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One Grump's Search for  
the Happiest Places in the World

THE GEOGRAPHY OF

*Bliss*

ERIC WEINER

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## Introduction

My bags were packed and my provisions loaded. I was ready for adventure. And so, on a late summer afternoon, I dragged my reluctant friend Drew off to explore new worlds and, I hoped, to find some happiness along the way. I've always believed that happiness is just around the corner. The trick is finding the right corner.

Not long into our journey, Drew grew nervous. He pleaded with me to turn back, but I insisted we press on, propelled by an irresistible curiosity about what lay ahead. Danger? Magic? I needed to know, and to this day I'm convinced I would have reached wherever it was I was trying to reach had the Baltimore County Police not concluded, impulsively I thought at the time, that the shoulder of a major thoroughfare was no place for a couple of five-year-olds.

Some people acquire the travel bug. Others are born with it. My affliction, if that's what it is, went into remission for many years following my aborted expedition with Drew. It resurfaced after college with renewed fury. I desperately wanted to see the world, preferably on someone else's dime. But how? I had no marketable skills, a stunted sense of morality, and a gloomy disposition. I decided to become a journalist.

As a foreign correspondent for National Public Radio, I traveled to places such as Iraq, Afghanistan, and Indonesia: unhappy places. On one level, this made perfect sense. Unconsciously, I was observing the first law of writing: Write about what you know. And so, notebook in hand, tape recorder slung over my shoulder, I roamed the world telling the stories of gloomy, unhappy people. The truth is that unhappy people, living in profoundly unhappy

places, make for good stories. They tug at heartstrings and inspire pathos.

They can also be a real bummer.

What if, I wondered, I spent a year traveling the globe, seeking out not the world's well-trodden trouble spots but, rather, its unheralded happy places? Places that possess, in spades, one or more of the ingredients that we consider essential to the hearty stew of happiness: money, pleasure, spirituality, family, and chocolate, among others. Around the world, dozens of what-ifs play themselves out every day. What if you lived in a country that was fabulously wealthy and no one paid taxes? What if you lived in a country where failure *is* an option? What if you lived in a country so democratic that you voted seven times a year? What if you lived in a country where excessive thinking is discouraged? Would you be happy then?

That's exactly what I intended to find out, and the result of this admittedly harebrained experiment is the book you now hold in your hands.

I was born in the Year of the Smiley Face: 1963. That's when a graphic designer from Worcester, Massachusetts, named Harvey Ball invented the now-ubiquitous grinning yellow graphic. Originally, Ball's creation was designed to cheer up people who worked at, of all places, an insurance company, but it has since become synonymous with the frothy, quintessentially American brand of happiness.

Ball's cheery icon never worked its magic on me. I am not a happy person, never have been. As a child, my favorite Winnie-the-Pooh character was Eeyore. For most of human history, I would have been considered normal. Happiness, in this life, on this earth, was a prize reserved for the gods and the fortunate few. Today, though, not only is happiness considered possible for anyone to attain, it is expected. Thus I, and millions of others, suffer from the

uniquely modern malady that historian Darrin McMahon calls "the unhappiness of not being happy." It is no fun at all.

And so, like many others, I've worked at it. I never met a self-help book I didn't like. My bookshelf is a towering, teetering monument to existential angst, brimming with books informing me that happiness lies deep inside of me. If I'm not happy, they counsel, then I'm not digging deep enough.

This axiom of the self-help industrial complex is so deeply ingrained as to be self-evident. There's only one problem: It's not true. Happiness is not inside of us but out there. Or, to be more precise, the line between out there and in here is not as sharply defined as we think.

The late British-born philosopher Alan Watts, in one of his wonderful lectures on eastern philosophy, used this analogy: "If I draw a circle, most people, when asked what I have drawn, will say I have drawn a circle or a disc, or a ball. Very few people will say I've drawn a hole in the wall, because most people think of the inside first, rather than thinking of the outside. But actually these two sides go together—you cannot have what is 'in here' unless you have what is 'out there.'"

In other words, where we are is vital to who we are.

By "where," I'm speaking not only of our physical environment but also of our cultural environment. Culture is the sea we swim in—so pervasive, so all-consuming, that we fail to notice its existence until we step out of it. It matters more than we think.

With our words, we subconsciously conflate geography and happiness. We speak of searching for happiness, of finding contentment, as if these were locations in an atlas, actual places that we could visit if only we had the proper map and the right navigational skills. Anyone who has taken a vacation to, say, some Caribbean island and had flash through their mind the uninvited thought "I could be happy here" knows what I mean.

Lurking just behind the curtain is, of course, that tantalizing, slippery concept known as paradise. It has beguiled us humans

for some time now. Plato imagined the Blessed Isles, a place where happiness flowed like the warm Mediterranean waters. Until the eighteenth century, people believed that biblical paradise, the Garden of Eden, was a real place. It appeared on maps—located, ironically, at the confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, in what is now modern-day Iraq.

European explorers prepared for expeditions in search of paradise by learning Aramaic, the language Jesus spoke. I set out on my journey, my search for paradise, speaking not Aramaic but another obscure language, the modern liturgy of bliss spoken by the new apostles of the emerging science of happiness. I brush up on terms like “positive affect” and “hedonic adaptation.” I carry no Bible, just a few *Lonely Planet* guides and a conviction that, as Henry Miller said, “One’s destination is never a place, but a new way of seeing things.”

And so, on a typically steamy day in Miami (itself some people’s concept of paradise), I pack my bags and depart my home on what I know full well is a fool’s errand, every bit as foolish as the one I tried to pull off as a peripatetic five-year-old. As the author Eric Hoffer put it, “The search for happiness is one of the chief sources of unhappiness.” That’s okay. I’m already unhappy. I have nothing to lose.

## Chapter 1

# THE NETHERLANDS

## Happiness Is a Number

It is a fact of human nature that we derive pleasure from watching others engage in pleasurable acts. This explains the popularity of two enterprises: pornography and cafés. Americans excel at the former, but Europeans do a better job at the latter. The food and the coffee are almost beside the point. I once heard of a café in Tel Aviv that dispensed with food and drink altogether; it served customers empty plates and cups yet charged real money.

Cafés are theaters where the customer is both audience and performer. I find a wonderful one a block from my hotel in downtown Rotterdam. It is simultaneously large and cozy, upscale and run-down. Nice wood floors, but they look like they haven’t been polished in years. It’s the kind of place where you could spend hours nursing one beer, and I suspect many people here do just that.

Everyone is smoking, so I join in, lighting up a little cigar. Something about the place makes time feel expansive and I become acutely aware of the smallest details. I notice a woman sitting on a bar stool, her legs perpendicular, resting on a nearby banister so that they form a little drawbridge, which she raises and lowers as people pass by.

I order something called a Trapiste beer. It’s warm. Normally, I don’t like warm beer, but I like this beer. All around me I hear the pleasant chortle of Dutch. It sounds vaguely familiar, though I can’t imagine why. Then it dawns on me. Dutch sounds exactly

like English spoken backward. I know this because I've heard a lot of backward English. In the predigital era, I'd edit tape for my NPR stories on a reel-to-reel tape deck the size of a TV set. Invariably, this would entail playing segments of the tape backward. As I sit in the café, with my little cigar and my warm Trapiste beer, I wonder if I recorded someone speaking Dutch and played that backward, would it sound like regular English?

As you have no doubt surmised, I am a man with time on my hands. Lots of time. But that is the whole point of a European café: to linger excessively and utterly without guilt. No wonder most of the world's great philosophers came from Europe. They hung out at cafés and let their minds wander until some radically new school of philosophy—existentialism, say—popped into their heads. I have not come here to invent a new school of philosophy. Not exactly. I am engaged in what the French call *la chasse au bonheur*, the hunt for happiness.

Specifically, my prey is a Dutch professor named Ruut Veenhoven: the godfather of happiness research. Veenhoven runs something called the World Database of Happiness. It is no joke. Veenhoven has collected, in one location, the sum of human knowledge about what makes us happy, what does not, and, of particular interest to me, which places are the happiest. If there is indeed a road map of happiness out there, an atlas of bliss, then Ruut Veenhoven will know about it.

I leave the café, reluctantly, and head back to my hotel for dinner. Rotterdam is not a beautiful city. It is gray and dull, with few sights of interest. Still, Rotterdam's mix of native Dutch and immigrants, many of them Muslims, leads to some interesting juxtapositions. The Cleopatra Sex Shop, the window display of which consists of a menagerie of large and alarmingly lifelike dildos, is only one block from the Pakistan Islamic Center. At one point, I catch a whiff of marijuana, the fragrant aroma of Dutch tolerance: secondhand stoke. Two blocks later, I see a man perched on a ladder, hanging a giant yellow clog on a storefront, while below two Middle Eastern men greet each other with symmetrical pecks on

the cheek. I don't know exactly where they're from, but some of the immigrants here come from countries where alcohol is illegal and women are covered from head to toe. In their adopted home, marijuana is legal, and so is prostitution. No wonder I sniff tension in the air, mingling with the cannabis.

The hotel dining room is small, cozy. The Dutch do cozy well. I order the asparagus soup. It's good. The waiter clears my bowl and then says, "Now maybe you would like some intercourse."

"Excuse me?"

"Intercourse. You can have intercourse."

I'm thinking, Wow, the Dutch really are a permissive bunch, when it dawns on me that he is speaking of something else entirely. Inter course. As in "between courses."

"Yes," I say, relieved. "That would be nice."

And so I do. I have inter course, right there in the Hotel van Walsum dining room. I enjoy it very much, this unhurried dining experience. I sip my beer, stare into space, and, in general, do nothing—until the waiter brings the grilled salmon, indicating that, for now, my inter course is over.

In the morning, I take the subway to my Holy Grail: the World Database of Happiness, or WDH. Normally, I do not associate the words "happiness" and "database," but this is different. The World Database of Happiness is the secularist's answer to the Vatican and Mecca and Jerusalem and Lhasa, all rolled into one. Here you can, with the click of a mouse, access the secrets of happiness. Secrets based not on ephemeral revelations in some ancient desert but on modern science; secrets inscribed not on parchment but on hard drives; written not in Aramaic but in the language of our times, binary code.

I walk a few blocks from the subway and am instantly disappointed. The college campus where the WDH is housed looks more like a suburban office park than a center of bliss, the repository of humanity's knowledge about happiness. I try to shrug off

this feeling. After all, what was I expecting? The Wizard of Oz? Willy Wonka and the Oompa Loompas scurrying around shouting ecstatically, “We’ve got it, we’ve got it. The secret to happiness”? No, I guess not, but I had been hoping for something a little less sterile. More happy, less data.

I walk down a nondescript corridor and knock on a nondescript office door. A man with a Dutch accent yells for me to enter. There he is. Dr. Feelgood himself. Ruut Veenhoven is a trim man, in his early sixties, I guess. He has a salt-and-pepper beard and bright, electric eyes. He is dressed in all black—stylish, not morbid black. He looks vaguely familiar, and then I realize why: He looks like a Dutch Robin Williams, with the same coiled energy and slightly impish grin. He springs from his chair and offers his hand and a business card, which reads: “Ruut Veenhoven, Professor of Happiness Studies.”

His office looks like that of any professor: books and papers everywhere—not especially messy, but not the neatest office I’ve ever seen, either. Conspicuously, there is not a smiley face in sight. Veenhoven pours me a cup of green tea. Then he grows silent and waits for me to talk.

I don’t know what to say. As a journalist, I’ve conducted hundreds of interviews. I’ve interviewed kings and presidents and prime ministers, not to mention heads of terrorist organizations like Hezbollah. Yet sitting here, across from this kindly Dutch professor who looks like Robin Williams, I am stumped. Part of me, the part that desperately craves peace of mind, wants to shout, “Dr. Veenhoven, you’ve crunched the numbers, you’ve studied happiness your entire professional life; please give it to me. Give me the damn formula for happiness!”

But I don’t say that. I can’t shake years of training, which tell me to maintain my distance from my subject and never, ever reveal too much about myself. I’m like the off-duty cop who is out to dinner with his family but can’t stop scanning the restaurant for potential shooters.

So instead of unburdening my soul, I resort to an old trick

employed by journalists and women who want to put a date at ease. “Dr. Veenhoven,” I finally say, “tell me about yourself. How did you get into the happiness business?”

Veenhoven leans back in his chair, happy to oblige. He came of age in the 1960s. Everyone on his college campus was smoking dope, wearing Che Guevara T-shirts and talking about the good society. Veenhoven also smoked plenty of dope but didn’t wear a Che Guevara T-shirt; and as for those “good societies,” Eastern Bloc countries, Veenhoven found them wanting. Instead of judging a society by its system, he thought, why not judge it by its results? Were its citizens happy? Veenhoven’s hero wasn’t Che Guevara but a socially inept nineteenth-century British barrister named Jeremy Bentham. Bentham famously espoused the utilitarian principle, “the greatest happiness of the greatest number.” Veenhoven would have gladly worn a Jeremy Bentham T-shirt, had such a thing existed.

Veenhoven was studying sociology—a field that, at the time, meant only the study of sick societies, dysfunctional ones. Its sister discipline, psychology, studied sick minds. But not young Ruut. He was interested in healthy minds and happy places. One day, a bit timid but determined nonetheless, Veenhoven knocked on his advisor’s door and asked if he could please study happiness. His advisor, a sober man with solid academic credentials, told him, in no uncertain terms, to shut up and never mention that word again. Happiness was not a serious subject.

Veenhoven left, chastised but secretly pleased. He knew he was on to something. It so happened, though the young Dutch graduate student didn’t know at the time, couldn’t possibly have known, that around the world social scientists were waking up to a new discipline: happiness studies. Today, Veenhoven is at the forefront of a field that churns out hundreds of research papers each year. There are happiness conferences and a *Journal of Happiness Studies* (which Veenhoven edits). Students at Claremont

Graduate University in California can now earn an MA or PhD in positive psychology—in happiness.

Some of Veenhoven's colleagues still think his old advisor was right, that the study of happiness is misguided, stupid. But they can't ignore him. His research is out there; it's cited in journals, and in the academic world that means it matters.

The contemplation of happiness, of course, is not new. The ancient Greeks and Romans did a lot of it. Aristotle, Plato, Epicurus, and others sweated over the eternal questions. What is the good life? Is pleasure the same as happiness? When are we going to invent indoor plumbing?

Later, the Greeks and the Romans were joined by others, paler-skinned men from lands farther north who spent an inordinate amount of time in cafés, contemplating life's inextricable quandaries. Men like Kant, Schopenhauer, Mill, Nietzsche, and, later, Larry David. They, too, had much to say about happiness.

And then there is religion. What is religion if not a guide to happiness, to bliss? Every religion instructs followers in the ways of happiness, be it in this life or the next, be it through submission, meditation, devotion, or, if you happen to belong to the Jewish or Catholic faith, guilt.

