Benjamin ZH Tan

Carol Connare

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My Favorite Meal

The rain stopped as a group of friends and I hiked from the ridgeline down into a grove of subtropical oak trees, giving us a few moments to shed the now soaked layers we wore to stave off the cold mountain air.

We had been following a muddy minefield of yak dung down from the summit of Shivapuri Peak all morning. Once off the ridge, we followed the trail to a fork where our support crew were to establish a temporary kitchen and prepare lunch. But when we stopped at the fork, they were nowhere to be seen.

I looked around. Raindrops sparkled on the surface of every tree and shrub in sight, beading up and forming rivulets that silently chiseled its way through gnarled bark.

“Alright gentlemen, listen up,” our geography teacher said. His boots making a squelching sound as he made his way through the assembled group. “We’ve arrived at our planned lunch site, but we can’t cook because the river is dry. We’ve been walking for a few hours, but we’ll have to carry on until we can find a decent amount of running water.”

Water. I wondered how something so abundant could become so scarce. Seventy-one percent of the planet is covered in water, most of it as saltwater. Seventy-five percent of the Earth’s freshwater is trapped in glaciers and ice sheets. The Kathmandu Valley lies in the Himalayan foothills, so there should be no problems with accessing freshwater. But here we were – drenched to the bone with rainwater and stepping in an ankle-deep brew of mud and dung – looking for freshwater, plentiful and clean enough to drink.

The irony was not lost on me, as we finally found a gurgling brook high above the valley floor. A kilogram of rice consumes about 2,500 liters of water to produce. Pork, the main ingredient in Spam, requires about 6,000 liters per kilogram. Sardines are farmed in water.

And you need water to cook. Rice needs to soak in water prior to steaming over a wood fire. Dal is a dish of curried whole and split lentils that cannot be cooked without water. And don’t forget the naan bread. Water must be added to the dough to amalgamate it, before flattening and sticking fist-sized discs to the sidewalls of a makeshift wood-fired oven.

The end result was a riot of textures and flavors, best served in the company of old friends. The gritty long-grain basmati rice absorbed the spicy dal like a sponge absorbs water. The Spam stood out like a sore thumb with its salty flavor and slightly rubbery texture. But in the mountains, you have to replace the sodium you lose. At the end, the soft, pillowy naan bread was the perfect edible napkin to wipe up all that spicy dal from the plate. A perfectly nutritious meal, all enabled by water.

Confronting the possibility of having to skip a meal because of a lack of sufficient clean water was concerning, but having to live not knowing when water would be available is unimaginable for me, but a very real reality for one-fifth of the world’s population.