

Book Review

The Geography of Bliss
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Book : The Geography of Bliss
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If you are a student of positive psychology or cultural psychology or both, then this book is for you. If you like witty, informative travel guides, then this book is for you too. And if you just like a good read, with a few laughs and a reflection on the many questions that you may have about life, this book is definitely for you too. It is the documentation of one man's search for the happiest country in the world. Witty, insightful and sometimes sad, Weiner entertains and questions at the same time the concept of happiness across four continents. Weiner's self-deprecatory introduction of the title as "One Grump's Search for the Happiest Places in the World" is an indication of both the existential and economic questions being asked by people of different cultures and the light hearted writing style he follows.

Each chapter covers a different country the author visits while attempting to find out the happiness quotient of its citizens and the causes for it. As a correspondent for National Public Radio, Weiner had visited most of these countries before and has a storehouse of knowledge about the places and the people. Rediscovering them while studying happiness he gains insights into the impact culture has on happiness. By its very definition culture covers the entire range of human influences including food, climate, religion, artefacts, history, rituals and beliefs. In each chapter Weiner identifies one cultural correlate that most explains the happiness quotient of that country. Tolerance in the Dutch for instance, or boredom in the Swiss.

The book begins with a very pragmatic approach of understanding happiness through the lens of happiness researchers at the World Database of Happiness (WDH) at Rotterdam, Netherlands. Professor Ruut Veenhoven, whom Weiner refers to as the godfather of happiness research, is a well respected figure in academic circles for his work in positive psychology. However the description of the meeting and the build up to it is anything but academic. Weiner has interestingly woven in findings from decades of research, published in reputed scientific journals, into a fine tapestry of human behaviour, history and geography.

Besides Netherlands and Switzerland, Weiner covers Bhutan, Qatar, Iceland, Moldova, Thailand, Great Britain, India and America. His imagination leads him to ramble sometimes and the reader might also enjoy a chuckle at the images he

manages to conjure up in your thoughts. Imagine a pig trying to heat chicken burritos in a microwave and getting his pudgy paws stuck in the microwave door. That's what Bhutan does to Weiner. From the outrageous wealth of Qatar to cash-strapped Moldova, from the happiest nation Iceland to the unhappiest nation (according to WDH) once again Moldova, Weiner takes the reader on a tour of happiness, coded by nation and coloured by his own perceptions about what makes a nation tick.

Iceland's fascination with failure and its chart topping performance in the happiness database makes one wonder if the Icelanders have got it right. For a nation that functions in the dark, the author feels they have an amazingly healthy attitude towards failure. It is expected and celebrated. While for the rest of the world, failure means the therapist's couch, in Iceland it is celebrated for the honesty of the intentions. So truly reflected in Indian philosophy where the emphasis is on the *karma* (act) and not on the *karma-phala* (fruit of acts). Such instances of spiritual truths are scattered throughout the book and one need not have to look too hard to find them.

Lack of culture in both Moldova and Qatar according to Weiner is reflected in their happiness quotient. While the former is poor, the latter is a rich nation. So although wealth camouflages a lot of ills, unhappiness is not one of them. Yet the people who are happy in this unhappy nation are those who are able to contribute towards the well-being of others, proving true yet another aspect of happiness, 'service to others is of greater value than service to self'. The lack of identity that Moldovans face further crushes their attempts to happiness. 'Know Thyself' suddenly sounds so much more than just a line from philosophy.

Another gem is the Thai concept of not thinking. According to the author, the Thais are too busy being happy to ponder on the question of their happiness. Permissiveness is encountered in Netherlands and Thailand but the context and hence the approach to both varies. While for one it is a matter of pride, for the other it is just a reality and need not be harped about too much. The Thais are apparently happy not in spite of the lack of control over their fates, rather because of it. Both these aspects lead to sense of greater happiness and give the nation a respectable score on the Happiness rankings in the WDH.

Great Britain, famously known for the "stiff upper lip" possessed by its inhabitants, also provides great insights on this happiness quest. One alarming thought for the soldiers of positive psychology is when according to the author one question dismisses most of the positive psychology movement. The question is when one has something fundamentally stinky, is there much one can do with it? Although researchers in the field will be up-in-arms and would like to quote from very sound data, it is an enigmatic question. Can something good come from something fundamentally bad? Matthew asked a similar question in the New Testament when he asked can a good tree bear bad fruit and can a diseased tree bear good fruit? The author's experience in Great Britain also emphasized the strong British tendency to moan about things and then just move on.

India is introduced as the land of contradictions. Bearded gurus and McDonald's co-exist peacefully, the saint and the charlatan can both be the same person, and the same individual can be accepted and rejected at the same time. The ability to maintain this contradiction and not be affected by it is the key to the Indian style of happiness, according to the author. He learns that in India imperfection

and unpredictability is accepted. Lack of control and unpredictability are both considered causative of a lack in mental health according to western psychology texts. But here it is identified as a contributor, if not the cause, of happiness.

The journey ends with the author's understanding of his home, America. Although America is materially prosperous, wealthy and considered a super-power, it ranks nowhere near high when it comes to happiness rankings. For the author, this is largely due to rising expectations. The country is materially wealthy and spiritually poor. This probably explains all the attempts by Americans trying to find happiness and peace in Eastern religious practices and accepting their practices and rituals as part of their lives too. Summing up, the author feels that there are many routes to happiness and culture is the glue that holds the entire happiness enterprise together.

Peppered with such insights into the realities of modern living and proving true at various points the teachings of seers and sages across centuries, Weiner doesn't make his book out to be a book of philosophy. However it is impossible to not ponder on mysteries of life and the living while reading it. Non-judgmental, sceptical and based on past research like the work of any true researcher, this book should be made compulsory reading for anyone interested in studying the impact of culture on human behaviour.

BOOK RATING

I will rate the book 4 out of 5