All of this may have been helpful, enlightening even, but it wasn't science. It was opinions about happiness. Learned opinions, no doubt, but opinions nonetheless, and in today's world we have little regard for opinions, except possibly our own and then not always. No, what we respect, pay heed to, is hard science or, failing that, soft science. Most of all, we love a good study. Newscasters know instinctively that the best way to get people's ears to perk up is with these five words: "A new study has found." It matters little what follows next. A new study has found that red wine is good for you / kills you. A new study has found that homework dulls the brain / enlarges it. We especially like studies that lend credibility to our own idiosyncrasies, as in, "A new study has

found that people with messy desks are smarter" or "A new study has found that moderate daily flatulence improves longevity."

Yes, if this new science of happiness was to be taken seriously, it needed studies. But first, it needed a vocabulary, a serious jargon. The word "happiness" wouldn't do. It sounded too frivolous, too easily understood. This was a problem. So the social scientists came up with a doozy: "subjective well-being." Perfect. Not only was it multisyllabic and virtually impenetrable to laypeople, it also could be condensed into an even more obscure acronym: SWB. To this day, if you want to find the latest scholarly research on happiness, you need to Google "SWB," not "happiness." Next came other pieces of the jargon puzzle. "Positive affect" is when something feels good; "negative affect" is—you guessed it—when something feels bad.

Next, the new science of happiness needed data. Numbers. For what is science if not numbers, preferably large ones with lots of decimal points. And how do scientists get these numbers? They measure things.

Oh, no. Major roadblock. How can you measure happiness? Happiness is a feeling, a mood, an outlook on life. Happiness can't be measured.

Or can it? Neuroscientists at the University of Iowa have identified the regions of the brain associated with good and bad moods. They do this by hooking up research subjects (college students in need of quick cash) to MRI machines and then showing them a series of pictures. When they show people pleasant pictures—bucolic landscapes, dolphins playing—parts of the prefrontal lobe are activated. When they show unpleasant images—a bird covered in oil, a dead soldier with parts of his face missing—the more primitive parts of the brain light up. Happy feelings, in other words, register in the regions of the brain that have evolved most recently. It raises an intriguing question: Are we, in evolutionary if not personal terms, slouching toward happiness?

Researchers have toyed with other ways of measuring happiness: stress hormones, cardiac activity, and something called "facial

coding”—counting how many times we smile, for instance. All of these techniques are promising, and, indeed, one day scientists may be able to “take your happiness” the way a doctor today takes your temperature.

Now, though, the main way researchers measure happiness is through a far more low-tech and, when you think about it, quite obvious technique. They ask people how happy they are. Really. “All things considered, how happy would you say you are these days?” That is the question, more or less, that surveyors have asked people around the world for the past forty or so years.

Ruut Veenhoven and his colleagues claim that the answers are remarkably accurate. “You can have a disease and not know it,” Veenhoven tells me, “but you can’t be happy and not know it. By definition, if you are happy, you know it.”

Perhaps, but man’s capacity for self-deception is not to be underestimated. Are we indeed capable of gauging our own happiness? There was this moment, for instance, when I was seventeen years old that I thought I was very happy indeed, completely content, without a care in the world. In retrospect, it turns out I was just extremely stoned at the time. Plus, beer was involved. I think.

Another speed bump on the road to happiness: Different people define happiness differently. Your idea of happiness may not be the same as mine. My favorite definition of happiness sprang from the mind of an unhappy man named Noah Webster. When he penned the first American dictionary, in 1825, he defined happiness as “the agreeable sensations which spring from the enjoyment of good.” That says it all. It has “agreeable sensations,” the notion that happiness is a feeling. The hedonists would get off on that. It has “enjoyment,” which signifies that happiness is more than pure animal pleasure. And enjoyment of what? Of the “good,” a word that, I think, Webster should have capitalized. The Good. We want to feel good but for the right reasons. Aristotle would have approved of that. “Happiness is a virtuous activity of the soul,” he said. A virtuous life, in other words, is a happy life.

We humans are creatures of the last five minutes. In one study,

people who found a dime on the pavement a few minutes before being queried on the happiness question reported higher levels of satisfaction with their overall lives than those who did not find a dime. Researchers have tried to get around this quirk of the human psyche through something called the experience-sampling method. They strap little Palm Pilot–like devices to research subjects and then ping them maybe a dozen times a day. Are you happy now? What about now? Here, though, the Heisenberg principle rears its head. The mere act of observing something alters it. All of that pinging, in other words, might affect the subjects’ happiness.

Also, most people want to present a happy face to the world. That explains why people consistently report higher happiness levels when they are asked in face-to-face interviews rather than in mail-in surveys. And we report even higher happiness levels if the interviewer is a member of the opposite sex. Instinctively, we know that happy is sexy.

Happiness researchers, however, are quick to defend their work. For one thing, people’s answers are consistent over time. Also, researchers corroborate people’s responses by, for instance, checking with their friends and relatives. “Does Joe seem like a happy person to you?” It turns out that these outside assessments tend to jibe with our own degree of perceived happiness. Besides, scientists measure IQ and attitudes toward issues like racism, which are also subjective. Why not happiness as well? Or as Mihály Csíkszentmihályi, a giant in the field of happiness studies, put it: “When a person says he is ‘pretty happy’ one has no right to ignore his statement, or interpret it to mean the opposite.”

So assuming that these happiness studies are reasonably accurate, what have they found? Who is happy? And how do I join them? This is where Ruut Veenhoven and his database come into play.

Veenhoven leads me to a room as nondescript and soulless as the rest of the campus. Inside is a bank of a half-dozen computers. They are manned by the small, mostly volunteer staff of the

WDH, none of whom looks especially happy. I let this incongruity slide; even an overweight doctor might have some good advice about exercise and diet.

I pause to take in the moment. On these computers, right in front of me, is humanity's accumulated knowledge of happiness. After virtually ignoring the subject for decades, social scientists are now making up for lost time, churning out research papers at a prodigious rate. Happy, you might say, is the new sad.

The research findings are alternatively obvious and counter-intuitive, expected and surprising. In many cases, the findings validate the great thinkers of centuries past—as if the ancient Greeks need validation. Here are a few of the findings, in no particular order.

Extroverts are happier than introverts; optimists are happier than pessimists; married people are happier than singles, though people with children are no happier than childless couples; Republicans are happier than Democrats; people who attend religious services are happier than those who do not; people with college degrees are happier than those without, though people with advanced degrees are less happy than those with just a BA; people with an active sex life are happier than those without; women and men are equally happy, though women have a wider emotional range; having an affair will make you happy but will not compensate for the massive loss of happiness that you will incur when your spouse finds out and leaves you; people are least happy when they're commuting to work; busy people are happier than those with too little to do; wealthy people are happier than poor ones, but only slightly.

So what should we do with these findings? Get married but don't have kids? Start going to church regularly? Drop out of that PhD program? Not so fast. Social scientists have a hard time unraveling what they call "reverse causality" and what the rest of us call the chicken-and-egg problem. For instance, healthy people are happier than unhealthy ones; or is it that happy people tend to be

healthier? Married people are happy; or maybe happy people are more likely to get married? It's tough to say. Reverse causality is the hobgoblin that makes mischief in many a research project.

What I really want to know, though, is not who is happy but where they are happy—and why. Veenhoven sighs when I ask about this and pours another cup of tea. Here, the calculations get trickier. Can we really say which countries, which peoples, are happier than others? Has my search for the world's happiest places ended before it begins?

All cultures have a word for happiness, and some have many words. But does the English word "happiness" mean the same as the French *bonheur* or the Spanish *felicidad* or the Arabic *sa-haada*? In other words, does happiness translate? There's some evidence that the answer is yes. The Swiss report equal levels of happiness, whether they take the surveys in French, German, or Italian, the country's three main languages.

All cultures value happiness, but not to the same degree. East Asian countries tend to emphasize harmony and fulfilling societal obligations rather than individual contentment; perhaps not coincidentally, these countries also report lower levels of happiness, what's been called the East Asian Happiness Gap, which sounds to me like some sort of Chinese Grand Canyon. Then there is the "social desirability bias." The concern here is that people answer the happiness surveys not from their heart but in ways that their society would approve of. The Japanese, for instance, are famously self-effacing, afraid to be the proverbial nail that sticks out; they are also, relative to their wealth, not very happy. I lived in Japan for years and never got used to the sight of Japanese women covering their mouths when they laughed or smiled, as if ashamed of their glee.

We Americans, on the other hand, wear our happiness on our sleeves and, if anything, are guilty of inflating our contentment in order to impress. Here is what a Polish citizen living in the United States told the writer Laura Klos Sokol about Americans: "When

Americans say it was great, I know it was good. When they say it was good, I know it was okay. When they say it was okay, I know it was bad.”

This is going to be tough. The atlas of bliss, if one exists, won't be easy to read. It's like that crumpled map sitting in your glove compartment. But I was determined to plow ahead, convinced that while we may not be able to differentiate fine shades of happiness among countries, surely we can say that some countries are happier than others.

Veenhoven gives me complete access to his database and wishes me luck, but first he warns me: “You may not like what you find.”

“What do you mean?”

The happiest places, he explains, don't necessarily fit our preconceived notions. Some of the happiest countries in the world—Iceland and Denmark, for instance—are homogeneous, shattering the American belief that there is strength, and happiness, in diversity. One finding, which Veenhoven just uncovered, has made him very unpopular with his fellow sociologists. He found that income distribution does not predict happiness. Countries with wide gaps between the rich and poor are no less happy than countries where the wealth is distributed more equally. Sometimes, they are happier.

“My colleagues are not amused,” says Veenhoven. “Inequality is big business here in the sociology department. Entire careers have been built on it.”

I accept his advice politely but think he must be exaggerating about the dangers that lie ahead. I am wrong. Looking for the world's happiest places can make anyone miserable—or at the least give them a splitting headache. With each click of the mouse, I encounter mysteries and apparent contradictions. Like this: Many of the world's happiest countries also have high suicide rates. Or this one: People who attend religious services report being happier than those who do not, but the world's happiest nations are secu-

lar. And, oh, the United States, the richest, most powerful country in the world, is no happiness superpower. Many other nations are happier than we are.

My days in Rotterdam fall into a pleasant routine. I have breakfast at the hotel, perhaps indulge in a bit of inter course, then ride the subway to the World Database of Happiness. There, I sift through the research papers and the data, looking for my elusive atlas of bliss. In the evenings, I go to my café (I never do learn its name), where I drink warm beer, smoke little cigars, and ponder the nature of happiness. It's a routine that involves much contemplation, moderate amounts of intoxicants, and very little actual work. It is, in other words, a very European routine. I'm going native.

For some reason, I decide to start at the bottom of the happiness ladder and work my way up. Which countries are the least happy? Not surprisingly, many African nations fall into this category. Tanzania, Rwanda, and Zimbabwe are near the very bottom of the happiness well. A few African countries, such as Ghana, manage to achieve middling levels of happiness, but that's about it. The reasons seem obvious. Extreme poverty is not conducive to happiness. The myth of the happy, noble savage is just that: a myth. If our basic needs are not met, we're not likely to be happy.

Curiously, I find another batch of nations stuck at the bottom of the happiness spectrum: the former Soviet republics—Belarus, Moldova, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, and a dozen others.

Are democracies happier than dictatorships? Not necessarily. Many of those former Soviet republics are quasi-democracies; certainly they are freer now than in Soviet times, yet their happiness levels have decreased since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Ron Inglehart, a professor at the University of Michigan, has spent most of his career studying the relationship between democracy and happiness. He believes that the causality flows the other way; democracies don't promote happiness, but happy places are more likely to be democratic—which, of course, does not bode well for Iraq.

What about the warm and sunny places, those tropical paradises that we associate with happiness and pay good money to vacation in? It turns out that they are not so happy. Fiji, Tahiti, the Bahamas—they all fall into the middle latitudes of happiness. Happy countries tend to be those in temperate climates, and some of the happiest—Iceland, for instance—are downright cold.

Believe it or not, most people in the world say they are happy. Virtually every country in the world scores somewhere between five and eight on a ten-point scale. There are a few exceptions: The sullen Moldovans consistently score about 4.5, and for a brief period in 1962 the citizens of the Dominican Republic could muster only a 1.6, the lowest level of happiness ever recorded on the planet. But, as I said, these are rare exceptions. Most of the world is happy.

Why does this come as such a surprise? Two types of people, I think, are to blame: journalists and philosophers. The media, of which I am a culpable member, report, as a rule, only bad news: wars, famine, the latest Hollywood couple's implosion. I don't mean to belittle the troubles in the world, and God knows I have made a good living reporting them, but we journalists do paint a distorted picture.

The philosophers, though, are the real culprits—the brooding white guys from Europe. They tended to wear all black, smoke too much, and had trouble getting dates. So they hung out, alone, in cafés, pondered the universe, and—surprise!—concluded it is an unhappy place. Of course it is. That is, if you happen to be a lonely, brooding, pasty-skinned white guy. The happy people of, say, eighteenth-century Heidelberg were busy being happy, not writing long, rambling diatribes intended to torture some not-yet-born college student in Bloomington who needs to pass Philosophy 101 in order to graduate.

Worst of all was Freud. While not technically a brooding philosopher, Freud did much to shape our views on happiness. He once said: "The intention that Man should be happy is not in the plan of Creation." That is a remarkable statement, especially

coming from a man whose ideas forged the foundation of our mental-health system. Imagine if some doctor in turn-of-the-century Vienna had declared: "The intention that Man should have a healthy body is not in the plan of Creation." We'd probably lock him up, or at least strip him of his medical license. We certainly wouldn't base our entire medical system on his ideas. Yet that is exactly what we did with Freud.

Still, most people are happy? It doesn't sit right with me. I'm a person, and I'm not particularly happy. Which got me thinking: Where did I fall in Veenhoven's constellation of happiness data? If I am honest, and I might as well be if I'm taking the trouble to write this, I'd say I was a six. That makes me considerably less happy than my fellow Americans, but according to the WDH I'd feel right at home in Croatia.

I'm inclined to agree with linguist and fellow curmudgeon Anna Wierzbicka, who, when faced with this very same claim that most people are reasonably happy replied with one simple question: "Who *are* those reportedly happy people?"

Who indeed. My head hurts. Have I embarked on a futile mission to find the world's happiest places? Then I notice that one country scores consistently high on the happiness scale—not number one but darned close. It also happens to be the country I am visiting at this very moment.

I retire to my café, order a beer, and ponder Dutch happiness. Why should the Netherlands, a flat and nondescript country, be so happy? For starters, the Dutch are European, and that means they don't have to worry about losing their health insurance, or for that matter their job. The state will take care of them. They get a gazillion weeks of vacation each year and, being European, are also entitled to, at no extra cost, a vaguely superior attitude toward Americans. Does smugness lead to happiness? I wonder, sipping my Trapiste beer. No, there must be something else.

