arabic word *suhoor*), "before the sun comes up."

In other words, life has returned to its normal frantic state with the beginning of classes, composing syllabi and reading lists, getting to know the group of advisees I've been assigned, meetings of various school committees, and the other many tasks of the new semester.

So it's nice to have made some good memories over the summer with a special visit from family and a chance to travel.



My older brother Gil, his wife Janet and their two children, Benjamin and Martha Rose, came to explore Indonesia with me for 15 days. They landed one evening in Jakarta, and the next morning we boarded a train across the emerald-hued rice paddies of Java. Arriving in Yogyakarta in central Java, we visited the spectacular temples of Borobudur (Buddhist) and Prambanan (Hindu). Both were built around the ninth century a mere 35 miles apart, a testament to religious tolerance and to the strength of the two religions on this island at that time.

Our next adventure was to the active volcano of Bromo in east Java. Arriving quite late at our destination, we were quite stunned the next morning, rubbing our sleepy eyes, when we found ourselves staring over the edge of a vast *caldera*. "Caldera" is from the Spanish word for cooking pot, referring to what's left when a volcano collapses. About 820,000 years ago, a mountain called Tengger, at 13,000 feet once the highest peak in Java, caved in and left a caldera six miles wide. The cooling lava in the middle formed a completely flat landscape called the Sea of Sand, in the midst of which have since emerged three smaller volcanoes, Bromo, Batok and Kursi. My niece Martha and I rode horses down into the caldera, across the sand, and up to the foot of Bromo, while the rest of the family followed on foot.



Local legend claims a love-smitten ogre dug out the Tengger caldera with half a coconut shell. The ogre had been promised the hand of a beautiful princess should he manage to dig a lake and fill it with water in a single night. The king, seeing the ogre close to success, ordered his servants to pound rice, which caused the roosters to crow as if dawn had broken. The crowing caused the ogre to believe he had failed,

so he tossed the coconut shell and disappeared. The coconut shell became Batok Mountain and the unfinished trench became the Sea of Sand. Although our family didn't meet any kings, princesses, or lost ogres, we did meet up with a group of Balinese pilgrims who consider the Tengger caldera a holy place and have built a Hindu temple on the Sea of Sand.



From Bromo we traveled to easternmost Java and crossed a narrow channel to the island of Bali. This strait, less than two miles wide, is nevertheless quite dangerous and has claimed many lives in its turbulent current. Java and Bali were one land mass until the melting of the last ice age; but the local people have a much livelier story for why the two islands separated from one another. A Javanese man visited the magical dragon of Mount Agung, Bali's highest peak, to ask for help paying debts incurred by his son's gambling. The dragon offered to shake his tail, causing gemstones to fall into the father's hands. Because the son couldn't stop gambling, his father had to return many times to the dragon.

One day the son went to the dragon by himself and in his desperation cut off the dragon's tail rather than settle for a few gemstones. He was reduced to ashes by the dragon's wrath. The father convinced the dragon to restore his son to life in exchange for reattachment of the tail. The father used a magic staff to draw a deep boundary line between the son and the dragon. It filled with water, and thus the Bali Strait came to be. Happily, our trip across the Strait was uneventful, with no sign of dragons or compulsive gamblers.

Arriving safely in Bali, we spent two nights in the palace of a sultanate that once encompassed 7,000 acres of land. It was established in the 14th century when a Javanese king sent an army led by five generals across the strait to subdue an evil leader who was terrorizing the Balinese people. When the generals succeeded, each was granted a sultanate. The palace where we stayed belongs to a direct descendant of one of the five generals. The current sultan told us that the family had their land seized by the Dutch in the 1940s, so they must rely on tourism to maintain the royal compound. He seems to have adjusted well, however, regaling us with amusing stories such as visits to the palace by Mick Jagger, and in the evening, teaching us Balinese dancing.

We ended our lovely trip sitting on the beach in the quiet seaside town of Sanur. Now that I am back in crazy, crowded Jakarta, I thank God for memories of relaxing under coconut palms with my beloved brother and sister-in-law while my precious niece and nephew soaked up the sun, sand, and surf.

Becca