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Hi everyone,

I just got off a ten-hour train ride, and the monotony of the landscape and lack of company got me thinking again. So here goes another one...

As a city, Ahmedabad, where I am based, is all about industry and commerce. If I had to stay here continuously, choking on the pollution and bracing myself against the traffic, all I'd see of India would be the crises and hurdles of development--and working in the 'development' field would only reinforce that. Luckily, though, there is amazing natural and historical beauty only an overnight train ride away, in Rajasthan. I spent the first three days of last week with friends from the America India Foundation in Udaipur, this romantic lakeside city in the middle of the mountains, overlooking a floating palace. I was so thrilled to be with people whose jokes I found funny that all I really wanted to do was sit in the lovely rooftop bars and chat, and was satisfied to just look at the city. Still, though, the surfaces of things can be revealing, especially when they stimulate unlikely comparisons. Udaipur looks surprisingly like Greece--only, the Rajputs of a few hundred years ago were capable of a far more refined and delicate architecture than the Greeks of that time were. An Indian historian I spoke to said that after going all the way to Greece he felt just like he was back home in Jodhpur. He said that Greece made him understand that India is also a decayed and ancient civilization, and that it hurt him that the average Indian villager, like the goat-herders on Santorini, had no real understanding of his ancient surroundings and so therefore couldn't draw any "moral sustenance" from them. It probably is true that today, in the old princely cities like Udaipur, most citizens draw sustenance from the tourists--and tourists who, in turn, are most interested in Udaipur as the setting of "Octopussy" (which you can watch nightly in all the hotels) than as the setting of the old rajput glories. But life in the villages is a different story.

After Udaipur, I went to Jodhpur to visit fifteen of the surrounding villages, where a wonderful Swiss woman named Jacqueline de Chollet started the Veerni Project, an organization dedicated to women's empowerment and maternal health. My friend Elizabeth, whom many of you know, is starting an arts program in Jacqueline's villages, and I jumped at the chance to come spend a few days with them.

At first glance, what struck me in the villages is the vibrancy of the ancient art and dance and song, especially in contrast to the state's decaying cities. I had never before been in a place where the creation of art is part of most people's daily routine and where it serves an actual purpose-- even an arcane purpose that I can only guess at. As I walked around admiring the beautiful wall paintings, sand-drawings on the floor, and henna drawings on the women's hands, I indulged myself in the fantasy that finally, here was a culture so strong and healthy that it had withstood the forces of change. I felt a huge amount of respect for the care the women took with their elegant attire and for how gracefully they danced, and felt like an oafish slob in comparison. I imagined, when we smiled at each other, that we were connecting. I knew it is wrong to romanticize village life in India, but was finding it hard to resist. By the end of four days, however, I could barely stand to be there anymore.

Jacqueline's organization has courageously taken on a fight that few Indians care to tackle, since nearly everyone views population as the greater problem--the fight against female infanticide. Her workers have collected one horrifying piece of data: in one of the villages where she works, there are 135 little boys under a certain age and only 65 girls. More than half of the little girls that should be there have either been aborted, killed at birth, or so neglected that they've died. In one village, we found a beautiful little seven year old girl whose hair was falling out from malnutrition. Her younger brother was perfectly well-fed and looked healthy and happy. When we finally found the mother, who was very reluctant to talk to us, the doctor grilled her for half an hour on what the girl was being fed. By the end, we think that at least the mother understood that her daughter had to be present at school the next day--for the first time in her life. Nonetheless, her bold-faced lying (she tried to convince us she'd taken the girl to the hospital for some special shampoos) made it clear she saw a doctor who wanted to save her daughter's life as her adversary, not her friend.

On another day, the doctor visited a young woman of 25, whose two year old daughter was suffering from severe malnutrition. For months the doctor had been monitoring the baby's weight change and pleading with the mother to start feeding her better, but all that this careful surveillance amounted to was watching the baby be slowly starved to death. Her weight hadn't changed at all in the past month, and she couldn't do anything a child that age should be able to; she couldn't even sit up. This woman was pregnant again, for the fifth time. She had given birth to five girls already (though I think only a couple of them were still alive,) and said that if this one was also a girl, she would keep trying until she had a boy. Most chilling was a woman and her baby girl who we saw on my final day. Last year Jacqueline had had this woman's previous daughter hospitalized because she was on the point of death. The parents were so resistant to the baby being hospitalized that Jacqueline had to tell the hospital that she would call the police if they released the baby before it was better. A week after the baby was returned home, Jacqueline went to see her only to discover that she had died during the night, of a 'chill'. Apparently the easiest way to get rid of an unwanted baby girl is to leave it naked outside in the desert during the winter--it has no chance of making it through the night. Now here was this young woman standing in front of Jacqueline, who had lifted up the woman's veil in order to confront her, with another little girl in her arms. The mother stood there with this defiant grin on her face, and finally thrust the baby towards us saying, "you take her if you want her so badly."

