

Texel Feder

## Happiness

Brother David Steindl-Rast said, “Gratefulness is the key to a happy life that we hold in our hands, because if we are not grateful, then no matter how much we have we will not be happy -- because we will always want to have something else or something more.” The most important lessons in life are often learned during childhood. As children we see life in a simplistic manner and are drawn to the least complex explanations of things. Growing up in a family where emphasis was placed on fun and happiness, instead of things and money, taught me a lot. With a writer/juggler/baker for a father and a former artist/cake decorator/English teacher for a mother, we never had much money. My mom stayed home to school my sister and me, and during the days spent at home I learned that happiness is not what we own, but a state of mind or a feeling of gratefulness with what we already have.

The United States is known for the emphasis our culture places on material goods, and it is common to measure happiness by the things we have, not the contentment we feel. India, by contrast, is a country filled with some of the poorest people on the globe, yet it is also a country filled with some of the happiest people in the world. While I was traveling in India on a Girl Scout trip this past summer, the lessons I had learned in childhood about happiness were vividly reinforced. I saw whole families living on the sidewalks with nothing more than a tarp, a cooking pot, and the clothes on their backs, but I never saw them without a cheerful grin. For some fellow travelers, it was difficult to understand how these people could be

happy. But I think I knew their secret - happiness doesn't depend on how much money you have or how big your house is - it depends on your outlook on life. A positive outlook leads to happiness, no matter what your circumstances are.

In India co-existence is one of the keys to happiness. Not only do the people of India live in close proximity to each other in cities crowded with shops, homes, and traffic, but animals are everywhere as well. Goats sleep on benches, water buffalo wander the streets, and of course no place is without its loose chickens and skinny dogs. The people of India never seem to mind sharing their cities with the animals, but if the same situation were to occur in America, everyone would be swept up in discontent about whose animal is on whose property. A sense of equality helps the people in India retain their happiness, even through trying times.

While visiting Mahatma Gandhi's home in Mumbai, I was surprised to see how sparsely furnished the house was with its simple furniture and his spinning wheels. Gandhi is one of the most well-known men in modern history, yet by looking at his home, I could not have guessed he was any more influential in the world than the man next to him. Never without a smile, Gandhi embodied all qualities, most importantly happiness, for which Indian people are known. He chose to live with less and found happiness in his struggle for Indian Independence.

At the Maher Women's Shelter in Pune, I experienced first hand how hard life can truly be for some in India. The women at this shelter had escaped from abusive relationships or were widows and, therefore, outcasts of society due to long standing tradition in India. These women and children had next to nothing, yet

upon our arrival we were greeted with smiles, songs, garlands of marigolds, and hugs. Happiness seemed to seep out of the cracks in the old, worn out buildings that these women had made their home. The small gift shop where the women sell their crafts as a means of income was simply decorated but overcrowded with women and young girls eager to assist us in our purchases. They bustled around carrying candles, incense, jewelry, and bags. I left with an armload of gifts, but more importantly, I left feeling happier.

Happiness is not only a state of mind, it's also highly contagious. Sitting next to a happy person, one can't help but feel a grin sneak onto one's face, brightening the day. While driving past the slums of Mumbai one afternoon, a crowd of children gathered and began to run alongside our small bus smiling and waving at us. We may wonder what they have to smile about, but when we are able to focus our goals on the happiness of our minds and souls, rather than possessions, perhaps our culture will truly be happy.