Tolerance! This is the original "don't tread on me" nation. A nation where, it seems, the adults are out of town and the teenagers are in charge. Not just for the weekend, either. All of the time.

The Dutch will tolerate anything, even intolerance. In the past few decades they have welcomed, with open arms, immigrants from around the world, including those from nations that don't tolerate things like religious freedom and women who work or drive or show their faces. Dutch tolerance comes at a cost, as the murder of the filmmaker Theo van Gogh by a Muslim extremist highlighted. But Veenhoven's research shows that tolerant people tend to be happy.

What exactly does Dutch tolerance look like, in an everyday way? Three things come to mind: drugs, prostitution, and cycling. In the Netherlands, all three activities are legal. All three can easily lead to happiness, provided that certain precautions are taken. Wearing a helmet while cycling, for instance.

I needed to investigate one of these activities, up close, in order to get at the heart of Dutch happiness. But which one? Cycling is certainly worthwhile, and God knows the Dutch love their bicycles, but it was chilly outside, too chilly to get on a bike. Prostitution? That activity takes place indoors, usually, so the weather wouldn't be a factor. And it clearly makes some people happy. But there was the issue of my wife. She has supported my happiness research, up to a point, and something told me that engaging the services of a Dutch prostitute lies beyond that point.

So drugs it is. Soft drugs, marijuana and hashish, are legal in the Netherlands. They are served in coffee shops, which aren't really coffee shops at all but drug dens. "Coffee shop" sounds more respectable than "drug den," though.

But which one should I try? There are so many to choose from. In Rotterdam, every third or fourth storefront, it seems, is a "coffee shop." I'm tempted by one called Sky High, but the name seems too... obvious. Others look too hip. I haven't gotten high since my junior year in college. I don't want to make a fool of myself.

Then I spot it. The Alpha Blondie Coffee Shop. It's perfect. Besides the irresistible name, the Alpha Blondie also offers ventilation, an open window, which is a definite plus. I press a buzzer then walk up a narrow staircase. Inside, there's a foosball table

and a cooler filled with orange Fanta and Coke, as well as plenty of Snickers and M&M's, for the munchies, no doubt. I'm surprised to see an actual coffee machine in this coffee shop, but it looks like it hasn't been used in months. A prop, I conclude.

Bad 1970s music is playing, and a little too loudly. On one wall, I notice a painting that looks like it was done by a talented sixth-grader. In the foreground is a car that has just plowed into a tree, with skid marks trailing off toward the horizon. Underneath is written: "Some roads only exist in drugged minds." I'm not sure if this is meant as a warning about these roads or as an endorsement of them.

Everyone here seems to be a regular, except, of course, for me. I'm instantly transported back to my college dorm room in New Jersey. Trying to be cool, trying to fit in, but failing miserably.

An olive-skinned man comes over to me and, in broken English, explains the menu. Today they are featuring Thai marijuana, he says, as if describing the soup du jour, as well as two types of hashish: Moroccan and Afghan.

I'm at a loss. So I do what I always do when the menu proves overwhelming. I ask the waiter for his recommendation.

"Do you prefer strong or mild?" he asks.

"Mild."

"Then I would definitely go with the Moroccan."

I hand him a five-euro note (about six dollars), and he hands me a baggie with a chalky brown slab the size of a postage stamp.

I have absolutely no idea what to do with it.

For a moment, I'm tempted to call my old college roommate, Rusty Fishkind. Rusty would know what to do. He was always the cool one. Rusty handled a bong the way Yo-Yo Ma handles a cello. I'm sure Rusty is a corporate lawyer now, living in the suburbs with four kids, but still, I bet he would know what to do with this chunk of Moroccan hash.

As if on cue, Linda Ronstadt pipes up. *You're no good, you're no good, baby, you're no good.*

I briefly consider swallowing the hash and washing it down

with a Pepsi but think better of that idea and just fumble with the hash instead, trying to look as helpless as possible, which under the circumstances comes naturally. Finally, a bearded man wearing a leather jacket takes pity on me. Without saying a word, he takes the hash in his hands and crumbles it like feta cheese. Then he unrolls a cigarette, a regular cigarette, and inserts the hash. After a fluent shake, lick, and tap, he hands the now hash-infused cigarette back to me.

I thank him and light up.

A few observations. First of all, I do recommend the Moroccan. It is indeed a smooth smoke. Second, at least half the fun of engaging in illicit activity is the illicit part and not the activity part. In other words, smoking hash legally in Rotterdam is not nearly as much fun as doing it illicitly in your college dorm room with Rusty Fishkind, knowing that at any moment you might get caught.

Still, I am feeling good. No pain. And, as the Moroccan settles into my cerebral cortex, I wonder: What if I stayed like this all of the time? Wouldn't I be happy all of the time? I could end my search for the world's happiest places right here, at the Alpha Blondie Coffee Shop in Rotterdam. Maybe this is the happiest place in the world.

The philosopher Robert Nozick had something to say on the subject. Not about the Alpha Blondie, which I doubt he's frequented, nor about Moroccan hash, which he may or may not have smoked. But Nozick did think long and hard about the relationship between hedonism and happiness. He once devised a thought experiment called the Experience Machine.

Imagine that "superduper neuropsychologists" have figured out a way to stimulate a person's brain in order to induce pleasurable experiences. It's perfectly safe, no chance of a malfunction, and not harmful to your health. You would experience constant pleasure for the rest of your life. Would you do it? Would you plug into the Experience Machine?

If not, argued Nozick, then you've just proved that there is more to life than pleasure. We want to achieve our happiness and not just experience it. Perhaps we even want to experience unhappiness, or at least leave open the possibility of unhappiness, in order to truly appreciate happiness.

Regrettably, I find myself in agreement with Nozick. I would not plug myself into the Experience Machine, and therefore I will not be relocating to the Alpha Blondie Coffee Shop. Which is a shame. Did I mention how smooth the Moroccan hash is?

The next morning, my mind Moroccan-free, I make my daily trip to the WDH. I mention my little experiment to Veenhoven. He approves, of course. In fact, when I had first pointed out that many of the activities that the Dutch engage in regularly, such as prostitution and drugs, would get me arrested in the United States, he just smiled slyly and said, "I know. Enjoy."

Veenhoven says the database might provide some answers to the age-old question: Is pleasure the same as happiness? After a few digital detours, I find a paper that Veenhoven himself wrote. It's called "Hedonism and Happiness." I read the abstract.

"The relation between happiness and consumption of stimulants follows an inverted U-curve. Spoil sports and guzzlers are less happy than modest consumers." In other words, as the ancient Greeks counseled a few thousand years ago, everything in moderation. I read on and learn that "several studies have observed a positive correlation between permissive attitudes towards sex and personal happiness." Presumably, these permissive happy people are not the same happy people who are attending church regularly. As for drugs, a 1995 study found that—no surprise—use of hard drugs tends to decrease happiness over time. But what about soft drugs, like, say, Moroccan hash? It turns out that there has been little research in this area.

How about that, I think, swiveling away from the computer monitor. Last night, at the Alpha Blondie Coffee Shop, on the very

first leg of my journey, I was engaged in cutting-edge happiness research. Who knew?

It's my last day in Rotterdam. A forgettable city but one that I will miss nonetheless. It's time to say goodbye to Veenhoven, and I am never good at goodbyes. I thank him for all of his help, for all of his blissful data. Then, almost as an afterthought, I pause at the door and say, "It must be wonderful working in the field of happiness studies."

Veenhoven looks perplexed. "What do you mean?"

"Well, you must have an abiding faith in mankind's capacity for happiness."

"No, not really."

"But you've been studying happiness, analyzing it your entire life."

"Yes, but it doesn't matter to me if people are happy or not, as long as some people are happier than others. I can still crunch the numbers."

I just stand there for a moment, stunned. Here I thought Veenhoven was a fellow traveler, a comrade in the hunt for happiness, but it turns out that, as they say in the South, he has no dog in this hunt. Or, if you prefer, Veenhoven isn't a player in the happiness game; he's the referee, keeping score. And, like any good referee, it matters not one whit to him who wins the game. Happiness or despondency, it's all the same. As long as one side prevails.

That is, I suppose, the whole point of this new, dispassionate study of happiness. Veenhoven and the other blissologists desperately wanted academia to take their discipline seriously, lest they be dismissed as New Age faddists. They have succeeded, but I wonder at what cost. In their world, happiness is reduced to yet another statistic, data to be sliced, diced, parsed, run through the computer, and, ultimately, inevitably, reduced to spreadsheets. And I can't think of anything less happy than a spreadsheet.

I realize that my visit to the WDH was a fine start but an incomplete one. Nowhere among the eight thousand studies and research papers did I find any mention of the happiness a nation derives from its arts, the pleasure accrued by hearing a particularly lovely poem read aloud and well, or by watching a darned good movie, accompanied by a tub of popcorn, no butter. Nor does the database reveal anything about the invisible threads that bind a family. Some things are beyond measuring.

So I construct my atlas of bliss, my road map of happiness, based partly on Ruut Veenhoven's database and partly on my own hunches. Rich or poor, hot or cold, democracy or dictatorship, it matters not. I will follow the happiness scent wherever it leads.

With my atlas in hand, I board the train at Rotterdam Central. As the train begins to roll and the Dutch countryside glides by, I feel an unexpected sense of relief. Freedom even. Freedom from what? I can't imagine. My visit was fine. I drank some good beer, smoked some fine hash, and even learned a thing or two about happiness.

Then it dawns on me. Freedom from all that . . . freedom. Tolerance is great, but tolerance can easily slide into indifference, and that's no fun at all. Besides, I can't live with so much slack. I'm too weak. I wouldn't know when to stop. If I moved to Holland, you'd probably find me a few months later, engulfed in a cloud of Moroccan hash, a hooker under each arm.

No, the Dutch way is not for me. Perhaps my next destination is the one. I'm heading to a country where the trains run on time, the streets are clean, and tolerance, like everything else, is doled out carefully, in moderation. I am heading to Switzerland.

isn't quite right, either. Words fail me. We have far more words to describe unpleasant emotional states than pleasant ones. (And this is the case with all languages, not just English.) If we're not happy, we have a smorgasbord of words to choose from. We can say we're feeling down, blue, miserable, sullen, gloomy, dejected, morose, despondent, in the dumps, out of sorts, long in the face. But if we're happy that smorgasbord is reduced to the salad bar at Pizza Hut. We might say we're elated or content or blissful. These words, though, don't capture the shades of happiness.

We need a new word to describe Swiss happiness. Something more than mere contentment but less than full-on joy. "Conjoyment," perhaps. Yes, that's what the Swiss possess: utter conjoyment. We could use this word to describe all kinds of situations where we feel joyful yet calm at the same time. Too often when we say we feel joyful, we're really feeling manic. There is a frenetic nature to our joy, a whiff of panic; we're afraid the moment might end abruptly. But then there are other moments when our joy is more solidly grounded. I am not speaking of a transcendental moment, of bliss, but something less, something Swiss.

We might experience conjoyment when we are doing something mundane, like sweeping the floor or sorting our trash or listening to that old Bob Dylan CD we haven't heard in years. Yes, that's it. The Swiss may not be happy, but they sure know how to conjoy themselves.

## Chapter 3

### BHUTAN

## Happiness Is a Policy

*There came a time, he realized, when the strangeness of everything made it increasingly difficult to realize the strangeness of anything.*

— James Hilton, *Lost Horizon*

The Airbus levels at thirty-seven thousand feet, somewhere over the Himalayas. The cabin lights glow soft and warm. The flight attendants glide down the aisle, gracious and attentive.

I am looking out the window, for I have been advised by Those in the Know that an aisle seat just won't do. Not on this flight.

For a long while I see nothing but a solid blanket of cloud. I am beginning to question the wisdom of Those in the Know when suddenly the clouds are gone, and the mountains reveal themselves. Towering, mesmerizing mountains. The Himalayas make all other mountains look like bunny hills.

People around me are craning their necks, reaching for cameras, ahhhhing and oohing. My thoughts, however, are elsewhere. I'm thinking of another airplane and another time. The year is 1933, and this airplane is a rickety propeller plane. It, too, is flying over the Himalayas, not far from where I am now, but the cabin on this plane is cold, the seats hard, the flight attendants nonexistent. The passengers—three Brits and an American—need to shout to make themselves heard over the engine noise. The

trepidation in their voices, however, is unmistakable. The pilot, brandishing a revolver, is way off course, flying toward some unknown destination. They are being hijacked.

The destination turns out to be a remarkable place of “sumptuous tranquility.” A place of eternal peace where monks meditate, poets muse, and everyone lives impossibly long and satisfying lives. A remote place, cut off from the horrors of the outside world, though not from its tactile comforts.

The place is Shangri-La, the four passengers characters in the book *Lost Horizon*. Shangri-La is, of course, an invented place. James Hilton, the author, never ventured farther than the British Museum in London for his research. But the idea of Shangri-La is very real. Who hasn’t dreamed of a place simultaneously placid and intellectually invigorating? A place made for the head and the heart, where both live in happy unison to the ripe old age of 250.

When the book and the movie came out in the 1930s, *Lost Horizon* captured the imagination of an American public in the grips of the Great Depression, reeling from one world war and bracing for another. Franklin D. Roosevelt named his presidential retreat Shangri-La (later renamed Camp David). Hotels, grand and fleabag alike, called themselves Shangri-La, hoping to bask in its utopian glow.

Shangri-La contains all of the classic ingredients of paradise. First of all, it is difficult to reach. Paradise, after all, is not paradise if you can take a taxi there. Furthermore, there must be a clear demarcation between paradise and ordinary life, separated by a netherworld that only a few fortunate souls can traverse. Paradise, in other words, is a selective club. Just like business class, which owes its pleasures, in no small way, to the presence of other travelers less fortunate than yourself, back there in coach gumming rubbery chicken and fishing in their pockets for exact change (which is always appreciated) to anesthetize themselves with miniature bottles of vodka. You can’t see these poor souls—that’s what the curtain is for—but you know they are there, and that makes all the difference.

And so Shangri-La’s enigmatic High Lama proclaims: “We are a single lifeboat riding the seas in a gale; we can take a few chance survivors, but if all the shipwrecked were to reach us and clamber aboard we should go down ourselves.” As would an airliner, no doubt, should the curtain fail and the unwashed masses stream forward, toward business class.

Though invented more than seventy years ago, James Hilton’s Shangri-La is a very modern kind of paradise. It contains the accumulated wisdom of the east, yes, but also the accumulated plumbing of the west (bathtubs from Akron, Ohio). Not to mention a reading room with leather-bound volumes of the great books. Comfortable accommodations. Food that is plentiful and delicious. Shangri-La, in other words, was the first soft-adventure destination. Paradise lite.

