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Happiness: What Can We Learn from the Underprivileged?

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I walked past a group of migrant workers gathered on grass patches just outside their dormitory. They were squatting in circles, beer cans clinking and their boisterous laughter punctuating the air. It was mesmerising to witness the joy on their faces the fact that they just finished a hard day at work. Other passersby hurried past them, some with darted gazes, seemingly dismissing their presence. The migrant workers did not seem to mind the suspicious look on people's faces. They embraced their space, shifting around to ensure that they were not of inconvenience to passersby, perhaps out of habit or concern for others.

Underneath those dim streetlights amidst the cooling night breeze, their conversations and laughter echoes with sincerity and warmth. Their faces lit up in joy as they exchanged jokes and banters through a blend of languages I could not understand. The pungent smell of alcohol coated the gentle night air, adding an informal yet comforting atmosphere to their tired souls. I peeked through their eyes, and I saw what was hidden beneath: homesickness due to being away from their families for a long time, yet courageous enough to carry on with life in a foreign soil. "We miss our family very much, but when we, as friends, come together, cook, and sing, we feel this is family", uttered Al Amil Iqbal, a construction worker from Bangladesh. They illustrate camaraderie. They embody perseverance. They cultivate willingness to go through tough times. This made me wonder: How are they able to find joy, whilst living in such a dire environment? And how can a simple contentment of those less privileged shape the way we view happiness?

Ng (2015) brings us through the life of the migrant workers behind the scenes through her heart-warming interviews with migrant workers in Singapore. Ng (2015) pays tribute to the foreign workers and seeks to find out their hopes and dreams. What I learned from those interviews were tremendously eye-opening. While we desire to gain more material wealth as indicators of success that boosts our ego, migrant workers prioritise the basic needs of their

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families back in their home country, rather than themselves. Almost 80% of their salary are remitted back home while the remaining amount is spread throughout the month to buy their needs in a country with one of the highest costs of living worldwide. While we are turning down jobs that don't seem to meet our requirements for standard of living, migrant workers are left with no choice but to bravely confront a filthy, dusty, and laborious job on a daily basis. While we enjoy the comfort of life in condominiums, and desire to get a nice car and a mansion, migrant workers focus their goals in giving their children a decent education in a faraway village in their country as the legacy they can leave them with, and as a way of extracting their families from poverty, through their regular remittances. Guilt haunts me for undertaking part-time jobs, the salary and perks of which only myself is partaking since I cannot remember buying something for my parents from such a job. If Singaporeans demand privilege and entitlement whilst migrant workers find joy in the dearth of life, would this possibly shape and change the way we view contentment and happiness?

In a separate article, Tan et al. (2020) shared the key challenges that migrant workers face: wage discrimination, deportability, and poor mental health. Working under time pressure, they only receive around \$1,400 per month which is way below the average salary of Singaporean citizens; however, they maintain such commendable resilience and enduring perseverance so that they can provide the needs of their families back in their home country. They find joy in their forged friendships and build strength and camaraderie in adversity. They are vulnerable to abuse, exploitation, workplace hazards, and deportation, but they keep the courage to remain in Singapore because of a hefty sum to pay their employers and to ensure that their families back in their home country will survive. The severity of their situation cannot be overstated, yet they carry on living and sacrificing in order to send remittances to their family back home as a testament of their worth, and an apparent source of joy and fulfilment as fathers looking after their family at a distance.

Their dire situation and lack of emotional support exacerbate mental health problems that are difficult to bear; however, with their forged friendships and the shared struggle to carry on with life, they find joy in the simple pleasures such as sharing a few cans of beer after a long day's work, or sipping cups of *kopi* on a lawn away from the prying eyes of the crowd. Joy and happiness can come from life's simplest pleasures, and this is what the migrant workers embody. A steaming cup of *kopi* or an ice-cold beer, is more than just a refreshment. It exhibits a cherished escape from the demands of their hard labour each day. The simple joy derived from playing cricket in available public parks and cooking together in their makeshift dormitories turn strangers into a tightly knit community, a brotherhood of sorts. Their daily interactions offer

emotional sustenance as they seek to constantly renew their resolve every day, willing to face each day with faith, bravery, and enthusiasm. Simple things that are deemed as a necessity in our lives bring about the most happiness amongst the migrant workers, highlighting an expanding divide between *them* and *us*. Are they aware of this? I do not know. Do they mind this discrepancy? This seemingly palpable social gap between *them* and *us*? I am not sure. What I know is that the community they are forging is much stronger, closer, happier. Their bond is envious, their brotherhood inspiring.