The murder of girls happens all of over India. There is a saying that "raising a girl is like watering a flower in somebody else's garden," and it goes part of the way to explaining the neglect of the girls. If she is going to 'belong' to her in-laws, then she won't be there to care for her parents in their old age, and any investment in her education will only benefit her in-laws. But it is a particularly acute problem in Rajasthan, and that is one of the main reasons Jacqueline has chosen to work here--and maybe one of the main reasons I hadn't seen this before with SEWA. My reaction to the SEWA women has been conviction that they are the vehicles for enormous success and social strengthening, and so to stand in front of these village women and feel I was present to barbarism was a new sensation. When I stood back, I knew, of course, that these women were not barbarians and they were acting not out of cruelty but out of what they considered necessity. Yet

when I heard that woman tell us that we should “take the baby if we cared about her that much,” the lovelessness hit me like a ton of bricks.

Visiting the Veerni Project was a tremendous experience for me because I saw some of what it takes to start an organization on one’s own, especially from Jacqueline but also from Elizabeth, who is dedicating her time and energy to creating an arts program for the women. I chose to work this year for a big organization like SEWA because I felt there was so much to learn. I see now, though, that one can just jump in--that the same qualities that make someone a successful leader back home will probably mean that anything one tries abroad will also be a success. Jacqueline, I believe, is guided by conviction--that girls deserve to live, even in an overpopulated country; by compassion, by a thorough understanding of the issues, and finally, by those key American abilities to make things happen, and trust one’s instincts. She says she got the idea for the Veerni project in a village about ten years ago, when she was buying a textile from a village woman. As she left the village, she saw the woman’s husband come and take the money from her, and she was so incensed at the woman’s lack of power that she decided to act. She set out learning what the villager’s most pressing problems were and what services were already being provided by the government (none, like in 90% of Indian villages,) and then decided to focus on those that she felt the keenest intuitive connection to--women’s health and empowerment. This story inspires me because this could happen to any of us while we are traveling, if we are open to the possibility of it. I have many fears that have stopped me from believing I could start my own small organization to address something that made me really angry, or really sad. Meeting Jacqueline, however, made me realize that many of these fears--I discuss three of them below--are really just misconceptions.

For one, *you don’t need to have all the answers*. What makes Jacqueline’s organization so alive is that it’s really a search for a solution to a question: “how can we make these villagers care whether their girls live or die?” Because she’s trying to find out an answer, she listens and adapts and is always willing to try new things.

You don’t even need to know what kind of project you want to do. All you need to do is go to the villages or slums, and the ideas will come to you. I was in the field for four days and four ideas came to me: one event made me think of an adoption agency, another of a program to send some girls to excellent private schools, another of creating incentives for the parents to invest in their girls, another of a hospital to train rural health workers. Most likely none of these would turn out to be the intelligent solution. The point is simply that when you are in the field, you’ll have no shortage of ideas.

You don’t need to have a lot of money. In the villages I visited, there is as much need for a donation of school books as there is for a well-funded school. I could easily imagine a friend visiting this area and deciding to fund an extra after-school teacher in one village. Wouldn’t there be so much more satisfaction in knowing your money was funding something you’d thought up yourself? Even a contribution of only your time and your presence is worthwhile to the villagers. For when you tell them that you have come all the way from America to see them, it lets them know that somebody actually cares about them.

For all my friends who would like to help but don't know how, I want to suggest one way a person can contribute. Be open to the idea that the affection and concern that we feel for the people we meet traveling in developing countries might be more than just interest, it might be a calling. If we follow that voice and find ourselves in a village, the ways we can help will rapidly become clear. The needs are so great, but at least they are obvious, because they are basically the same needs as we have: for health, education and employment, but also for intangibles, like the self-expression that Elizabeth's art project will address, or the self-confidence that Jacqueline fosters when she gets a roomful of village men to clap for the illiterate village health-worker. I suppose the approach I'm suggesting sounds a bit like, "adopt a village," but why not? Villages are so small and so isolated, and their needs so basic, that an outsider can quickly develop an understanding of the people's problems. But more significant than understanding the issues is that you'll understand the people. If you spend time in the villages, the people will work their way into your hearts. And listening to your heart is surely the best way to discover what specifically you can do to help.

Love,
Jessie