The thing about paradise, though, is we don’t always recognize it immediately. Its paradiseness takes time to sink in. In *Lost Horizon*, most of the kidnapped foreigners plot to escape Shangri-La. They are desperate to return to “civilization” and are suspicious, justifiably so, of the excuses proffered by the lamas. Bad weather. Not enough supplies. But one of the group, a misfit British diplomat named Conway, is enthralled by Shangri-La and chooses to stay. When I first read *Lost Horizon*, I related to Conway and would have given anything to trade places with him.

*Lost Horizon* spoke to me, but I didn’t speak back for many years. Not until I heard about Bhutan. I was living in India at the time, the early 1990s, as a correspondent for National Public Radio. I was the network’s first correspondent in that country; the path was unbeaten. Monkeys occasionally wandered into my apartment. Snake charmers dropped by. I was having the time of my life.

The countries I was assigned to cover—my patch, as it were—included Bhutan. I could hardly believe my luck. Here was a country that, in my mind, was the closest thing going to Shangri-La. Bhutan had the mountains, towering peaks that touched the heavens. It had the requisite idiosyncrasies—a benevolent king, for

instance, with four wives, all of them sisters. It had lamas and mystics and an actual government policy of Gross National Happiness.

My editors in Washington, D.C., didn't share my enthusiasm. You want to go where? It will cost how much? No one had much interest in a tiny Himalayan nation with a polygamous monarch and a happiness fixation.

The years passed. I moved on to another posting in Jerusalem, then Tokyo, all the while pining for Bhutan. For me, a place unvisited is like an unrequited love. A dull ache that—try as you might to think it away, to convince yourself that she really wasn't the right country for you—just won't leave you in peace.

"Your first time?"

I swivel my head, caught off guard. "Beg your pardon?"

"Is this your first time going to Bhutan?"

The words are spoken by a Bhutanese businessman sitting next to me on the Airbus. He's wearing a brown suede jacket and looking me in the eye.

"Yes, my first time."

"Your timing is perfect," he says. "You'll be there for the *tsechu*, the big festival. You'll see things you've never seen before. Amazing things."

The Airbus dips. We've begun our descent. The captain's voice comes on the PA in that reassuring everything-is-under-control tone that they must teach pilots somewhere.

"For those flying into Paro for the first time, if you see mountains closer than you've ever seen them before, do not be alarmed. That is our standard approach."

Sure enough, the Airbus banks steeply—first right, then left, then right again—and with each turn a mountain appears large in my window, close enough to touch, it seems. Finally, clear of the peaks, the Airbus drops abruptly and, with a squeak of tires, we're on pavement. The flight attendants swing the door open. The air is bracing, the sky deep blue.

In most countries, your arrival is staggered, your transition into

a new environment eased by the familiarity and hermetic sameness of Airport World. But in Bhutan there is no Airport World. There is, truth be told, barely an airport. Just a tiny hut of a terminal, which, with its carved woodwork and swirls of deep reds and blues, looks more like a Buddhist temple than an airport.

Every visitor to Bhutan is assigned a guide. You pay his salary out of the two hundred dollars a day you must shell out to a Bhutanese tour company for the privilege of being in Bhutan—part of the country's effort to keep out the sort of straggly-haired backpackers who have infiltrated neighboring Nepal. This makes me more than a little apprehensive. On reporting assignments to Iraq during Saddam Hussein's time, our guides were called minders. They were oily-haired men in ill-fitting suits who were there, supposedly, to "facilitate" the work of foreign journalists. In fact, they were there to facilitate the work of the *mukhabarat*, Saddam Hussein's secret police. They were spies. Everybody knew that. We knew that. They knew that we knew.

The young man waiting outside the airport for me doesn't look like a spy. He looks more like a Bhutanese Boy Scout, if they had Boy Scouts in Bhutan. Olive-skinned, with a shiny, freshly scrubbed face, he is wearing a dark brown *gho*, the traditional Bhutanese dress for men. A *gho* looks something like a bathrobe, only much heavier and with cavernous pockets. Bhutanese men have been known to pull all manner of objects from their *ghos*: cups, cellphones, small farm animals. In a pinch, the *gho* can do double duty as a blanket or curtain. (It's a good thing the *gho* is so handy, because all Bhutanese men are required to wear one during business hours. Bhutan is the only country in the world with a dress code for men.)

"Welcome to Bhutan, sir," says the young man in the *gho*, looping a white scarf around my neck. He introduces himself as Tashi, then shakes my hand. It's not like any handshake I've ever experienced. Two hands cupped over one of mine, head lowered in a half bow. It is a very deliberate, present action. At first, I find it off-putting. I'm just shaking hands with you, Tashi, we're not going

steady or anything. Later, though, I would learn to appreciate the Bhutanese handshake and, come to think of it, the way they do nearly everything—cross the street, wash dishes—so deliberately, so attentively.

“Attention” is an underrated word. It doesn’t get the . . . well, the attention it deserves. We pay homage to love and happiness and, God knows, productivity, but rarely do we have anything good to say about attention. We’re too busy, I suspect. Yet our lives are empty and meaningless without attention.

My two-year-old daughter fusses at my feet as I type these words. What does she want? My love? Yes, in a way, but what she really wants is my attention. Pure, undiluted attention. Children are expert at recognizing counterfeit attention. Perhaps love and attention are really the same thing. One can’t exist without the other. The British scholar Avner Offer calls attention “the universal currency of well-being.” Attentive people, in other words, are happy people.

Tashi carries my bags to our car. Given the reputation of the roads in Bhutan, I was hoping for something muscular like a Toyota Land Cruiser. It is a Toyota but no Land Cruiser. We pile into a beat-up 1993 Corolla. It’s 8:00 a.m., and I didn’t sleep a wink on the overnight flight.

“Where would you like to go, sir?”

“To anyplace that serves coffee, Tashi.”

We drive to a small café, although calling it a café is a stretch. It is a concrete building with a few wooden tables and chairs. They serve only instant coffee. As a coffee lover, I find this deeply disturbing, but I drink it and don’t complain.

Tashi is gracious and eager to please. He also possesses, I soon discover, an impressive knack for the obvious. He says things like “We have arrived at our destination, sir,” when clearly we have or “It’s raining, sir,” when we’re dripping wet.

His mannerisms are courtly, like those of an eighteenth-century nobleman. He holds doors open for me, carries my bag, and hovers like a chopper over an L.A. car chase. If he could carry me, he probably would.

He does all of this, though, in a dignified rather than sycophantic way. The Bhutanese were never colonized, never conquered, so their hospitality is served straight up, devoid of the gratuitous deference and outright ass-kissing so common in this part of the world.

Tashi’s English is rough and peculiar. It’s not just his accent, which is heavy, but his vocabulary. He says things like “Shall we take some vestigial food, sir?” At first I have no idea what he is talking about—some Bhutanese delicacy perhaps?—then I realize he means leftovers. “Vestigial” as in “vestige” as in “no longer needed.” I explain to him that this word is not commonly used. He still uses it, though, and eventually I stop trying to correct him.

“Okay, Tashi, let’s head to Thimphu.” That’s the capital of Bhutan and my home for the next week or so.

“We can’t go, sir.”

“Why not?”

“The road is closed.”

“How long will it be closed?”

“For some time.”

In this part of the world, For Some Time is the last thing you want to hear. Fortunes have been won and lost during For Some Time. Empires have risen and fallen during For Some Time. The problem is that For Some Time can mean five minutes or five days or five years. It matters not what you are waiting for—the next bus to Bombay or a kidney transplant—For Some Time will not arrive until it does. Unless it doesn’t.

“What about taking an alternative route,” I suggest, helpfully. Tashi and the driver find this extremely funny. I surmise this by their peals of laughter and knee slapping. Alternative route! Good one sir, ha ha, alternative route, ha ha.

There is no alternative route. There is barely a route. Bhutan’s generously named National Highway is the only road in the country—and barely a road at that, only wide enough for one car.

So we sit and wait. This is fine, I think, all Buddha-like. It gives me a few minutes to catch my breath, at this elevation no easy feat, and take stock of where I am.

Why am I here? Where does Bhutan fit into my atlas of bliss? Yes, the country resembles Hilton's Shangri-La, superficially at least, and that I find enormously appealing. Happiness is even in the country's national anthem: "As the doctrine of Lord Buddha flourishes, may the sun of peace and happiness shine on the people." And then there is Bhutan's policy of Gross National Happiness. In a nutshell, Gross National Happiness seeks to measure a nation's progress not by its balance sheet but rather by the happiness—or unhappiness—of its people. It's a concept that represents a profound shift from how we think about money and satisfaction and the obligation of a government to its people.

I have my doubts, though. Is Bhutan really "a laboratory of human betterment"? as one observer put it. Or is it just another shithole, to use the foreign correspondent's inelegant term for countries where the government is corrupt, the roads slow, and the coffee instant.

I can't answer any of these questions yet and instead find solace in the words of Conway, who tried to calm his uppity companions, stranded in Shangri-La. "We're here because we're here; if you want an explanation I've usually found it a soothing one."

Finally, after waiting For Some Time, the road to Thimphu reopens, and we pile into the Toyota. I quickly discover that driving in Bhutan is not for the meek. Hairpin turns, precipitous drop-offs (no guardrails), and a driver who firmly believes in reincarnation make for a nerve-racking experience. There are no atheists on Bhutan's roads.

Fortunately, I sleep for most of the trip, waking to find us chugging up a steep hill. Bhutanese schoolkids, gabbing and laughing as they walk from school, part for our Corolla like the Red Sea for Moses. They do so without snide remarks or dirty looks. Something else that is here—or rather not here. No billboards or neon signs; there is hardly any advertising in Bhutan, and neon signs were banned until a few years ago. However, I do spot this hand-painted sign, propped up by two pieces of wood on the side of the road.

When the last tree is cut,  
When the last river is emptied,  
When the last fish is caught,  
Only then will Man realize that he can not eat money.

I am pondering those words as the Corolla pulls up to a guesthouse at the top of the hill. I am greeted like visiting royalty by the entire staff. Another white scarf is lassoed around my neck, and then I'm led upstairs to my room. The proprietor, a handsome woman named Sangay, informs me that Richard Gere once stayed in the very same room. "I remember it clearly," she says. "He said—how did he put it?—that the room had 'a million-dollar view.'"

The view is indeed wonderful; the city of Thimphu, with its white- and green-roofed houses, is visible directly below, mountains and wispy clouds off on the horizon. But "million-dollar view" strikes me as not quite the right term to describe it, not here in Bhutan, a country determined to diminish the importance of money in our lives.

Exhausted, I flop down on the mattress. I close my eyes and try to imagine Richard Gere, *the* Richard Gere, lying on this very same bed. I don't like the images this conjures and think of baseball instead. It's not personal. I have nothing against Richard Gere. Indeed, I can honestly say that were he a better actor, I might not be married today. On my first date with my now-wife, we went to see a Richard Gere movie in Greenwich Village. It was called *Mr. Jones* and was so profoundly bad, on so many levels, that we spent the rest of the evening dissecting its badness and forming a deep and abiding bond that endures to this day. So now that I have the chance, I'd like to say: thank you, Richard Gere, thank you.

My sleep is restless, my dreams disturbed, due to the altitude, I suspect. I wake the next morning to sounds of hooting and hollering off in the distance. An insurrection? A coup d'état?

"No, that's probably an archery match you hear," says Sangay, as I eat runny eggs and toast for breakfast. Archery is the national

sport in Bhutan. It is played with vigor and noise. Bhutanese pray quietly; everything else they do raucously.

Afterward, I have some time to kill before Tashi picks me up, so I decide to do something that was not possible in Bhutan, would have been unthinkable, until very recently. I watch television. Bhutan was the last country in the world to get television, in 1999. It has quickly become an indispensable—and controversial—part of life. Bhutanese teenagers, for reasons not entirely clear, developed a taste for *Wrestlemania*. The government banned the channels that carried it. That worked. For a while. Then other channels picked up the wrestling matches. After centuries of isolation, Bhutan finds itself invaded by the likes of Hulk Hogan.

Sangay Ngedup, a former prime minister, expressed a concern shared by many Bhutanese. “Until recently, we shied away from killing insects and yet now we Bhutanese are asked to watch people on TV blowing heads off with shotguns,” he told the British newspaper *The Guardian*.

The newscast on BBS—the Bhutan Broadcasting Service—is smartly produced. The anchor, wearing a *gho*, reads the news with that mix of authority and chumminess that American anchors have mastered. Behind him is a shot of Thimphu’s Dzong, the Bhutanese equivalent of the White House. Underneath, I can just barely make out squiggles. Wait a minute. The squiggles are moving. What’s going on? I inch my chair closer to the screen. Good God, they have the crawl! Only seven years of television and already they have the crawl. And so it goes with Bhutan’s headfirst leap into the twenty-first century. There are now Internet cafés and cellphones and, that ultimate sign of civilization, at least civilization circa 1973, discos. Keep in mind that this is a country that until 1962 didn’t have a single road, school, or hospital. It didn’t even have a national currency.

Tashi arrives at the hotel and announces with great fanfare: “I have arrived, sir.” I have decided that Tashi is not a spy. He’s not smart enough. Either that, or he’s an extremely good spy. No, Tashi is more of a guide or, in journalistic parlance, a fixer. A fixer

arranges interviews, interprets, ferrets out information from reluctant officials, provides juicy anecdotes, takes photos, gets coffee, and sometimes writes articles. In other words, fixers do most of the correspondent’s work for no credit and little pay. Some might find this unfair, even unethical. Perhaps, but the fixer/correspondent relationship has a long and proud tradition. And I am not about to mess with tradition.

I’m concerned, though, that Tashi might not be a good fixer. His English is too rough, and he is clearly new at this, as green as an avocado. I must have let my concerns slip to someone at the hotel because I get a call from Tashi’s boss, Sonam, manager of the tour company organizing my trip.

“I understand you are not happy with Tashi,” she says flatly. Wow, I’m thinking, this *is* a small country.

“Nooo,” I lie, embarrassed by my indiscretion, “I’m perfectly happy with him.” She persists, offering to assign another guide. I could have agreed, could have dumped Tashi right there and then, but for reasons I still don’t fully understand, I decide to stick with him.

Word of my unease, however, has clearly reached Tashi. He has interpreted my criticism to mean he is not hovering closely enough, not opening enough doors or carrying enough bags, so he redoubles his efforts.

We drive down the hill to Thimphu. Every trivia buff who visits the city loves to point out that it is the world’s only capital city without a single traffic light, so I will do so here. Thimphu is the world’s only capital city without a single traffic light. Instead, at the main intersection, a policeman wearing white gloves directs traffic with precise, almost comical gestures. A few years ago, they tried replacing the cop with an actual traffic light, but the king didn’t like it, and—the king being pretty much like the pope; that is, infallible—everyone agreed it was a bad idea, and down came the traffic light.

Thimphu is a likable city, about the size of Burlington, Vermont. The skyline is a tangle of power lines and prayer flags.