Both Ng (2015) and Tan et al. (2020) provide insights into how miserable the living conditions of migrant workers in Singapore are. While Tan et al., (2020) offer a more focused view on the poor living conditions of migrant workers highlighting the key problems they face, Ng (2015) goes even further by interviewing the workers and understanding them on a deeper emotional level, finding out what drives their courage and perseverance to find joy in such dire circumstances and hard labour. “If this were a sign, what does it signify” I asked myself. Constant rumination allowed me to arrest a fundamental value that embodies these migrant workers – selflessness, their deep concern for the needs of their children and families back home, such that they sacrifice living and working in a foreign land despite being under the heat of the scorching sun or being drenched by sudden rain, despite the pain, despite mental suffering, despite anxiety and depression.

The workers earn a meagre wage and oftentimes, they send most of it to their families back home, leaving themselves with almost nothing. “How can they survive with such dearth of life?” I wondered. The last time I recalled feeling uncomfortable would have to be in National Service where I constantly associated my time to be restless. I was counting every tick of the clock until I could book out – for relief from the demands of the service. However, the migrant workers can find contentment and joy even if they are only afforded the briefest respite from hard labour. They find the purest of joy through the simplest of pleasures that life can offer – a cup of *kopi* and toasted bread to begin a laborious day, and a can of beer to end it anticipating for another cup of *kopi* the next day. This routine means a lot to them because deep in their hearts and souls are their families giving them the inspiration to find meaning in what they do.

Thinking deeper, I recognised that my frustration in National Service and in life, in general, was rooted in entitlement. I was expecting comfort and convenience to be a basic right and not a privilege. Yet, despite having a better life, caring parents, higher salary, and better living conditions, we often find ourselves disdained rather than happy, complaining rather than having gratitude in our hearts, indignant rather than having a calm disposition. This stark contrast in our aspirations raises an uncomfortable yet necessary question: Are we truly

happier than them? We, who constantly chase higher salaries, living in high-end condominiums, and excited for the next luxurious purchase to validate our socio-economic positions, and our existence with the world? Have we then overlooked the pure joy of being happy, and being content with life?

The migrant workers showcasing important values such as sacrifice, struggle, courage, resilience and gratitude seem to summon us to reevaluate our priorities. Their humble and innocent souls serve as a stark reminder that joy and happiness are not exclusive to the wealthy or affluent. The poor and the underprivileged can be happy because they choose to be, and because they want to, and they are living it. It is in this courage to live each day, and accepting life as it unfolds that allows them to experience joy in their hearts. If migrant workers who are living another day can find joy in the dearth of life, why is it difficult for the wealthy or the comfortable to experience such joy? Perhaps there is a need to look within ourselves and assess why we feel entitled while many more in the world are deprived of the necessities to survive and have a decent life. Perhaps, what we need is to peek into the lens of the underprivileged for us to see life differently. In this world of constant pursuit of wealth and social validation, perhaps what we need is to look into the lives of the marginalised and the underprivileged. Who knows they have something to offer, and we are just ignoring it. Perhaps it is about time that we notice this.

Bionote

Joshua Tan Wei Jun is an undergraduate student pursuing a degree in Sport Science Management at the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University (NTU) Singapore. Beyond academics is his strong passion for sports and an active and balanced lifestyle. He finds joy in sports and in appreciating the simple pleasures of life, whether it is a quiet walk, conversations with friends, or moments of reflection amidst a hectic day. Joshua believes that one of the greatest ways to gain a deeper understanding of the world is through observing and talking to people. Observation is a window into the human soul teaching us the values of empathy, patience, and compassion. This mindset has made him naturally curious about different peoples and cultures.

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