Life in Thimphu reminds me a lot of James Hilton's description of the inhabitants of Shangri-La: "They were good-humored and mildly inquisitive, courteous and carefree, busy at innumerable jobs but not in any hurry over them."

Thimphu has just the right amount of bustle and chaos: Indian workers trading gossip on their day off; cheap hotels; satellite dishes sprouting from rooftops like wild mushrooms; a sign thanking me for not spitting; dingy Internet cafés; rickety bamboo scaffolding; tourists in sneakers and sunburns, their guides shadowing them like Secret Service agents; Bhutanese women carrying umbrellas to shield themselves from the midday sun.

And stray dogs. Lots of stray dogs. They lie in the sun or, if the mood strikes, cross the street. They do this with an air of invincibility. They know no one would dare hit them. In Bhutan, dogs are the kings of the road. The last time I saw such arrogance from an animal was in India, where the cow, smug in her holiness, has developed a serious attitude problem. Cows loiter in the middle of roads, chewing their cud and daring—just daring!—drivers to go ahead and hit them. Enjoy your next life as a warthog, buddy.

In my next life, I want to come back as a Bhutanese dog. They have it made. Why? Surely, the Buddhist respect for all sentient beings has something to do with it. But this belief, while surely noble, isn't quite as altruistic as it seems. If you believe in reincarnation, then you also believe you might come back in your next life as a horse or cow, and if so you'd want to be treated well as a horse or cow. This is how Ringzin Dorji, quoted in Barbara Crossette's book on the Buddhist Himalayan kingdoms, describes this phenomenon: "Today my mother may be human. But when I die I may be reborn as a dog and then my mother may be a bitch. So, therefore, you have to think that all living things are my parents. My parents are infinite. Let my parents not suffer."

When I first read that passage, it made a big impression on me. Not just the dubious proposition that "my mother may be a bitch," but the more profound notion that our parents are infinite. That we are all related.

I pick up a newspaper, the *Bhutan Observer*. A headline jumps out at me: "Sneak sales on the street, in the dark." Oh, no, I think, Bhutan has a drug problem or, worse, a brisk trade in contraband firearms. I read on: "The main items sold here are fruits, vegetables and fresh and pure milk products." The vendors, it turns out, can't sell all of their wares during the sanctioned weekend market, so they stick around Thimphu on Monday and make clandestine sales of zucchini and asparagus before traveling back to their villages.

Apparently, this is what passes for crime in Bhutan. But the police are worried. They know that it's a slippery slope; black-market sales of zucchinis and asparagus can easily lead to more hard-core vegetables.

Clearly, Bhutan's low crime rate—murder is almost unheard of—contributes to the overall happiness here. Not surprisingly, places with high crime rates rank low on the happiness scale. (Though there are outliers, Puerto Rico, for instance, is both crime ridden *and* happy.) The reasons are less obvious than you might think. Someone who has been robbed or assaulted, of course, is not likely to be happy, but crime victims still make up a tiny part of the population (in most countries at least). It's not the crime per se that makes places unhappy. It's the creeping sense of fear that permeates everyone's lives, even those who have never been—and probably never will be—victims of crime.

In the last few decades, Bhutan has made tremendous strides in the kind of metrics that people who use words like "metrics" get excited about. Life expectancy has increased from forty-two to sixty-four years (though it is still well short of the 250 years in Shangri-La). The government now provides free health care and education for all of its citizens. Bhutan is the world's first nonsmoking nation; the sale of tobacco is banned. There are more monks than soldiers. The army, such as it is, produces most of Bhutan's liquor, including Red Panda beer and my favorite, Dragon Rum. Imagine if all of the world's armies got into the alcohol business. "Make booze not war" could become the rallying cry for a whole new generation of peaceniks.

\* \* \*

I wanted to find out more about Bhutan's policy of Gross National Happiness, which aims to supplement the more traditional measure of progress, gross national product. Is this for real? Everyone with even a passing knowledge of Bhutan advised me to see Karma Ura. He runs Bhutan's most important think tank, which also happens to be Bhutan's only think tank. I look forward to meeting him partly because he is such an intellectual force in this country, a man who has thought long and hard about the nature of happiness and partly because I have never met someone named Karma before.

Tashi and I drive to the outskirts of Thimphu, not far from where the king lives, and pull up to an old building. I'm directed to a conference room a few yards away. I walk along a wood beam, balancing over a pit of mud. My expectations for the "conference room" are low, but when I open the door I'm surprised to find a smartly designed space bisected by a long wooden table. Bhutan bucks the trend in most developing countries, where money is poured into appearances—a glitzy airport terminal surrounded by slums, hotels with extravagant lobbies but shabby rooms. In Bhutan, what's on the inside is often more impressive than what's on the outside.

I hand Karma the white scarf that Tashi gave me, circular giving, and he responds with the trace of a smile. He's wearing a checked *gho* and has a lean, handsome face. He speaks slowly, deliberately. It's not that he thinks before he speaks. He thinks *as* he speaks and does so in a measured, synchronous way. Silence makes me uncomfortable—all of that nothingness drives me nuts—and I have to restrain my urge to fill the empty spaces in our conversation.

The way Karma Ura sees it, a government is like a pilot guiding an airplane. In bad weather, it must rely on its instruments to navigate. But what if the instruments are faulty? The plane will certainly veer off course, even though the pilot is manipulating the controls properly. That, he says, is the state of the world today, with its dependence on gross national product as the only real

measure of a nation's progress. "Take education," he says. "We are hooked on measuring enrollment, but we don't look at the content. Or consider a nation like Japan. People live a long time, but what is the quality of their life past age sixty?" He has a point. We measure what is easiest to measure, not what really matters to most people's lives—a disparity that Gross National Happiness seeks to correct.

I feel myself slipping into my old, coolly professional style of interviewing and realize it's time to get personal.

"Karma, are you happy?"

"Looking back at my life, I find that the answer is yes. I have achieved happiness because I don't have unrealistic expectations."

This strikes me as an odd explanation. In America, high expectations are the engines that drive us, the gas in our tanks, the force behind our dreams and, by extension, our pursuit of happiness.

"My way of thinking is completely different," he says. "I have no such mountains to scale; basically, I find that living itself is a struggle, and if I'm satisfied, if I have just done that, lived well, in the evening I sigh and say, 'It was okay.'"

"Do you have bad days?"

"Yes, but it's important to put them in the perspective of insignificance. Even if you have achieved great things, it is a sort of theater playing in your mind. You think it so important, but actually you have not made such a difference to anyone's life."

"So you're saying, Karma, that both our greatest achievements and our greatest failures are equally insignificant?"

"Yes. We like to think we really made a difference. Okay, in the week's scale it may have been interesting. Take another forty years, I'm not so sure. Take three generations, and you will be forgotten without a trace."

"And you find this a source of comfort? I find it terribly depressing."

"No, as we say in Buddhism, there is nothing greater than compassion. If you have done something good, then in the moment you should feel satisfaction. I used to kill many flies and

mosquitoes every day because they give me some fear of malaria, but sometimes I don't do that. I have a moment of pause and think, 'Well, he is not harming me, not directly threatening me. He is defenseless. Why am I crushing it?' So then I release it, and there is a moment—it is an insignificant act, I know—but there is a moment of genuine peace. I just let it go."

Then I decide to do something out of character. I talk about myself. Really talk. Why, I'm not sure. Maybe it is the gentleness of this man, or the fact that he's named Karma, or the disorienting nature of Bhutan, but for whatever reason, I tell Karma a story, one that unfolded in Miami a few weeks before I began my search for the world's happiest places.

"Wake up," I hear the doctor say, impatiently, eyes fixed downward, as he swings open the door to the examination room.

"I am awake," I say.

"No," chides the doctor. "I'm talking to my computer." Of course. Now I can see the microphone—the size and shape of a gumball, hovering in front of his mouth—and the glowing tablet in his hands.

This strange sight distracts me briefly before I remember why I am here. The numbness in my hands and feet. The shortness of breath. These symptoms have grown worse in recent weeks, keeping me up at night.

And so it came to pass that at the pivotal, no-turning-back, life-is-half-over age of forty-three, I find myself sitting in a cold examination room, with a doctor who talks to his computer, awaiting the MRI results that I know, just *know*, will provide grim confirmation of my inoperable brain tumor. Or maybe, if I'm lucky, Lou Gehrig's disease. Two weeks earlier, lying prone in the sarcophagus-like tube, the machinery invisibly clicking and whirring around me, I could practically hear the technicians behind the glass partition muttering to each other. "Poor bastard, he doesn't have long."

So as I await the official results, my life clicks before my eyes like a bad PowerPoint presentation. Final slide. Death. Thanks for attending our seminar. Coffee and bagels are available outside.

"Well, I have the MRI results here," the doctor says.

Yes, I know you do. I can see them in the palms of your cold, merciless hands. Give it to me, Doc. I can take it. Actually, I can't. But give it to me anyway.

"And we have your blood work."

Yes, my blood work, I know. How long do I have?

"And... we found..."

"Nothing. They found nothing," interjects Karma, flatly, without a hint of doubt.

I am floored. He's right. The numbness in my hands and feet was caused by erratic breathing and inconsistent oxygen flow; in other words, a panic attack. Just another brush with hypochondria.

"How did you know, Karma?"

Karma pauses one of his pauses and then answers with a suggestion, a prescription. "You need to think about death for five minutes every day. It will cure you, sanitize you."

"How?"

"It is this thing, this fear of death, this fear of dying before we have accomplished what we want or seen our children grow. This is what is troubling you."

"But it sounds so depressing, thinking about death every day. Why would I want to do that?"

"Rich people in the west, they have not touched dead bodies, fresh wounds, rotten things. This is a problem. This is the human condition. We have to be ready for the moment we cease to exist."

It is only then that he tells me about his cancer. The diagnosis. Chemotherapy. Surgeries in hospitals far from home. Finally, remission.

Now I am the one who is silent.

We say our goodbyes, and I make a point of asking to see him once again, before I leave Bhutan. Then I walk back across the wooden plank, and get back into the Corolla. We're driving back to the hotel, something Tashi feels compelled to announce, and I'm thinking about this remarkable man I have just met. A happy

man. He is an academic who studied at Cambridge and can riff about regression analysis along with the best of them, but the next second he's talking about Buddha and the cancer that nearly killed him. Seamlessly. Karma Ura's life is integrated. Organic. Not a series of silos—work, love, family—like most people's I know. Like mine.

When we arrive at the hotel—which Tashi points out by declaring, “We have arrived at the hotel, sir”—I am in no mood for small talk with the staff, so I carry a chair to the balcony outside my room and sit. Just sit. My head is spinning. Karma Ura has thrown me for a loop. Happiness is low expectations? How do I reconcile that with my driving ambition, which has served me so well in life? Or has it? And what he said about compassion being the ultimate ambition. What was *that* about?

Then I see it. About two feet from me. A bug. It is lying upside down, its tiny legs flailing futilely. I look away. But my eyes are drawn back to this tiny creature in such a pathetic state.

I consider my options. Option One: I can squash it and put it out of its misery. The main advantage of Option One is that it ends suffering, the bug's and mine. Option Two: I could ignore it, which is how I usually respond when faced with the suffering of others. Don't get involved. Be a good journalist. Remain neutral at all costs. But this is not a news story. There will be no “Bug Dies in Himalayas. Family Distraught. Footage at 11:00.”

There is, I realize, an Option Three. I could intervene and save a life—an insect life, true, but still a life. I take a tentative step toward the bug and give it a gentle kick. Only it's not quite as gentle as I intended, and the bug slides a good ten feet across the patio, still upside down, legs still flailing. Okay, another failed humanitarian intervention. The United States—with all of its resources—couldn't save Somalia or Iraq, so why should I feel bad that I couldn't save one bug?

I go downstairs and order a Red Panda beer. When I return

to my room a half hour later, out of morbid curiosity I peek out on the patio and see that the bug is still flailing, though losing steam. Why the hell should I care? I hate bugs, damn it. But all this Buddhist talk of loving-kindness has gotten to me. What the heck, I give the bug one more kick, this time more gently, and in an instant it is right-side up, scampering away. Not thanking me but that's okay. It feels good. I saved a life. I got involved.

A postscript. When I stepped out on the patio later that evening I found a bug, the very same bug I'm sure, on its back again. I couldn't believe my eyes. This time, I did nothing. I slept easily that night, though. Nobody, not even Karma Ura, I bet, can save a dumb bug from itself.

Bhutan is an upside-down place. Here the number thirteen is considered lucky. Children greet you with “bye-bye.” The king wants to abolish himself.

Or take marijuana. In Bhutan, they have a novel use for it. They feed it to pigs. This makes the pigs hungry and therefore fat. The first time I heard this, I couldn't help but imagine an entire barnyard of pigs with the munchies. They're marching to a 7-Eleven, a pig 7-Eleven, and buying goopy chicken burritos and now—I can see it so clearly—they're trying to heat them in the microwave, but their pudgy pig paws get stuck in the microwave door so they start squealing wildly, as pigs are wont to do, until the clerk, a pig himself, waddles over and asks them, in pig speak, to please keep the racket down because this is, after all, a 7-Eleven and not a barnyard or something.

These are the kind of thoughts I find myself having in Bhutan. It might be the altitude, but I think it's something more than that. This place gives license to my imagination. Most of the time I keep my imagination on a leash. In Bhutan, it runs wild, messing up the freshly mowed lawn and sometimes pooping where it shouldn't but also rewarding me in unexpected ways.

For all of these reasons, traveling in Bhutan requires a serious

suspension of disbelief. Reality and fantasy live side by side. Sometimes they are indistinguishable.

I'm sitting at the hotel drinking tea, when Sangay, the hotel owner, says out of the blue, "My husband is the brother of the Dalai Lama."

"Really," I say, "he's the Dalai Lama's brother? I didn't know the Dalai Lama had a brother."

"No, not brothers now but in a previous life. My husband is the twelfth incarnation of a Tibetan lama."

This sort of confusion happens all the time in Bhutan. This life, a previous life, a next life. They all blur together, happily. Or take this exchange I had with one of the sweet young girls who works at my hotel.

"There has been so much rain lately," I say, making conversation.

"Yes, sir, that is because of Blessed Rainy Day. It's a festival we have every year to mark the end of the rainy season. After Blessed Rainy Day, there will be no more rain." She says this with utter certainty, as if she were explaining to a dullard that the sun always rises in the east.

The next day, the rain stopped.

Tashi and I decide to visit the weekend market, where every manner of vegetable and craft is sold: apples the size of your head and Buddhas by the bushel. Sitting at the entrance to the market is an astrologer. "Very good, very famous man," says Tashi. The man is squatting on the ground, a blanket spread out in front of him. It is then that I notice he is a leper. He is missing all of his fingers, only stubs remain. Yet he manages to hold a deck of fortune cards, each about the size of a bumper sticker.

He asks me to pick three cards. Then I roll three dice. The verdict: "What you're doing now is fine, everything will turn out fine. All your dreams will come true." I wonder if my favorable fortune has anything to do with the small fee I paid. I mention

this to Tashi, who reassures me that the fortune-teller is "very good man, very respected." Later that evening, reading about the adventures in Bhutan of the British explorer Lord Ronaldshay, I discover that he encountered the same good fortune a century ago. "I was invited to make offerings to the deity and to throw the dice. I did so, and curiously enough threw three 'ones.' A throw which was immediately proclaimed by the presiding lama to be supremely lucky!"

The next morning, I wake after another fitful night's sleep and more disturbing, hazy dreams—it *is* the high altitude, I'm sure—and stumble downstairs for breakfast. I'm slurping up my runny eggs when I hear a deep baritone "Good morning." For a moment I think it's the TV, but when I spin around in my chair I am greeted by a smiling man with a shiny bald head and meaty cheeks. He's wearing a red vest and bright yellow shirt. He looks like the Dalai Lama's younger brother.

He is Barba Tulku, Sangay's husband, otherwise known by the honorific Rinpoche, which means "precious one." He's an expressive man, with kind eyes and a ferocious laugh. When he talks, his whole body shakes and wiggles. He hunches over to make a point, then springs up, then hunches again. Hunching and springing, he tells me his story.

A few days before he was born, several respected lamas visited his home. "Suddenly, springwater appeared in the garden, very white water, like milk. All the pots and pans filled with it. Then, a round rainbow appeared above the house." These are the classic signs, he says, that an incarnate was about to be born.

As a child, he began speaking Tibetan, even though he never studied the language, and the Bhutanese language is quite different from Tibetan.

He traveled to India when he was eighteen years old and met the Dalai Lama.

"The Dalai Lama took me aside and said, 'You are very special. Where did you learn Tibetan?' I told him I just knew it. He said, 'Come tomorrow morning.'" It was at that morning meeting

when the Dalai Lama concluded the young man, the man with the ferocious smile, was a reincarnated lama from eastern Tibet.

The Dalai Lama took him under his wing, inviting him to study in the Indian town of Dharamsala, the capital of the Tibetan government in exile.

"It was a great opportunity to get the oral transmission; you can read and read the text to get some ideas, but you can be misled by written words. It is best if it is done orally."

I'm not sure what to make of this man with the soft eyes and convulsive laugh. Back home, stories of miracles and reincarnation and milky-white springwater would strike me as fanciful, possibly psychotic. I decide to change tacks.

"Are the Bhutanese people happy?"

He pauses a good long while before saying "Maybe" and laughs hard, his body shaking and convulsing so much I wonder if he's having some sort of seizure. I decide not to pursue the matter any further. I listen as he tells me more things, crazy things. About a hidden land where spiritual treasures are buried. About how he once meditated for three years, three months, and three days.

Then he tells me about someone who lived in Bhutan five hundred years ago, someone known as the Divine Madman. His name was Drukpa Kunley, and he was the Howard Stern of Tibetan Buddhism. A holy man unlike any other.

"He was an amazing man. He would go to wineshops and tease women. His mother would say, 'Kunley, why can't you be like your elder brother, who is always praying? He has a look of such concentration on his face.'

"No, Mother,' Kunley replied. 'My elder brother is looking for a toilet. That's why he is always making that face.'" Kunley was right, as he was about most things. His elder brother was constipated, not consecrated. The moral of the story, the Rinpoche explains: "We can not judge by action, only by motivation."

This is the first I had heard of Drukpa Kunley, the Divine Madman, but it was not the last. In fact, I was told you can't really understand Bhutan without understanding Drukpa Kunley. Men-

tion his name, and people break into laughter. But it is no ordinary laughter. It is reverential laughter, if such a thing is possible.

Kunley belongs to a spiritual school of thought known as crazy wisdom. Every religion has its branch of crazy wisdom. The Christians have their Fools for Christ. The Muslims have their Sufi Mast-Qalanders. The Jews have Woody Allen. Yet none is as crazy, or as wise, as Drukpa Kunley.

I was determined to find out more about him. In an overstuffed bookstore in Thimphu, I found an English translation of his collected works. Some parts are ribald even by the raunchy standards of today. In one passage, Kunley "breaks wind like a dragon." On many occasions, he drops his drawers and employs his "flaming thunderbolt of wisdom." (Yes, it is what you think it is.) Drukpa Kunley was a womanizer extraordinaire, with a preference for virgins. Or, as he put it, "The best *chung* wine lies at the bottom of the pail / And happiness lies below the navel."

There was a point to Kunley's escapades. His outrageous behavior was meant to shock the Bhutanese people out of their stupor. Keith Dowman, who translated Kunley's adventures into English, says the point was that "emotion, particularly desire, is not to be suppressed, it is to be purified." In other words, the ancient Greeks turned upside down. Everything in excess, nothing in moderation.

I am late for my afternoon coffee with Linda Leaming, an American who has lived in Bhutan for the past nine years. Asia has attracted its share of spiritual seekers, or lama lickers as they're sometimes called, but Bhutan was closed to outsiders until the 1970s. Even after that, it was not an easy country to get to. You had to want it.

Linda Leaming wanted it. She sold everything she owned and moved from New York in order to teach English in Bhutan. As she tells it, she fell in love with Bhutan and then fell in love with a Bhutanese. She's been living here ever since.

She recommends a place called the Art Café, a new addition in Thimphu. It is light and airy, with overstuffed cushions and

blond wood floors. We could be in any U.S. college town. I notice that the woman behind the counter is reading *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*. Like I said, we could be in any U.S. college town.

Linda flounces in, wearing a patterned scarf and buzzing with energy. Apparently, she's starved for fluent English conversation, and her words fly out rapid-fire.

"Spirituality is everywhere here," she says, tucking into a brownie. "It's in the rocks, it's in the trees." It's one of those comments that I would snicker at anywhere else. But not in Bhutan. As one writer put it: "There is no such thing as an inanimate object in Bhutan." Everything is imbued with a spirit. This comes less from their Buddhist beliefs and more from an animist faith called Bon. I always associated animism with a primitive sort of faith, but if you think about it, all things are animated with a life force, and that sounds rather progressive.

"Geography dictates life here," Linda continues. "Isolation has made Bhutan what it is."

"Is that a good thing or bad thing?"

"It's a good thing. The mountains, the isolation slow everyone down. The attitude is 'What to do, *la*.'"

Bhutan is the land of *la*. The monosyllabic word serves as all-purpose affirmation, honorific, and verbal tic. Mostly, it is a softener, appended to almost everything. *La* means "sir" but also "ya know." I like the way it sounds and, during my weeks in Bhutan, use it myself, but always self-consciously, never finding the right rhythm.

"What about you, Linda? Do you believe in all this Tantric mumbo jumbo?"

"Oh, yeah. I'm gone," she says. "I've made the leap of faith. When I first came here, I was the typical neurotic woman, pushing forty, and I said, 'I don't want to get old and bitter before my time.' Bhutan has calmed me down, slowed me down."

Then there it is again: death. A subject that, oddly, comes up

an awful lot in my search for happiness. Maybe we can't really be happy without first coming to terms with our mortality.

Linda tells me how she had never really seen a dead body until she came to Bhutan. "I've seen a lot of death and suffering here," she says, her tone of voice signaling that this is not necessarily a bad thing. "Here, you think about death more often. People die more tragically, more openly. Dead bodies hang around for days." Then there is the discomfort of life in Bhutan. "I am cold; in the winter, I need to wear a coat inside my house. The strange thing is, it makes you feel alive."

Many Bhutanese men, Linda explains, go on three-year meditation retreats, like the Rinpoche did. For three years, three months, and three days, they do nothing but meditate. They don't even cut their hair. "And for three years they don't talk." That is a deal breaker for me. The longest I've ever gone without talking is nine hours. And I was asleep at the time.

The government strings electrical lines up to the places where the men meditate, in little wooden huts perched on the edge of a cliff. "What other country would spend \$100,000 to wire this tiny place in the mountains? They would say, 'No, you come down here.'"

And that is the thing about Bhutan. They do things that don't make economic sense. Like forsaking millions of dollars in tourist revenue or refusing to sell valuable timber. The Bhutanese, poor as they are, do not bow to the gods of efficiency and productivity.

When I was leaving for my trip to Bhutan, a colleague wished me well. "I hope you have a productive trip," he said. At the time I thought nothing of it, but here in Bhutan it strikes me as absurd. A productive trip? Why not an enjoyable trip or a good one?

Finally, Linda grows silent. We sit in this silence for what seems like forever but is probably only about thirty seconds. Then, Linda looks at me and says: "You know, if you stay here long enough, you lose touch with reality."

"In a good way or a bad way?"

"I'm not sure. You decide."

I'm at breakfast the next morning when the Rinpoche drops by. He's holding something spherical, wrapped in newspaper. He unfurls it with a flourish. It is an apple. The biggest apple I've ever seen, the size of a Nerf basketball.

He hands it to me. I thank him, then ask him about his work as a faith healer. Apparently, people come from all over the world to see him. Western doctors do a lot of good, he says, but it would be better if they understood that not everything can be cured by medicine. He invites me to see him at work one day, and I eagerly accept.

"You see, everybody has a personal deity, every person, every child has a guru, and your guru shakes you to your own reality," and with this he shakes the chair next to him so hard I'm afraid it will break. He must have picked up on my skepticism. "You don't believe me, do you?"

I ask him how he knows all this to be true, since there is no proof of these things.

"You see this light?" he asks, gesturing toward a lamp overhead.

"Yes, I see it."

"But you cannot prove it. If you were born blind, you cannot see it. If you want proof, you will never be enlightened."

In America, few people are happy, but everyone talks about happiness constantly. In Bhutan, most people are happy, but no one talks about it. This is a land devoid of introspection, bereft of self-help books, and woefully lacking in existential angst. There is no Bhutanese Dr. Phil. There is, in fact, only one psychiatrist in the entire country. He is not named Phil and, I am sad to report, does not even have his own television show.

Maybe Plato was wrong. Maybe it is the examined life that is not worth living. Or, to put it another way, and to quote another dead white man: "Ask yourself if you are happy and you cease to be so." That was John Stuart Mill, the nineteenth-century British philosopher who believed that happiness should be approached sideways, "like a crab." Is Bhutan a nation of crabs? Or is this

whole notion of Gross National Happiness just a clever marketing ploy, like the one Aruba dreamed up a few years ago. "Come to Aruba: the island where happiness lives." In other words, have I been scammed?

I don't think so. For starters, the Bhutanese aren't that sophisticated. They suffer from an excess of sincerity, a trait anathema to good marketing. The Bhutanese take the idea of Gross National Happiness seriously, but by "happiness" they mean something very different from the fizzy, smiley-face version practiced in the United States. For the Bhutanese, happiness is a collective endeavor.

The phrase "personal happiness" makes no sense to them or, as Karma Ura told me, "We don't believe in this Robinson Crusoe happiness. All happiness is relational."

A quick quiz. What do the following events have in common? The war in Iraq. The *Exxon Valdez* oil spill. The rise in America's prison population. The answer: They all contribute to our nation's gross national product, or what's now referred to as gross domestic product, or GDP, and therefore all are considered "good," at least in the dismal eyes of economists.

GDP is simply the sum of all goods and services a nation produces over a given time. The sale of an assault rifle and the sale of an antibiotic both contribute equally to the national tally (assuming the sales price is the same). It's as if we tracked our caloric intake but cared not one whit what kind of calories we consumed. Whole grains or lard—or rat poison, for that matter. Calories are calories.

GDP doesn't register, as Robert Kennedy put it, "the beauty of our poetry or the strength of our marriages, or the intelligence of our public debate." GDP measures everything, Kennedy concluded, "except that which makes life worthwhile." Nor does GDP take into account unpaid work, the so-called compassionate economy. An elderly person who lives in a nursing home is contributing to GDP, while one cared for by relatives at home is not. Indeed, he may

even be guilty of reducing GDP if his caregivers are forced to take unpaid leave from work. You have to give economists credit. They have taken a vice—selfishness—and converted it into a virtue.

Recent research into happiness, or subjective well-being, reveals that money does indeed buy happiness. Up to a point. That point, though, is surprisingly low: about fifteen thousand dollars a year. After that, the link between economic growth and happiness evaporates. Americans are on average three times wealthier than we were half a century ago, yet we are no happier. The same is true of Japan and many other industrialized nations. Think about it as Richard Layard, a professor at the London School of Economics, has: “They have become richer, they work much less, they have longer holidays, they travel more, they live longer, and they are healthier. But they are no happier.”

Enter Gross National Happiness, an idea first floated by Bhutan’s King Wangchuk in 1973. It didn’t really catch on, though, until a smart young journalist named Michael Elliott interviewed the king in 1986 for the *Financial Times*. The headline of the story couldn’t have said it any plainer: “Bhutan King: Gross National Happiness More Important than Gross National Product.”

Conventional economists probably thought that the king was suffering from a lack of oxygen up on his Himalayan perch. Or perhaps he was nibbling on the pig feed again. You can’t measure happiness, and even if you could, how can a government have a happiness policy? It is absurd.

And yet the idea caught on with other developing countries and even among a few rich industrialized ones. Papers were written. Conferences were held. Praise was sung. “Bhutan is the first nation to officially say ‘No’ and the first to challenge the idea that money alone is absolutely good,” writes Jeff Johnson in the compendium *Gross National Happiness and Development*.

John Ralston Saul, the Canadian philosopher, describes Gross National Happiness as a brilliant trick. “What it does is go ‘Snap!’ and changes the discourse. Suddenly you’re talking about something else. You’re not trying to amend the old discourse—you’re

introducing a new discourse from the core; that’s what’s so important and clever about GNH.”

Drukpa Kunley, the Divine Madman and trickster extraordinaire, would have loved Gross National Happiness. It is so absurd, so outlandish, that it shakes us out of our stupor.

But what exactly is Gross National Happiness? What does it look like? The best explanation I heard came from a potbelly Bhutanese hotel owner named Sanjay Penjor. GNH, Penjor told me, “means knowing your limitations; knowing how much is enough.” Free-market economics has brought much good to the world, but it goes mute when the concept of “enough” is raised. As the renegade economist E. F. Schumacher put it: “There are poor societies which have too little. But where is the rich society that says ‘Halt! We have enough!’ There is none.”

Wealth is liberating, no doubt. It frees us from manual labor, working in the fields under a merciless midday sun or flipping burgers, the modern-day equivalent. But wealth can also stymie the human spirit, and this is something that very few economists seem to recognize. As Schumacher said, “The richer the society, the more difficult it becomes to do worthwhile things without immediate payoff.” That is a radical and profound statement. In a wealthy, industrialized society, one where we are supposedly enjoying a bountiful harvest of leisure time, we are discouraged from doing anything that isn’t productive—either monetarily or in terms of immediate pleasure. The Bhutanese, on the other hand, will gladly spend a day playing darts or just doing nothing. For yet another parallel with Shangri-La, witness this exchange in the book between the British missionary, Miss Brinklow, and Chang, Shangri-La’s inscrutable host.

“What do lamas do?” she asks.

“They devote themselves, madam, to contemplation and the pursuit of wisdom.”

“But that isn’t doing anything.”

“Then, madam, they do nothing.”

Albert Einstein once said, “No problem can be solved from

the same level of consciousness that created it.” Economics is long overdue for the kind of radical shift in thinking that Einstein brought to his field of physics. Does Gross National Happiness represent such a breakthrough? Is it the elusive answer that so many of us have been looking for? Not necessarily, at least not yet, but it reframes the question. That matters more than you might think.

With Gross National Happiness the official policy of the government of Bhutan, every decision, every ruling, is supposedly viewed through this prism. Will this action we’re about to take increase or decrease the overall happiness of the people? A noble aim, no doubt, but is it working? In order to find out, I needed to speak with someone from the government.

Easier said than done, it turns out. Considering they run a blip of a nation, a smudge on world maps (assuming it appears at all), Bhutanese officials play awfully hard to get. Never mind the king, revered as a living god and just about as accessible. I was aiming for the home minister, a man who doubles as roving happiness ambassador.

Alas, I was told the Honorable Home Minister was too busy to see me, so I do what any self-respecting journalist would do. I crash his party. The party is, to be precise, an event called “Feel GNH.” It is sponsored by a group of Japanese do-gooders living in Bhutan. The home minister is the guest of honor. I take a seat in the first row. Everyone stands when the home minister enters. He is a trim man, late fifties I guess, with gray in all the right places and a dignified manner.

On the stage is a giant paper crane and a sign that says, “Love, emotion, feeling.” Oh, no. I brace myself for an onslaught of mushiness. The Japanese do-gooders show a film about the American bombing of Nagasaki. Horrible images flash across the screen. Children with skin peeling off their bodies like a layer of clothing. Men whose eyes are dangling from their sockets. People in the audience steal glances at me, the only American present, as if I personally dropped the bomb.

I’m not sure what any of this has to do with happiness, other

than underscoring the rather obvious point that a nuclear bomb dropped on a city will probably suppress happiness levels in said city. This is the problem—one of many—with Gross National Happiness. It is a fuzzy concept, easily co-opted by anyone with a cause—a good cause, perhaps, but still a cause. Once that happens, Gross National Happiness becomes just another slogan and not a new economic template, not a new way to live our lives.

The film is over, and everyone breaks for an intermission. I tail the home minister, who has made a beeline for the buffet table outside. He is balancing a plate of *momos* in one hand and a glass of apple juice in another when I make my move.

“What does Nagasaki have to do with Gross National Happiness?” I ask. Surprise flashes across his face. He is unhinged by my ambush—just for a moment, though, before finding his diplomatic footing.

“I truly believe that a country that is committed to happiness will not be bellicose; if we don’t pursue a sustainable way of life, we will be fighting for resources. Not just for oil, and not necessarily between nations. It might be a fight for water between San Diego and Los Angeles.”

He’s moving back into the conference hall now. I tuck in behind him. Doesn’t adopting a policy of national happiness place a burden on his small nation, a presumption of felicitousness that might be hard to live up to? I ask.

“Bhutan has never said we are a happy people,” he parries. “What we are saying is we are committed to this process of Gross National Happiness. It is a goal.”

“But many people in Bhutan, those in the villages, haven’t even heard of Gross National Happiness,” I counter.

“No, but they are living it.”

Good answer. Maybe only clever, maybe more than that. I’m not sure. We chat for a few more minutes. Him picking at his *momos*, me leaning on the edge of my chair. Him, a tremendously important person from an insignificant nation. Me, an insignificant person from a tremendously important nation. Somehow,

these two converse facts cancel each other out, creating an odd symmetry between us.

He talks about his trips to America, where he's greeted like a rock star in predictable places like Berkeley. ("It's amazing, packed halls everywhere.") He talks about the need to create happiness indexes. ("Governments only respond to data.") Now, he seems to have plenty of time for me, a little too much time, I think, considering he is the third-most powerful man in Bhutan. Finally, he finishes his last *momo*, and I take this as an excuse to say goodbye.

The Feel GNH event ends a while later with a traditional Bhutanese folk dance. Everyone forms a circle—the circle being the universal geometry of folk dances—and sways in unison to the melodic music. I'm on the sidelines when someone grabs my arm, and next thing I know I've transitioned from observer to participant. Normally, participation in pretty much anything that makes me queasy, but there is something inexplicably nice—there's no other word for it—about this simple folk dance. Arms up. One, two. Step to the right. Three, four. I was somewhere between five and six when I noticed the home minister swaying along with everyone else. Why, I wonder, is he doing this? Is this the Bhutanese equivalent of a politician yucking it up for the cameras at a softball game? Nope. There are no cameras. It occurs to me then that the home minister, the third-most powerful man in Bhutan, is dancing because everyone in Bhutan dances. Nothing more, nothing less.

As the music winds down and people begin to file out of the hall, I find myself thinking about home. American politicians were probably like this, long ago, before the consultants and the focus groups drained the sincerity from their veins. Before we confused form and substance.

The next morning, I wake early, shaken again by another bad dream that I can't remember. Today is a big day. I'm due to see the Rinpoche at work. After breakfast, I'm led up a muddy pathway to a door. I remove my shoes. (Given the amount of mud in Bhutan,

this is pragmatic more than anything else.) There are two rooms in the house. One for spiritual healing, the other for TV viewing. The latter has overstuffed chairs and a large-screen Panasonic, blaring an Indian film.

I'm guided from TV room to healing room and told to sit and observe quietly. The room is a blaze of colors: deep blues and yellows. It looks like a Tibetan curio shop after an explosion. There is stuff everywhere. *Thangkas* and other paintings, musical instruments. Mostly, though, offerings from grateful (or hopeful?) patients. Money, of course, but also fruit, biscuits, and big plastic bottles of Coke and Fanta. On the wall hang necklaces—more offerings—and what looks like an Olympic gold medal. I later learn it is indeed an Olympic medal, a token of appreciation from an American swimmer suffering from Parkinson's disease.

Four or five men are in the room, sitting quietly. They have a court hearing later in the day and are here to better the odds of a ruling in their favor. It doesn't strike me as a particularly noble cause, but I keep my thoughts to myself. The men are kneeling and facing the Rinpoche, who is sitting on a kind of wooden altar, legs folded, eyes closed. He is chanting quietly and has a slightly pained look on his face, as if he were constipated. The men rise, as one, and the Rinpoche dribbles water on their foreheads. Then they leave. That's it.

I am now alone in the room with the Rinpoche, but he doesn't acknowledge me for a few minutes. He is still chanting, eyes closed. Suddenly, he speaks.

"This is Vaseline," he says, holding up a small jar for me to see. I wonder where he is going with this. "Before, we used to use cow's butter to spread the blessings. But this works much better. It's especially good for diseases, wounds and all."

I ask him to explain what is actually happening during a healing, what is going on in his head. "I am concentrating on a deity, not the Buddha, but the totality deity. It's like a reflection in the mirror. We dissolve, the deity and me, and we become one."

A middle-aged woman enters the room. She has a giant sore on

one leg, which she props up on a bench. The Rinpoche, eyes closed tightly, chanting, blows in the direction of her leg. Then he gives her water, which she swishes in her mouth. He is still chanting when she places her offering, apples and biscuits, on the altar.

I am again alone with the Rinpoche. He opens his eyes. "You know, for these people I am a last resort. First, they prefer hospitals and the highest technology. They go to hospitals in Bangkok and America. Then, they come to me." He tells me the woman with the swollen leg used to be much worse before she started seeing him. "You see, I have to experience my own actions, if not in this life then the next," he says enigmatically. I'm about to ask him what he means by this when I hear a strange chiming sound. I've never heard anything quite like it. It's coming from the altar, near the Rinpoche's feet, and it's getting louder every second.

"Sorry," he says, reaching down and switching off his cellphone. "Where were we?"

"You were talking about experiencing your own actions."

He tells me a story. It's about a man who referred to his servant as a monkey—"Get me some tea, you monkey; take out the trash, monkey." In the next life, the man was reborn as—you guessed it—a monkey.

I like the story, but I'm not sure what it means beyond the obvious point that we reap what we sow. I decide to broach a sensitive subject. I ask the Rinpoche if he ever has any doubts about this healing business.

"No, I don't. I have helped thousands of people. I helped and that has brought me true joy and happiness." I'm jotting down his comments in my small black notebook when he looks at me and says, "You are always writing, writing in your notebook. You need to experience. Really experience." I'm getting every word—"always writing... need to experience"—when the irony dawns on me. I stop writing and look up. I mumble something lame about old habits dying hard.

"You see, everything is a dream. Nothing is real. You will realize that one day." Then he laughs and returns to his quiet chanting.

\* \* \*

Thimphu may not have any traffic lights—or fast-food joints or ATMs—but it is still a capital city. A road trip is in order. The next morning, Tashi and our driver load up the Toyota and we head east. Our destination is Bumthang province, about two hundred miles from the capital. It's a journey that in most parts of the world would take five or six hours. In Bhutan, it takes two days.

The word "travel" stems from the same root as "travail" does. There's a reason for this. For centuries, traveling was equated with suffering. Only pilgrims, nomads, soldiers, and fools traveled.

Traveling in Bhutan still has that element of travail, of suffering. Even more so, that is, than economy class on the red-eye from L.A. to New York. In Bhutan, the roads don't subdue nature but are subdued by it, bend to its whims, curving and snaking around the mountains in a series of endless switchbacks. I find this meditative. For about ten minutes. Then, I find it nauseating. Now I know how a pair of socks feels on tumble dry. No wonder they abscond.

Then there are the animals. Bhutan's roads rival the best zoos in the world. We pass cows, wild boars, goats, horses, monkeys, and too many dogs to count.

At times, the journey is exhilarating. The sheer drop-offs make me feel like we are flying along the ridgelines, a feeling amplified by the birds that occasionally shadow us, like dolphins frolicking in the wake of a boat.

A few miles out of Thimphu, I encounter my first penises. Alarmingly lifelike, painted on the side of a house. There would be more penises, many more. Colorful penises. Monochromatic ones. Large ones, small ones. Penises dangling from rafters of a building, others swinging from the end of a bar like party favors. I say something to the effect of, "What's up with the penises, Tashi?"

Tashi explains that they are designed to ward off evil spirits. As

the owner of a penis myself, I can think of no body part less qualified to ward off evil spirits than the penis. Penises stray and are notoriously unreliable. They are vulnerable to injury and do not always rise to the occasion. Indeed, if anything, penises tend to attract evil, not repel it. Better, I think, the Bhutanese use wooden thumbs or toes or elbows—anything, for God's sake, except penises.

All of these penises, though, again remind me of Drukpa Kunley, the Divine Madman. It turns out that a temple devoted to Kunley is nearby. It is popular with infertile couples.

We pull the Toyota into a small village. From there, Tashi and I walk on a muddy path that takes us through rice paddies, neatly arranged and impossibly yellow. We pass an old man with a mouthful of betel juice. It's turned his lips ruby red. Leaves protrude from his mouth. He looks like he's swallowed a rooster. Tashi has a conversation with the man, but I can't imagine how, given the explosion of colors and textures in his mouth.

Rooster man gives us directions to the temple, and we walk on. We pass a sign that says "Happy Visit." A feeling of peace washes over me, and I'm thinking this is it, this is happiness, when I hear Tashi yell, "Stop, sir! Stop!" I'm about to say, "What is it now, Tashi? Can't you see I'm enjoying a rare moment of bliss?" when an arrow whizzes a few feet in front of me.

The Bhutanese love archery. They also love drinking. They tend to combine their two passions, and this is worrying. I apologize to Tashi, and once the archer has moved on we continue our trek up a muddy incline. Then there it is: the Divine Madman's temple. It's nothing fancy, as Drukpa Kunley would have insisted. We walk inside the temple, and Tashi prostrates himself several times, touching his forehead to the ground, then springing to his feet, then back down again. Buddhist calisthenics. At the altar, offerings of money, nuts, and Kit Kat bars are piled high. I meet the abbot, a rotund man, with a not-unpleasant smile.

"Yes, it's true," he says, when I ask about the temple doubling as a fertility clinic. "Many women have come here to be blessed. Women who could not bear children were then able to conceive."

He tells me of one American woman, forty-five years old, who was able to conceive only after being blessed by the Holy Dildo. That's what I call it. A fourteen-inch-long wooden phallus carved with impressive detail. Colorful pendants dangle off one end—the end that would be attached to a real man, if real men were endowed with fourteen-inch wooden penises.

The abbot shows me photos—smiling couples (some foreign, some Bhutanese) with their bundles of joy. Cards, too.

"Thank you for blessing us with the greatest joy of our lives... our son," signed Barbara Banks-Alterkruse.

I'm thumbing through the pile of cards when a couple of Bhutanese women show up. One by one, and with great gentleness, the priest touches the Holy Dildo to the crown of their heads. They seem pleased with the treatment and leave soon after.

Tashi asks if he can take time from his guide duties to have his fortune read by the abbot. I say sure. Tashi holds three dice to his forehead then rolls them. The abbot looks at the dice for a long second then tells Tashi that his wish will be granted. I roll the dice and am told that my wish, too, will be granted. Walking out of the temple, I ask Tashi if it is possible to get a bad fortune in Bhutan. "Oh, yes, sir, very much so."

Nearby, an old man is sitting on the ground, twirling beads in his hands and every now and then pushing a giant prayer wheel beside him. It's huge, the size of a refrigerator, and it takes a good heave to get it going. I ask him how long he's been doing this.

"I always do this," he says.

"Nothing else?"

"No, nothing else." It doesn't strike me as a well-rounded life, but who am I to question faith?

We stop for the night in the nearby town of Wangdue. The guesthouse is surprisingly nice. They even serve real coffee. I'm sitting on the terrace, overlooking a fast-moving river. It's a beautiful setting, and instinctively I reach for my notebook and camera. But I

stop myself. The words of the Rinpoche echo in my head. Experience. You need to experience. He's right. Recording life is a poor substitute for living it. So for the next twenty minutes I sit on that terrace, listening to the roar of the river and doing nothing. Absolutely nothing. No notebook, camera, or tape recorder. Just me and life. And a vicious swarm of killer Bhutanese mosquitoes. That's enough experience for now.

We press on, driving farther east into the Bhutanese heartland. Something—or someone—is blocking the road. A dozen or so creatures with white bodies and dark faces scurry as our car approaches. Langur monkeys, Tashi tells me. He says that spotting them is a good sign.

"Is anything a bad sign in Bhutan, Tashi?"

"Yes, sir, the brown monkeys. If you see them, it is a bad sign."

The monkeys eventually tire of loitering on the road, and we continue. Every now and then we pass a hand-painted sign that says, simply, "Thanks." Thanks for what? The sign doesn't say, but I appreciate the thought nonetheless.

I can't take the hairpin turns anymore and ask the driver to stop. He pulls the Toyota over, and Tashi and I walk. Tashi confesses that he doesn't enjoy walking like this in the dark.

"Because of the bears, Tashi?" Sonam, the tour operator, had warned about them.

"No, sir, because of the demons. I am more afraid of the demons than the bears. From birth, we are taught to fear the demons."

Can this be healthy? I wonder. All of these demons running amok in the Bhutanese mind.

We're back in the Toyota, climbing and climbing to ever higher elevations. More than ten thousand feet. The road is only wide enough for one car at a time. Passing is negotiated through a series of elaborate, poetic hand gestures, and I'm reminded of what one Bhutanese told me back in Thimphu: "There is no room in

Bhutan for cocky assholes." He's right. Everything in this country requires cooperation. Harvesting the crops. Passing another car on the road.

In the west and in the United States especially, we try to eliminate the need for compromise. Cars have "personal climate controls" so that driver and passenger need not negotiate a mutually agreeable temperature. That same pair, let's say they're husband and wife, need not agree on the ideal firmness of their mattress, either. Each can set their own "personal comfort level." We embrace these technologies. Why shouldn't everyone enjoy their own personal comfort level, be it in a car or in a bed? I wonder, though, what we lose through such conveniences. If we no longer must compromise on the easy stuff, like mattresses, then what about the truly important issues? Compromise is a skill, and like all skills it atrophies from lack of use.

We arrive in Trongsa, a smidge of a town built along a hillside. The guesthouse is simple, just shy of fleabag. It's run by a rotund divorcée with a big smile. I ask her if she's happy, and she bursts into an even bigger smile and says, "Yes!" She reminds me of a laughing Buddha.

On the wall, a row of clocks shows the time in Tokyo, New Delhi, New York, and Bangkok. I am amused. No one in Trongsa cares what time it is in Trongsa, let alone in New York.

The next day, more driving. At one point, Tashi and I decide to get out of the Toyota and walk to a local temple. The sun is strong, but after two days on the road it feels good to be out of the Toyota.

"Sir," asks Tashi, "is it true that cowboys are very respected in your country?" I try to explain to him that there are not many cowboys left in my country. He seems a bit disappointed. Tashi asks if I want to hear a poem he learned to recite in school. I say okay.

"Climbing on the hillside beneath the shadow trees..."

I can barely understand the words—"beneath" sounds like

“bequeath”—but Tashi is proud. “If we didn’t recite it properly, the teacher would beat us mercilessly,” he says, shadowboxing to underscore his point. I suspect Tashi was hit many times, and I wonder if it explains a few things about him. I ask Tashi if this sort of thing still happens in Bhutan. “Only in the rural areas, sir.” I find this little solace; 80 percent of Bhutanese live in rural areas.

As we walk, silently, toward a nearby monastery, I realize how fond I have grown of Tashi. His annoying habits now seem endearing. Has he changed, or have I?

The next morning, I am walking alone along a ridgeline. The air is bracing and fresh. I feel good. Then I remember Sonam and her warning about bears. I no longer feel so good. When did I become so afraid of nature? Why do I feel safer in the frenzy of Tokyo or New York than here in the Himalayan foothills, among the fir trees and chirping birds? I am shaking my head, bemused by my childish trepidations when I see an object, a very large object, moving off in the distance. I can’t make it out completely, a tree is blocking my view, but I’m not about to find out. I spin on my heels and start walking briskly in the opposite direction. Oh, heck, I’m not walking briskly. I’m running, damn it!

After a few dozen yards, I turn around and see that I have been running from a large and ferocious . . . cow. I decide to give myself a time-out. I walk toward a nearby monastery, sit on a ledge, and close my eyes. Karma Ura is right. There is a theater in my mind. Only it is Off-Off-Broadway. The critics have panned it. It is, I know, time to close the show, but I don’t know how.

I’m more successful in taking Karma Ura’s advice in another matter. I decide to visit the village where he grew up, as he had suggested. His family home is a solid house, with sturdy wood floors. There is virtually no furniture, though, except for a knee-high table called a *chokse*. Karma Ura’s mother, seventy-nine years old, is sitting at the table, a dark wool blanket draped on her lap, a book open in front of her. She had been praying.

Her skin is lined but retains an elasticity. She is missing more than a few teeth. She welcomes us warmly and gestures for me to take a seat on a cushion on the floor. Unlike her son, she doesn’t speak a word of English. Tashi offers to translate. Which is a good thing, for Mrs. Ura turns out to be a talker.

“I moved to this village when I was twenty years old. As a child, we traveled by horse. We would journey for miles, twice a week, to get basic supplies like salt. Now we have cars and a paved road and electricity.”

“Was there anything better about life back then?” I interject.

“No,” she says, as if I were a dolt. “Life is better now. Except for television. That is both good and bad.”

I ask about the king’s plans to introduce democracy in Bhutan. Is she ready for it?

“It can’t be good for the people. There will be corruption and violence. I’ve seen the TV pictures from Nepal and India, people throwing stones at the police, and the police shooting at the people, police firing tear gas and worse. Nothing productive, nothing good, will come of this democracy. We are begging our king, please, we don’t want democracy.” A few months later, back in Miami, I would read a small news item in *The New York Times*: The king had abdicated to his son. Mock elections were held. Real ones weren’t far off. I thought of Mrs. Ura, who surely wouldn’t be pleased.

She lifts herself up, with a nimbleness that surprises me, and offers tea. I decline, but she insists. “What would my son say if I didn’t offer you tea?” Mothers are the same everywhere, I think.

Back in the Toyota, heading back toward Thimphu, Tashi tells me a story. In 1999, six boys went hiking at a lake. They threw rocks and litter into the lake. Suddenly, a fog appeared, and the boys lost their way. Three survived, three died. Tashi is convinced it’s because they had disturbed a deity, the lady of the lake.

“Many people believe it. You’re not supposed to pollute lakes.”

“What about rivers?”

“Rivers are different, sir.”

We stop for one last night. Our travels and travails are nearly over. After dinner, I'm savoring a Red Panda when I hear a familiar accent. American. Suffolk County, Long Island, to be precise. A small group of American tourists. Terri and her husband, Marty, invite me to join them. I tell them that I am writing about happiness in Bhutan, and everyone perks up. I tell them about the government's policy of Gross National Happiness. Marty is skeptical. "How can you measure happiness? It's what you believe that makes you happy, and you can't measure beliefs."

The conversation turns to the huge economic disparity between the United States and Bhutan. The average American earns nearly a hundred times more than the average Bhutanese. "Remember that house we saw on Long Island?" Marty says to his wife. "That woman had an entire walk-in closet just for her shoes. Here, some people don't even have a single pair."

"Yes, but they seem to be happy," says Terri. "Even those women with a baby strapped to their backs, breaking rocks on the side of the road, they seem happy. They smile when we drive by."

I don't have the heart to tell Terri that those women are neither Bhutanese nor happy. They are Indian laborers imported to do the jobs the Bhutanese don't want to do. But her point is valid. People in Bhutan do seem happy.

"So maybe we don't need as much as we think we do in order to be happy," I suggest.

"No, these people just don't know any better," she says. "If you took them to America, they would see what they're missing."

I tell her that of the Bhutanese who study abroad, 90 percent return to Bhutan, forsaking western-style incomes for life here in Bhutan. Terri is silent, clearly confused. Finally, she says, "Now, why would they do a thing like that?"

We're back in Thimphu. The Toyota pulls up to the guesthouse. I rest for a few minutes, but I'm in a hurry. I only have two more

days in Bhutan, and there are some people I need to see and some questions I need answered.

Karma Ura lives high in the hills overlooking the capital. When I asked directions on the phone, he said, "Just ask anyone who I live. They will know." He was right, and a few minutes later the Toyota glides up to a walled compound. A servant leads me through a corrugated-tin gate into a large yard, where two young girls are bouncing on a trampoline. I'm then directed to a room enclosed in floor-to-ceiling glass. The room is sparse; other than the Dell laptop in one corner, it's no different, really, from a room in the village where I met Karma's mother.

Karma is wearing slacks and a vest, no *gho* today, and is sitting on the floor with a wool blanket draped across his lap. He looks pale, and I wonder if he is not well. He offers me walnuts which he expertly cracks open with a hammer.

We make small talk, then I ask him about the story Tashi told me, about the lady of the lake. Do people really believe that?

"Yes, they do," says Karma. "And it is a good thing." The way he sees it, these deities—"greenhouse deities," he calls them—represent the highest form of environmentalism. People in the United States don't pollute in part because they fear they will be fined. People in Bhutan don't pollute because they fear the greenhouse deities. Is one way of thinking really better than the other?

Karma is on his feet now. He nimbly catches a fly in his palm and carries it outside, where he releases it. He's still talking, but must have picked up on my skepticism, for he tells me a story about the surgery to remove the tumors in his stomach. "The surgery went well; they removed the tumors, but for two years my stomach wouldn't function properly. The doctors attributed it to 'postsurgical complications.' What does that mean? It means they don't know what the problem is, haven't a clue. But they need to call it something, so they give it a name. Postsurgical complications. Is that really so different from people believing that there are deities living in lakes?"

He asks me to stay for dinner. We sit on the floor eating rice and green beans that he grew in his backyard. I ask the question that Bhutan demands: Can money buy happiness?

Karma answers quickly (or so it seems; either his speech has speeded up or my tolerance for silence has grown): "Money sometimes buys happiness. You have to break it down, though. Money is a means to an end. The problem is when you think it is an end in itself. Happiness is relationships, and people in the west think money is needed for relationships. But it's not. It comes down to trustworthiness." I'd heard the same thing in Switzerland. Trust is a prerequisite for happiness. Trust not only of your government, of institutions, but trust of your neighbors. Several studies, in fact, have found that trust—more than income or even health—is the biggest factor in determining our happiness.

That's not to say that money is irrelevant. A little money can buy a lot of happiness up to a point, as I said. The problem is that Bhutan has not yet reached that point. It is still on the upslope of the happiness/income curve. If the social scientists are right, the most efficient way to make someone from Bhutan happy is to give them more money, at least until they're earning about fifteen thousand dollars a year.

But by then a way of life has taken hold, and it's difficult to shift gears—not only for Bhutan but for all of us. Running after money has brought us happiness in the past, so we assume that it will do so in the future. That's like saying to a starving man, "Here, eat this hamburger, you'll feel better. That was good, yes? Now, here, eat another and another and another."

The next day Linda invites me to dinner at her apartment. She, too, lives in the hills overlooking Thimphu. She lives near the four queens but, as she is quick to point out, not like a queen. Her apartment is small but comfortable. She introduces me to her husband, Namgay. "I married the noble savage," she says affectionately.

Over dinner, she recounts Namgay's first visit to a Sharper Image

store in the United States. He was blown away. Here was a store stuffed with wondrous things designed to fulfill needs that Namgay didn't even know he had. He would pick up each item—say a combination juicer/shiatsu massager—and study it with genuine awe. "But the thing is," says Linda, "he had no desire to buy anything, to possess anything. He was perfectly content to admire it, then put it down and walk away."

We are lounging now on big, comfortable chairs, drinking very bad Indian wine and admiring the view of a temple and Thimphu below. Linda is telling me about the two things she misses most about life in America, the First Amendment and working toilets. When suddenly she shifts gears and asks me point-blank: "So, are you happy here?"

This catches me off guard. Am *I* happy here? Though I've had some happy moments, I hadn't really asked myself that question. I'd been too busy running around trying to ascertain if the Bhutanese are happy. I answer yes, but without any real conviction. I need to think about this.

But first there is drinking to be done. My last evening in Bhutan and I've convinced Tashi to join me for a beer. After a few sips at Red Panda, Tashi turns red and, uninhibited, confesses that not all of his guests are equally wonderful. The German tourists are the worst. Big complainers. More confessions: Tashi is worried about his future. He's twenty years old and not married yet. In Bhutan that's old. He's also worried about the future of his country, with more hotels going up all the time and the smell of money in the air. Good for business, Tashi concedes, but not necessarily happiness. As we say good night, Tashi hands me a gift: a cylindrical package wrapped in plain brown paper.

Lying in bed that night, I wonder if I have fallen too hard for Bhutan, if my journalist's critical eye has gone fuzzy. Have I, darling, I say, become a lama lickster?

I recall the words of another Bhutanese tour guide I met on

day. "People here say they're happy, but they're not. They have problems. They are only telling you 50 percent of the truth." I'm thinking 50 percent happy is not so bad when I remember Tashi's gift. It's long and shaped like a dog bone. Why would Tashi give me a dog bone? I unwrap it and discover it is not a dog bone but a phallus, fourteen inches long, complete with testicles. In any other country, if my guide bought me a giant wooden phallus as a souvenir I would be concerned. In Bhutan, I am touched.

The next morning, I wake before dawn and meet Tashi downstairs. A few minutes later, our driver pulls the Toyota up to the tiny terminal building and Tashi announces, "We have arrived at the airport, sir."

I'm going to miss this guy. We shake hands goodbye. I use two hands, one cupped over the other, and make a point of prolonging the moment. I pay attention.

I clear customs and security quickly and find myself with plenty of time on my hands before my flight. It's raining outside, and I wonder if it's safe to take off in this weather, with the mountains so close, so high.

I think about plane crashes more than most people. I know how to fly planes, small ones, and while you'd think this would be a source of great reassurance, for me it has the opposite effect. Every shake or bump or something not quite right strikes fear in me. Is that flap extended properly? Are we descending too rapidly? Doesn't that left engine sound funny?

Yet sitting here in this airport terminal that looks like a Buddhist temple, watching an archery match on a small TV screen and drinking bad instant coffee, I am overwhelmed with a feeling that is alien to me: calm. Not hashish- or alcohol-induced calm, but the real thing. I take out my pen and write the following words in my notebook, using large letters, scrawling across an entire page so that when they find my body in the wreckage it will be easier to spot.

I would not have done anything differently.

All of the moments in my life, everyone I have met, every trip

I have taken, every success I have enjoyed, every blunder I have made, every loss I have endured has been just right. I'm not saying they were all good or that they happened for a reason—I don't buy that brand of pap fatalism—but they have been right. They have been...okay. As far as revelations go, it's pretty lame, I know. Okay is not bliss, or even happiness. Okay is not the basis for a new religion or self-help movement. Okay won't get me on *Oprah*. But okay is a start, and for that I am grateful.

Can I thank Bhutan for this breakthrough? It's hard to say. Bhutan is not Shangri-La, of that I am sure, but it is a strange place, peculiar in ways large and small. You lose your bearing here, and when that happens a crack forms in your armor. A crack large enough, if you're lucky, to let in a few shafts of light.